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KIERA LEGEND



BRANDED BY THE  
DRAGON  
PRINCE

a LORDS OF FIRE AND ASH novel

# BRANDED BY THE DRAGON PRINCE

## KIERA LEGEND



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# CONTENTS

## [Prologue](#)

1. [Onya](#)
2. [Onya](#)
3. [Onya](#)
4. [Onya](#)
5. [Onya](#)
6. [Onya](#)
7. [Onya](#)
8. [Onya](#)
9. [Onya](#)
10. [Onya](#)
11. [Saeldreon](#)
12. [Onya](#)
13. [Onya](#)
14. [Saeldreon](#)
15. [Onya](#)
16. [Onya](#)
17. [Onya](#)
18. [Onya](#)
19. [Onya](#)
20. [Onya](#)
21. [Saeldreon](#)
22. [Onya](#)
23. [Onya](#)
24. [Saeldreon](#)
25. [Onya](#)
26. [Saeldreon](#)
27. [Onya](#)
28. [Onya](#)

## [About the Author](#)

## [Also by the Author](#)

## PROLOGUE



### SAELDREON

Thoughts of my long-dead brothers kept me awake. I'd been thinking about them more often since the *Asatora Drecki* tracked me down in the Inemi Islands and smuggled me back to my homeland.

The members of the secretive order talked a lot about the old days when the dragon lords ruled Andlang, despite that, none of them had been alive two hundred years ago. Their loyalty to the old ways was admirable, which was one of the reasons I joined them.

I sat up from the fur bed I'd been lying on, glancing toward the fire fashioned in the middle of the camp. A few men sat around the flames, warming themselves, sharing pieces of jerky, and passing around a wineskin. Others patrolled the surrounding woods, on the lookout for signs of the royal guard—who had been trying to hunt us down for weeks. They'd nearly found us on a couple of occasions. Once while hiding out in a northern village, with inn keepers who were sympathetic to our cause.

When the guard happened upon the village, they'd torn it apart in their search for us, questioning residents with more than words. I had watched the treachery from a high perch in one of the trees nearby, tempted to fly in and kill the soldiers, but I would've been outnumbered twenty to one. Despite my abilities, I didn't think I would've gotten out alive.

Although I had no need to get warm, I went to join the men gathered around the fire. Each one stood and bowed their heads as I approached.

Joakim, the leader of the Drecki, bowed the lowest. “My Lord, you should be resting. We’ll be breaking camp and moving soon.”

I didn’t think I would ever get used to being called a *Lord*. It had been a very long time since I ever was one. Despite that, I was of the mind that I didn’t deserve the title. While I had traveled the world foolishly getting into trouble and bedding women under the guise of promoting trade for Andlang, my brothers were upholding their duties as true nobility would—keeping the country safe and nurturing it to prosper.

My older brother, Tomiss, had been the last dragon to sit on the throne of Andlang. The last dragon to be called king. He was known as *the Lord of the Mountain*, and as a wise and fair ruler, much loved by our people.

My brother, Haakon, was called *the Lord of the Skies* and served as the army general. Back then, over two hundred years ago, no one had a bad thing to say about either of them. Except for the human rebels and the greedy human lords who funded them, sowing seeds of treason and treachery in the dark alleys of the city capital, Jarlstad.

Even after all this time, I blamed myself for not being there when the rebellion started. I could’ve saved my brothers’ lives, their families, and all the citizens and soldiers who stood by them only to sacrifice their lives.

Or I could’ve died that day too—like my rational mind often reminded me.

Then I wouldn’t have had the chance to take back the throne and avenge my people.

Olaf, a big bear of a man with an equally big and bushy beard, handed me the wineskin, and I took a hearty drink of the strong wine. I slapped him on his meaty arm and returned the skin. Since uniting with the *Asatora Drecki* to take back

the throne, I realized I had found new brothers despite them being human.

Once we finished the wine, one of the scouts ran out of trees toward the camp.

“I spotted a small battalion on the main road.” Labored breaths escaped him after running here to warn us. It wouldn’t be long before those soldiers marched into the forest and saw the light of our campfire.

Everyone sprang into action.

Kicking dirt onto the burning wood, I immediately snuffed out the flames, stomping out the embers. I ran to my bed roll, tied it up with leather straps, then attached to the back of my belt. We couldn’t leave anything behind that would indicate we’d been there.

After gathering all our gear, we set off one by one deeper into the thick, dark woods. We tried to keep our footprints as close together as we could, stepping stealthily over broken branches, so they couldn’t guess our numbers. That was how the Drecki had survived for so long, because no one really knew how many of them there were. Even I didn’t know.

The group I was with had only six members. Their factions were established all over the country, waiting for the day that the last dragon would return to claim the throne.

I was that last dragon.

We had just barely made half a furlong before the reckless snapping of branches came from the east. It wasn’t anyone from the order, for I knew they would never make that much noise. A few shouts followed seconds later.

“They’re here! I found them.”

More shouts echoed through the trees; the thump of several feet pounding on the hard-packed forest floor painfully clear while they ran toward us.

Joakim grabbed my arm. “Go. Run. We’ll lead them away.”

“We can fight together.”

He shook his head. “There are too many. Your survival is the most important thing. We all trained in the order to put our lives down for *the Lord of Fire*. Find the others in Gray Valley.”

Before I could argue, Joakim and the others dashed west into the trees, making sure to cause a lot of noise. For a second, I watched them go, then kept running north, needing to get to a clearing as soon as possible.

As I ran, the yelling continued, before a scream of pain sliced the night. The royal guard had caught up with the order. I pressed on, even though the urge to turn around and join the fight surged through my body and mind. My brother once told me that leading a nation meant the acceptance of sacrifice—whether it was your own or that from the people who followed you.

I could see slits of moonlight through the tree trunks, announcing the clearing wasn’t far ahead. A few more feet and I’d have the room to change. The moment I burst past the last tree and felt the glow of the moonlight on my skin, I reached down, deep into my body, into my psyche and urged the dragon to surface.

He’d been waiting inside for too long, simmering, and pacing for a chance to emerge. He wanted to fly.

My back hunched forward as my shoulder blades started to expand. They needed to be ten times as big to support the weight and breadth of my wings. While my bones shifted, grew, and rearranged, a burning pain rushed through me. From the tips of my toes to the top of my head, the fire within flared to life. My skin started to crack open from the pressure.

The shift didn’t come fast enough, but I knew if I pushed it harder, pain would explode in my body, edging me close to unconsciousness. After a few more moments, I felt the bones, cartilage, and skin webbing of one wing spring out from the split skin on my back.

So focused on becoming my true self, I didn’t notice the three royal soldiers emerging from the forest behind me.



The leader's voice reached me though. "Loose your arrow!"

And I did feel the sharp pinch of pain as an arrowhead pierced my body, along my flank. A liquid burn surged through every piece of flesh, every muscle, every vein, every nerve. The wing that had already sprouted instantly shriveled, melting back into my body.

The arrow had been silver.

It was the only metal that could hurt me.

Swallowing the roar, I reached behind me, grabbing the arrow shaft, and pushing on it. Unfortunately, the arrowhead was lodged deeply, and I couldn't pull it out without shredding my insides. The tip of it came out near my navel. Thankfully it had missed my vital organs. I broke it off, then yanked the wooden shaft out—blood oozed from both wounds instantly, soaking my shirt.

Although I couldn't shift into my dragon form, I could still fight. Unsheathing the dagger from my belt, I whirled around, intending to stab anyone who came near me. When I turned, a soldier was already on me, grabbing my neck. I managed to land a good punch to the side of his head, forcing him to stumble backward.

With the silver still burning through me, all my strength spilled out of me. My legs gave way, and buckling, I sunk down to my knees. I could barely lift my arms, but I forced a hand up to feel the silver chain wrapped around my neck.

Fuming, I looked up at the soldier I'd hit, the man who had collared me. His grin was soaked with venom and blood.

"Not so tough now, are you?"

The other two soldiers approached—one of them the archer who shot me.

His hands shook as he lowered his bow. "Is h-h-he really a dragon?"

"Yah, isn't that something?" His leader's laughter reached my ears just as his boot hit my side, right on the puncture

wound.

Pain speared through me, and my vision swam. Unable to keep upright, I fell over onto my side, feeling bile fill my mouth—I was dangerously close to vomiting.

“I’d heard that the Drecki found him and were keeping him secret.”

“I can’t believe it,” the other young soldier said, awe capturing his voice as he stared down at me. “Wait until the others find out that we took down a dragon.”

Grabbing him by the strap on his leather chest plate, his leader shook him. “You can’t tell anyone. You have to keep your yap shut.”

The young one vehemently nodded. “I won’t say anything, *Herr*. I swear.”

“I won’t either, *Herr*,” the archer agreed, enthusiastically.

“That’s good.” The man patted the young soldier on the shoulder. “That’s very good. But I just don’t believe you.”

His hand immediately went to his belt, withdrawing his blade swiftly, and sinking it into the soldier’s stomach. The boy cried out, his hand going to the wound, but there wasn’t anything he could do—he would soon bleed out and die.

Satisfied, he pushed the kid away, then turned to the archer. The young man fumbled with his bow, trying to notch an arrow to defend himself, but his hands shook too much, and he couldn’t get it right before his leader was on top of him. The knife sunk into the archer’s side, slicing into his liver like butter. A killing blow.

All witnesses dealt with, the man retrieved his knife and shoved the archer onto the ground.

I struggled to push back up to my knees, but I refused to let this man lord over me, so I gathered every bit of strength I had left as he faced me. The knife was clutched in his hand, blood dripping from the blade.

“You like this knife, ey? It was specially made for you.” He drew the flat of the blade across his pants, wiping off the

blood. When he brandished it again, toward me, I saw the metal glint in the moonlight. “A silver blade for a fiery dragon.” He must’ve thought he’d made some kind of jest because he chuckled to himself.

When the man got closer to me, I could see the maniacal look on his face—he was enjoying inflicting pain and suffering. He’d probably enjoyed killing his fellow soldiers. Obviously, he was a man with little remorse.

“When I was little, my ma told me a story about dragons. She said that fire filled their veins, and that when they were cut, molten rock would spill out. She said that was how Andlang was formed eons ago, by the Great Dragon spilling its own blood to create the world.” He sneered. “I’ve always hoped I’d be able to find out if that was true.”

The tip of his dagger pressed against my cheek, just below my eye, and he slowly dragged it down the side of my face. It burned as my skin split open, but I held his gaze and didn’t flinch. I refused to let him know that he’d hurt me.

“Hmm,” he ran his finger down the gash, my blood gathering on the tip, “I guess that’s not true.” His eyes roamed over my body. “Maybe I have to get to the heart of the matter.” He poised his knife over my chest.

My eyes flickered to the right just as another man, a bigger man in leather armor and carrying a sword, came up behind the leader and kicked him to the side.

“What in the Gods’ balls are you doing, Gunnar?”

Gunnar recovered from the unexpected kick, and whipped around, the knife still brandished in his hand. “Just having a little fun.” Spittle flew out of his mouth as he quickly explained himself.

“The king wants him alive.”

“I wasn’t going to kill him, *Herr Torin*.” He spoke the man’s honorifics with a sarcastic flare.

Torin looked down at the two young soldier’s bodies, likely identifying the wounds they’d suffered. The archer was still alive, and he groaned lowly. He crouched down to the

kid's side, the boy's lips moving, but I couldn't hear what he said before he went still—his head sagging to the side. His eyes remained open, but unseeing.

Whatever he'd told the older soldier wasn't anything good, because he instantly stood and grabbed Gunnar by the throat.

"You're lucky that you're the king's cousin. It's the only thing that's saving your life right now."

Gunnar clawed at Torin's meaty grip, until he was released. He stumbled backward, his hand rubbing at his neck. "You will regret that."

"I doubt it," Torin retorted. Approaching me, he grabbed my arm and pulled me to my feet, his attention shifting to the blood still blooming over my shirt. "I'll have the healer fix those wounds."

I remained silent, contemplating how I was going to escape. There was obviously no love lost between these two men. It made me happy to see a crack in the royal guard...

That meant there was always a way to break it wide open and use it to my advantage.

# I

## ONYA



“Get her, Onya! Don’t let her get out!”

In the small, fenced in, muddy pen, I made my stand against the large sow that glared at me with tiny, beady black eyes—trying to make a last-ditch effort to escape my clutches. I needed to hook my arms around its wide belly under its front legs. That was always the best way to drag a stubborn pig where it needed to go.

It snorted once, as if in warning. I wasn’t deterred though. The sow and I had done this dance before. Rounding up the pigs for my friend Yve’s family’s homestead was one of my favorite things to do. It got me away from my own house, and out from the watchful, critical eye of my stepfather.

I readied myself, flexing my fingers, and trying to anticipate which way it was going to run. The sow snorted again, one of its big, tufted ears twitching. Keeping my eyes on its legs to see where it would turn, I dashed forward. It zig-zagged to the left, and I darted that way, confident that I would be able to grab it, when the ground beneath us groaned like an old, wizened man then trembled.

The surprising shaking under my boots sent me sprawling forward. I reached for the pig but was so off balance that I landed in a huge mud pool instead. It splattered everywhere. Most of it seemed to be caked onto my boots, legs, dress, and

hands. Though, I suspected a few flecks dotted my cheeks. It was most definitely in my hair as well.

As usual, my mother would squawk at me about acting more like my younger brother, Peder—a dirty, messy little boy—than the eighteen-year-old young woman I was supposed to be.

Rolling out of the mud and onto my knees, I slowly got to my feet to see my friend, Yve, perched on top of the pen's fence while clutching the pole in a death grip. Her eyes were wide as she looked around, probably trying to figure out what had just happened.

“The dragons are waking,” she whispered, her voice quivering.

I made a face at her. “There are no such things as dragons, Yve.”

Slowly, she let go of the pole and jumped onto the ground. She seemed unbalanced, and I imagined her knees were shaking underneath her tunic. “But what about the teachings?”

“Just old stories to scare children into behaving.”

“Then why did the ground shake? It must be the dragons trying to break through to take over the country and enslave all the people.”

I examined her face, her eyes, to see if she was joking, or if she actually believed that nonsense. She smiled to break the tension, but there was worry and fear in her gaze. I didn't blame her though. We grew up in the village, with the elders and our parents constantly telling us these stories about when the dragon lords ruled the world. Of how ferocious and cruel they had been to the humans they ruled. The dragon king Tomiss, the Lord of the Mountain, and his two brothers had supposedly had enslaved human women as concubines and frequently burned villages to the ground. It was all a bunch of horse shit.

After hundreds of years of cruelty, the humans rose in rebellion, fought the dragon lords, and won, placing a human

on the throne of Andlang for the first time in the world's creation.

“It wasn't dragons. It was probably the Fire Mountain bubbling to life.”

The mud in my boots sloshed as I walked toward the fence gate, wiping my dirty hands on the front apron of my dress. More mud wasn't really going to matter at this point. I was going to be the one to clean it anyway. The washing was just one of the many chores that I'd been tasked with, but I would've much rather have been in charge of the hunting for the family. I made solid rabbit traps, and I could take down any bird with an arrow.

Unfortunately, my stepfather forbade me from doing “manly” chores, since I should be learning how to take care of a household, and eventually, raise babies. I hated that my mother tied hands with that man so soon after my father died, but I understood why she had to do it. A woman would have a difficult time raising two children alone, even though I was fully grown and able to work to earn coins, feed and clothe them, while hanging onto the homestead.

I learned long ago that women had to do whatever was required to survive in this world.

“How can it be the mountain?” Yve asked as she opened the wooden gate for me. “It is so far away from here. It's a three-day ride. At least, that is what Nils said.”

“Nils hasn't been to the mountain.” I smirked. “He just told you that to impress you.”

Yve shrugged her bony shoulders, with a tilt of her head. Obviously, it had worked on her. The look on her face told me that she was smitten with the big, dumb blacksmith's apprentice. It was cute though. Nils would be a good match for her; he was kind and friendly. He was also big and muscular enough that no other man would dare approach Yve.

“Nils told me that Anders asked him about you.”

My head snapped up to frown at her. “Anders? His older brother, Anders?”

Frowning at my expression, she nodded. “What’s wrong with Anders? I think he’d be a good match for you.”

“I have no interest in being a farrier’s wife.” I gathered all my errant hairs and tied it all back up at the nape of my neck. “I have no interest in being anyone’s wife, if I’m honest.”

Her hearty laugh echoed in the air. “Of course, you’ll tie hands with someone. A woman can’t be alone her whole life. You’ll end up like Mad Siva, the village Shaman—living in a small turf hut on top of a hill and talking to the animals.”

The scenario actually appealed to my mind and heart, but I pressed my lips together, suppressing the urge to tell her that. I’d seen first-hand what a bad union did to a woman. From what I could remember when my father was alive, their union had been satisfactory for them both. They seemed well suited for each other, enough to raise children and manage a homestead.

My father hadn’t been an especially kind man, however. I supposed he just hadn’t been cruel. For the most part, he preferred to be out on the fishing boats and at the tavern than at home, so I didn’t interact with him often. My brother naturally had more interest from him as Peder carried his namesake and his lineage.

Yet, it wasn’t until after he died and my mother tied hands with Iver, my stepfather, that I truly understood the torment a bad union could do to a woman.

“Onya, you’re as stubborn as that sow, but I know one day there will be a man who will turn your head and capture your heart.”

I gave her a small smile, because I didn’t have the heart to argue with her and dash her high hopes for my love life. Yve was a romantic at heart. She read a lot of poetry, books that her brother brought back from one of the big towns as our village didn’t have anything resembling a library. The schoolhouse had some rudimentary books written by old men, I assumed, that children were allowed to read during lessons. The poems she loved the most talked about love and destiny.



I didn't believe in either of those things.

Yve's hand wrapped around my arm. "C'mon, let's go to the house so you can clean up. I don't want your mother to tan your hide, and mine, for asking you to help me corral the pigs again."

We barely made it around the wooden shed that served as the pigs' shelter when the bell in the village tower rang out, startling us both. The last time I'd heard that bell ring was eight years ago, when the royal guard stopped for food and shelter for the night on their journey back to the capital. It only rang when the emblem of the capital was seen waving on a flag.

"Do you think it's the guard again?" Yve squeezed my arm.

"Probably. Who else from the capital would venture to Freyhaven?"

Sonya, Yve's little sister, came barrelling down the small hill near the main house. Her braids flapped in the wind while she sprinted toward us on her thin little legs. She looked like she was being chased by a wild boar.

When she finally reached us, she was breathing hard, her chubby cheeks red from the exertion. "Onya..." she had to take in a big breath to continue, "Onya, the White Carriage is heading to your home."

My heart dropped into my stomach. "What? That can't be true."

Sonya nodded vigorously. "I saw it on the road with my own two eyes. The carriage was white and gold, flying the royal flag."

Yve's eyes grew wide, and she pulled on my arm in excitement. "Blessed Freya!! No one ever thought the White Carriage would come here."

My stomach rolled over, and my head swam. This couldn't be happening. It had to be some kind of mistake.

“You should hurry home, Onya.” Yve squeezed my arm again, pulling me from my maudlin thoughts. “Your mother will be frantic, I’m sure, especially if you’re not there to greet the Dagmar.”

“What if I didn’t go home?” The words left me, even though I hadn’t meant to say them out loud.

Yve’s smile instantly dropped. “Why would you do that? This is a blessing, Onya. An honor is being bestowed on you.”

I didn’t agree with her sentiment. It wasn’t an honor but a punishment.

“No one ever thought the representative of the Brull House would come here to our little village. The word of your beauty must’ve reached the nobles’ ears.”

“Or it’s just a coincidence and they are going to all the villages this time.” Oh, how I wished for that to be true. The last thing I wanted was for them to know about me.

Yve hugged me tightly, leaning into my ear. “I would give anything to be chosen, Onya, the chance to be in a union with a noble gentleman, maybe even the prince, is the greatest opportunity. He is of age to be bound with a wife. So, you must go home and accept this honor, for me, for all the women in this village, and the next, who will never get this chance because we were not blessed with the face of Freya.”

When I pulled away, my gaze held hers. We’d been friends since birth, only a year between us—she seventeen, me eighteen—and I’d never heard her speak about wanting to be chosen and taken to the capital to be trained as a beholden wife at the Brull House. Even when the female elders talked about it during private ceremonies with just the women and girls of the village, Yve never commented on what they’d told us.

I had no idea she harbored this secret wish in her heart.

“If I’m chosen, I’ll be taken from the village to live in the capital. I’ll never be able to return. I’d lose my life here with my mother and little brother. With you.”

Her hands cradled my face, caressing my cheek. We weren't ones for public displays of affection, despite the fact that Yve was like my sister. So, the gentle touch threw me off guard, and I had to force myself not to pull away from her. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, especially now when this might be one of our last interactions together.

“Think of what you'll gain, Onya. A husband, wealth, prosperity, children who will never know what it's like to ration food because of a hard winter and a bad harvest. Your family will receive a bounty when you are tied to another. They will never have to worry about nourishment or shelter again either.” When she pressed her lips together, I thought she might cry. “Maybe you'll be lucky and find love as well.”

There were her romantic hopes again. I didn't know how she could believe such things. In my experience, there was no such thing as true love. All relationships were transactional, some burdensome even, and I didn't want to be part of any of that.

Unfortunately, it seemed like I didn't have a choice.

## ONYA



After everything Yve had just confessed to me, I still didn't want to return to my home. My eyes darted toward the thick woods just beyond Yve's homestead. Once more, I thought about running away. I could reach the tree line in two minutes flat.

I knew this land's terrain, hills, and valleys well since I'd hunted here so often. If they couldn't find me, how could they take me to the capital? Surely, I wouldn't be that valuable for the royal guard to spend time to hunt me down. I was just one of many girls heading to the Brull House and their eventual eternal prison.

My thoughts must've shown on my face, as Yve grabbed my arm again and squeezed tightly. "You can't run away, Onya. You know they'll punish your family for it."

We all grew up hearing the stories about the White Carriage and what it would mean for the lucky girls who were selected. Yet, we'd also heard cautionary tales of what happened if a girl ran from her destiny. The most famous story was about Hilda, who lived in a village close to the mountain—though no one could agree on the name of the village. One time it was Oxbrooke, and another it was Stormdenn, but the end result was always the same.

When the royal guards couldn't find Hilda, her family, her mother, father, and younger sister were stripped of all their possessions—including money, home, and livestock. They were forced to live on the streets, begging for food, and any townsfolk who tried to help them were punished with the same fate. The story says the sister died early on from malnutrition, and her mother drowned herself in the nearby lake.

Sometimes, the tale changed, saying she threw herself off a cliff, and in others, she cut her own throat. The end was always the same though. Death and despair.

Honestly, I never fully believed the story, as it seemed to change depending on who was telling it, but I understood its purpose. To instill fear on those who sought to defy the crown. The thought did go through my mind, what if it was true?

Could I do that to my mother and little brother? Could I even take the risk?

“I will return home.” Turning around, I started up the small rise. My homestead was just on the other side, past the dirt road leading into the main village.

“Don't you want to clean up first?” Yve pointed to the basin of water next to the animal shelter.

I shook my head. “Maybe they won't take me if they see a muddy, wild girl.”

“A bit of mud won't hide your beauty, Onya.”

She was probably right, but I didn't comment as I ran up the small grassy knoll. I wanted to hold on to any hope, even if it was a tiny sliver, barely discernable to the eye. Maybe the selector would take one look at me—the mud, and dirt all over my dress, face, and hands, even at my hair in disarray—and decide that I would be too much trouble to turn into a lady. That the effort wouldn't be worth the result.

Fighting the thoughts of escaping into the dark forest, I took my time walking to the house. I would have no problem fending for myself since I knew how to hunt, which bushes had the best berries, and where to dig to find mushrooms and roots to eat. I could easily build a shelter by the stream that ran

into Darkfall Tarn, and have fresh water to drink. It wouldn't be easy, but I could definitely live well without a house, or food from the market.

*Mother wouldn't be able to, though. She was much too fragile.*

That was the thought that drove my steps forward, until I crossed the road and reached the edge of my homestead.

The White Carriage sat in front of the house, with two big roan horses still hitched to the cart by leather traces. The gold glinted in the sunlight, and I'd never seen something so magical. I had to fight the urge to touch the decorative wood and metal.

A large man in a fancy white and gold uniform stood at attention near the carriage, and I wondered if he had to remain like that, unmoving, the entire time. Seeing him here, at attention, his body stiff, made me want to run at him to try to topple him over, like the wooden toy soldiers with which my brother played.

As I neared, his gaze flitted to me, eyes widening. He took a step forward, as if to stop me from entering my house, but I put my hand out in defense.

“Don't even try it, *doonga*. I live here.”

Before he could even respond, I brushed right past him.

I imagined he was not use to anyone speaking to him in that manner, calling him a stupid, lazy person, especially a young woman. It put a little bounce in my step when I came into the main foyer of the long house. Though, that bounce deflated when I heard my mother's voice coming from the kitchen.

“Would you like some tea, *damma*, while we wait for Onya to return from her chores?”

There came a discernable *tsk* and then a deep gravelly voice, that sounded like sandpaper to my ears. “Have you not sent someone to retrieve her? I will not wait much longer in this manner. It's disrespectful to me and to the crown. *Blessed Freya*. Woman, have you no sense?”

“Excuse my wife, *damma*, she is quite dimwitted.”

My hands curled into fists as I stormed into the kitchen. “How dare you speak about my mother like that?”

I stopped a mere foot away from my stepfather and glared at him. He was a tall man, but reedy and weak. He used to be able to punish me when I was younger, but as soon as I didn't wilt under his malicious gaze anymore, and began staring defiantly at him without uttering a sound while he hit me in the arms and shoulders with his stick, he stopped trying. Something told me he was worried I would snatch the stick from his hand and hit him with it twice as hard.

If he had continued, I would've done just that.

My mother shook her head at me, taking in my dirty state, but then smiled, coming to my side and setting her hand on my shoulder. She turned me slightly, so I faced the old woman sitting in one of the kitchen chairs, her silver tipped cane clutched in one bony hand. The matron wore a blue headscarf over her hair, but I could still see gray braids peeking out. Her blue, wool dress was formless and hung to her feet, the kirtle pulled over a brown, wool, long sleeved tunic.

It was the traditional, sexless uniform of the Dagmar, the one who trained young girls to be ladies. I'd heard stories about her cold, emotionless gaze and heavily lined rough face, the tales were mild compared to the reality of her sitting in front of me.

In the back of the room, standing alone and unnoticed, was a short, rotund man whose clothes strained over his large belly. A mustache and a clipped beard covered his face while his gaze remained fixed on me, making me wonder who he was and why he was here.

“Here is my Onya.” My mother squeezed my shoulder, reminding me of my manners. “Isn't she beautiful? With a face like Freya.”

Holding my hands in front of my body, I lowered my eyes, then bowed to the old woman, as was custom when greeting an elder. When I straightened, she was scrutinizing every inch

of me. It made me extremely uncomfortable, but I knew I had to endure it.

“Why are you so muddy, child?”

“I, ah, was helping my friend with her pigs.”

“You must be strong then.”

“I am.”

My mother poked me in the side. “Don’t be so impudent, Onya. Ladies should never be boastful.”

“Well, I’m not a lady. Nor will I ever be.” My words were a clear challenge to the Dagmar as I matched her gaze.

Her small smile was unexpected.

My stepfather kicked me in the side of my calf. “Your rudeness is embarrassing this family. Embarrassing me.”

I whipped around to glare at him. Satisfaction filled me when I saw him slightly flinch back, his eyes falling to the fist curled at my side.

The Dagmar tsked again. “Leave her be. She’s showing me exactly who she is, and what I must work with.”

Surprised, I turned back to her. This was not going as I had planned. I wanted her to be disgusted with my impetuosity, with my rebellious nature, not intrigued.

“Court isn’t an easy place for a young woman,” she explained. “Her obvious hard-headedness might well be an asset. That is not a place for someone weak.”

“So, you’ll take her to the capital?” my mother asked, her voice small.

It was hard to tell if she was pleased or upset at the possibility. I’d hoped she would be upset as I was the only one who protected her when Iver was drunk, in a rage, and looking for an outlet.

The Dagmar stood and slowly moved closer to me, her gray eyes like icicles piercing my flesh while she scrutinized



my face. Lifting her cane, she pressed the tip to the side of my jaw and turned my head one way then the other.

“Show me your teeth, girl.”

I tilted my head up, lifting my upper lip in a sneer.

Satisfied, she nodded and grasped my upper arm, squeezing it tightly. Her hand went to my waist next, moving down over my hip. She pressed hard against my bones.

“She is comely, to be sure, despite all the mud trying to hide it. She’s quite angular though, but seems to have good, sturdy hips.” The Dagmar took a step back, her gaze falling to my chest.

My hand instinctively moved to cover myself, but my mother pulled my arm down to my side again.

“Her bosom is small, but of course, that will change when she is heavy with child.”

The notion of having children, of my body growing and expanding with a new human life inside my womb, made my stomach roil. Nausea rolled over me and I had to bite down on my lower lip from reacting to that feeling.

Never had I expressed these thoughts to anyone, wouldn’t dare speak them out loud, but I didn’t want to be bound to a man or have children. I wanted a life of adventure and freedom. Being tied to one person and to a home just didn’t appeal to me.

However, I knew that among my people, and the girls I grew up with, my thoughts were not normal. So, I’d always resigned to keeping them to myself and figuring out a plan to wiggle my way out of such a situation, even if by my quick-witted tongue and sheer will alone. I’d managed to stave off several marriage proposals over the past year by being obstinate and cutting with my remarks. No man wanted a troublesome wife.

Now, I was faced with such a life. One not in my village where I could find some solace and support in my mother and my friends, but in the capital, a city I’d never hoped to ever see in my lifetime. A place I never wanted to be part of. I

never once thought about being noble or being among the royal elite.

While some of the girls in my village dreamed of meeting the prince, falling in love, and being a princess with a castle in the bustle and chaos of the big city, I dreamt of chasing deer through the woods with my bow, of jumping into cold lakes after a hard day of sweaty work, of laying on the grassy plain while looking up at the vast sky of sparkling lights, wondering why they existed.

“I assume she’s menstruated.”

I was set to tell the truth, that I hadn’t bled yet. That the village healer told me that it wasn’t unheard of but rare.

But my mother nodded. “Of course she has.”

The Dagmar nodded with satisfaction. “Pack your bag with some personal items and essential clothes, then say your goodbyes to your family, child. We will be leaving for the capital within the hour.”

A small gasp escaped my mother’s lips and I turned to look at her. Tears welled in her eyes, which tore at my heart. I knew her tears weren’t only for me, but for herself and my brother Peder. I’d been the only thing standing between them and Iver’s temper.

“No,” I declared, turning back to the Dagmar.

The old woman frowned, the lines on her face cutting deep into her flesh. She made that offended tsking sound again. “What do you mean, no?”

“I won’t leave. I refuse to go to the capital. There are plenty of other pretty girls in the village who would jump at the chance to marry some stupid, fat nobleman and have babies.”

My stepfather flinched beside me. “You insolent bitch!” He raised his hand to strike me, but the Dagmar’s cane stopped his blow with an audible *smack* against his forearm.

“You dare strike a ward of the Brull House?” the Dagmar’s eyes flashed like ice at Iver. “You could be publicly whipped

for such an act.”

It made me happy to see true fear in his eyes as he lowered his arm, favoring it a bit where he'd gotten hit. I'd never seen my stepfather afraid, so I hoped it hurt and left a bruise to remind him of his failure to hit me.

He bowed his head. “Please forgive me, *damma*. I forgot myself for a moment.”

Her derisive sniff easily discounted his words before her steely gaze focused on me again. “I don't think you truly understand the situation, girl. You should be grateful for this opportunity to travel to the capital and fulfill your duty of birthing the next lineage of noble citizens. It is a great honor, and you should treat it with the respect it deserves.”

Defiance rose in me once more as I stared at her, carefully considering my next words.

Then she leaned into my ear. “Think about your mother and your little brother, and their fate.” She pulled away and turned her back on me. “Pack lightly, when we reach the Brull House you will be given a new wardrobe fitting of a potential lady of the court.”

The Dagmar left the kitchen before I could respond to her last words. They were definitely a threat. The stories about what happened if a girl refused the selection must've been true. She had given me no choice but to accept my fate.

Once she was gone, the fat man left, so did my stepfather. It was just me and my mother, frozen on the spot at the realization of the situation. Her tears fell as she grabbed my arm and turned me to face her, but I didn't reach out to stop them. And I was too numb to cry.

“I'm sorry,” she stammered.

Frowning, I looked down at her. What was she sorry about? It wasn't her fault that the Dagmar came to collect me for her stable of broodmares.

Pulling her into my arms, I hugged her tightly. “It's okay, mama. I'll be fine. You just make sure you look after Peder and do whatever you have to do to stay safe.” I pushed her

back and looked her in the eyes. “Don’t let him hurt you anymore.”

She wiped at her tears but ignored what I’d just said to her. “Write to me if you can. I want to hear everything about the capital and about the fine young men who will beg to court you.”

I smirked at the “fine young men” part. In my opinion, there was no such thing as a fine nobleman. They lived in their gilded houses with servants, balls, and banquets, while their people struggled to eat.

Finally, I sighed. “Mama, you can’t read.”

“I’ll get Peder to read it to me. He’s been doing really good in his schooling.”

To that I nodded. “I’ll write as often as I can.”

Earnestly, she cupped my face with her hands. “I wish I could’ve done more for you, Onya. I feel like I failed you in so many ways.”

I covered her hands with mine. “I know it wasn’t easy after Papa died. I know you had to make hard choices to keep a roof over my and Peder’s heads. I never blamed you for *him*.”

Standing on her toes, mama kissed my forehead. “I hope you know that you are loved, my girl.”

Pain sliced through the numbness, and I had to bite my bottom lip to stop tears from welling in my eyes. I couldn’t remember the last time my mother had kissed me or told me that I was loved. Maybe just after my father died when I was eleven.

Then she dropped her hands and stepped back, wiping away the tears. “Go clean yourself up, pack your bag, and then say your goodbyes to Peder.”

Hardening myself, I left my mother in the kitchen, and went into the separate small area in the long house that Peder and I shared. A place for sleeping and quiet moments for us where I would often read or whittle a new toy for Peder. We both had small cots, the mattress stuffed with soft grass, the

blankets made from cotton and fur lined for the cold winter months.

There was also a small basin of cool water sitting on the windowsill that I'd used to wash early this morning. I used it now to wipe off the mud from my face, neck, and arms. I didn't have time to wash my hair, so I just untied it from the nape of my neck and ran a comb through it. It didn't help with the multitude of tangles in it, but I couldn't be bothered to fix that before I rolled it up along the back of my neck and refastened it.

Removing my overdress and the sheath underneath it, I grabbed my thinner burgundy cotton dress, and pulled it over my head, wrapping my wide leather belt around it, then buckling it to the side. I didn't have a second pair of good walking boots, so I just managed by wiping the caked-on mud from the leather. My favorite, thick wool cape fell comfortably over my shoulders to keep me warm even in winter, and I fastened it with a silver brooch my mother gifted to me on my eighteenth birthday.

It was in the shape of a dragon so I thought it fitting, considering the capital was very close to Fire Mountain and the birthplace of the dragon myths. Maybe the talisman would protect me.

Next, I grabbed a small leather bag from the corner that I often took out with me when I went hunting for small game—it usually carried the bracers that protected my forearms when using my bow, leather gloves for pulling the bowstring, and my belt sheath which held my small iron dagger. I removed the bracers and gloves but left the knife. Just in case. Finally, I shoved another cotton dress inside it, my warm underclothes, and my leather-bound journal where I wrote and drew.

Packed, I took one last, long look at the room I'd grown up in. In all honesty, I knew that I eventually would have left this house to have a house of my own, but I never thought I'd be taken against my will across the country, to live an entirely different life.

I pinched my leg to stop from crying. It wouldn't do me any good to be seen as fragile and weak. Although, I didn't know much about life in the capital, I did know that I was going to a very dangerous place, among dangerous people, and I couldn't allow myself to be seen as a target for those who wished to bully and abuse.

Bag in hand, I left the room and went in search of my little brother. I easily found him outside, playing with one of the stray dogs that lived in and around our homestead, and Yve's. Peder often fed the dogs scraps from meals that he hid in his pockets so Mother and Iver wouldn't see. My mother knew though. I would often catch her smiling when he thought no one was looking, and put a crust of bread in his pocket.

My brother squatted on the ground, petting one of the mangy mutts—the one he called Muck because the dog smelled like cow manure. His head lifted as I approached, his gaze tracking the bag in my hand.

“Are you going hunting?” he asked, skipping over to me. “Can I come this time? I promise I'll be quiet and won't scare the birds off.”

“I'm not going hunting.” My throat grew tight. “I'm, ah, going on a trip.”

“A trip?” He frowned. “To where?”

“I'm going to the capital.”

Peder's eyes grew big. “You are? For how long? Will you bring me back a present?”

I hated seeing the excitement on his face, knowing I was going to crush it. I set my hand on top of his flaxen colored head. It would darken as he aged, as it had with mine. “I don't know how long I'll be gone. So, you're in charge now. You have to take care of Mother.”

It was clear he was about to argue with me, so I grabbed his chin between my fingers and looked him dead in the eyes, let him know that what I was telling him was serious and that he needed to listen carefully to me.

“Do you understand what I’m saying to you, Peder? About taking care of Mother?”

Slowly, he nodded, his eyes welling with tears. “You’re not coming back, are you?”

For a long moment, I just glanced at him, but then shrugged, hoping to lighten the situation a little. “You never know. Life has a way of surprising us every now and then.”

He slammed into me, wrapping his arms around my waist, hugging me hard and tightly.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I patted his head, leaning down to his ear. “If I can make it back, I will. So, you must be strong now, to make sure there’s still a home to come back to. You can’t let Iver destroy it.”

“I won’t.” He sniffled into my side.

I untangled Peder’s arms and pushed him back. If I let him, he would cling to me all the way out the gate to the carriage waiting for me on the road. Tapping his head once more, I walked away, not daring to look back at him, or the house. My mother would be standing in one of the windows to watch me leave and I didn’t want to see her eyes filled with tears.

Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I trudged down the dirt road leading away from my home. As I neared the small barn where we kept our horse and all the tilling machines for the garden that had hardly grown anything this year, voices came from inside it. One of them belonged to my stepfather. Since I didn’t want him to see me, I crept closer to the structure and pressed myself up against the wall, peering around the corner and through the open door.

Iver stood there, talking to the fat man I’d seen in the kitchen earlier. The man handed my stepfather a large leather satchel that resembled the coin purse I carried on market days. Except much bigger.

“One hundred gold, the agreed upon price,” the fat man offered.

Iver’s bushy eyebrows came together. “I was told it would be one hundred and fifty for her.”

“One hundred to take her to the Brull House, but the extra fifty is paid if she manages to wed a nobleman. If she fails and becomes a *hendey*, you don’t get the extra payment. A servant is not worth the price of a wife.”

It felt like I’d been slapped in the face. The collectors for the Brull House hadn’t come to my village because they’d heard about me and my beauty. They came because my stepfather sold me. Like a broodmare. Like cattle. Like a pig for the slaughter.

I ducked down behind the barrel of water as the fat man came out of the barn and headed down the path to the main road. When he was out of sight, I stood again and peered into the barn. Grinning like a weasel, Iver opened the pouch and grabbed a fist full of gold coins. He marveled at them, then dropped them back into the satchel.

My stomach rolled over at the sight. I watched as he hid the coin purse under a bale of hay. It was a place my mother would never happen upon because she never came into the barn. The bastard was hiding the money from her. Money that could and would change her circumstances.

I walked away from the barn, not down the road to the waiting carriage like I should have, marching into the house instead—to the kitchen where my mother had been standing at the window to watch me leave.

Surprised, she turned to me when I approached. “What are you—?”

Urgently, I grabbed her by the upper arms. “Iver sold me to the Dagmar and is going to hide that money from you.” Blood drained from her face, and she opened her mouth to ask questions, but the look in my eye stopped her. “He hid the bag of coins in the barn, under the hay in the far corner. Prepare a time and day to leave him, you, and Peder, and arrange to go and stay with Aunty Helly. When you’re ready, go to the barn, get the coins, and leave.”

“Onya... I—”



“Promise me you’ll do this, Mother. I won’t be able to leave otherwise.”

She held my gaze for a long moment, then finally nodded. “I promise.”

My hands dropped. “However long it takes me, no matter what I must do, I will return here and I will kill Iver for everything he has done. That is a promise I make to you.”

## ONYA



By the time I reached the waiting carriage, along with three covered wagons on the main road leading out of Freyhaven to head east, I was exhausted. Not physically, as it wasn't a long walk from my house to the road, but emotionally. I was so drained that I could've easily collapsed on the ground and slept, but I didn't have that luxury as my fight against my fate was just starting.

When I approached the White Carriage, the driver opened the door, kicked down the steps. The Dagmar stepped out, hiking up her long skirt.

"You are late."

"Well, it's too bad you didn't leave without me."

Her cane smacked me in the thigh. She'd acted so quickly that I hadn't expected it. It stung, but I'd had worse, so I kept my face neutral, as if it didn't affect me.

"You would do well to hold your tongue, girl."

"I thought it was a blasphemy to strike a ward of Brull House?" I knew I was pushing my luck, but I wanted her to know that I wouldn't be an easy target.

"Not by me, it isn't." Her gray eyes flashed sharply. She raised her cane again, and I thought I was going to get a blow

to the head this time, but instead, she pointed to the wagon directly behind the carriage. “You will ride in that one.”

As I trudged toward the waiting wagon, I took in the multitude of guards on horseback cantering back and forth along the road, and the guards on foot, swords sheathed on hilts around their waists. They all looked outfitted for war and not a simple accompaniment to the caravan. It made me wonder if they were expecting trouble along the route to the capital.

When I reached the cart, one of the guards who had been stationed nearby, tipped his head to me and offered his hand to help me board. I could’ve easily gotten in on my own, but decided I’d play the game a little. Accepting his help, I pushed the canvas cover aside and stepped inside it. Five sets of eyes looked up at me. Four of them were curious, the other one was full of contempt.

There was another girl in the wagon, sitting by herself while dressed in a simple, brown wool sheath, and a head covering similar to the one the Dagmar wore, but not as elaborate. She didn’t look at me though, her gaze was set on the floor. It was obvious that she didn’t want to draw any attention to herself.

“Ugh, we really did come to the dregs of the country,” the contemptuous one rolled her big blue eyes, as she stuck her tiny nose up into the air. At my side, my hands instantly curled into fists. If she had been one of the village girls, I might’ve thrown a punch.

The girl wore a burgundy dress with fitted arms, puffed up shoulders, and form fitting bodice. Her golden blond hair was in a long braid draped over her shoulder. Clearly, she came from some sort of wealth; her father was probably a landlord, as she seemed like a person accustomed to looking down at others less fortunate.

Instantly, I disliked her, and with the way she regarded me, the feeling was most definitely mutual.

“Don’t mind her.” One of the other girls grabbed my hand and pulled me down onto the cushioned bench next to her. “I

think that since we're all in this together, we should be friends."

Her smile was big and warm, genuine. She was dressed similarly to me, simple and of spare means, but her generous curves filled out her blue dress more than mine did. Her hair was dark as well, which was not often seen around the area. The girl must've come from a village from up north.

"I'm Iren. That's Mina, Linn, Dagny, and Margo." She gestured to the other girls seated on the two benches on either side of the wagon. The last of them, Margo, seemed to have already made up her mind about me, and it wasn't friendly in any way.

"I'm Onya."

I only had a few minutes to get settled before the wagon started to move. It was going to be a long journey across Andlang to Jarlstad, the capital, three days at least, so I was thankful we had cushions to sit on, and after a quick survey of the cart, I saw we had some rations of dried fruit and water to share. Since I imagined we would make camp when it got too dark to travel the road safely, sleeping together in the wagon, Margo better hope that I didn't sleep near her, or she was going to get a kick in the leg during the night.

For the first little bit, the girls all shared a bit about themselves. I'd been right about Iren; she was from a small village in the north called Frostford. I'd also been right about Margo. She was from a bigger town west of Freyhaven called Gullvale, which translated into the valley of gold.

Not that I cared to ask, but I knew without a doubt that she was the daughter of a landlord. The privilege was etched on everything about her, her clothes, her shoes, the manner in how she spoke and in the perfect paleness of her skin. She probably hadn't worked a day outside in her life. Life at court likely wouldn't be much different for her. It would fit her well just like the fabric around her chest.

A petite girl with strawberry blond hair and big green eyes, Linn I thought, started talking about how the White Carriage

just showed up in her village and immediately came to her house, and what a shock it had been to her and her parents.

“I was so surprised when the Dagmar stepped out of the carriage and came into our home to talk to me.” Her hand fluttered at her chest. “To think that she’d heard about me and had traveled all that way to bring me to the capital.”

Dagny nodded. “Yes, it was quite surprising but exciting for me too.”

Margo made a little snickering noise, but turned away when I glanced at her. “Surprising to me, too... that some of you are here.” Her words were muffled but I heard her well, as did the other girls.

I gestured to her. “You weren’t surprised when they showed up on your door, I suppose.”

“Not really, no. I’ve had several offers of marriage from various noblemen in my town, but I turned them all down knowing that the White Carriage would come for me. I was destined to marry well and live in the splendor of the capital.”

Chuckling, I shook my head.

“You think that’s funny?” She glared at me.

“Not really,” I admitted. “I think this whole ruse is tragic.”

Iren frowned. “What do you mean ruse?”

“The White Carriage didn’t come because someone from the capital heard of ‘our beauty.’ I stared Margo in the eyes, making sure she really heard and understood my next words. I didn’t know why, I wasn’t normally a petty or vindictive person, but I wanted to deflate her ego and hurt her pride. “Each of our families sold us to the Brull House for gold coin.”

As Iren’s eyes widened, she flinched back, as if I’d just slapped her across the face. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“Because it’s true.”

The others all balked at my words, but hesitation clouded some of their gazes, as if they were going over the events that brought them into this wagon with five other girls from different parts of the country. Remaining silent, they tried to decide if it made any sense. The lone girl in the corner instantly snapped her head up to look over at me.

“You’re lying,” Margo sneered.

“Why would I lie about such a thing?”

“Because you’re trying to upset me.”

It was telling that she’d only mentioned upsetting her and not the other girls. Although, I’d just met her, I wasn’t surprised. I knew girls like her—self-centered, arrogant, only concerned with how events affected them. Not caring if those around them got injured, as long as they were safe.

“Let me ask you this, then. When the Dagmar visited you, was there a short, fat man with a beard also present?”

Margo’s gaze dropped, making it obvious that I’d been right.

“Yes, I remember him. He just hovered in the background and never spoke to anyone,” Iren explained, and the others all nodded.

“Before I left, I saw this man give my stepfather a bag of gold. He paid him one hundred coins for me.”

Linn gasped, her hand fluttering to her throat. “It can’t be.”

“My stepfather would get another fifty gold coins if some nobleman decided that he liked me enough to tie hands with me and make me his broodmare. But would get no more money if I was to be rejected.”

As I spoke, the girl with the head covering avidly watched me and listened to my words, making me sense that she knew what I was talking about. She worked for the Brull House, so I imagined she knew all kinds of things that would shock us.

“Maybe that’s what happened to you,” Margo sneered. “I wouldn’t be surprised, considering how you look and act. But my father and mother would never do that to me.” She flipped

her braid off her shoulder. “Besides, it’s not like my family needs money. We have lots of land and tenants paying rent.”

“But what about queen Gudrid?” Mina asked, her eyes pleading when she leaned forward. “She was plucked from her small village by the Dagmar because she was so beautiful, brought to the capital and married the king.”

My head shook at the absurdity. “It’s a story. A story to make us feel like we were destined to be chosen, to be trained at the Brull House. In truth, it’s just another way for the nobles to own us, to force us to have babies.”

Every one of them gasped. Iren even flinched away from me, and I realized too late that I shouldn’t have expressed my true thoughts and feelings. These girls weren’t my friends, and I wasn’t going to a friendly place. I needed to guard myself more.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that,” Margo snickered. “No nobleman is going to want you for a wife. You’ll likely end up as a *hendey*,” she gestured to the girl with the headscarf, “and work in the capital for the rest of your life as a servant.”

Though I didn’t know the word *hendey*, I understood about being a servant. I knew that was a possibility, especially for me, considering I wasn’t the most amiable young woman. Hadn’t I already just told the Dagmar that it would be impossible to turn me into a lady?

“I’d rather be a servant than be bound to some rich, fat old man who I have to obediently bed at his whim.”

“Stop it!” Iren glared at us both. “We have a long trip ahead of us and having you two arguing the whole way will be bothersome. Besides, it doesn’t really matter how we all got here. These are our circumstances now, and we need to learn how to live with it.”

“I’m excited about living in the capital,” Mina admitted, grabbing Dagny’s hand. “We’ll get fine dresses and sleep in big comfy beds *and* eat whatever we want. That is a far cry from what I would’ve been offered in my village.”

Dagny nodded. "I'm excited too."

I thought about arguing with them, trying to get them to understand the truth, but the girl with the headscarf slowly shook her head at me. She was telling me to shut up, and for once in my life, I decided to listen. It wouldn't do me or them any good anyway.

Pressing my lips together, I discreetly slid down the bench, away from the others while they chatted amiably about all the good food and fine things they were going to have once they arrived at Brull House. I crossed my arms over my chest and rested my head back against the wagon. I wasn't sure I could sleep, but I closed my eyes anyway to try. At least it would give me an excuse not to engage with the others for a while. They were probably happy about that as well.

I must've dozed off, because the sudden stop of the wagon jerked me upward, making me feel disoriented. The jarring motion threw two of the girls off the bench and onto the floor. Outside, I could hear concerned shouts and the clapping of horse hooves. Something had happened.

As the others helped each other up, I moved over to the canvas flap that acted like the door and lifted it slightly, sticking my head out to see what was happening. One of our guards stood at attention at the front of the wagon.

"Hey," I shouted at him. "What's going on?"

"I guess there's a downed tree blocking the road," he replied without looking back at me. His gaze searching the surrounding woods, and his hand went to the hilt of his sword. "The *Asatora Drecki* may be lurking in the shadows."

Frowning, I peered into the thick woods that lined both sides of the road right where he had. I'd read about the *Asatora Drecki* in a book marked forbidden by the elders. Marcus, one of the older village boys, stole it from the elder house and showed it to me—trying to impress me I supposed. We'd read it together one late night, hiding in the barn while sipping on mulled wine, something he'd also stolen.



They were supposedly a brutal gang of killers and thieves who believed that the dragons were still the rightful rulers of Andlang. Their sole goal was to find the last dragon. For years, they had been roaming the country and elsewhere to locate *the Lord of Fire*, cutting down anyone in their way.

I'd scoffed while I read that small passage, as I didn't believe there were dragons. Maybe a thousand years ago, but they died off long ago. It was madness to belong to a group like that. I made mention of that to Marcus, but he thought it would be thrilling to be part of something like that. Thrilling wasn't the word I would've used. Afterward, I'd pretty much dismissed the idea that a group like that existed.

Obviously, I'd been wrong as I could definitely hear fear in the guard's voice.

The tall thick trees on either side of the road all looked healthy, not rotten. The only thing that might've felled a large tree like that would have been lightning, except there hadn't been a storm in the area for weeks.

I was about to ask for more information but the *thwap* sound of an arrow flying through the air stopped me, and the *thunk* of it as it speared the guard right through the neck.

## ONYA



**B**lood spurted from the guard's neck, as he fell to the ground. Instinctively, he reached for the arrow to pull it out, but that wouldn't have saved him. The second that iron tip pierced his flesh he was a dead man.

I wasn't a stranger to death. As a hunter, you had to be firm in your resolve to take a life, but that had always been for survival, for sustenance. This was brutal killing, and it made my stomach roll over in disgust.

"What's going on?"

"Who's shouting?"

The other girls worriedly asked behind me.

Before I could pull my head back in to tell them what was happening, three men dressed in black leather and carrying curved swords sprinted out from the darkness of the thick woods.

Their long hair was tied back to reveal their sun-withered faces, but beards of varying lengths still obscured their features. One man's jacket only had one sleeve, clearly showing ink markings resembling the scales of a snake on his exposed arm.

I'd never seen men like those, they were definitely *not* Andlangers.

Hoping the strange men hadn't noticed me, I ducked back under the cover of the wagon.

Iren grabbed my arm, panic flaring in her eyes. "Something bad is happening, isn't it?"

There was no point in lying or trying to placate them. It wouldn't do anyone any good not to be prepared for the worst. I nodded. "We're under attack."

"By who?" Linn jumped to her feet.

"I'm not sure." I started searching the space for anything to use as a weapon. "Do any of you know how to fight?"

More shouts came from outside, followed by horses hooves.

"Protect the Dagmar at all costs!"

"Secure the wagons! They're after the women."

The guards' shouts sent the girls into a tizzy, every set of eyes widening in horror. Margo was about to open her mouth, probably to scream, so I grabbed her and clamped my hand over her lips. "Don't scream. They'll hear you."

She struggled against my hold, then bit down on my hand. It stung instantly, so I pulled my arm back. When I looked down at the palm, I found that, thankfully, she hadn't broken skin, but I could definitely see some teeth marks. Obviously, the girl had some fight in her, which was good, because I suspected we were going to need it.

I found a shovel near the back of the wagon, a helpful tool to use if we ever got stuck in the mud and handed it to Margo. Out of all of them, I deduced she'd be the one who to swing the hardest at anyone attacking her. The others might prove to be too squeamish for violence, even if to defend themselves.

My attention shifted to the girl with the scarf. "Do you have something for defense? Surely, you know how to fight?"

She nodded, picking up the wooden staff that had been lying next to her feet.

“You stay here and stay quiet.” I gestured to the others before I opened my bag and took out my dagger, gripping it with the blade down so it was easier to wield. “I’m going to go check on the situation.”

Iren grabbed my arm. “We should all stay here together. You might get hurt.”

“The guards will protect us,” Linn assured, “I’m not sure what you think you can do for us but draw attention.”

She was probably right, but I couldn’t just stay here and do nothing. I felt vulnerable just waiting for something to happen, waiting to be attacked, and I hated that sensation. If we were going to be attacked by the *Asatora Drecki*, I wanted to see it coming, so I could at least have some time to react and protect myself.

“I’ll come with you.” The girl with the scarf moved to the front of the wagon.

“What’s your name?”

“Ester.” Her voice quivered a little.

I touched her shoulder to try and reassure her, but my hand also shook, so I snatched it back, tucking it into my side to hide it. “I’ll take a look to make sure it’s safe, then we’ll quietly step out and stand by the horses.” I didn’t say it, but the animals would make good shields for us from arrows. Although, I wondered if it would be best to unhook them from the cart so they didn’t gallop off in a panic, taking the girls with them and risking even more harm.

Slowly, I lifted the flap and peered out. Several guards ran toward the wagons in front of the White Carriage, shouting instructions to each other, but so far, it seemed that our wagon was not directly under attack.

“Okay, let’s go.”

I pushed the canvas aside, and crouching, I jumped to the ground, then turned to help Ester so she didn’t fall. Once we were outside, I searched the immediate area around us. Fighting sounds came from in front of us and behind us. There

were two guards standing by the horses, and they both turned in surprise when we emerged.

The bigger one with a broad face and hawk-like nose swung around with his dagger raised. “What the blazes are you doing?! Get back in the wagon!”

“We want to help,” I offered, only for him to scoff.

“How can you help? You are women, too weak to fight.”

“You’re too important to the kingdom. You’re to be protected.” The other guard tried to grab my arm to lift me back into the wagon, but I stepped away, dodging his attempt.

“Is it the *Asatora Drecki* attacking us?” I asked.

The second guard shook his head. “No, it’s slavers from Katharos; they are worse.”

Without another word, the big guard took hold of Ester and dragged her back to the others. I was about to stop him when two big men in black leather charged out of the trees. The sight of them nearly loosened my bladder.

I quickly got in behind one of the horses. Not the best position, considering one solid kick to my midsection would break all my ribs. One kick to the head and I’d likely be drooling out of the side of my mouth for the rest of my life—if I even lived. Yet, I figured I’d take my chances with the horse than with the big, scary man and his big, scary blade.

Before the guard carrying Ester could turn and draw his sword, one of the men in black swiped his blade across his back. It cut through the guard’s leather vest and to his skin, blood staining the sword as the slaver lifted it again to strike.

As the guard dropped Ester, she landed awkwardly on the ground, her knee buckling to the side. Yet, the guard swiveled, drawing his sword just in time to block the slaver’s next swing. The clanging sound of clashing blades echoed around us, and I winced, not expecting it to be so aggressive and loud.

While those two clashed swords, I lost sight of the other slaver and guard. A quick glance to the wagon, showed Ester struggling to get to her feet. She was out in the open and

vulnerable, so I dashed from my hiding spot between the horses to her side. Grabbing her arm, I yanked her to her feet. Unfortunately, I had to sheath my blade to do so, since I couldn't carry it and her at the same time.

"You should hide," she urged me. "They're looking for girls like you, not me. I'll be safe as long as I don't get in their way."

"I'm not leaving you."

I started to drag her back, to get her behind the wagon but the second slaver came walking out from around the front of the horses. There was blood splattered on his face and hands, and I didn't have to see the body to know that he'd slaughtered the other guard.

My stomach churned at the sight of him bloody with a wild look in his eyes as he walked closer. I settled Ester at the front of the wagon, behind the horses, then drew my dagger from the sheathe on my belt.

Before I could advance, she grabbed my arm, shaking her head. "Don't."

"Just stay out of sight." I crept around the wagon just as the slaver stepped up onto its edge, ready to go inside it.

Charging at him, I took him by surprise and swept my blade across the back of one leg. I only managed to cut the leather, but it definitely got his attention. Turning, he leered down at me, but his eyes widened, and he grinned.

That made my stomach lurch into my throat. I'd never seen anything so evil in my life.

He jumped down and spoke. The words were short, clipped, harsh in my ears. Although I didn't understand any of them, I knew the intent underneath. He was mocking me, playing with me. He looked at me like I was his next meal.

I took up a defensive stance, my arm to the side, dagger tightly gripped, ready to strike if he dared to come any closer.

Chuckling, he did take a step toward me. "You pretty, but too flat, like boy. No good for wife and baby," he said, in

broken Andlangian before taking another step, his smirk making me feel uneasy and dirty. “Good for plaything.”

I sneered in disgust at the thought making me nauseous. “Over my dead body.”

He made a grab for me, but I swiftly swung my blade, slicing the top of his hand. Instinctively, he snatched it back, but then laughed. It wasn’t the reaction I’d hoped for, instead, he seemed utterly amused at the wound on his hand.

A few words left him in the other language, making him sound entertained by my attack, then he tried to grab me again. This time, he anticipated my defense and reached under my swing, to grab the front of my dress. Before he could tug me forward though, Ester appeared behind him, whacking the man across the head with her wooden staff—and breaking it in half from the hard blow.

The loud crack echoed in the night as the man stumbled forward, falling on one knee. Ester’s attack afforded me an opportunity to get away from him, so I dashed out of his reach and back to the wagon. Sadly, he wasn’t stunned for long, and turned to rush us—his eyes dark, a deep scowl on his face.

Grabbing Ester’s arm, I pulled her with me so we could run, but her legs got tangled and she twisted her ankle, falling to the ground. Stopping in my tracks, I swiveled to grab her, but the slaver was too fast, and I too slow. The glint of his sword blinded me as it came down, eliciting a shrill scream before I could even register what was happening.

Then it suddenly cut off.

I didn’t want to look down. I didn’t want to see what I knew to be true. The scent of blood filled my nose, so overpowering that I nearly gagged. Still, my gaze drifted downwards and all I saw was red. It stained everything—her dress, her face, the ground around her. However, it were her eyes that branded an imprint on my brain.

They were still open. Blank. Void. Unseeing.

My entire body trembled, from fear, from anger. At this point, I couldn’t decipher between the two. The only thoughts

that spun through my mind was to hurt, to kill this man for what he'd done.

A shriek so loud that it hurt my own ears ripped from my throat, and I charged toward him. Hoping that one of my swings would sink my blade into his body, I flailed my arms frantically. A crimson haze had shrouded my eyes. Fury, hard and desperate, surged through me.

I was so lost in my attack that I didn't know if I hit my mark at any time. The next thing I knew, someone kicked me in the gut, which catapulted me into one of the horses. My dagger flew out of my hand as I hit its hind leg. The horse reared up, stomping its feet.

One of them nearly missed coming down on my head, but I managed to roll out of the way. My chest and gut throbbed from the blow, and it hurt to move, but I had to get up again. As I grabbed the harness to pull myself up, screams came from inside the wagon.

My heart lurched into my throat. He'd gotten to the girls.

Pushing the pain aside, I scrambled out from between the horses. When I got close to the wagon, cover bulged from something, or someone, being pushed against it. More shouts and screams came, and I watched in horror as a blade of some sort tore through the canvas. The closer I got, the more I recognized the shovel spade that I'd given to Margo poking out of it. I'd been right about her being able to swing it without hesitation.

Just as I was about to climb up, the flap pushed open and the slaver jumped out, knocking me aside. He had one of the girls slung over his shoulder. She was obviously unconscious, as her head bounced against his back with each move. Long dark hair extended down to the back of his leg, sending dread through me.

Iren hung from his shoulder like a prized deer killed for the slaughter. Before I could react, he sprinted across the road and into the trees.



Gathering my breath, I chased after him, but I never reached the treeline. The big guard from before grabbed my arm. I turned to look at him to find blood splotches covered his tunic and leather armor. Behind him, sprawled out on the road, was the other slaver.

“Where are you going?”

“He took Iren. We need to go after him!” I tried to pull from his grip, but his fingers dug into my flesh tighter.

“No, we’re getting back on the road.”

“But he took her. We have to save her.”

The man shook his head. “Sorry, girl, but we can’t risk any more men for a lost cause.”

All the fight seeped out of me as his words sunk into me. Although we were considered valuable to the capital, we still weren’t worth their guards’ lives. All the blood rushed from my head making me dizzy, and I sunk to the ground. Adrenaline had been coursing through me, fueling my fight response, but now it had run its course. Now, I felt empty.

The guard picked me up without effort, carrying me back to the wagon. When I pushed through the flap and went inside, the other girls all stared at me, wide-eyed with fear and horror. Margo’s hair had come out of her braid, and her dress was torn, but she still fiercely gripped the shovel.

“Where was Iren?”

“Where was Ester?”

“Why is there blood on your clothes?”

“Are your hurt?”

“Did you really think you could protect any of us?”

The other girls all shouted questions at me, but I ignored them, sinking onto the bench.

I didn’t have reasonable answers that would bring them any solace.

Resting my head against the side of the wagon, I shut my eyes, hoping that sleep would take me under—for a few hours at least. I didn't want to think about anything, and I especially didn't want to remember what I'd just seen. Maybe I could sleep until we reached the capital. Then, and only then, would I deal with my actions and let the guilt take hold.

Right now, I was too exhausted to care.

## ONYA



After a few more hours on the road, the caravan stopped to make camp for the night along the trees just off the main road. When the wagon stopped, a guard stuck his head through the torn canvas to instruct us to get out. One by one, the girls jumped out, I went last, which was preferable to them. Since the slavers' attack, I'd become a pariah.

Once outside, the guards ushered us over to where another eleven girls gathered. Glancing at each of their faces, I found the same level of horror from what had transpired earlier in their eyes. One of them looked injured since she favored her right arm and had a cut on her cheek. If they had the same number of girls in their wagons initially, I suspected one other girl was taken along with Iren.

Seeing her injuries made me wonder if she fought hard to save her companion.

Margo and the rest made a push to align with the others, leaving me obviously singled out and ostracized. Even before the attack, I'd expected as much. I didn't now, and never had belonged, preferring my own company to others'. Honestly, I found most people either boring or stupid, and sometimes they were both. So, this division didn't really bother me.

The Dagmar came out of her carriage, accompanied by two young women, who were dressed similarly to how Ester

had been dressed. As she stood in front of us, I noticed that more of her gray hair had escaped from the braids underneath her head covering. She looked as disheveled as the rest of us, and for some reason, that made me feel better.

“I understand that two girls were taken,” she began, eyeing the group. “The girl from Moorfell and the one from Frostford.”

“Iren,” I muttered.

The Dagmar’s head turned to look at me, her scowl deepening the lines around her thin mouth. “What did you say?”

I cleared my throat. “Her name is Iren. Not the *girl from Frostford*.”

The matron didn’t like my outburst at all. Her eyes flashed like icy daggers, aimed straight at my throat. “Then I’m sure you remember the name of the *hendey* you got killed. It was Ester, was it not?”

At the mention of her name, my stomach clenched. The image of her slaughtered body was a permanent fixture in my mind. One I was sure to keep for the rest of my life. The Dagmar was right; it was my fault she died. If she hadn’t followed my reckless plan, and stayed in the wagon with the others, she’d likely still be alive.

Despite that, I still tried to defend myself. “I thought I could protect—”

“And that is where you went wrong. You do not think. You need to listen and obey.”

“But—”

“Be quiet!” She banged her staff on the ground, then stepped toward me. “Your foolishness cost Ester her life, and I’d hazard a guess that was how the slaver was able to snatch Iren as well.”

For a moment, I considered justifying my actions, but with the Dagmar’s expression, and the way the other girls were staring at me, it would be in my best interest to keep my

mouth shut from now on. We'd only been on this road for six hours or so, and I'd already made an enemy out of every single person, which was not good considering where we were going. I knew I was going to need allies in the capital if I was going to survive.

After the Dagmar inspected everyone to make sure we were unharmed, and tended to the girl who was injured, we were led into the woods to the small camp and fire prepared. The guards, five less than we started with, took up positions around the perimeter and back by the road to look after the wagons, carriage, and horses.

We each found a place to sit, as rations of bread, jerky, and a bowl of boiled potatoes were passed to us. It wasn't a fancy fair, but it would at least fill our stomachs. Margo and Linn complained about the food, and I had to hold my tongue from criticizing them for it. Flagons of wine were also passed to everyone. When it was my turn to drink, I gulped down as much as I could. Maybe I could knock myself out for the duration of the trip and not have to face the looks of distrust and condemnation.

After we ate, two guards ushered my group back to the caravan to sleep. Once we climbed inside, the other girls all gathered at the far end of the wagon, leaving me with a little room near the canvas opening. It was fine, I was expecting hostilities. Leaning my back against the wall, I sat down and pulled up my knees to my chest, resting my head on top of them. I'd slept in more cramped spaces than this one in the past.

Except when I closed my eyes, sleep didn't come. Instead of the wine relaxing me and making me sleepy, it made my guts churn, leaving a bad taste in my mouth. I desperately needed to walk the feeling off, so once I was sure the others were sleeping, I quietly slipped out through the canvas flap and jumped onto the ground—making sure no guards were looking my way.

The voices of two guards approaching rose in the air, so I crouched low and tucked myself next to the wheel of the wagon, hiding in the shadows.

“A message came from the royal battalion to Herr Torin,” the skinnier man said to his companion. “It must be about the Drecki.”

“Maybe they finally found their encampment,” the other guessed.

They walked by without a glance my way, and once they disappeared past the White Carriage, I stepped out onto the road to follow them. My interest was definitely piqued. I’d read about the dragon cultists, but there hadn’t been a lot of detail, since they were very secretive and had been around for hundreds of years searching for the last dragon and not been caught. It baffled me that these people believed that dragons still existed in Andlang, so I had to know more about them and what drove them to such fantasies.

Quietly, and cautiously, I made my way down the road, keeping to the shadows to make myself as small as possible not to draw attention. I was good at sneaking around, had done it more times than I could count back home. Every few steps I stopped and hid as more guards walked by or took up positions along the road, but I was light on my feet and made little to no sound when I moved.

After getting past the White Carriage and another wagon full of girls, I spotted those two guards cross into the woods on the right. It was pitch black amongst the trees, which meant I had to be extra careful with my steps not to put my foot down on rotting branches, or to trip on snarled brambles and telegraph my presence.

Something told me these men would attack first, without even identifying who I was, and I really didn’t want to get an arrow through the neck for being curious.

I spotted a beacon of light up ahead, most likely a small fire for the guards to warm themselves, and walked toward it. The closer I got, the more my heart thundered in my chest. It was so loud in my ears I was sure they could hear it. When I reached the edge of the small clearing in the forest, I stopped, knowing if I went any farther I would definitely be spotted.

Crouching down behind the trunks of two thick aspen trees that were stuck together like twins, I listened to the chatter of the guards standing around the fire and warming their hands.

“They definitely found where the bastards were hiding,” one of the men assured.

Another shook his head. “I can’t believe it. They’ve been looking for them for years.”

“Was *he* with them? Did they finally capture Dre the Dread?” A younger man asked, his eyes wide.

The first one who had spoken nodded. “That’s what I heard the commander say.”

“Wow. I wonder how many he killed before they could get chains on him.”

Scowling, the first guard threw a chiding look at him. “Watch your tone, boy. It almost sounds like you admire the butcherous criminal.”

The young one shook his head vehemently. “Of course not. He’s traitorous scum, who has brought nothing but brutality and misery to the people of Andlang. I can’t wait until they hang him from the gallows for his crimes.”

It almost sounded like he was protesting too much, and I’d heard the reverence in his voice before too. Another guard, a big man with a full black beard, marched into the camp then, and started barking orders at the other men. I figured that was my cue to leave and creep back to the wagon to try to sleep. Although now, all I could think about was who was this *Dre the Dread*?

I was just about to turn around, when a big hand came down on my shoulder, startling me. My mouth clamped down to stop a yelp from escaping, and as I looked over my shoulder, I found a giant of a man with thick dark eyebrows over dark eyes, and a thick puckered scar that cut down his left cheek.

“What are you doing here, girl?” His voice was low and gruff.

“I, ah,” I stuttered, my mouth going dry.

Gripping the back of my neck, he forced me to walk back to the road. “You’re lucky I found you and not one of the other disagreeable men. A lot of these men have been on the road a long time, and a pretty, young woman alone might be too much of a temptation.”

What he suggested sent a shiver of dread down my spine. Bile rose into my throat and I had to swallow it down or risk gagging. Surely, the young wards of Brull House were off limits to scoundrels, but I supposed one more girl lost to dishonorable men wouldn’t have been a big deal. I had snuck out on my own, without anyone knowing, so they might see me as fair game.

When we reached the road, I thought he was going to ask me which wagon I was riding in, but he immediately marched me to the back of the caravan. Obviously, he knew who I was.

He shoved me forward. “Get back in the wagon and stay there. You’re a big nuisance and you’re going to get yourself hurt. I can’t do my job when you’re running around carelessly.”

“I’m not weak. I’m not some useless girl.” I hated that my voice cracked with emotion.

“I never said you were either of those things.”

His response surprised me, and I wasn’t sure how to react, so I just glared at him.

He gestured to the wagon. “Go inside and get some sleep. We’ll be breaking camp in a few hours.”

I turned to climb up like he wanted.

“Hey.” His voice called my gaze back, and I saw him reach under his leather armor and tunic to pull out a knife. My knife. Then handed it to me. “You dropped this earlier. I’m sure you want it back.”

Swallowing down my shock, I took it, but I didn’t get to answer him. He swiveled on his boot heel and marched away,



each stride long and heavy. I watched him until he disappeared from view, and finally went back inside the wagon.

I settled down on the floor where I'd sat before, staring at dagger he'd returned to me. I twirled it around in my fingers, noticing that it had been cleaned. There was no blood from the slaver tainting the blade.

Honestly, I didn't know why he gave it back to me, couldn't even fathom his reasons. Regardless, I was thankful for his kindness. I slid the dagger back into its sheath on my belt and rested my head onto the wagon wall. I didn't bother to close my eyes, as I knew I was beyond the temptation of sleep. There were too many thoughts spinning around in my head, and I was too anxious about what I would be facing in the capital.

## ONYA



After another long, boring day of travel, the caravan reached Jarlstad, the capital city of Andlang, and home of the Great Fortress of Kings. Because our wagon was covered, we couldn't see the tall wooden gate as we approached, but we heard a mournful horn sound announcing our arrival.

Anxious to see what we were getting into, I went to the front of the wagon and pushed open the canvas flap. I opened it wide enough for all the girls to stick their heads out and watch as the wagon rolled through the large open gate, and into the city proper.

Lining the streets were the most people I'd ever seen in one place. Some manned carts, selling fish, root vegetables, or leather works—like chest armor and wrist bracers—while others milled about to buy. More people bustled along the road, crossing in front of and behind the caravan as they went into various wooden and stone buildings. Signs hung over the doors, identifying taverns, tailors, and shoemakers.

The street seemed to go on forever, as did the line of wooden buildings on either side. Other roads branched off to the left and right with even more buildings and houses. Some people stopped to stare at the wagons as they rolled by, and I wondered if they knew who rode inside them. Surely, they must've recognized the White Carriage and its white dappled

horses. Maybe they didn't know, only stopping out of curiosity, or they didn't care and were just concerned with things going on in their own lives, put off by the long caravan disrupting their day.

I, however, was mesmerized by it all since I'd never been outside of my village of Freyhaven. The sheer scope of the architecture alone was overwhelming. All the structures in my village were one level, here, there were buildings that rose at least three stories high. One we passed by, had several women and men hanging out of windows, or standing on balconies in varying levels of frivolity and undress.

Beside me, Mina giggled as one young man waved at us. She was going to return the greeting, but Dagny grabbed her hand to stop her.

"Don't," she warned. "You can't welcome advances of men who are not of noble birth."

"I wasn't."

"I heard that just smiling at a man can bring punishment."

Mina's smile instantly faded.

I didn't say anything to coddle her, as I suspected there was going to be many things beyond our control that we were going to be punished for if caught. All the girls needed to learn that as fast as possible. Myself included.

As we continued down the main street, it soon opened into a main public square. If I thought the other streets were crowded with people before, then I wasn't prepared for the loud din of hundreds all gathered in the center of the city. Here, the main marketplace thrived with a hundred stalls at every corner—vendors yelling and fighting for customers. The noise reminded me of the grunts and squeals the pigs made when I tried to wrangle them into a new pen.

There were also street performers dancing, singing, and playing varying instruments. One man juggled knives, while another stood on stilts, chasing after screaming children. I'd never seen such a spectacle, not even when the traveling

theatre came to our village every spring to celebrate the equinox.

“It’s all so BIG.” A bit of reverence engulfed Linn’s soft voice.

She was right though. Everything about Jarlstad was big and grand. All encapsulated by the monument made of what looked like black ice in the center of the city square. It had to have been twelve feet tall, and as wide as the wagon.

Marveling at it as we rolled by, I tried to make sense of its shape. It almost looked like it had been something else before it ended up in its current form. I could make out a snake-like body and neck, and on top of that should’ve been a head, but it seemed melted and molded into a different shape. It made me extremely curious about what the statue represented before it was altered.

After the caravan passed through the public square, it stopped in front of a large wood and stone structure atop a set of five stone steps with huge arched doors—the wood etched with sacred runes and scenes depicting the Gods. The doors opened and four figures emerged, two male and two female, their heads wrapped with blue scarfs—a few thin braids peeking out of it.

They were all similarly dressed in sky blue robes that almost covered their bare feet. Their faces were powdered white, with a black streak across their eyes like a mask, and a thin line of black from their bottom lips to their chins. Drawn on their foreheads were three runes, representing the three main Gods.

“I’ve never seen Shamans before.” Mina’s eyes grew wide.

“Neither have I,” Linn admitted.

“I have.” Margo scoffed. “We have a Shaman in our town.”

I didn’t bother telling them about Mad Shiv from my village.

One of the guards opened the door of the White Carriage, helping the Dagmar down so she could meet with the Shamans

at the bottom of the temple steps. She inclined her head to each of them, before they split up and one of them approached each wagon.

As the tall female Shaman took a position near the wagon, I could feel her intense gaze on me. Realistically, she probably wasn't just staring at me since I wasn't the only one hanging out of the wagon, but it definitely felt like it.

She raised her hand, which was also painted black, and drew the rune of Berkana in the air, a line with two sideways triangles, and a short line under it. It was one of the symbols that represented Freya, a blessing of vitality and fertility. The other girls ran two fingers from their bottom lip down to their chin, which was the customary gesture to accept a blessing from an elder.

I hesitated to make the gesture, as I didn't want to be blessed with fertility, causing the Shaman's brow to furrow as she most definitely was looking at me. Although it was considered an act of defiance to do so, I met her gaze, unable to stop myself. I was captivated by her.

As I continued to stare at her, I noticed that her hand, which was down by her leg, suddenly moved. She lifted two fingers and made a lightning bolt shape in the air, then made a fist and knocked it once against her thigh. Her movement was small and quick, indiscernible to someone not studying her like I had been. The symbol she'd made was unknown to me, but I suspected it was something meant just for me.

I finally made the drawing gesture from lip to chin, which seemed to appease the Shaman, because she quickly turned and walked back to the steps where the others waited for her. Once they reunited, they slowly climbed the stone steps and disappeared back inside the temple, the doors shutting behind them with a resounding bang.

The Dagmar returned to the carriage, and then the caravan got going again.

Feeling unsettled and a bit queasy, I pulled back from the open flap and sat down on the bench. I didn't know why the brief encounter with the Shaman rattled me, but I couldn't

deny the feelings of both dread and anticipation in my gut. Maybe I'd offended the woman and the last sigil she wrote in the air had been a curse instead of a blessing. Whatever it was, because I had made the gesture on my chin, I had accepted it into my life.

It wasn't long before the wagon stopped again, but this time, we were told to get out. After everyone grabbed their bags, one by one, the other girls jumped down, though I waited to go last. When it was my turn, I nearly fell down, despite the guard who grabbed my arm for support. It wasn't the motion of jumping that had me wobbly, it was the sight of the Great Fortress of Kings that knocked me off balance.

The fortress sat atop a bluff that overlooked the harbor and the Great Sea. At least twenty steep steps, built into the cliff, led up to the king's house. Royal guards stood at the ready on every other step, and on each side of the lofty entrance. The A-frame structure was three stories high, and so vast that I couldn't see the end of it, including the two other wings that jutted out from each side. I assumed one of those wings belonged to Brull House, where we would eat, sleep, and train to be obedient companions.

Once the Dagmar lined all of us up, she led the way to the Great Fortress of Kings, which would be our new home. For some of the girls it would be a stepping stone to prosperous unions with noble families, for others, it would be the place where they lived the rest of their days—serving those noble families.

To get to the stairs we had to walk under an imposing ten-person wide archway, made up of sheep horns. As I went under it, my gaze marvelled over the structure; there had to be over a thousand horns all locked together as if in battle. For some, it was probably a sign of greatness, strength, and reverence. For me, it was grotesque, giving me the creeps until the hairs on the back of my neck lifted.

As the line of sixteen girls climbed the stairs, I purposely kept last, noticing each guard hold their gaze straight ahead, offering a quick, sharp bow of their head as we passed. Except,

I did catch one reedy guard do a double take on Margo when she walked by him.

Reaching him, I gave him a sly look that caught him by surprise. “Better watch your eyes there, boy. If I saw you, sure as shit someone else could’ve seen you too.”

His cheeks flushed, seeming stunned, and probably considering how to respond or even if he should. I needed to start making allies in the capital, and a royal guard seemed like a good first option. It was those who served, seemingly invisible and mute, who knew the most about a place and a situation.

“Not to worry. I’ll keep that information to myself.” I winked at him, watching his eyes widen, and I thought for sure he was going to faint.

Satisfied, I added a little jump in my step as I kept climbing, but soon I felt a presence behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I saw the guard who found me in the woods and gave my dagger back to me approaching. Each guard he walked past bowed deeply to him.

“Don’t be stupid.”

“Not sure what you mean, *Herr*.” I feigned innocence but made sure to use honorifics, since I was entering the place that those types of things mattered.

Leaning in, he spoke quietly to me. “Learn who you can trust and who you can’t. There are no friends here.”

He then brushed past me, marching up the stairs, and passing all the girls along the way, as well as the Dagmar. The two guards at the doors immediately opened them for him, and he disappeared inside the castle.

I didn’t know what to make of that encounter. Maybe while I was trying to figure out how to make allies in the capital, I’d already made one.

## ONYA



When I finally reached the top of the stairs, everyone was gathered there, waiting. Both the Dagmar and Margo gave me angry looks, as if I'd been the one to make the stairs so steep and plentiful. I ignored them both and got in line behind the other girls—most chatted excitedly about the prospects of finding rich husbands and living comfortable lives. Although a couple who looked as horrified as I felt. I memorized their faces, hoping to make friends later.

*“There are no friends here...”*

The old soldier's voice echoed in my head, so I thought it would be prudent for me to pay attention to his words. He was giving me a warning, though why he had was a whole other question.

Once we were altogether, the Dagmar led us forward to the doors of the fortress. The two guards stationed on either side gave a quick bow to the old matron, then welcomed us inside too.

I couldn't stop myself from gaping in awe when I crossed the threshold and stepped into the Great Hall of the Kings, which was the first thing that greeted us upon entering. Its vaulted ceiling and curved, wooden beams overhead gave the illusion of walking into a temple of worship. The room was long, not wide, and at the far end there were four steps leading



up to a dais where two thrones made of the same black glass that I'd seen in the city square.

I imagined the king and queen sitting there, and all the noblemen gathering in the room before them to make their offerings of fealty to the crown.

“This evening, after you are all properly washed and dressed, you will come into this room to be presented to the nobility of Jarlstad. I suspect some of you will garner interest immediately.”

Her gaze drifted over to me, yet it became hard and cold.

“While others will find it difficult to pique anyone's interest upon first glance. This is why the training you will be going through is vital to your chances of finding a fitting match. You will learn how to be a proper lady. If you fail to receive offers of tying hands, then you will be assigned a role to serve Brull House.”

That didn't sound all too horrible to me. Until I thought of Ester again and my thoughts became dark. I tried to shake them off, but just being in this situation, forced to be some obedient broodmare kept those dark notions front and center.

The Dagmar then gestured to her left, and to the archway leading to the separate wing. “Now I will show you to Brull House, where you will spend the majority of your time. The rest of the fortress will be off limits to you, unless accompanied by me or another representative of the house.” Again, her gaze narrowed onto me. “Any trespassing or rule breaking will result in harsh punishment.”

“At least here no one will get killed if the rules are broken,” Margo scoffed to the other girls around her.

When she looked at me to make her point, I smiled openly and broadly, almost maniacally. “Don't be so sure of that,” I muttered mostly to myself, but I knew she got the gist of what I'd said.

It had the desired effect as she shuddered and quickly looked away. Unfortunately, the reward of her unease and discomfort quickly faded, the image of Ester's bloody body

returning to my mind. I pushed that aside and tried to focus on the surroundings, eagerly thinking of ways I could escape or hide.

Brull House was just as grand and lavish as the main hall of the fortress. Dark, rich-colored wood adorned the place, with large pillars and twisting beams along the ceiling, and stone floors polished to a shine. I almost felt bad about stepping on it and making marks with my dusty boots.

The Dagmar showed us the dining hall where we would take our meals, it was stark and bare, gray, not like the main area we'd entered. Beyond the stone wall, the smell of boiled meat and potatoes wafted from the kitchen, making my stomach immediately start to rumble. The last substantial meal I'd had was the one in the morning before the White Carriage arrived to disrupt my life.

Then she led us up a set of winding, wooden stairs to the second level, where the sleeping quarters and common rooms were located. Each dorm room had six single beds and a separate small room that contained a wash basin, a mirror for morning cleanings, and separate from that, a privy. I'd never been in a place that had indoor facilities.

"Each room will be occupied by the girls from the wagons you arrived in."

*Great.* I sighed to myself. I'd been hoping to get away from Margo and her merry band of angry girls. Although, I supposed, I'd given them all kinds of reasons for that, failing to foster any good will during that two-day trip. All I managed to do was to aid in Iren's kidnapping and get Ester killed.

After everyone claimed a bed in their respective rooms—with me taking the one furthest from anyone else, next to the window and the cool draft that fluttered from it—we all gathered in the dining hall, to eat a proper meal before we had to be scrubbed down and dressed appropriately for the auction block. At least, that's what I considered it.

The meal was hearty, which I was thankful for, but my stomach started to churn at the thought of what was to come. When we arrived back to the room, there were five young

women waiting for us, dressed just like Ester had been. At the Dagmar's nod, each girl approached one of us. The young woman who came up to me limped slightly, she also had golden skin, like she'd been sun-kissed, and golden-brown eyes. A few wisps of short brown hair were visible under her white headscarf.

She gave me a little bow. "Welcome to Brull House, Onya Stavig, I'm Sigrunn, your *hendey*."

"Nice to meet you, but I don't know what that means exactly."

"It means I will be your personal attendant. I will help you bathe, and dress, and I will accompany you on any outing in the fortress or to the city." With her eyes downcast, she recited the words with no emotion in her voice.

"No offense, but I can bathe and dress myself. I'm perfectly capable of—"

Her hand moved quicker than I expected from such a frail looking girl. She encircled my wrist and discreetly tugged me forward, so we were eye to eye. Her gaze was fierce. "It is my job to serve you. Don't interfere with that."

"Ah, okay, I won't."

Her demeanor quickly changed back to the meek, docile girl she'd initially come across as, which was interesting. I was going to have to watch myself around her. The old guard told me to *trust no one*, and I was going to take his warning to heart, but I couldn't deny that she intrigued me. I wondered what kind of information about the noblemen and royalty I could extract from her.

I didn't have long to ponder before the *hendey*s ushered us out of the room, and down a corridor to the communal bath house. There were six tubs, all filled with steaming hot water. The Dagmar paced around the line of tubs, looking at us from head to toe.

"Make sure they are thoroughly scrubbed and check the hair for any lice. Some of these girls come from poor families in poor villages." Stopping near me, she poked me in the gut

with her staff. “Really scrub this one. I suspect she’s dirtier than the others.”

Before I could form a response to her biting remark, Sigrunn started pulling at my dress.

Flustered, I stepped back. “I can do it myself.”

Around me, the other girls were dealing with the same measure of being disrobed. I really didn’t want to be naked around these strangers, but it looked like I didn’t have a choice as Sigrunn grabbed me again, and roughly tugged at my dress. With a few skilled moves, I was unclothed and shivering, one hand trying to cover my breasts while the other tried to hide my genitalia.

Sigrunn pointed to the wooden tub. “Get in.”

The Dagmar stared at me until I did what I was told and stepped into the tub.

Getting in, I violently sunk down into the hot water, pleased with the overflow spilling onto the floor and wetting the Dagmar’s feet and bottom hem of her sheath. I bit down on my lip to stop from grinning.

Honestly, I was expecting her to smack me with her staff again, I was prepared for it, but instead she wacked Sigrunn in the back of her leg. She grimaced, pressing her lips together, but didn’t make a sound.

“Make sure you keep this one on a tight leash.”

The Dagmar walked on to the next tub and girl.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Sigrunn, “Are you all right?”

Instead of answering, she took a comb out of the pocket of her dress, undid my hair in the back, and started to yank on it, running the comb through it roughly. She was not gentle at all, and I was startled by how much hair was falling.

On instinct, I tried to move away, but realized that would just make it worse. I clenched my jaw and bared it as Sigrunn untangled my hair, scraping my scalp with the comb with every stroke. When she finished that, she put her hand on top

of my head and pushed me down into the water. She was much stronger than she looked.

Thrashing about, I finally came up, spurting water. She immediately started scrubbing my body with a rough cloth, beginning with my arms then working her way across my chest and then downwards. As she neared my thighs, I grabbed her hand and squeezed it tightly, crushing her fingers together.

“I can finish it,” I said between gritted teeth.

I thought she was going to fight me on it, but she immediately let go of the cloth, took a step back, and gathered my hair in her hands, adding soap to the strands. While I finished washing my legs, and rear end, she scrubbed at my head and hair. When she was finished, she pushed me down into the water again.

After I came up, she declared me finished, and instructed me to get out. As I did, she immediately wrapped me in a towel and dried off my body and hair. Soon, I realized that this was just step one in what was going to be a long, arduous process.

Step two was dressing me in a fancy frock. Sigrunn picked out a silky white blouse with billowy sleeves, pulling on a light maroon colored sheath over top, with a pretty, sweeping hem to it that went to my ankles, over that, she tied me into a darker maroon, crushed velvet corset. Once she tightened the strings until I could barely breath, she turned me toward the mirror.

I was stunned with how the dress fit. It actually gave me full breasts and accentuated my slim waist. The color complimented my skin tone and the sun-enriched golden streaks in my hair. As I marveled at myself, Sigrunn took the sides of my hair, pulled it back, and rolled it up, fastening it and letting the rest fall naturally down my back.

Glancing around at the other girls, I realized they were all getting a similar style—probably how the women wore their hair in the capital. I definitely wasn’t used to it, to seeing myself like I was in the mirror, but I had to admit even if only to myself that I didn’t hate it. I actually looked pretty, which

wasn't something I usually paid attention to, but here, it seemed that was going to be very important.

After Sigrunn put my feet into dainty leather shoes that had a bit of a heel on them, she took a step back to observe me. Her frown made her little nose scrunch.

Testing out the shoes, I paced back and forth, terribly failing—they made me wobble when I moved. “How can people wear these? Makes no sense. They're so unstable.”

“With care and practice.” She grabbed my arm to make me stop moving.

“I guess I can't greet the king in bare feet.”

“Will you stop making my life difficult?”

My gaze flickered over to the Dagmar who was watching the whole thing with eagle eyes. Thankfully, she hadn't looked our way.

I nodded and stayed perfectly still. “I'll behave.”

*For now.* Yet, I didn't say that out loud.

Sigrunn then opened a small wooden box, dipping her finger into it until the tip was speckled black—like soot from an old fire. She proceeded to rub the dust onto my eyelids, dabbing it under my eyes.

“How long have you been here?” I asked as she concentrated.

“Ten years.” Pulling back, she studied my face.

“That's a long time to serve Brull House.”

She met my gaze. “Yes, it is.”

I didn't ask anything else, but she didn't say anything else either while she finished staining my lips red, and pinching my cheeks so they were flushed and rosy.

Once everyone was prettily painted and frocked, the Dagmar had us line up single file at the bottom of the stairs for her to address us.

“You will follow me into the Great Hall, and one by one, I will present you to the king and queen. You will step up to the dais and curtsy once before walking around the room, then leave through the corridor and gather back here.” She made eye contact with every girl, and lastly, her gaze focused on me. “Do you understand?”

Everyone gave a quick nod.

“Good.”

She led us forward, the *hendeys* herding us from the sides. I was stuck in the middle of the pack, with a girl I didn’t know in front of me, and Margo behind me. When I stepped into the Great Hall, all I saw were the old and young faces of wealthy men and women gawking at us while we were paraded by them.

The crowd was divided in two, with a narrow path between them leading toward the dais. I tried to keep my eyes on the girl in front of me, because I didn’t want the fury that raged inside to show on my face when I looked at the spectators.

The blood rushed to my head until everything around me looked distorted; the sound was muffled like I was underwater. Despite that, I heard the Dagmar announce each girl by name. I counted them in my head, knowing I was the tenth girl in line.

Seven. Eight. Nine.

The moment the girl in front of me stepped forward, I got an unobstructed view of the dais, and of the king and queen sitting on their glass-like thrones. I’d heard that King Nikolai Runebrooke was an ugly man, and the rumor was definitely true. He had a round face, ruddy cheeks, probably from all the ale he likely consumed, bulbous pocked nose, and thin lips.

His tall, golden crown couldn’t hide the scraggily brown hair underneath it, and even though he was sitting, I could tell that he was short. His feet barely touched the floor in front of the throne. In some ways, he looked like a child playing dress up and sitting in his father’s chair.

Queen Gudrin Runebrooke by comparison was a fine-looking looking woman. I knew her to be barely forty, but she looked so much older with the deep lines around her eyes and puckered mouth. Her crown, of course, wasn't as tall or opulent as the king's, but she wore it better. It looked more natural on her head, with twin braids of still, blond hair draped over her shoulders.

To the side of the king stood a younger man, with similar looks and coloring to the king. I assumed he was the prince, Leif Runebrooke. On the queen's side, stood the old guard who had returned my dagger to me and delivered the warning.

So wrapped up in studying the royal family, I didn't hear when the Dagmar called my name. She had to state it a second time, and by the intense way she looked at me, I figured I would get a punishment after this ceremony.

"Onya Stavig from the village of Freyhaven." She tipped her chin, gesturing for me to step forward.

My whole body shook, but I took a step forward. Unfortunately, I fell onto my knees, nearly hitting my head on the second step of the dais. I immediately looked back to find Margo with her hand over her mouth, attempting to cover her laughter. She had tripped me, of that much I was sure.

The Dagmar came to my side but didn't do anything to help me. "Get up girl."

As I got to my feet, I heard other snickers from the gawking crowd. My knee throbbed from banging it on the first stone step and I could feel a warm trickle of blood rolling down my shin. Without looking at the king or queen, I did a modified curtsy, and was about to walk away when the queen's voice stopped me.

"Herr Torin has told me about your bravery during the attack by slavers on the road to Jarlstad."

My head whipped around to look at her, which I knew would be considered rude by the Dagmar and I'd probably get a stick to the leg or gut for it. Then my gaze lifted to the guard



standing by her throne. He'd obviously told her about me, and I had to wonder why. I wasn't anyone of importance.

“That courage will be an asset to you at court.”

I curtsied to her again. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

The Dagmar gasped because I had spoken.

As I limped away from the dais and did my obligatory walk around the room, I kept my head high, heading back to the corridor. Curious gazes landed on me with each step, the buzz of hushed whispers following.

I didn't know what they were saying, and I didn't much care. All I knew was that, quite possibly, Herr Torin was making it known that I would find an ally in him.

## ONYA



That night I couldn't sleep.

It wasn't just because I was in an unfamiliar place, sleeping in a room with four strangers, or that the bed was lumpy and uncomfortable, I also couldn't stop thinking about what had happened in the Great Hall.

Margo tripping me had been unfortunate, and I did have a little talk with her afterward, warning her of some kind of retaliation, I just hadn't thought of it yet.

The most interesting part was the queen's reaction and the fact that Herr Torin mentioned me to her. I'd heard conflicting reports about the queen. Some said she was cold and calculated, scheming to usurp the king and put her princely son on the throne. Others said she was a fair and measured ruler, who often went to the temple to worship and then spent time riding through the streets, giving coin to the less fortunate.

I figured maybe it was a bit of both.

Not everyone was happy about the exchange I had with the queen. The Dagmar had been livid when she returned to Brull House, after all the girls had been presented to the court. She made a beeline for me, her face a mask of cold fury, accusing me of feigning the fall to get attention. I told her she was blind

to what Margo had done, and that earned me a smack to the thigh with her staff.

Realization came swiftly, she only hit me in places that could be easily covered. I supposed she didn't want to spoil the merchandise. No noble would purchase damaged chattel.

Sitting up in bed, I surveyed the dark room. Judging from the soft breathing sounds, and a few snores, the other girls were asleep. It wasn't like any of them would ask me what was wrong, or care about what I was feeling or thinking anyway, even if they were awake and saw me.

Margo had done a good job turning them all against me.

I swung my legs off the bed, setting my feet into a pair of soft leather slippers, then stood. We'd all been given house slippers and sleeping gowns for the night. A chill permeated the air, especially near the window, which made me thankful that my gown was made from a thick linen and wasn't like the thin garment I'd worn back home.

Quietly, I stepped through the room, careful not to bump into the other beds—figuring now was the perfect time to check out the rest of the fortress, while everyone was asleep. I knew I would be in a lot of trouble if I was caught, but for me it was worth the risk to find out more about the place, the people, and a possible escape route. Besides, I was an expert at being stealthy. In all the years I'd snuck out of my house I'd never been caught.

I had just about made it through the gauntlet of beds when Margo, who was close to the door snorted, then grumbling, turned onto her side, facing me. I froze in the spot, peering at her to see if her eyes were open. Counting to five in my head, I was about to keep moving, when she let out a loud fart. My hand flew to cover my mouth and stop me from bursting out with a laugh. I was definitely going to use this as collateral if she continued to mess with me. Waiting three more seconds, I walked to the door.

Only a few candle-lit sconces flickered with dim yellow light over the walls when I peered out into the dark corridor, but it was enough to see that the hall was empty. Thankfully,

there were no guards keeping watch on our rooms. That was good to know. I stepped out, quietly shutting the door behind me, then crept to the staircase, my back to the walls.

After a quick cursory glance, there wasn't anyone coming up or going down, so I quickly descended, making sure my footsteps were light and made no noise. Once I was at the bottom, I had to think quickly about my route through the fortress. I wouldn't go out through the Great Hall as I suspected there would be guards stationed there, so I decided to go where I would be the least noticed. Where the servants lived and worked.

My feet padded down the narrow corridor to the dining hall where we took our meals. It was empty, as I expected it would be, then continued on to the kitchen. There had to be a back door there, the place where they would get their food and drink deliveries. It could be my way out once I stocked up on the supplies needed to survive out there on my own.

When I stepped into the kitchen, I was surprised to see one of the scullery maids already hard at work, prepping for the next days' meals.

Her head came up from the pot she was scrubbing, her brow furrowing. "You shouldn't be here, miss."

"I know, I'm sorry. I was just hoping I could get a bit of bread. I missed the evening meal."

The way she frowned even more, told me that she likely didn't believe my story, but she went into the food cupboard and came back with a heel of sourdough bread, handing it to me.

"You should get going. Two guards usually come in about now to get their supper."

The sound of footsteps approaching soon echoed. I guessed those guards were coming.

She pointed to another entrance, and I quickly dashed across the kitchen and out through the archway. It took me to a part of the fortress I didn't recognize. I wasn't sure how to get

back, so I just kept walking forward, hoping the hallway would lead me to the main entrance of Brull House.

My heart pounded in my temples as I crept along the dark corridor—I'd been too confident about my ability to stalk around here. This wasn't Freyhaven, where the worst that could happen if I was caught sneaking out of my house was getting extra chores. Here, I could be flogged for breaking the rules.

I was about to step around a corner, when the voices of guards, walking my way, echoed. Perhaps I could head back to the kitchen, but I couldn't be sure that it would be safe, and I didn't want to get the scullery maid in trouble. In a panic, I looked around, spotting a break in the wall, and a set of stone steps leading to a lower level.

Rushing to the alcove, I pressed against the wall, but realized that the guards would still be able to see me when they walked by here. So, I ventured down the stairs, hoping to find another way out.

The further down I went, the colder it got. By the time I reached the bottom, my whole body trembled. Not only was it cooler down here, but it was also dank and smelled really bad. Like a few rodents had died and their bodies were rotting.

Still, I forced myself to press on, I needed to find another way to get back. Surely there had to be another set of stairs somewhere down here leading to another part of the Great Fortress of Kings.

Following the line of torches on the wall, I kept walking, wondering what was down here. I'd never been in a long house with an underground. Maybe since it was so cold, it was where they kept their meat stores, which could've also been the reason for the putrid smell. However, when I turned a corner and saw two darkened rooms, dug into the rock with metal bars blocking them off, I realized I'd walked into a prison.

Beyond them, stood another cut in the wall and the first step of a staircase leading back upstairs, but I had to walk by the cells to get there.

Taking in a deep breath, I set my sights on the far wall, and started to walk as quickly as I could. Halfway there, several arms came out from between the bars on my left, one grubby hand managing to hook onto the sleeve of my sleeping gown.

“Ooo, pretty girl.” The owner of the hand pressed his face up to the bars—the man old, and wizened, with a sharp nose, and a missing eye. When he grinned at me, I saw that he was missing several teeth. “Give me a kiss.” His tongue poked out, rancid breath spilling.

He tried to pull me closer, but I clawed at his hand until he abruptly let go. I stumbled backward, my back hitting the bars of the opposite cell. I could barely breathe. My legs shook so badly that I thought for sure I was going to fall.

Turning, I grabbed onto the metal bars, so I didn’t collapse onto the ground, thankful that this cell seemed empty.

Except, it wasn’t.

Standing in front of me, was a tall, big, muscular man, with long, fire-red wild hair and matching beard. He reached through the bars and wrapped big hands around my upper arms to keep me from moving. When he leaned in closer, I saw there was a silver chain wrapped around his neck, and it was attached to the wall.

“The old man is right, you *are* pretty.”

The timber of his deep voice vibrated over my skin, causing goosebumps to pebble my arms, and the back of my neck.

“L-l-let me go.”

“Why? Isn’t this why you’re down here in the dungeon?” His eyes traveled down my body, and it felt like he could see right through my gown. “You’re skinnier than my usual lady visitors, but I imagine you’re just as wet between your thighs.”

His crude words filled me with disgust, but my body still flushed from the thought of him.

“I don’t know what you mean!”

“Don’t be shy, girl. You paid the guards to have sex with me, didn’t you?” Again, his gaze swept over my body.

My stomach clenched hard.

“You’re disgusting!” I tried to pull away from him.

“Not as disgusting as the bored ladies who come down here to get their cunnies filled.”

My cheeks flushed at his use of such vulgar word for a woman’s private parts.

He smiled then, it was deliberately slow and wicked. “Are you turned on, girl?”

“No! Let me go!” I wiggled my body, trying to dislodge his hands from my arms, but that just made him grip me tighter.

“You’re feisty, I like that, it could prove useful.”

It hurt at first, as his fingers dug into my flesh, then that twinge turned into a burn. It was like I was being seared by a hot poker.

I screamed as that pain surged over my arms. I’d never felt that type of agony in my life, and I thought I’d go mad from it. My screams continued, my throat ripping from the power of it.

Several guards ran to the cells. One of them attempted to pull me away, but the wild man wouldn’t let go, and I felt like my arms were being yanked right off my body. The guard must’ve realized that it was hurting me because he stopped.

Another one opened the cell door and rushed in, followed by others, their batons beating violently at the man’s shoulders and back. At first, it seemed to have no effect, since he still held on to me. He even started to laugh.

Yet, after more and more blows found him, each harder and harder until one caught him across the chin, his arms dropped to his sides, and he fell onto the ground. Blood dribbled from the brutal cut across his lips and chin.

The guard who had pulled me away, ushered me out of the dungeon and back up the stairs. When we reached the top, I

sagged against him—I had no more strength in my legs to hold myself. Then the world seemed to spin out of control, and eventually, I passed out.



## ONYA



When I forced open my eyes, the light from the window above me shone on the stern face glaring down at me. I blinked several times, thinking I was still asleep and dreaming. Sigrunn hadn't been in my dreams, had she? A sudden image of large golden eyes with a vertical black pupil, and an elongated jaw full of razor-sharp teeth flashed in my mind, but then vanished.

Had I dreamed of dragons?

"Get up." Sigrunn shook my shoulder, none too gently.

I rolled onto my back, wincing from the soreness in my arms and back. How did I end up back in my bed? Did the guard carry me up here? Surely, he wouldn't have done that without telling his superiors, and likely, informing the Dagmar of my trespasses. Except, I didn't remember seeing her.

"I said, get up." She reached down to grab my arm, and as she did, the sleeve on her wool sheath bunched up, showing several bruises on her forearms.

Careful not to touch any of the dark marks, I gripped her wrist. "What happened?"

Sigrunn pulled away from me, yanking down her sleeve.

Sitting up, I swung my legs off the bed. "Was that because of me?"

“You were unconscious last night, so the Dagmar thought I would be a suitable substitute for your punishment for breaking the rules,” she explained, rolling back my bed covers and forcing me to actually get out of bed. “What were you doing sneaking around anyway? Don’t you know how dangerous that is?”

Standing there, watching her, I had the urge to reach out and hug her. She looked so small and fragile. I refrained, knowing she wouldn’t want me to, she’d reject me.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured to her.

Her gaze lifted to me, showing something haunted in her brown eyes. “If you’re truly sorry, then stop breaking the rules.” She finished making my bed, tucking in the sheets with skillful precision. “With the way you’re going, I’ll be dead by the time you find a match.”

Stunned by the bluntness of her words, I just stared at her. I didn’t know how to respond to that. Would it really get that bad? The Dagmar was a cruel woman, but I didn’t think she’d be capable of something so drastic over a couple of foolish transgressions.

I glanced around to make sure no one was listening to our conversation. The other girls were engaged with their *hendeys*, so they weren’t paying any attention to me.

“Surely, the Dagmar wouldn’t... harm you like that over something I’ve done. That seems drastic.”

“You really have no idea about the reality of your situation, do you?” She gave me a weary look, shaking her head. “Come on. Let’s get you washed, dressed, and ready for the day.”

Sigrunn had gathered my clothes already—a simple but pretty frock in a light blue—and ushered me into the washing room. After shutting the door, she attempted to pull at my night gown.

“I can take off my own clothing.”

Dropping her hands, she gestured for me to proceed.

It felt uncomfortable to be naked in front of her, but I had to get used to it if I wanted this whole situation to get easier. Grabbing the hem of my gown, I pulled it over my head and took it off. Self-consciousness instantly captured me, but I resisted the urge to cover myself pointlessly with my hands.

She took the gown from me, but then paused, her brow furrowing as she regarded me.

“What?”

Tossing the gown aside, she reached for my arm. “What are these marks?”

Once I looked down, I realized what she was talking about. There were four, three-inch-long, dark brown stripes across my upper arm. “They must be bruises from the man who grabbed me.”

A sudden flash of wild red hair and wicked eyes appeared, making my stomach clench.

Sigrunn gently touched the marks, making my skin throb slightly. “These don’t look like bruises. Those are usually dark blue or black, green, and yellow as they fade.” She poked at my arm, inspecting it closely. “These look like burns.”

It felt like I’d been punched in the gut.

Doubling over, I remembered the pain I’d endured when the man touched me. I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten about it. When I’d woken earlier, the memories of the dungeons felt old, fuzzy, faded, like an old painting losing its vibrant colors over time. Not anymore. I sunk to the floor, my heart racing, my throat dry, nails digging into the palm of my hands to stop the residual pain of the now intense memory.

Sigrunn crouched next to me. “Tell me everything that happened last night.”

I shook my head. “A lot of it I can’t really remember. I was walking through the halls and ended up underground. I’m not sure how, but then I saw *him*.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know, exactly. He was chained up, and he had wild red hair.” My hands lifted to my head. “And a beard. He said filthy things to me, something about ladies paying money to, to have relations with him, then he grabbed my arms.” I lifted it. “I tried to get away but he-he grabbed me so hard that I couldn’t move. All I could feel was... pain.” I shook my head again, trying hard to make sense of it all. “It was like someone had thrown my body into a fire.”

“You must keep these marks hidden.” Her soft touch on my shoulder surprised me. “Make sure that the Dagmar never sees them. She will discard you for being damaged, and you’ll never have a chance to be matched with a nobleman.” She paused, but it looked like she still had words to say to me.

“I don’t want to be matched. I’d rather live a life like yours.”

“You’re a foolish girl.” Anger accentuated her words, and she gripped my chin with her fingers. “If you knew what my life was really like, you would not wish that upon yourself.” Standing, she hooked my arm and pulled me to my feet. “Let’s get you dressed and presentable. If we don’t hurry, you’ll miss the morning meal.”

Thankfully, the wave of pain stopped, and Sigrunn was able to comfortably get my dress over my arms. As she buttoned up the bodice in the back, I thought about what she’d said.

It was true that I didn’t know about the rigors of her life, and that made me sad. It also made me more determined to escape the fortress and make my own way in the world, because I knew if I left, I still wouldn’t be able to return home. That would be the first place they would look. I just had to hold on a little while longer and endure whatever indignities the Dagmar would press upon me.

“These marks will fade, won’t they?” I asked.

She didn’t answer right away, and that made me suspicious, but she finally nodded. “Of course, they will. I’ll find a salve to put on them for you this evening.”

Right as I opened the door to leave, she grabbed my shoulder. “Don’t go down to the dungeons ever again. That man is *very* dangerous.”

“Do you know who he is?”

Her gaze dropped, as did her hand. “They call him *Dre the Dread*, and he will only cause you pain and suffering. Please forget him.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I don’t plan on ever going there again.”

“Good. Stay in your room. It’s better for everyone that way.”

THROUGH THE ENTIRE MORNING MEAL, I thought about the conversation with Sigrunn. It was easy to do considering everyone was keeping their distance from me, even the girls that I didn’t know. I wondered if the word of my misadventure last night had reached their ears. Margo hadn’t stopped giving me nasty looks since the porridge was first served.

The way Sigrunn had regarded the marks on my arms, and the warning she gave me about the man in the dungeon, I thought she knew more than what she’d told me. When I’d asked her if she knew who he was, she couldn’t look me in the eyes.

I decided to push it out of my mind, as I had no intention of ever venturing to the dungeons. Whoever that man was, he obviously deserved to be locked up, and I had no business trying to find out more about him.

After our meal, we were taken to one of the common rooms. There were several loungers arranged in a rectangle shape, with round tables at each end. On top of each table, I recognized tools and thread needed to embroider. Something I hated and was no good at, so I was thankful that my mother never expected me to be proficient at any of that stuff. She had been fine with me tending to the cow milking, butter churning, bread baking, and helping any of the neighboring homesteads with livestock problems. I was good at herding animals.

In the corner of the room was a piano, next to it a stand for sheets of music, and a lyre. Along two walls were shelves of

books. I'd never seen so many in my life. The library in the Elder House in my village had been twenty books in total. In front of one shelf of books was a desk, with paper, quill, and inkwell on top. I'd learned to read well, but my writing was messy and most times, illegible.

If we were going to be judged on each of these skills, I was going to fail miserably.

Once everyone had filed into the room, the Dagmar had us line up in front of her. Of course, I ended up on the very end since no one wanted to stand next to me.

"Today you will start your training on how to be a lady and a worthy prospect for a nobleman. It is important that each of you have pleasing skills such as embroidery, musical prowess, poetry, letter writing, and lastly dancing, to be a good wife."

I smirked, and immediately the Dagmar's head whipped over to glare at me. "Do you have something to say Onya?"

*Don't say it. Shut up! Don't say anything.* The practical, reasonable little voice in my head chanted.

"Why do any of those things matter? It's prettily wrapped up nonsense if you ask me."

As the Dagmar slowly walked over to me, the other girls visibly moved away.

"Why do you constantly have the need to be disruptive and contentious?"

"Well, you did ask—"

I didn't see the switch in her hand until it was too late—she whipped me across the thigh. The sting was immediate, then it kind of dulled into a pulsating throb. Thankfully, the fabric of my dress cushioned the blow a little.

"You *will* do these things over and over again, until I deem you proficient." The matron turned to look at the others. "That goes for all of you."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Margo smirk, and I really hoped I would get the chance to smack that right off her face one day soon.

Over the next six hours, we took turns at each station. We were separated into groups of four, then took time with each skill. The Dagmar wandered around the room to observe our progress with her judging gaze.

During embroidering, I kept sticking my fingers with the needle. I drew blood a couple of times. Sparingly, Linn took pity on me and tried to help me with the proper stitches—she was probably just sick of hearing me wince then curse softly under my breath.

At the piano, I was even more useless. Every note I played was wrong. The Dagmar stood right beside me and smacked my hands with the switch every time I made a mistake. By the time I was able to move on from there to the writing desk, the backs of my hands were lined with angry red welts. I just about complained to her about having to use a quill and write after my hands had been whacked a hundred times, but I held my tongue.

I really didn't want to give her more reasons to hit me.

Thankfully, I managed to compose one letter—poorly scribed as the Dagmar pointed out with a cluck to her tongue—recited one poem, of which I forgot most of the lines, or got them mixed up, then we took a break to have tea and little cakes. I was thankful for the reprieve, despite the fact that I could barely lift my teacup, my hands ached so bad.

After our short break, we were ushered into another room—bigger and unencumbered by furniture. The Dagmar told us that this was a room for entertainment, and that in a week's time the queen was to host a lavish social gathering. This would be our first opportunity to consort with the nobility so she needed to make sure that we could all dance properly, since dancing was the best way to make an initial connection. Finally, this was something I was pretty good at.

We separated into two groups of eight, then joined hands in a circle. I didn't know the particular dance, but I easily picked up each step and move, surprising everyone in my circle *and* the Dagmar. She gave me an unexpected nod of appreciation.

When we were about to learn a specific line dance, a guard entered the room, and spoke lowly to the Dagmar.

“I need to take care of an important matter. Practice the dance you were just shown until it is perfect.” She nodded to him, and then he hurried out of there.

When she was gone, our circle did the dance again. Then during a brief reprieve, I remembered the dances from my village. Fun lively reels that would fill our small community hall with music and laughter.

Memories of a dance I used to do with my mother returned, reminding me of the rare times she let loose and actually enjoyed herself. The complicated foot movements flowed naturally from me, and I lifted my legs high, then spun. Normally, one would spin around with another person, holding hands tightly.

Dagny, who was in my circle, watched me closely. “What is that dance?”

“Just a reel we would do during celebrations.”

“Can you teach it to me?”

“Sure.”

I grabbed her hands, showed her the footwork, then spun her. The second time we did it, she laughed so hard that she snorted. It made me happy to hear it. By then, all the other girls wanted to try the dance.

Except Margo, of course. She stood off to the side, her lips pursed like she’d just sucked on something sour.

For the first time since I’d gotten into the wagon set for Jarlstad, I was laughing and enjoying my time with the other girls. Maybe they weren’t all that bad, and maybe, they didn’t think I was all that bad either. I wouldn’t have minded some companionship, friendship even. I was of the mind that we needed to band together if we were going to get through all of this. At the very least, it would make it easier.

We were all in pairs, and threes, laughing and spinning around and making ourselves dizzy. Linn ended up falling



after Mina had accidentally let go of her hands. She didn't complain though, just laughed harder while she rubbed her rear end—where she'd landed.

“What is the meaning of this?”

We all immediately stopped, and turned to look as the Dagmar glared at all of us.

“Onya thought it would be fun to teach everyone a silly dance from her village, instead of practicing the dance we were supposed to learn.”

Of course, it was Margo who reported on me. When I looked over at her, she gave me that lopsided cruel smile of hers.

“It's not Onya's fault,” a girl named Anette offered. “We all wanted to learn it.”

The Dagmar slowly crossed the hall, tapping her staff against the stone floor with each step, until she stood right in front of me.

“I warned you, girl.”

My chin lifted proudly; I didn't want her to think she could crush my spirit. “It was a bit of fun. What harm could it do?”

She leaned close to my ear. “You are not in control here, girl. I am. You will learn that even if it kills you.” She then pulled away and gestured to my skirt. “Lift your skirt.”

I didn't move. I just stared at her.

She turned and grabbed Anette by the arm, pulling her forward. She was strong for such an old woman. The Dagmar held Anette's arm out, and she hit it with her switch, making her cry out. A red mark instantly welled on Anette's pale skin.

“For every moment you defy me, this girl will suffer.”

She lifted her arm to strike her again.

“Stop!” I shouted.

The Dagmar lowered her weapon.

Slowly, I lifted the skirt of my dress, revealing my thighs. After releasing Anette, the Dagmar stepped closer to me. She brought the switch down hard across my right thigh. I tried not to flinch, but it was impossible. Pain instantly snaked up my leg.

The other girls all cringed as she hit me again, shrinking into themselves to avoid the Dagmar's fury. And again. Until tears rolled down my cheeks and blood trickled down my leg to make a crimson bloom under my shoe.

# IO

## ONYA



That evening, I didn't join the others for a meal. I was still sore when I moved too much or sat down, so the Dagmar allowed me to take some food to my room. I spent that time lying on my bed, as Sigrunn applied a special salve to my welts and wounds.

“Are you going to stop causing trouble, now?” She lightly dabbed the cream on my leg, then gestured for me to pull down my gown, so she could also tend to the marks on my arms. “You see what happens when you do.”

When I exposed my arms, I was hoping that the marks had faded and weren't as bad as they were in the morning, but they were still there, and seemed to have darkened to a deep brown. My skin had puckered somewhat as well, giving it a rough texture. Looking at them closer, they did look like burn scars. I'd seen something similar on the cattle in the village. Brandings from the different homesteads to identify ownership.

Concern clouded Sigrunn's features as she applied the salve to my marks. “Do they hurt?”

For a moment, I considered the question. “Not really. A bit tender maybe, but no more pain.”

*Not like when they were made. How could that man's grip on my arms make these marks?*

“You look like you know what these marks are.”

Vehemently, she shook her head, and got to her feet. “Of course not, why would I know such a thing?”

I sat up, wincing when the movement tugged at the wounds on my leg. “Sigrunn...”

She placed a hot cup into my hands. “Drink this tea. It will help you heal and get some sleep.”

“I have questions.”

“Being curious is what got you into the situation you are presently in.” She tipped the cup to my lips, forcing me to drink. “Do what you are told for once.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be my attendant and do what I say?”

Her eyes narrowed, and a dark look crossed her face. “I’m your guide, not your servant.”

She was right, and I felt embarrassed that I had said that. Without another word to her, I drank the tea, then handed her the empty cup. After a satisfied nod, she urged me to lay down and sleep. I did as she asked.

The moment my head rested on the pillow, my eyes started to droop, and my vision got a bit fuzzy. There was a lightness to my body. I realized that Sigrunn had put something in my tea. I tried to keep my eyes open, but failed, and I slowly, gently drifted to sleep.

*THE WARM BREEZE fluttered my hair around my face as I climbed to the top of the hill. I was wearing my hair loose, and it flowed around my bare shoulders. The summer sky was so clear, blue, and big, that I thought if I raised my arm, I’d be able to touch it with the tips of my fingers. I looked out over the vast valley below. It was rich and lush with vibrant greenery. So unlike the area I was from.*

*Just beyond that, I saw a farm with several thriving crops, a bunch of fat goats and chickens in the yard. I didn’t recognize the farm, or the area. It looked too healthy with overabundance to be near Freyhaven.*

*Loud, whooshing sounds echoed nearby, seeming almost like waves crashing against rocks. The next instant, a shadow spread across my body and the ground beyond my feet, calling my gaze upward.*

*A large, red dragon, soared overhead.*

*Its wings seemed as wide as the valley stretched out below him, causing my heart to pound in my chest at the sight of the magnificent beast. I'd never seen a dragon before, except in the story books I read as a child. I'd always thought them to be imaginary. A myth spread among people over hundreds of years to both delight and scare the children.*

*This had to be a dream, as I didn't believe dragons existed.*

*The beast flew over the hill and then swooped down along the valley, making a circle to come back. As it neared, I fully understood how big it truly was—taller than the temple, with a wingspan as wide as the entire field of wheat.*

*When it was right above, its big head tilted downward to look at me, eyes sparkling gold. Its jaw opened slightly, and I swore it was smiling. A shiver rushed over my body, but not out of fear...*

*In that moment, I couldn't breathe.*

*The dragon circled the hill once more, then it hovered in midair, its big wings flapping slowly as it lowered to the ground. Each flap of its wings sent a gust of air over me, fluttering the ends of my hair around my face. Finally, it landed, perching on the edge of the hill a mere twenty feet away.*

*My heart slammed against my chest, and I thought about running but I was frozen on the spot. I didn't know what to do. Running would have been pointless anyway. It could grab me with its front claws easily, crushing me between its long, sharp talons like a vise, or snatch me up with its iron-like jaws, razor teeth cutting me in half.*

*I stared at the beast, my gaze transfixed on the marvel of its existence and the raw beauty of its iridescent red scales, glinting like fire in the bright sunlight. It was hard to*

*rationalize how something so frightful could also be so magnificent. My fingers tingled with the urge to reach out and touch the dragon, and I wondered what its body would feel like.*

*Would its scales feel slick or rough, like the skin of the grass snake I discovered in the barn during one unusually hot summer? That roughness reminded me of the marks I had on my arms.*

*Reminded, I peered down at my arms, which were surprisingly bare, as I only wore a thin sheath as clothing. The four dark bands around each bicep still marred my skin even in the dream. I ran my fingers over one, feeling the rough texture of the scales, and a rush of heat spread over my body. Surprised by it, I snatched my hand back.*

*A shadow crossed over me and I looked up to see the dragon's big head looming down on me. The vertical slit of its eyes widened. Tendrils of smoke curled out from its nostrils.*

*Deep in my belly, a scream formed, as I was sure it was going to raze me with fire.*

*Instead, it spoke, but I was positive I heard its voice in my head as it would be impossible for such a beast to form human words...*

*“Have you been thinking about me, girl?”*

I shook my head, confusion clouding my mind. “You don't exist.”

His laughter was deep and rumbly, like a roll of thunder during a violent rainstorm. “I assure you I'm real.”

My eyes widened when I realized that I was looking into the face of the man in the dungeon, and *not* the dragon in my dreams.

“W-what's going on? Where am I?”

In a panic, my head whipped around to see that I was back in the dungeons, wearing just my dressing gown, my hair unbound and flowing over my shoulders, and the man's hands wrapped around my arms. Again.

The last thing I remembered was drinking the tea Sigrunn gave me and laying my head down on my pillow. How had I ended up down here, with no memory of escaping my room?

“Don’t be shy, girl, I don’t mind that you’ve come to see me again.”

“Believe me, I did not purposely come down here.” I tried to pull away from him. “Let me go!”

A crooked smile bloomed on his face, and it made me really uncomfortable that it sent a pleasant shiver through my body. Why was my body responding to this man? I should be repulsed by him, and his actions. He was a criminal.

“I think you like my hands on you, *drotning*.”

The word he used for me, *drotning*, meant princess in the old language. A language no one really spoke anymore. The only reason I recognized it was because of all the old storybooks I devoured as a child.

He brought his face closer to mine, and from this distance, I could see ink markings along his hairline and right temple. Shaped like teardrops, the marks stacked on top of each other, making a pattern. The ink wasn’t black either, it was more of a dark reddish-brown. Peering at them, I could also see that they had a texture to them. Not all that different to the marks on my arms.

“You’re trembling,” he murmured, his voice going an octave lower, and rumbling over my skin. “Either you’re afraid or you’re excited. Either one will do for what I have in mind.” The tip of his tongue lightly licked his top lip.

I turned my head, avoiding his intense gaze. “You’re disgusting.”

“Fire doesn’t lie.”

His words made me look back, and frowning, I searched his face for a reason he would utter them. “What does that mean?”

His grip tightened on my arms, reminding me of the marks he’d left the first time. Heat immediately surged through me,

from my head down to my toes, and concentrated on the parts in between. A sudden, surprising throb pulsed between my thighs.

Why was I reacting to him in this manner?

I'd been attached to men before, getting those flutterings in my belly, and the flush of skin from desire. From thoughts of touching, and kissing, and laying together. Yet, the sensations rushing through my body right now were stronger, more intense. So much so, that I had to bite down on my bottom lip to prevent an embarrassing response to his hold on me.

His smile got wider as he noticed my reaction. "What's your name, *drotning*?"

"Why?"

"So, I can call you by your name when I dream about you."

Before I could respond to that, three guards rushed into the dungeon, shouting at him to release me, and at me for being down there without them knowing. One guard grabbed me to pull me away. Another guard banged on the cell bars with a baton.

At first, I thought the man in the cell was going to keep holding onto me, but he let go and I tumbled back into the guard, nearly knocking him.

"You can't be here, *fruken*," the guard scolded. "You're going to get hurt."

"I'm sorry. I don't know how I ended up down here." I tried to explain it, but even to my ears it sounded like I was lying.

"Take her to the Dagmar," the older guard ordered with a sneer. "See that she's punished for breaking the rules."

"No!" I clutched at the one who was holding me. "Please, just let me go back to my room."

"I don't know, *fruken*." He spoke lowly and softly, probably so his commander didn't hear him.



“Please.” I beseeched.

Finally, he nodded, and with an arm around my shoulders, he ushered me down the corridor to the stairs.

“Give me your name!” the red-headed man demanded while the other guards continued hitting him with their batons.

“Onya,” I whispered, as we rounded the corner. I didn’t know why I spoke it out loud, it wasn’t like he could’ve heard me.

True to his word, the guard took me back to my room without alerting the Dagmar or anyone else. I quietly opened the door and crept across the floor to my cot in the corner. Getting into bed, I pulled the covers over me, staring up at the ceiling.

I was sure I wouldn’t fall back asleep. My body was too alert, too awake. Besides that, I was afraid to dream again, in case the man from the cell found me there. I’d be unable to escape, and I feared what he would do to me... because I wasn’t sure I would fight back. I was scared that I would welcome him into my arms and between my legs.

## II

### SAELDREON



O *nya...*

I whispered her name to myself, reveling in the feeling of every letter on my lips. Her name was like a soft caress against my body.

My grin came instantly, knowing she hadn't meant to tell me. That she thought she'd been far enough away from the cell for me to hear as she instinctively murmured it. Fortunately, my hearing was ten times as efficient as a human.

It had come in handy during the thirty days I'd been imprisoned. Thanks to it, I'd learned the names of all the guards who at one time or another were on dungeon duty, along with many secrets about the royal family and the rich noblemen who thought they ruled over the city and its occupants.

Secrets that I hoped to one day utilize to my advantage and escape this place.

Audolf, the youngest guard on duty who entered my cell, pulled me back by the chain round my neck. I could've easily fought him, but it wasn't worth the effort. The silver metal dampened my strength as well as my shifting ability. I needed to reserve as much energy as possible for the fateful day I knew was coming, where I could break out of the dungeon and rendezvous with the surviving members of the *Asatora Drecki*.

Turning, I growled at the young guard, knowing that despite the chains, he was still scared of me. Flinching, he stumbled away. I didn't know if he knew who I truly was, or just believed the story spread about me. Either way, the boy was petrified.

“You shouldn't be down here, Audolf, it's too scary for you. You'll piss your trousers.”

I laughed full heartedly.

It was cut off when a baton came down on the back of my head. A bit stunned, I dropped to my knees on the hard cold stone floor. When I looked up, Biorn, the older guard, and a bastard through and through, leered down at me like a feral dog. There was foamy spittle forming at one corner of his big mouth.

“You need to shut yer mouth. Or the next blow will be across your pretty lips.”

“Biorn, I had no idea you found me pretty. I didn't think I was your type. I heard you liked your boys young and weak.”

That earned me the promised baton across the face.

I fell over onto my side, pain radiating from the gash in my cheek, and the split across both lips. Blood pooled in my mouth, and I spit it out, making sure I hit the toe of Biorn's boot.

“I should kick yer head in.”

He attempted to move, but Audolf grabbed him, holding him back. “You can't! The king needs him to be able to talk.”

“He can still talk with a bunch of missing teeth.” His bravado left him at the mention of the king, and he let Audolf usher him out of my cell. The young man quickly relocked the door.

“You've lost rations for two days for luring that girl down here.” Biorn glared at me through the bars.

I sat up, then scooted across the floor to rest my back against the stone wall. “She came on her own volition. How could I lure her from down here?”

Naturally, he didn't consider that, but even if he did, it was just another reason to display his cruelty. These guards weren't picked for their thinking or reasoning skills, but for their ability to follow orders and dole out random violent acts. Especially Biorn. I'd witnessed him beating one of the other prisoners just because he could.

As far as I could tell, the elderly man had done nothing to provoke him except for simply being a poor derelict who had to steal heels of stale bread to survive.

Most of the ten men crammed together in the other cell were in prison for being poor and needy. One was in for drunkenly fighting in a pub, he'd accidentally hit a royal soldier, and another was in for running a gambling house. Both were petty crimes, a few months in prison was not warranted.

I'd learned that the king didn't like to look at those who were starving on the streets when he went out for his weekly carriage ride through Jarlstad. From what I'd heard some of the guards mutter when they thought no one was listening, King Runebrooke was an arrogant, petty man, with no compassion for his people.

This information would hopefully help when it was time for me to usurp the crown. If I had the common people's backing, it would make the whole rebellion easier. In all truth, I hoped I wouldn't have to fight with the people of Andlang. Just with the soldiers that the nobles paid to protect their wealth and self-interests. Even then, I wanted to have some of them on my side when the time came. I had never wanted the crown but I knew it was my duty to the memory of my brothers and to the people of Andlang to take it.

It didn't have to be the bloody rebellion it had been two hundred years ago, when my brothers, their families, and hundreds of citizens were slaughtered because of the greed of a few noblemen.

Nevertheless, I would shed blood to get what I wanted. To return what was rightfully mine.

After a bit, things quieted in the dungeons, my neighboring criminals stopped yelling, and the guards left. I reached for the

water bucket nearby, dragged it to me, and dunked the wooden ladle into it. The water wasn't the cleanest, it had bits of dirt and debris in it, but it was still drinkable. I could go days without food, and had a few times since my incarceration, but thankfully, the guards left the water bucket.

As I drank, careful of the cuts on my lips, the cool water filling my mouth and going down my dry throat, I thought about the girl.

"*Onya*," I spoke her name again, out loud. The fire inside my body instantly flared to life.

I had actually been surprised when she wandered into the dungeon again. When she stepped up to the bars of my cell, I could see that she'd come unknowingly. There was a blank look on her face, a stillness to her pretty eyes. It was obvious that her body, and her psyche, had acted on their own...

Heading the call of fire that I branded onto her arms.

Over a hundred years had passed since I last branded a woman. Her name was Somi, and she'd been Inemi. We were together for twenty years before she fell ill and eventually succumbed to it.

At first, our union had been about convenience for the both of us. She needed a protector, and I needed comfort and companionship. Over time though, our love bloomed. By the time she died, I'd loved her deeply.

I never thought to brand another woman again. Never felt the need to... until *Onya* stumbled into the dungeons.

Truth be told, I hadn't planned to push my fire into her. I thought she was just some young, naive noblewoman looking for an adventure. If she had been, I would've gladly fucked her silly, so she'd have a tale to tell her friends and they could giggle about together, fantasizing about it when they were alone for the rest of their boring, miserable lives.

*Onya* was pretty, a bit skinny, but I figured it would all feel the same in the gloom of the cell.

However, her confusion and fear had been real. When I grabbed her, I could feel how afraid she was. She'd trembled

in my hands, but I also sensed something else inside her. A strength, a thread of rebellion that I didn't know if she even realized she possessed.

The arousal coursing through me when I touched her, looked at her pretty face, and into those eyes filled with secrets couldn't be denied. I hadn't planned on branding her, but I sensed that Onya would be a pivotal part of my plan to escape this prison. As the last dragon, I forced my inner fire into her, not knowing if it would mark her or incinerate her right there and then.

Luckily, she didn't burst into flames, instead walking away intact. Still, I hadn't expected the branding to take, because it had been so long since I'd attempted to use that power, and I was collared in silver. The metal dampened my abilities.

When I saw her sleepwalk her way back to me, I'd felt a sliver of hope that I would soon be able to make my escape.

It was too bad the poor girl had no idea what was about to happen to her. I didn't have the luxury of sympathy though. My single purpose was to get out of this cell and take back the throne. I'd do anything to achieve that. Even using an innocent lady of the court to get my way.

As I scooped more water to drink, I heard soft footfalls coming down the main corridor. Obviously, someone didn't want to be heard or seen approaching my cell. A minute later, a shadow extended just outside the metal bars.

"I bring you a message from the order."

I had heard the voice before, I knew it well.

"They are growing in numbers every day. Some in the fortress are also on your side."

That confirmed my knowledge of sympathizers in the city, there had been for years. I also knew that I had allies inside the royal guard, and in the ranks of nobility. There were many who hated King Runebrooke, and the brutal way he ruled.

Finally, it was time to start an uprising and put a dragon back in power.

A bunch of fabric rolled into the cell, hitting the bottom of one of my bare feet. I grabbed it, unwrapping it to find some bread, jerky, and bless the Gods, an orange. My body only needed meat to gain strength, but I had a weakness for the sweet fruit. I was thankful that someone knew about my preference.

Biting off a piece of jerky, I chewed it slowly, stopping the urge to devour it all in one bite. “Use the girl,” I ordered after swallowing.

“What girl?”

“She’s called Onya.”

“Onya? But she’s just a simple village girl, being trained to be someone’s obedient wife. She’s of no importance.”

“No one will suspect her,” I assured. “She is tied to me now. She will do what is demanded of her.”

“I’ll see it done, my lord.”

Then the footsteps receded down the corridor.

As I rested my head against the stone and ate the rest of the smuggled food, I wondered if I would be able to sleep now—even if for an hour or two. I smiled to myself, hoping I would find the girl in the dream realm again.

## ONYA



The next morning, Sigrunn pinched the back of my arm as she was getting me dressed for the day.

“Ow. What was that for?” Was she angry at me for barely being able to get out of bed?

I was so tired. I hadn’t gotten much restful sleep, being too scared to roll into a dream where the man in the dungeon could find me. The thought of him touching me made me quiver all over again.

She looked around first, making sure no one was in hearing distance. “Sneaking out of your room again, going where you shouldn’t be going.”

My brow furrowed. “That guard promised me he wouldn’t say anything.”

“Maybe not to the Dagmar, but the guards keep the *hendeys* informed of what their charges are doing. It’s not just you who gets punished for your transgressions. You’re risking my wellbeing as well.”

“I know, but it wasn’t my fault. I swear I didn’t purposely go there. I must’ve been sleepwalking, because I have no memory of leaving the room or going down to the dungeons. That would be the last place I would go anyway.” A shiver



rushed down my back, thinking about the man with the wild red hair and intense golden eyes.

Her long, worrying look held me before she continued to tie up the corset on my dress. “I will give you something to help you sleep soundly.”

“Will it stop me from dreaming?”

Sigrunn stopped. “Why don’t you want to dream?”

Sighing, I leaned into her ear. “I don’t want to dream about *him*. He said he’d find me in my dreams.”

“The man in the dungeon?”

I nodded. I knew it sounded foolish, childish even to be afraid, but I couldn’t help the sensations surging through me when I thought about him. Although, I had been disgusted by the idea of him touching me, I couldn’t deny the way my body had responded to him. My cheeks flushed thinking about it, so I turned my head so Sigrunn couldn’t see my face.

“He was just trying to scare you. He can’t enter your dreams. No one can.”

“What about Shamans? It’s said they can dreamwalk.”

“That’s an old myth based on nothing but nonsense.” Once she finished buttoning me up, then started on my hair, styling it in the same manner as the other girls and the ladies at court.

“I saw a Shaman on the way to the Great Fortress. She blessed the caravan.”

For a moment, I considered telling her about the strange behavior the woman had exhibited toward me. I didn’t know what it meant, and maybe Sigrunn could explain it. She was the closest I had to a confidante and seemed to care about me, or at least, for my wellbeing—although it was a case of self-preservation in most aspects.

I opened my mouth to tell her, but Sigrunn interrupted me. “No more questions. You need to concentrate on your training.”

“Training to be a man’s broodmare is vile. I don’t want to be bound to some nobleman for the rest of my life.”

The slap across my face came suddenly and unexpectedly. My cheek instantly stung. Raising my hand to cup my cheek in shock, I gaped at Sigrunn.

“Stop whining.” She took a step away from me, her hand clutching at her skirt. She looked almost as shocked as I felt. “This is your life now, Onya. There is no going back to where you came from. You need to burn that into your mind. It’s the only way you’re going to survive.”

“Give up everything I am and believe in? Is that what you did when you were brought here?”

Her head came up at that, and I saw a sadness in her eyes, but her lips pursed in anger. “You’re not a girl anymore. You need to stop being foolish and rebellious. Accept your fate. You can have a nice life if you wish it.”

“I don’t believe in fate.”

Whirling on my heel, I walked out of the dressing room without her. I hated that I let down my guard in front of her, and she had thrown it in my face. Sigrunn was as much a part of the subjugation of Andlang’s people as the king.

From now on, I would keep things to myself.

Once all of us were dressed and done up prettily with silk ribbons and fancy frocks, we assembled in the common room for instructions from the Dagmar. Truly, I hoped it wasn’t going to be another day of doing boring tasks like embroidery. I didn’t think my sanity could bear it.

As the Dagmar spoke, she almost looked happy, or what passed for joy on her wrinkled face.

“Today, you will be treated to something special. Once every month, the king hosts nobles from the city and neighboring towns at the Great Fortress for a rigorous game of *Knotter*. After the match, you will have the privilege of joining the other guests for tea. You may even get to speak with a few of the noblemen attending.”

A ripple of excitement went through the gathering. I knew the stick and ball game of *Knotter* since sometimes the boys in the village would play it. Often, I would join them. I'd been one of the only girls who liked to play. Even if they hadn't allowed me to play, I would've joined in anyway. It wasn't like any of them would've dared to stop me.

"Do we get to play?" The question flew out of my mouth without thought.

All the other girls looked at me, eyes wide with surprise. Margo snickered behind her hand, knowing I was going to get in trouble for my outburst.

Tapping her staff like a warning, the Dagmar walked down the line to stand in front of me. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course, you don't get to play. Women do not play such games."

I was about to argue when I saw Sigrunn stiffen while glaring at me, she was lined up across the room with the other *hendeys*. She gave her head a quick shake. Swiftly, I pressed my lips together to stop from blurting out anything else.

The matron kept her fierce gaze on me for another few moments, tapping her cane on the floor. Tap. Tap. Tap. It looked like she was trying to decide whether to strike me with it or not.

Eventually, her mercifulness won, and she moved away from me, telling us how privileged we were to witness the game played by the noblemen. Some of them would be the eligible bachelors we needed to impress with our comely faces, slim waists, and high breasts.

Once she was done explaining all the reasons why we should be thankful for this opportunity, she led us through the fortress, out the main doors, and we looped around to the royal private grounds like a bunch of ducklings following their mother for their first swim in the pond. The way the Dagmar kept glancing at me, I imagined she was conjuring up ways to drown me in that figurative pool.

We were lined up along one side of the playing field, next to the raised platform where a crowd of noblewomen and courtiers sat on benches, and next to that, on an even higher platform was a throne for the king. Our *hendeys* lined up behind us—about two arm’s length away. Across from us were the players getting ready for the game; it looked like ten to each team, nine stickers and one guard.

There was a mix of younger and older players, all decked out in fancy wool trousers, and billowy silk shirts of varying colors, completely inappropriate for the type of rough game I was used to enjoying. Maybe they played *Knotter* differently here. It was probably fancy and less competitive. More a sport for show than an actual game to win.

Linn and Dagny, who stood next to me, began giggling after one of the younger players smiled and waved to them. I rolled my eyes at the nonsense. I would never giggle, especially not for a man.

*“You would giggle for me, drotning...”*

As the voice caressed my ears, I whipped around, but there was nothing behind me except for Sigrunn, who gave me a puzzling look. The man from the dungeon wasn’t standing there, smiling at me with that fierce piercing gaze. I faced the clearing again.

“Bastard. Get out of my head,” I murmured, hitting my temple with my fist.

“You’re a strange one, Onya.” Linn took a wide sidestep, away from me.

I shrugged. I didn’t care that she shrunk away from me because I wasn’t looking for her friendship. Before, I could say that to her, the drums sounded, playing a thumping beat that reverberated over the field.

It was the king’s procession.

He approached the platform, and two of his attendants helped him up the few stairs to stand by the throne—too fat to do it on his own. He turned toward the crowd and players, expecting their adulation. Without hesitation, all the men

bowed, and the women curtsied. I was last to subjugate, and unfortunately, the Dagmar noticed. After the king sat, more drums started, and then came the long mournful call from the horn to start the game.

The crowd clapped and cheered as the players ran out onto the field, carrying their sticks and ready to advance the leather ball toward their opponent's end post to score a point. One team had blue painted sticks and the other carried red. Sized like an apricot, the leather ball sat on the trimmed grass, in the middle of the turf, waiting to be scooped up by either team.

An older player on the blue team reached the ball first, scooping it up with the flat end of his stick. A couple of the girls clapped for him, but I smirked, the man hadn't even done anything worthy of applause yet. He ran down the field with the ball balanced on his stick—which, I admitted, was hard to do—while members of the red team chased him, trying to knock off the ball.

When I played with the village boys, we'd tackle the player who had the ball.

As he got closer to the end post, he threw the ball with his stick at a teammate. The younger man smacked the ball with his hand, and it struck the wooden post, scoring them a point. The crowd and the girls beside me erupted into cheers. I was the only person not clapping, which again, drew the Dagmar's attention. I smacked my hands together a few times just as the cheers died down, and a few heads turned my way. Sheepishly, I lowered my hands.

After the score, the red team took possession of the ball, and came rushing down the turf toward where I stood with the other girls. The blue team's guard took up a defensive stance in front of the end post. As the players ran back and forth with the ball mid field, it started getting exciting, and I found myself squeezing my hands together as I watched eagerly. It was unclear which team I was rooting for, didn't really matter, they were all the same, but I was enjoying watching the action.

It reminded me of being back home.

Once more, the red team got the ball and came running towards us, making a couple of blue players take positions near the guard. It was a stupid play. They should've charged at the man as he didn't look too stable balancing the ball on his stick.

Too excited and frustrated at the lack of skill on display, I took a step forward, and started to point at the blue player closest to me. "Why are you standing there doing nothing? Rush him!"

The young man gaped at me so hard that the stick nearly fell out of his hands, but the red player kept rushing forward, right toward him.

I took another step forward, not realizing I'd stepped onto the field. "Go man! Don't just stand there!"

By now, the red team player had taken notice of me waving my arms around and shouting. Shocked, he tripped over his own feet, and fell forward. The ball vaulted off his stick, hit the ground and rolled right toward me. I couldn't stop myself from bending over and picking it up.

Several startled voices rose behind me, including Sigrunn's shouting at me to drop the ball and get off the field. Instead, I reared my arm back and threw it as hard and fast as I could toward the blue team guard. He caught it with an incredulous look on his face that made me grin.

Then I felt a hand on my shoulder, yanking me backward. As I looked behind me, I thought I would see Sigrunn's angry face, ready to scold me, but it was one of the royal guards who had grabbed me.

"Let go of me!" I tried to pull away from his hold, but his fingers twisted in the fabric of my dress.

"You dare assault Herr Karsten!"

"I didn't assault anyone. I just threw the ball. Besides, he caught it, didn't he?"

Reaching down to his belt, he unlatched the leather flogger attached and raised his hand to bring it down on me.

“Let her go!” Sigrunn pushed me away, just as the flogger came down, striking her across the shoulder and back.

Shouts and screams erupted all around us. From the girls or from the spectators, I couldn't really tell. It was all just one loud ringing that vibrated in my ears.

The guard lifted the flogger again, obviously intending to hit Sigrunn once more for interfering but I couldn't let that happen. She didn't deserve to be punished just for coming to my rescue, especially since I was accused of something I didn't do.

I jumped onto the man, grabbing his arm to stop him from hitting her. I must've taken him by surprise because he immediately whipped around, and the flogger's eight leather whips came down across my face. Instant pain gripped me, and I could feel the trickle of blood down my chin. The force threw me onto my knees on the ground, but my arms swiftly came up over my head to protect my face from another blow.

“Stop!” The harsh voice reverberated through the field, sending a shiver down my back.

Peering between the intersection of my arms, I saw the Dagmar approach, her staff pointing accusatorially at the guard while he lifted his hand again. Surprised by the matron's menacing tone, he lowered the flogger to his side.

“How dare you strike a girl from Brull House?”

“She assaulted a nobleman...” he stuttered.

“She did no such thing.” She waved her staff at the other girls and the crowd who were now all on their feet watching us. “We all saw it. Onya merely tossed the ball to a player. Yes, she was out of line for doing such a thing, but she's new to all of this and eager to be noticed.”

Crouching, the Dagmar put her arm around me and helped me to my feet. Her display of care surprised me, but I suspected it was all for show. Her eyes studied my face, her frown deepening.

“You've damaged her face.” She threw him a scathing look. “It will take weeks for this to heal.”

Shamed, the man lowered his head. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking...”

“No, you certainly weren’t. I should have *you* flogged.”

Loud, braying laughter came from the raised platform. “Take this nonsense off my field. You’re interfering with the game.”

The matron swung around and offered a deep bow. “My apologies, Your Highness.”

He waved his hand toward us. It was a dismissal.

Still cradling me to her side, the Dagmar ushered me off the field. She nodded to her attendants to look after the other girls as we walked right by Sigrunn, who was still slumped on the ground. The back of her dress was torn open, and there were dots of crimson on the fabric.

“If you feel you must still punish someone,” the matron told the guard, nodding toward Sigrunn, “punish this one for not teaching her girl properly.”

I wanted to say something, to protest, but Sigrunn shook her head discreetly, and I let the old woman take me back to the fortress. Behind me, the sound of the flogger and Sigrunn’s grunt of pain echoed.



## ONYA



Once we were away from the crowd's gaze, the Dagmar's hand clenched around the back of my neck and squeezed. She had a lot of strength for such an old woman. Her clipped nails dug into my flesh and I suspected they would leave divots.

"I should've let that guard flog you."

"He did hit me once, so you should be happy about that." I knew I should've just kept my mouth shut, but she just drew the rebel out of me. I'd already attained her wrath, so how much worse could it get?

She shook me by the back of the neck like one would a stray cat.

When we reached the Great Fortress and entered, the matron called over one of the guards. "Take her to her room and lock the door. Get a healer for her face, but that is the only person who may enter the room." Letting me go, she handed him a ring of keys. "If she is found wandering the halls again, I will make sure you are held responsible."

"Yes, ma'am." He tipped his head to her, before grabbing me by the arm and marching me through the Great Hall toward the Brull House's wing.

I tried to pull out of his grip, but he held firm. “You can let me go. I know where I’m going.”

“I will escort you right to the room.”

“Are you that afraid of the Dagmar?”

He didn’t respond, but holding my arm tightly, he took me all the way to the rooms. Once we arrived, he opened the door and pushed me inside, then shut the door. The click of the lock followed. Grabbing the door handle, I tried to turn it, but it wouldn’t budge. I was definitely locked inside this room.

I had no idea what I was going to do while the others had their tea with the king. There weren’t any books in the room, or games to pass the time, but I did have my embroidery that the matron was making me practice—though I’d rather sleep than do that.

Walking into the washing room, I began to inspect my wound in the mirror. It wasn’t as horrible as I’d imagined by the stinging pain that prickled my face. There was a raised red welt from my left cheek, over the bridge of my nose to a spot right below my right eye, and another that crossed my lips—the very tip of one leather tail had split open the very corner of my bottom lip. There was a bit of dried blood on my chin.

I grabbed a cloth, dunked it in the water basin and scrubbed at the crusted crimson stain. It made me look battered and bruised, not lady like at all. So at least my injury would get me out of having to socialize with any of the noblemen.

The sound of the door opening reached me, and soon a healer came into the washing room with her medicinal bag of herbs, ointments, and elixirs. She didn’t ask me what happened, or give me any words of comfort, she just cleaned the wounds and applied a foul-smelling ointment onto my skin. Then she left, and I was alone once more.

Suppressing the curiosity of rummaging around in the other girls’ bags, I paced around the room, until I gave up and laid down on my bed. Drowsiness slowly captured me, making

me wonder if the healing cream had some kind of sleep-inducing herb, but I closed my eyes and let myself drift a bit.

As I slowly sunk into sleep, the man from the dungeon popped into my mind. His face flashed behind my eyes.

*“Come to me, Onya...”*

His voice filled my ears and I immediately snapped open my eyes, sitting up on the mattress. A shiver rushed over my body, and then my arms started to throb like I’d been burned all over again. I rubbed at them, trying to soothe the sensation. It wasn’t necessarily pain, but it definitely did something unpleasant to my body.

With a harsh shake of my head, I attempted to dislodge his image and voice. It didn’t work. The man was still there, firmly planted in my mind. Getting up, I started to pace around once more while every muscle in my body twitched. No matter how hard I tried I couldn’t settle, I needed to move. It felt like if I stopped, I would suffocate.

Eventually, I rushed to the door and tried to open it. I twisted the handle as hard as I could, but it didn’t budge. Gods, I had to get out of this room. My gaze set on the shuttered window that was near my bed. When I opened the shutters it revealed two, wooden-framed, narrow panes of glass, so I pushed on one to see if it would swing outward.

It didn’t budge at first, but after putting all my weight against it, one of them creaked open. I poked my head out and looked around to find the ground was a good jump away.

It was far enough that I’d most likely twist my ankle, or worse, if I landed wrong, but not far enough that I would die from the fall. Peering at the outer walls, I spotted a wooden ledge no wider than a hand span, stretching the length of the Great House. I looked up to see if there was another ledge or even wooden panels that I could grip onto with my fingers. Three wooden carvings of fallow deer stags, with large horn racks, were spaced out by an arm’s length just below the roof of the house. That would do, I only had to make it to the next window.

I pushed up onto the window's wide ledge, swinging my legs out of the narrow opening. Slowly, I squirmed on my belly, holding onto the sill as I reached with my feet for the ledge. Settling them on the wooden beam, while still holding onto the windowpane, I straightened my body. Although I had great balance, I knew this was going to be difficult.

As I took a few steps, I tried not to look down. Reaching up for the first set of horns, I took another step, but slipped, gripping the deer's head tightly, so I didn't fall. Luckily, I managed to get balanced again, then took another couple of steps—I could see the next window only an arm's length away.

Still holding the horns with one hand, I reached for the other window and stretched my fingers; I was so close to being able to grab it. Just another inch more. I slid my foot forward, made sure I was stable, then let go of the deer head. For a split second, I teetered on the edge, my breath held tightly in my lungs, but my fingers dug into the groove around the window frame, holding on firmly.

I was able to kick open one windowpane and crawled into the common room. Thankfully, it was empty, because everyone was still at tea with the king. This door wasn't locked, so I peered out into the corridor, surely thinking that the guard would be posted at my door. He wasn't. The landing was empty, and I snuck out of the room.

To be honest, I wasn't sure what my plan was; I hadn't thought that far ahead. All I knew was that I had to find the man from the dungeon. Every fiber of my being ached for it.

Stealthily, I crept down the staircase and made my way along the back corridor, toward the stairs leading to the dungeon. Before I could reach it, the sound of several marching feet echoed. I ducked into a darkened alcove, shrinking as small as I could against the wall. Two guards passed by me.

“I heard the king is sure that he's the Dragon Prince.”

“I wouldn't say that to anyone else. You know his people are everywhere. If they heard you say anything about the dragon existing, it will be your head on the chopping block.”

Their booted steps receded, and once I was sure they were gone, I stepped out of the shadows. I was surprised to hear the words Dragon Prince spoken in the capital. Surely, they didn't actually believe that to be true. That the dragons had even existed. Maybe a thousand years ago, in a past that was more make-believe than reality.

Not now. That would be impossible.

I was about to continue to the stairs, when new voices and footsteps came from below me. I managed to duck into an empty storage closet as the light of a torch flickered across the stone floor. My body pressed against the wall, in the shadows, but was still able to see out to the corridor.

Another two guards came into view, one of them holding a thick metal chain in his hand. It chinked with each step he took. Behind them, I saw *him*. He was bare-chested, his leather breeches dirty and torn, he was also barefoot, several toes seeming black with rot. The chain was wrapped around his neck, and then looped over his wrists—binding both hands to his waist. He couldn't have moved them even if he tried.

I held my breath as he passed by, unable to believe I was seeing him walk through the halls of the Great Fortress. Where were they taking him?

More guards marched behind him. When they crossed the open door, I peered out again, catching the sight of whip marks across the prisoner's bare back. Some were old, scabbed over, a few already formed scars, but there was also a fresh set right across the wide expanse of his shoulders.

A rush of heat flooded my body. It was so intense and sudden that I sucked in a breath, pressing back against the wall for support. My legs vibrated. Resting my head against the wall, I tried to measure my breathing, to get a hold of the heart hammering in my chest.

*"Come find me, drotning. Be my witness..."*

His voice resounded again in my head.

I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know what he meant by that, but it prompted me to step out into the corridor

and follow the guards to find out where they were taking him.

It was important for me to keep a good distance so I wasn't spotted, but I thought the guards were so preoccupied with their prisoner that they wouldn't have noticed me anyway. They definitely picked a good day to take him out and walk him through the fortress, as everyone was still out on the grounds playing *Knotter* and drinking tea.

It wasn't long before they came to a set of grand, wooden entrance, ornately decorated with stag and bear frescos. The doors opened, and they marched the prisoner inside the room. Judging by how lavish the entrance was, I suspected it led to the royal chambers. Once they went through, the doors shut, but one of them didn't close all the way, leaving a small gap.

I crept up to the door, peering through the opening. There was no doubt that they entered the royal chambers. Everything was ornate, fancy, and expensive. One of the guards forced the man down to his knees in the middle of the large room, in front of a high-backed chair. His chains rattled as he moved, the sound making the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stir.

That same guard who had pushed the prisoner down, stood in front of him, about an arm's length away as he spoke. From where I stood, I couldn't hear exactly what he said, but from the cadence of his voice, I assumed it was a question. The red-headed man replied, but it was obviously not the right answer because the guard hit him across the face with his wooden baton. Its sound made me wince.

Urgency rushed through me, wanting me to get inside, so I could hear what was being said. Upon a sweep of the space, I noticed a set of thick burgundy curtains along one wall that probably hid a bath or dressing area. It would be the perfect hiding spot, as long as no one noticed me crawling along the floor, in the shadows, and against the wall.

Quietly and slowly, I nudged open the door wide enough for me to crawl through it. So, I didn't change my mind, I moved quickly. If I had really thought it through, I would never have followed the guards in the first place.

I made it to the curtain, and crouched behind it, still keeping a gap between them so I could see. Part of me thought the guard was going to ask another question; he took a step away instead and turned slightly toward the back of the room. There, a hidden door in the paneling opened, and the king emerged. The guard pulled the chair a little farther from the prisoner as the king waddled over to them. Fluffing out his long jacket, he sat in the chair, regarding the prisoner.

“We finally meet,” the king began.

“It took you long enough to show your face. But I always knew you were a coward.”

The closest guard lifted his arm to strike him with the baton, but the king shook his head.

“Defiant to the end, I see. I suppose it wouldn’t have been as fun if you’d complied so easily.”

Anger flooded my body; I’d heard that the king was a cruel man, yet seeing it with my own eyes made me furious. Even if this prisoner had been a horrible criminal, I still didn’t believe anyone deserved to be treated so inhumanely.

“If you tell me where the rest of the *Asatora Drecki* are holed up, I will make sure you come to your end quickly and painlessly.”

The red-headed man laughed. It was throaty and full, and I imagined in a different set of circumstances it would’ve filled others with warmth and joy. Here, it was mocking.

“Even if I knew where they were, I would never tell you. You’re just going to have to keep being afraid, Runebrooke, that *your* end is near.”

This time the king nodded to the guard, and he brought down his baton against the prisoner’s right temple. He slumped sideways.

“You talk of rebellion and treason. Only a dragon would ever think to be so bold and try to take the throne.”

A dragon? Why would the king say such an outlandish thing? Surely, he didn’t think dragons presently existed. Was

he suggesting that this man with the wild red hair and golden eyes was actually a dragon?

The prisoner remained slumped, his head lolling forward. It didn't even look like he was conscious.

“You've been hiding behind a mask for a long time. *Dre the Dread...*” The king laughed. “But you've made a critical error by becoming legendary for your crimes. Now, I can execute you without anyone knowing who you really are. No one will care about a dead outlaw.”

“Your king is talking to you.” The guard with the baton took a step closer to the prisoner so he could hit him harder.

As quick as a striking snake, his hands gripped the guard's leg in a vice. Screams ripped through his throat while he flailed, trying to get the prisoner off him, all the while smoke rose from his pants. The stench of melted fabric and burned flesh spread through the room. It rooted in my nose, making me gag.

At the same time, the marks on my arms started to throb. Harshly and intensely. Pulsating, as if they were on fire as well. It forced me to bite down on my bottom lip to stop from making any noise as my whole body overheated.

My widened eyes held the scene as the guard desperately fought to pull away from the man who continued to burn his leg. Finally, he hit him so many times with the baton, that the prisoner lost consciousness for a moment, hands sagging to his sides.

The king leapt to his feet and clapped. “I knew you were in there, Saeldreon.”

*Saeldreon?* My lips suddenly itched to whisper his name.

He looked down at his injured guard, who was writhing in pain on the floor, one leg of his trousers completely singed, the skin underneath blackened like burnt beef. “*Lord of Fire*, indeed. You're damn lucky he's still collared in silver, because he might've become his dragon form and razed this entire place to the ground.”



I slapped a hand over my mouth to muffle the ragged intake of air. I couldn't believe the king's words. I couldn't believe what the prisoner had done with his mere hands. My arms continued to throb, reminding me about the real possibility. Except, he hadn't melted off my flesh, instead he marked me with his fingers—like branding livestock.

My movement must've fluttered the curtain I hid behind, because Saeldreon's head came up a little, his gaze settling in my direction. His attention caused the air to leave my lungs, my heart leaping into my throat. I could feel my pulse thundering along my neck.

Had he really heard me? Could he actually see me?

I decided it was a good time for me to get out of there before the guards, or the king, saw me since I didn't think they would be lenient with me. Imagining myself bound in those chains, I dropped to all fours and quickly, but quietly, crawled back to the door. Thankfully, it was still open from when I entered, so I just slipped out to the hall.

Once I was out, I got to my feet and quickly walked back down the corridor so I could return to Brull House before the Dagmar and the girls returned. My heart was pounding so hard, and my breathing came so ragged that I could barely hear anything else above it. I felt lightheaded and disoriented. What I'd just seen and heard spun my head violently.

So distracted by that fact, I didn't immediately react as two soldiers marched down the corridor toward me. One of them was Herr Torin. His eyes widened when he spotted me, and I thought for sure he was going to acknowledge my appearance or call me out for roaming the halls alone. Instead, he stopped and faced the other soldier, forcing him to also turn away—giving me time to duck into a darkened alcove. A few moments later, they marched by, heading to the king's chambers.

Herr Torin made no indication that he'd seen me.

I took advantage of the reprieve he gave me and ran the rest of the way to the stairs, taking them two at a time to the landing and rushing back to my room. The door was still

locked when I tried to open it. Of course it was. The young guard had the key, and he probably thought I was still inside it.

The young man in question approached from another direction, his eyes growing wide and scowling. “How did you get out of the room?”

“Does it matter?” His mouth opened to answer but I cut him off swiftly. “What matters is that I get back into the room so that neither of us get in trouble.”

“But, but,” he stammered.

“Do you want to face the Dagmar’s wrath?”

He vehemently shook his head.

“Neither do I. So, kindly open this door, I will go inside, you can lock it up again, and no one will be the wiser. We can go about our day as if nothing happened.”

For a moment, he considered my words, then promptly took out the key ring, unlocked the door, and let me inside it. The click of the lock resounded behind me. Immediately, I went into the washing room, and splashed cool water onto my face to calm myself—being careful of my injury. My entire body was trembling. It was going to take me a bit to fully understand what I’d just witnessed, but there was one thing I did know for sure...

Dragons were real, and I’d been branded by one.

## SAELDREON



She was there.

My eyes and ears didn't deceive me. She was hiding behind the curtain in the king's room, watching. I'd heard her small gasp when I burned the guard's flesh off his leg.

The branding worked.

I'd asked for her to come to me, to find me, to be my witness, and she had. We were fully connected now. Onya would do anything I asked her to do.

Nevertheless, I had a sense that my time was limited. Runebrooke wouldn't want me to be a martyr. He would need to kill me soon before the word got out that I was indeed the last Dragon Prince.

The guard I'd burned was still writhing in pain on the floor as Runebrooke had done nothing to help him. His cruelty, even against his own soldiers, was on full display. The other guards seemed like they didn't know what to do, whether to help their fellow brother and risk the king's wrath, or just wait and watch as he died from shock. It didn't really matter to me either way.

The doors to the chamber fully opened then, and two more soldiers marched inside it. I recognized one of them, Herr Torin, as the man who saved me from a bit of torture in the woods—when I was first caught. His glance at me was quick,

as if he'd disturbed the king during his supper, instead of in the middle of torturing a prisoner for information.

"Your Highness," Torin offered after bowing to Runebrooke, "the queen has been asking for you."

Runebrooke smirked. "And she sent you to find me, is that it?"

Torin stayed tight-lipped, but his disparaging look spoke volumes. I could tell he didn't like the fake king. Over the days that I'd been imprisoned, I'd come to know that many of the guards and soldiers despised Runebrooke but fear kept them silent. I didn't blame them. It would've been treasonous to do so, and I suspected one whiff of it would've sent those men to the chopping block without hesitation.

I'd heard from the *Asatora Drecki* that when Runebrooke had inherited the throne when his father died from some mysterious illness at an unexpected early age. The new king had rounded up men who were extremely loyal to his father to have them imprisoned, and then eventually executed for a variety of reasons. No one dared counter him for fear of also losing their head. There was also a rumor that he executed one of the young lady attendants for refusing his sexual advances. According to the royal court though, she had been conspiring with the *Asatora Drecki* to usurp his throne, so her beheading was justified.

Rumor also had it that he'd sent the Queen Regent, his mother, across the North Sea to the country of Gronsted, a small island made of mostly rock and ice, to convalesce in one of the old gods' temples. To cure her of her grief. Some said her ship never reached the shores.

"The festivities are finished, and the residents are returning to the house. Including the queen."

"So?"

Torin glanced at me, then back to Runebrooke. "I'm sure you wouldn't want Her Highness to see such things."

"You're probably right, Torin." He nodded to the three guards who were unharmed. "Take him back through the

tunnel. I don't want anyone to see him, not until the day I cut off his head."

One of them picked up the chain and yanked me hard enough that I had to get to my feet or be choked. I knew they were afraid to get near me and grab my arm to force me to stand. I wouldn't have been able to do anything to them now, but they didn't know that.

Torin gestured to the guard on the ground, who had passed out from the pain. At least, I thought he was just unconscious and not dead. Looking at him intently, I saw the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

"I'll call a healer for Oren."

Runebrooke glanced briefly at the injured guard. "Take him to the healer instead. I don't want him in here. He stinks like rotten meat."

The old soldier and his companion crouched down, picking up the unconscious man.

"Go through the tunnel as well. I don't want the queen or any of the young ladies seeing such violence. It would disturb their fragile minds."

I was led to the back of the room, to the hidden door in the wooden panel. The head guard opened it and pulled on my chain to make me walk through it. I went along compliantly since I was too exhausted to put up any kind of fight right now.

Aside from the beating I'd received, calling on my fire drained me.

Through the secret tunnel, I struggled to keep up behind the lead since my legs shook from exhaustion. The other two guards followed behind me, while Torin and his companion dragged the injured man last. Their lead tugged on the chain unnecessarily, and I lurched forward, losing all balance. My knee hit the hard floor, and I braced a hand against the wall, so I didn't fully collapse.

"Get up!" The guard yanked on the chain again. He could pull all he wanted, but I wasn't getting up without help.

I didn't have the strength to support my weight on my good leg.

"I said get up, *doonga!*" He yanked so hard on my neck that I fell forward.

It was clear that he wanted to lash out at me, yet he was too scared to get close enough to do so.

"Get him up!" he ordered the younger man behind me, but the boy shook his head.

"No way. I don't want to be set on fire."

They started to argue back and forth about who should get me to my feet. It gave me a bit of a reprieve as I lay there, gathering my energy.

Eventually, Torin stomped over to my side. "You're both useless."

He crouched next to me and wrapped his hand around my arm, gently helping me up and surprising me.

"Aren't you afraid I'll set you ablaze?" I asked as he put his arm around me and forced me to move.

"If you had the power to set us all on fire, you'd have done it already."

Torin was absolutely right about that, he knew I was struggling. Thirty or so days was too long to be without proper food and limited water. The body started to deteriorate. Thanks to my special genetics, I had energy reserves to feed off in times of scarcity, but even my body had limitations.

Because of the silver dampening my power, I had limited use of my resources, and what I could use, sapped me of any energy reserve. It would take days before I could be back to full power. I'd need to sleep and eat, hopefully the guards would let me do both. They were bastards about it some days, but not all the guards were bad. Some of them were just kids forced into servitude to a cruel and immoral ruler.

Then, when the mountain finally woke up, which I sensed it would soon, it would be the sign for my liberation.

## ONYA



A different *hendey* helped me with washing and dressing that night. When I asked where Sigrunn was, she didn't answer me exactly, just said that Sigrunn was feeling ill and had taken to her bed for the evening. I asked if I could go see her but was denied any access to her. She'd obviously suffered at the hands of the guard because of me. In my mind, I pictured her laid up in bed, her face unrecognizable, her body a labyrinth of marks and bruises.

Because I didn't have Sigrunn to settle me in, I didn't have any potion to help me with my sleep.

So, I dreamed. Of dragons. And of *him*.

*I stood on that hill again, the lush green one from before, my hair unbound, wearing only a thin sheath on my body. The sun's rays kissed the skin that was uncovered, and I felt warm and comforted.*

*Then a large shadow loomed up above, the whoosh of large wings flapping dancing in the air. I turned expecting to see the majestic red dragon landing on the hill's edge like last time, but it was the man from the dungeons, Saeldreon, who stalked toward me. His wild red hair blew around him like flames. His face was stern, hardened, with a few days' growth of red bristles on his chin and around his full set of lips. His eyes glinted like gold in the sunlight.*

*He wore leather pants, but nothing else.*

*I'd never seen a man built like he was. Broad chest, muscled shoulders, and arms. His chest looked hard, and a distinctive line separated his muscles on either side of his navel, leading into the band of his pants. His strides were long, commanding, he walked like a prince storming into battle to take the throne.*

*And then he was there, right in front of me. I hadn't had a chance to move, to retreat from him. I was rooted to the spot on that hill, my bare feet nestled in the soft green grass, as if I'd been waiting for him for a lifetime.*

*"I've been waiting for you, my drotning." His deep voice vibrated over me, like the rumble of fire in a dragon's throat.*

*He reached for me, settling his hand along the side of my neck, fingers splayed along the back while his thumb caressed my chin, then up to my bottom lip. His gaze dropped from my eyes to my mouth. The hungry way he looked at me, produced a fluttering sensation in my belly, and an ache between my thighs.*

*His other hand stroked down my arm, his fingers rubbing along the dark marks on my skin. A pleasant shiver rushed over my body from his touch. He pressed harder and I couldn't stop the mewl of pleasure that escaped from my mouth.*

*"You belong to me, Onya. We're bonded until we die." Leaning in, his gaze narrowed on my mouth.*

*I took in a ragged breath, waiting for his lips to touch mine. My heart thundered in my chest. There was no doubt that he could hear it as he inched even closer.*

*We were but a whisper away when a cold draft blew over my body. I started to shiver, and his image began to blur. I reached out to grab onto him, but my fingers brushed through the air as if he was a spirit.*

*"No!" I cried. "Don't leave me!"*

*Frantic to grasp onto him, I reached out again, but this time my hands hit something solid. Not flesh though. It was metal.*



The taste of rust filled my mouth. The smell of dirt, sweat, and unspeakable things invaded my nose.

“I’m right here, *drotning*.”

Saeldreon’s voice returned, but it wasn’t the rich, lively baritone from earlier. It sounded raspy, dry, like he spoke with a mouth full of ashes.

Blinking away the fog that invaded my mind, I woke from my dream to find that I wasn’t in my bed, but back in the dungeons, standing at Saeldreon’s cell. In a panic, I looked around, wondering how I had come here again. Without Sigrunn’s medicated tea that put me in a restful deep sleep, I had dreamed of dragons, and in a daze had left my room, walking down to the dungeons.

How had no one seen me?

“I knew you would come to me.”

Peering into the shadowed cell, I could see him sitting on the hard stone ground, his back resting against one wall while the chain around his neck seemingly weighed down on him. He didn’t look like the man I’d seen in my dreams, not even the man I saw before tonight. Then I remembered the horrible beating he’d taken in the king’s chambers.

“I need water.”

“But how...” I stuttered, soon noticing I held a large key ring in my hand.

“There’s a water barrel just there.” He gestured slightly with his chin toward the cell gate.

Turning, I saw the barrel he meant and rushed to dip the ladle into the water, filling it up to the brim. I took the key ring, and tried the keys, until I found the one to unlock his door. Opening it, I went inside, fully realizing the risk I was taking. However, I felt compelled to do it. Although I was shaking with fear for what he could do to me, I still approached him.

Gently, I held the scoop to his cracked lips as he opened them, and I tipped it, so the water flowed into his mouth. He

swallowed it down greedily.

“More,” Saeldreon croaked.

I refilled the ladle and returned to him. This time, he took it from me and drank it slower. As he drank, my gaze surveyed his condition. His face was cut up, blood had dried around his mouth, nose, and his right eye. There was also a bit of blood matted onto his hair, making me wonder if he had a wound there. His body wasn't as powerful as it had been in my dream—he looked malnourished, his ribs sticking out so I could count them easily—but there was still no doubt about the power he possessed.

Old marks and scars marred the skin on his arms and legs, and I was afraid to even look at his back, imagining an excess of lines there too. Too many to count, too many for anyone to endure.

I didn't know why, but I tore a piece of cloth off the bottom of my night gown, went back to the water barrel, dipped it, and returned. Crouching next to him, I gently cleared the blood from his angular face. As I worked, he watched my face, his gaze going to my eyes, my cheeks, my mouth, then downward, where I could feel the heat of his look.

A ragged breath left me, and I tried hard not to acknowledge that his stare was affecting me, but I couldn't stop my body from trembling. I couldn't stop the flush across my chest and arms. It was then that the marks around my arms flared to life. The feeling was like a punch to my belly, and I gasped.

Saeldreon's hand reached for my face. “Who hurt you?”

I flinched away from his touch. “Some guard. Doesn't matter.”

“Are you afraid of me, *drotning*?”

“Yes.” I sighed, unable to control how my body reacted to his nearness.

“That's good,” he nodded. “You should be. I'm a very dangerous man.”

Really looking at him, I sat back on my haunches and swallowed. “Are you...what the king said you are?”

“What do you think?”

The instant his hand touched my arm, fingers wrapping around the marks, it felt as if lightning had struck me. I gasped aloud.

*He is the Dragon Prince.*

I couldn't doubt it any longer, not given how my entire body was aflame from his simple touch.

“Do you want me to get you out of here? Is that why you branded me?”

“Yes.”

Unsure of how to respond, how to act, I swallowed again. “How?” I finally asked.

Before he could respond, two guards rushed into the cell. One of them grabbed the back of my hair and pulled me away. I landed on my rear end as he dragged me across the floor.

“Let go of me!” I shouted, raking my nails across his hand.

The chain rattled as Saeldreon jumped to his feet, attempting to reach for me, but the other guard landed a kick to his gut that sent him staggering backward.

Glancing up at the guard who still had me by the hair, I realized that it was the young guard from the night before. “Let me go.”

“You're more trouble than you're worth.”

I slapped at his hand again. “When the Dagmar finds out...”

The other one snorted. “That old hag doesn't care about you, bitch. You're just some village girl brought here to be trained to be a servant.”

Everything inside me wanted to argue, to say that wasn't true, that I was to wed some nobleman, but he had the truth of it.

“No noble is going to touch you. Especially not after I tell everyone that you were down here to fuck this criminal.”

Once more Saeldreon tried to lurch forward and grab him. “Let her go or I’ll snap your neck!”

Laughing, the guard sidestepped him, since he was still unstable on his feet, kicking him again. This time Saeldreon stumbled back into the wall, hitting the back of his head against the stone.

“The only neck that’s going to be snapped is yours. In fortnight, you’ll be on the chopping block, and I’ll be cheering in the crowd.”

Frantically, I screamed again, lashing out with my legs to kick the other man. He turned toward me, still grinning with yellow teeth—one black, and one missing. It made him look like a troll from one of the story books I read as a child.

“Speaking of fucking...” he leered down at me, making my stomach roil.

Bile filled my mouth, and I was sure I was going to retch.

“No! Don’t touch me!” My voice echoed through the hall while I thrashed, desperately trying to get away.

The one who gripped my hair, let me go. “Biorn, I-I don’t think that’s right.”

“Then don’t watch, boy.” Grabbing one of my kicking legs, the troll-looking one pulled me toward him.

“Stop! Don’t!” I screamed as loud as I could.

That just made him laugh as he jumped on top of me, straddling my thighs, but before he could do anything else, a wooden staff struck him across the back of the head. He fell off me, and I was able to scramble away.

Sigrunn knelt beside me, her arm wrapping around my shoulder. “It’s okay.”

Panting, I looked up to see the Dagmar raising her staff at him. “Do I need to hit you again?”

Biorn, the guard, rubbed at the back of his head. “You don’t have any power down here, old woman.”

“Do you wish to speak with the queen, then? She’s taken an interest in this girl, and I wouldn’t want to tell her how badly you’ve treated her.”

The guard didn’t say anything, just shook his head. “Get her out of here. But if I see her down here once more, I can’t promise you that she’ll survive it.”

Sigrunn helped me up to my feet and took me out of the cell. “What in the Gods’ name were you doing?” she whispered.

I didn’t have an answer for her, because honestly, I didn’t truly know. Yet, as she rushed me past the cell, I felt Saeldreon’s gaze on me the entire time.

*“Soon, drotning. Soon, we will be together...”*

## ONYA



I was about to go into my room when the Dagmar blocked me with her staff, and then directed me into the common room to have a little chat. Hands clasped in front, I stood there, expecting the worst. So many rules I'd broken, a ton, even consorted with a known criminal. Surely, the guards would spread that information.

At first, she just looked at me. Her brow furrowed deeper and deeper as the seconds ticked away. I suspected she was trying to decide what punishment I was to face for my transgressions.

“It seems I've made a mistake leaving you on your own. You're much too wild for your own good.”

Hearing her say that she made a mistake truly took me aback. The matron didn't strike me as a someone who conceded any type of power to another. Not that she was pooling to me for that. That, I was sure to *never* hear from her lips.

The thought of explaining my actions crossed my mind, but honestly, I was unsure of them myself. I'd had no plans of going down to the dungeons once more, and yet, I ended up there anyway. Saeldreon said I was bonded to him, and that I would heed his call, but by telling her that I'd have to reveal the marks on my arms and how they were made. I didn't think

exposing my bond to the supposed Dragon Prince would gain me any sympathy.

On the contrary, it would likely be a death sentence.

“From now on, Sigrunn will be with you every hour of every day until you are properly tamed and can be trusted to be on your own. Every activity, every meal, every excursion, and every night, she will be by your side.”

I glanced to the side to find Sigrunn standing there, eyes downcast. Even though her face was turned down and the scarf covered her head, I could still see the bruises and marks the guard had given her for my foolishness, my determination to be rebellious, to fight against the unfair system we and the other girls had to put through to suffer.

How selfish I had been, only thinking about my fate and my desire to escape, and not about all the other *hendey*s who’d had gone through the same thing I was going through, but were found unfit and unwanted.

“I understand,” I eventually muttered.

The Dagmar took a step forward, so she was a mere two feet in front of me. She was forcing me to face her, to meet her intense gaze, which I did.

“Do you?” she asked, her brow furrowing even deeper. “Do you truly understand what’s at stake here?”

“Yes,” I replied with determination, although uncertainty did fill my heart.

“Then why do you make light of it? Why do you fight against it? It’s your duty to this country to come to Jarlstad and train to be a lady so you can wed and have babies.”

I pressed my lips together, fighting the urge to argue with her. To ask her why it was *my* duty to do such things when there were other girls who would’ve jumped at the chance to be a lady of the court.

“Babies are dying in wombs before even being born, others die within days despite all the effort to keep them alive.

Some women are infertile, unable bear children despite their desperate desire to.”

She took another step closer, and at this distance, I could trace every line on her face, see the different hues of her eyes. I imagined when she was younger, she might have been as beautiful as Freya herself.

“This country is slowly dying. I know you’ve seen that even in your remote village. Your animals are too skinny, your crops too scarce. Our people are dying as well. I fear that in fifty years’ time, there will only be half of our population still alive with no new children to replace us. Andlang will eventually become a wasteland. In time, we’ll be an ancient people from an ancient time that no longer exists.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she spoke, and I swallowed the uncomfortable feelings that arose from watching this formidable woman break apart in front of me.

“I’ll... I’ll try harder. I promise I will.”

Surprisingly, I meant it. I would try harder to do what was asked of me. To be compliant and grateful, because the alternative scared me to death. I didn’t want to be bound to Saeldreon. What he represented frightened me.

My entire life I thought the existence of dragons was a myth. A story passed down from generation to generation to weave some kind of magical meaning to Andlang and its people, and to give a reason for the land’s demise. I didn’t want to be involved with that story’s continuation.

The Dagmar raised her hand, and I flinched, expecting a slap across my face. Instead, she cupped my cheek in her rough palm. I swallowed again, unsure of what to say or do. This moment was too real, too raw and I couldn’t understand its meaning.

“Thank you.” Once her hand dropped back to her side, she turned away from me. “Now, return to your room to sleep. You will have to be up in a few hours.”

Doing exactly as I was told, I returned to my room with Sigrunn in tow. As I settled on my bed, I watched her prepare



my tea, adding in more valerian than the other night. It was hard to look at her face, see the bruises on her arms starting to bloom in purple and black and know that I was responsible.

“I’m sorry, Sigrunn,” I whispered.

“I know you are.” She didn’t look up, just kept stirring my tea.

“I promise I will behave from now on.”

She didn’t respond to that, only pushing the cup into my hands. “Drink it all.”

Despite its horrid taste, I drank it.

“Why do you go to the dungeons?” she asked softly, settling onto the trundle bed that had been brought into the room for her.

I leaned in closer. “I’m bound to him, I think. I hear his voice in my head.”

Her thoughtful eyes regarded me. “The marks on your arms...”

“They’re darker, sunk in, like they are a part of my flesh. I want to know how to remove them. I don’t want anything to do with him. He frightens me.”

Sigrunn grabbed my hand. “You can’t go there ever again. I’ve been able to protect you thus far, but next time, I fear it won’t be easily covered up. Too many guards know. You will be branded a traitor and executed for consorting with a known criminal.”

Remaining silent, I nodded, feeling her let go of me to lay down on her bed. Before I lay on mine, I sensed movement in the room, so I looked up to find Margo sitting up on her bed, staring in my direction.

Panic began to build inside me. Had she heard what we’d talked about?

After a few more moments of looking at me, she settled down into her bed.

In that moment, I wondered if she was going to be a problem for me, and if so, what I was going to have to do about it to keep my secrets.

THE NEXT DAY was the usual day of worship in Andlang. In my village, only the elders really went to the temple to pray to the Gods. I'd used to go when I was a child since my parents would take me, but after my brother was born, they hardly ever made the effort. Some people in the village blamed the deterioration of our land on those who didn't worship, saying the Gods were angry.

After our morning meal, we were all corralled into waiting carriages to take us to the city temple to make offerings to the Gods, particularly Freya, for vitality and fertility. The wooden carriages were painted light blue and white—the colors sacred to the Brull House and Freya—and were enclosed, with two benches along each side, and four small windows. I got in with the other girls from my dorm, and Sigrunn.

None of the girls questioned my *hendey's* presence. They likely suspected that she was there to control my actions.

The trip through the city was different from when we first arrived. Riding in the blue and white carriage of the Brull House signified our importance, and the people on the streets waved at us as we passed by, some made the symbol of Freya, others bent their heads low with respect. It was both humbling and unsettling to be relied on to somehow save Andlang with our sacred wombs.

The carriages stopped in front of the large, wooden, and stone temple we saw days passed. The place where the Shamans had come out to bless us. I wondered if I would see the tall female Shaman who had blessed our wagon; I wanted to ask her what else she had done, what the lightning bolt symbol meant. Had she cursed me? Had she somehow marked me to be dragon bound?

Once inside the temple I was overwhelmed by the grandeur of the place. The ceilings were so high that I could barely make out the frescos painted on the stone. Our footsteps

echoed throughout the immense space, and when we entered, the first thing that came into view was the statue of Freya.

At the east point, to her left, was the statue for Iver, *the God of Courage and Strength*, and across from him was his brother, Mim, *the God of Wisdom*. Those were the three main Gods of Andlang. There were other less important deities that oversaw more attributes, like prosperity, and health. In my village we also worshipped the three Gods so I was used to seeing their likenesses, but nothing could compare to the fifteen foot, elaborately carved stone effigies.

The Dagmar led us to Freya's altar. Setting the clutched bunch of yellow, Ulex flowers onto the altar, she got on her knees, bowing her head as she muttered her prayer. Then she stood and gestured for each of us to do the same ritual. We'd each been given a handful of the fertility flower upon entering the temple.

When it was my turn, I set the flowers down, then went to my knees. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the tall Shaman that blessed our wagon. She stood on the left side of the statue, her eyes directly on me. Her appearance was startling, and I nearly gasped aloud.

"Bless me Freya," I quickly said instead, and stood. I had to stop myself from going over to the tall woman immediately to ask her questions. It was considered a grave offense to the Gods to speak directly to a Shaman... but I had to know.

I took a step in her direction, but a hand snatched my arm to stop me. Sigrunn was at my side. "You mustn't. This transgression will get you killed," she whispered into my ear.

Immediately coming to my senses, I walked with her to where the others girl stood, reverently waiting with their bent heads. I didn't bow but continued to look toward the Shaman. She too didn't look away from me; her gaze had followed me. An unsettling shiver rushed down my back at the intensity of her stare, and I kept a close eye on her hands to see if they moved to make the lightning symbol.

She didn't move, just stared, unflinching.

After the last girl gave her offering, the Dagmar led us out of the temple and back to our carriages. Before I climbed inside, an uncomfortable sensation finger-walked up my spine, and I turned to look back at the temple.

The Shaman stood on the top step, watching me.

Linn shoved at my rear end, urging me to move, and right as I entered the carriage, I looked back again... The Shaman was gone.

An unsettled look must've captured my face when we pulled away from the temple, because Sigrunn touched my arm, leaning into my ear. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

I shook my head. "Nothing happened."

Not long after, while we rolled down a narrow street heading back to Brull House, everything happened.

## ONYA



Shouts from the guards and other men viciously rose outside, and the carriage came to a sudden halt.

The door was pulled open and a man wearing a belted red robe, over red pants, the bottom half of his face covered with a red sash, burst inside our ride. Without hesitation, he went straight for me, grabbing my arm and pulling me out with him.

The other girls all screamed but none of them made an attempt to help me. Sigrunn leapt at the man, trying to scratch at his eyes, but he backhanded her, sending her sprawling onto the wooden floor. She didn't get up again.

My body jerked every which way as I tried to fight him, but he was strong, dragging me out of the carriage with ease. Once I was on the ground, he picked me up, threw me over his shoulder, and dashed into a narrow alley that branched off from the main road. He was fast on his feet, agile too as he jumped over old, wooden wine barrels and a turned over food cart that had been blocking the way.

After we passed those, I saw several people come out of nearby houses and shops to gather by the cart as if nothing had happened.

Furiously, I kicked and screamed, trying to force him to let me go. To my dismay, he ignored me, turning another corner, to run down a narrow alley until we were deep into the city.

The crimson-dressed man ducked into a shadowed corner along a three-story row house, and finally set me on my feet. I was about to make a run for it, when he grabbed me again, this time to wrap an arm around my neck from behind, squeezing.

I beat at his arm. I didn't want to die, here, in the middle of a city that wasn't my home and surrounded by strangers for an unknown reason.

"No!" I managed to squeak out before my vision and my mind went dark.

WHEN I CAME TO, I was slumped in a chair in the middle of an empty room. My head spun, but I could still see that I was surrounded by six robed and masked men of varying heights, sizes, and ages. The one who had taken me, handed me a waterskin.

"Drink. You won't feel so lightheaded."

I didn't drink, because I had no idea what it contained. They could've poisoned it.

Knowingly eyeing me, the man drank from it, then handed it back to me. "We're not trying to kill you."

Hesitantly, I tipped it to my mouth and let the liquid go down my sore throat. The relief was instant, and my head did clear a little.

"Where am I?" I asked, looking around, although it wouldn't do me any good. I didn't know Jarlstad well, so I could've been in a completely different city by now. "Who are you?"

The man who kidnapped me stepped to the side, allowing an older and shorter man to approach. He hadn't been there at the start.

"I will answer that, but first, you must answer my questions."

I wasn't sure what kind of information I could give these men as I didn't even know who they were.

"How long have you been in Brull House?"

“Only a fortnight.”

“Have you heard rumors about a man in the dungeons?” I must’ve flinched or something because the man loomed over me. “You know of him, yes?”

There was no point in lying since I was sure they would be able to tell, so I nodded.

“Have you seen him?”

Then it occurred to me who they were. “You’re the *Asatora Drecki*.”

He glanced at the others before focusing back on me. “Is he still alive?”

“Yes, he’s alive, but I don’t think for much longer.”

“Do you know who he truly is?”

Swallowing, I nodded once more. “I heard the king call him Saeldreon.”

“But do you know who he *truly* is?”

I knew what they were asking but I didn’t want to answer because I didn’t know what they would do to me either way. Would they kill me because I didn’t know, or because I did know? Unfortunately, I suspected that staying quiet wasn’t going to help me either.

After a long pause, I finally nodded.

His demeanor became sterner after exchanging a look with the others. “Did he reveal himself to you?”

“In a way, I suppose.”

Unclear whether it was in my best interest, I decided to trust these people. Reaching for the bodice of my dress, I carefully loosened the ties. Deep concern colored the man’s features, and he took a step away, making me wonder if he thought I was going to try and seduce him. Slowly, I tugged down the sleeve of my dress to reveal my upper arm, and the marks that were burned into my skin.

A collective sound of surprise spread throughout the room.

The older man who seemed in charge leaned closer to inspect the marks. “He did this?”

I nodded. “The first time I came across him in one of the dungeon cells.”

“You’ve been branded by the Dragon Prince,” Such reverence engulfed his statement that it made me feel embarrassed.

“So, I’ve guessed.” I pulled my dress back up and retied it.

“You should be honored.” The man who had taken me from the carriage snarled.

“Why? I didn’t ask for this. I don’t want anything to do with him.”

A heavy sigh left the older leader, and he scrubbed at the grey bristles on his prominent chin. “To be bound to a dragon is to be bound forever. No matter how hard you try, no matter what you do, you will never be free of him.”

That was the last thing I wanted to hear. I didn’t want a complicated life, yet *he* had ruined it all for me.

“With your help, we can break him out of the dungeon.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I refuse to help you or him.” Still feeling a bit lightheaded, I got to my feet, but it didn’t affect my desire to get out of there and get back to Brull House. I never thought I would say that, but I understood now what that place could offer me, even as a servant.

“You won’t have a choice, girl. To be bound to a dragon means you will do whatever he demands of you. You are mentally linked.”

The memory of hearing his voice in my head, asking me to come to him, returned. I had, without even being aware of it.

“I don’t want this.”

“It’s done girl. You must accept it. If you don’t, and the king finds out, you will be executed. He won’t hesitate to cut your head off in front of a crowd of cheering subjects eager for justice.”



I knew he was right. The more I was learning about the king, the more I realized how cruel and unfit for rule the man was. Seeing the utter joy on his face when he interrogated Saeldreon, made my stomach roil, and the lack of concern he had for the injured guard made me angry.

“Runebrooke is rotten to the core. He should not be king. His utter indifference for the people of Andlang is the reason the land is dying, the reason why the women can’t produce children. The land is rejecting him. It cries out for the rightful ruler.” Their leader smacked his fist on his leg in frustration. “Saeldreon is that ruler. The dragons created this world; therefore, we need a dragon on the throne to heal it.”

I wasn’t sure I truly believed the bit about dragons creating Andlang, but I did believe that the king was destroying it. It was beyond time for a new king, someone who would actually help the people.

“You wish to usurp King Runebrooke?”

Their leader nodded.

“Will that not cause a war? How could you win when the royal army is so large?”

“That isn’t something you need to worry about,” my kidnapper snarled again.

The older man set a hand on my shoulder. It was gentle, comforting even, and I could see the sincerity in his gaze. “You must be ready to answer the call when it comes.”

“I’m a nobody. Not a revolutionary. What if I can’t do what you’re asking of me?”

“Saeldreon would not have chosen you if he hadn’t sensed strength in you. You survived the fire trial, girl. You are stronger than you think.”

My head shook with uncertainty. I had always wished for a different life from my mother’s, from the other girls’ in the village, but this was not what I’d wanted. Again, an unwanted fate was being forced upon me.

“You aren’t alone in this.” Their leader squeezed my shoulder reassuringly. “We have allies positioned in the fortress. When it’s time, someone will come to you and help you with your mission.”

My eyes widened. “Who? Who can I trust?”

Sadly, he shook his head. “I can’t tell you that. It’s for their protection *and* yours.”

A bunch of faces from the fortress flipped through my mind. Was it someone I knew?

Releasing my shoulder, he walked over to one of the windows to look outside. “We’ll release you and you can return to the carriage.”

I stood. “What do I tell them happened when they ask?”

“That we were robbers looking for money. We thought you were someone of importance, but when we found out you were just a village girl that the fortress wouldn’t pay for, we let you go.”

“What if they don’t believe me?”

Without an answer, he nodded for my kidnapper to take me out of the building. Before I was pulled away, their leader called to me.

“Tell the Dragon Prince that Joakim waits for him, and to remember what I told him.”

The moment we stepped outside, my kidnapper tied a scarf around my eyes, picking me up like he had before, and running down the street. I got disoriented after he turned several times, which was probably the point. Even if the guards interrogated me, I wouldn’t be able to accurately give them the location of where they’d taken me.

After a few more turns, he set me on my feet. I stood there for a few moments, wondering what was happening because I couldn’t hear him anymore. When I finally pulled the blindfold from my eyes, it revealed that I was alone in an unfamiliar back street. Alarmed voices and shouting rose in

the distance, the din of a crowd coming from the street to my right.

I followed that sound until I stepped out onto the main street. The carriages were still stopped down the road, the air filled with the commotion of guards searching the buildings nearby.

“I found her!” One guard spotted. “She’s there.” He pointed at me as I started to walk toward him, unsteady on my feet from the whole ordeal.

Two other royal guards rushed at me, each taking an arm, as if I was some sort of criminal. They half urged, half dragged me—not back to my carriage, but one of their wagons. No one said a word to me, when they pushed me up onto the ride, then got in after, sitting on either side of me like they thought I was going to try and escape.

Back at the fortress, I was quickly escorted inside and then to the king’s chambers. My heart raced, nearly exploding, as I considered the implications of being taken there. All too well, did I remember the scene I came across in this very room, between Saeldreon and the king.

Was I going to suffer a similar fate?

The king entered the chamber from the secret door, and I went weak in the knees immediately. I must’ve looked like I was going to faint, because the guard on my left quickly reached out to prop me up as I did a very sloppy version of a curtsy.

“I understand you went through quite the ordeal out in the streets.” A smile stretched his mouth, but no warmth came from it. It seemed more like when a wolf showed its teeth right before ripping out your throat.

“I did, my lord.” I nodded.

“Did your abductors reveal who they were and what they wanted?”

“I, ah, I was blindfolded the entire time, so I didn’t see them, but they kept asking me about gold and jewels that were

kept in the Great Hall. They wanted to know exactly where they were kept.”

“I see. So, you didn’t see them, but you heard their voices?”

I nodded again.

“Do you know how many men there were?”

“Two, maybe three.”

“Where did they take you?” His voice became sterner, strained even, like he was holding back.

“I d-don’t know. I was blindfolded—”

“Right, you were blindfolded. How convenient.”

“My lord, I—”

His fingers gripped my chin, pressing firmly against my jaw. “Why would they take you and not one of the guards? You’re just some lowly farm girl made to think you’re good enough to wed a man of importance.”

I wanted to pull away from him, but I feared what he’d do to me then.

He leaned into my face, the smell the sour mead heavy on his breath. “You’re lying to me, girl. I can smell the deceit on you like perfume.” His nose brushed against the side of my neck, making me shudder.

My body trembled in fear, thinking he was going to torture me. I didn’t expect I could survive that kind of pain after seeing what he’d done to Saeldreon. Except, he was a man, a dragon, and even he collapsed from the pain.

Tears welled in my eyes.

The king dragged a finger across my left eye, gathering those tears, before he put his finger into his mouth, making a show of sucking them.

Bile rose in my throat but I pressed my lips together to stop from retching. Before I could gather my wits, the door to

the chamber swung open and the queen marched in, Sigrunn a few steps behind her.

“Let the girl go,” she demanded.

The king immediately dropped his hand, pretending like he wasn't about to crush my jaw with his fingers. “My wife. What brings you here?”

I didn't think the queen liked being referred to as “my wife”, as her eyes flashed when she came closer to where I stood.

“This girl has done nothing wrong. She was victimized and you are treating her like she's a criminal.”

Without a word, the king nodded to the guard who had been holding onto my arm more for stability than to keep me from escaping. He let me go, and I immediately rushed over to Sigrunn who linked arms with me to help me stay upright.

“She should be treated with the respect she deserves for being part of Brull House. She is to become a lady of the court.”

The king snorted. “That girl will never be part of the court. She's too common and skinny. How will she carry a baby?”

“I will decide who will be a lady or not.” Her jaw clenched as she lifted her chin haughtily.

Relenting with a curt nod, the king waved his hand dismissively. “You may take her away.”

The queen turned on her heel and walked to the door. She seemed so regal to me, like she was floating on water—the hem of her elaborate green gown swaying like seafoam. Once she moved past us, Sigrunn and I followed her outside.

When we were away from the chamber doors, I couldn't stop from speaking. “Your Majesty, why did you help me?”

Sigrunn hit me in the arm and shook her head, but it was too late, the words were already out of my mouth.

Stopping her advance, the queen turned. “You remind me of when I was a girl, here in Brull House, taken from the

country to wed a nobleman. I just happened to wed the king when he was still the prince.” Her gaze softened a little. “I too was considered common and ugly. The Dagmar once called me ‘too wild to be tamed.’”

The same words the matron had said about me.

“So, I know what you are going through, child.”

I felt so thankful for her that I wanted to throw myself onto her feet. Instead, I curtsied so low that I could touch the floor. “I’m forever grateful, Your Majesty.”

She nodded. “Just see that you are never in this type of situation again. Next time, I won’t be able to save you.”

Sigrunn and I left her and returned to the dormitory. Before we went into the room, Sigrunn pulled me into an embrace.

“Are you sure you are all right?” she whispered in my ear.

“Yes, I’m not hurt.”

Letting go, we entered the room. The other girls were assembled in the common room, so it gave me some time to gather myself. I sat on the edge of my bed, took in a deep breath, and wondered when I would be forced into another situation like this one.

## ONYA



That night, while washing, I tried to erase the marks on my arms. Taking an old cloth, I dipped it in hot water and scrubbed my skin with manic fervor. By the time Sigrunn came into the room to dress me in my night clothes, I had peeled a layer of skin off my arms, bleeding all over the floor.

All that work, all that discomfort, and the marks didn't even fade. In fact, to my dismay, they almost appeared darker.

After Sigrunn fixed me up, tending to my raw skin, she helped me to bed. At first, I felt embarrassed about having Sigrunn constantly at my side, but now I found comfort in her presence. She gave me tea with a lot of valerian root in it, promising me that my body would be so heavy and numb, I wouldn't stir at all. Greedily, and eager to fall asleep, I drank every drop, needing a reprieve from all the madness swirling around me.

I didn't dream that night, but I did leave my bed. Sigrunn found me crawling on the floor, dragging my legs behind me as they were too numb to be useful.

"Stay out of my head!" I shouted as she shook me awake.

She didn't bother asking me who I was talking about. She knew.



OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, I tried hard to put effort into the etiquette lessons, and not get into any more trouble. Despite all that, I still wasn't good at embroidery, piano, or reading poetry, and I suspected I never would be.

There was something I was good at though. Archery. It was a rare occasion when we ventured outside as a group to do an activity. The Dagmar had explained that some of the noblemen loved to hunt wild boar, and birds, so if we could show a proficiency in handling a bow it could be seen as an asset.

The moment I was handed the bow, I felt at ease for the first time since arriving in Jarlstad. To their surprise, I didn't need any instruction by the head Bowman who usually accompanied the king when hunting. For years, I had handled a bow while doing most of the hunting for my family, and it showed.

I slung a quiver of arrows over my shoulder, and sliding one out, I notched it before letting it loose at the target—twenty feet down the field. The Dagmar had been about to shout at me, or strike me for insubordination, but then my arrow nearly hit the center mark. The Bowman cheered loudly, making me grin.

The other girls hated that I was so good at this, especially Margo, and I had to admit that since she could barely pull back her string, let alone loose an arrow, I gloated the entire time.

During the training, I also tried hard not to think about Saeldreon and what the *Asatora Drecki* had tasked me to do. By the third day, I'd convinced myself that it had been a dream. Still, I watched people with suspicion, thinking that maybe one of them was the ally the Drecki had told me about, and that they were going to force me to help them break Saeldreon out of prison.

When one of the other girl's *hendey* would approach me, I immediately tensed up, or if a guard even looked in my direction.

After the archery lesson, the Dagmar concluded that I was eligible for a one on one with one of the noblemen. The



wounds on my face had finally healed, so I figured that was taken into consideration as well.

On the day of my meeting with Herr Sondre Brakken, Sigrunn stuffed me into a corset that pushed my breasts nearly up to my neck, and a voluminous underskirt, in red. She thought the color suited my skin, hair, and eyes. It was a bold color, and she whispered at the last second that it suited my personality as well. My hair was arranged into an updo, and she even smudged a bit of coal around my eyes, staining my lips the same hue as the dress.

As I made my way across the room to leave, Margo and Dagny snickered behind their hands.

“Have fun with Herr Brakken. I think you’re perfect for him,” Dagny muttered, and then they both laughed.

Usually, I didn’t care what others said about me or even to me, but their behavior and words left a lump in my stomach.

Before I walked through the door, Linn touched my hand. “You look very pretty, Onya.”

Her simple compliment hit me right in the heart. Touched by her kindness in the face of the others’ spitefulness, I almost felt teary.

“Thank you, Linn.”

I was to meet Herr Brakken in the gardens behind the fortress for a simple lunch. As per the conditions, Sigrunn was with me. Even if she hadn’t been instructed to stay by my side, it was customary for a *hendey* to accompany their wards on every excursion.

As we walked down the narrow path through the shrubs and flower beds, Sigrunn rattled off everything she knew about my potential suitor. Unfortunately, it just made the sick feeling in my gut worse.

“He’s a landowner, has quite a big homestead with servants and a cook too. He’s an avid hunter, which is one of the reasons the Dagmar thought you would be a suitable candidate for him.”

“If he’s a landowner already, then he must be a lot older than me.”

She didn’t answer at first, but then sighed. “Yes, he’s fifty-four and a widower. His previous wife died during childbirth, as did the baby.”

“Oh... that’s sad.”

“It is,” she agreed.

It was indeed tragic, and I felt for him, but that didn’t mean I wanted to be his next wife.

We rounded a corner and came upon the lunch location. It was set up under a tarp to block the sun, with a small round table and two chairs. The food was already served, and I questioned whether I was late.

Herr Brakken stood and gave me a quick, polite bow. He was a tall man, reedy thin, with ruddy cheeks and a thin pinched nose—what little hair he still had was as black as soot. He wasn’t an attractive man and looked frail enough that I could probably snap his arm in half.

Without hesitation, he pulled out the chair for me, and I sat down, feeling completely out of my element. The Dagmar had taught us the right subjects for polite conversation, and how to eat with the proper fork and spoon, but those lessons failed to stick.

After he sat, he poured what looked like wine into my goblet first then his.

“I’m pleased you could join me for lunch... Onya.” My name left him as an afterthought, as if he wasn’t sure he should use it or not.

I could’ve told him I didn’t care either way.

“Yeah, um, thank you for inviting me. Herr Brakken.” I picked up the glass and gulped down the wine, hoping it would just relax me and not go straight to my head.

As we ate roasted pheasant, and carrots, which was something I hadn’t had in a long time because the village carrot crop never seemed to grow well, he told me about his

land and house, and the cows he tended to there. He spoke quickly, not once looking up at me to see if I was interested, or even listening to him. It was obvious he didn't care what I thought about anything.

When appropriate, I nodded, the rest of the time I just looked at him with wide doe eyes and a forced, thin smile.

If this was what I had to look forward to, then I would just tell the Dagmar that I gave up, and they could make me a servant. That life would be infinitely better than the possible one I was facing.

As I watched the man gobble up the food, getting bits on his shirt, I thought about Saeldreon. I didn't know why, but a sensation rippled down both my arms and an image of him instantly flashed in my mind.

It wasn't how I saw him last in the dungeons, but how he looked in my dreams. Strong, formidable, demanding, and so incredibly alluring.

*"It's time, drotning. It's time for you to come to me..."* His voice caressed my ears.

My brow furrowed. What did that mean?

Before I could contemplate the answer, the ground shook under my feet. It was a strange, unnerving sensation, but I wasn't the only one who felt it though.

Herr Brakken's head snapped up, his brow furrowed too. "Did you feel that?"

Nodding, I glanced over at Sigrunn. The look on her face was one of pure shock. She got up and came to the table. "I think we should go inside."

I attempted to stand, but the ground shook again, with more force, making me fall back into the chair and hit my hip on the arm of it.

Sigrunn grabbed onto my shoulder. "What's going on?"

"I don't know. Feels like the entire world is moving." I thought about what Yve had said about the dragons waking in the mountain.

The ground trembled yet again, and this time, it was violent enough to topple the posts holding the up tarp. It came down, trapping the three of us underneath it. It was heavy, and I struggled to get out from under it, crawling on hands and knees. Once I was out, I helped Sigrunn. For a moment, I thought that Herr Brakken could fend for himself despite his pitiful cries for help, but I couldn't leave him to be possibly hurt or worse. He was a bore of a man but didn't deserve to die.

With Sigrunn's help, we lifted the tarp so he could get out from under it. When he saw a way out, he scrambled toward us. I helped him to his feet, but the earth quaked under us again, and he shoved me aside, making a run for shelter. I stumbled sideways, putting a hand against one of the trees so I didn't fall.

“We should get inside!” Sigrunn urged.

Holding hands, she and I headed back toward the fortress. As we came around the side of the wooden structure, a billowing cloud of grey smoke vent into the sky. Ash floated down from the sky in response, dusting everything, including my hair and clothes. The sound of the eruption didn't hit for another few seconds, but its power knocked us both sideways.

After getting balanced again, we rushed toward the steps up to the doors and ran up, until a crack erupted along one of the steps, making me leap over it.

Sigrunn stopped and gaped as more smoke billowed in the air from the top of the mountain that loomed over the city, squeezing my hand tightly.

“The mountain... the mountain has awoken.”

## ONYA



Chaos unfolded when Sigrunn and I ran into the fortress. Guards and servants frantically scattered around, trying to keep tapestries from falling off the walls, vases from tipping off tables and breaking, and furniture from toppling over as the ground's violent tremors continued.

No one seemed to know what was happening. Wild speculations reached our ears while Sigrunn and I rushed toward Brull House to take shelter in one of the rooms—although, I wasn't certain that was the best course of action, considering heavy things were falling from the ceiling.

What if the roof itself cracked, pieces of wood and stone falling on top of us? What if the floor collapsed and we plummeted to our death?

"The Gods are angry. They are punishing us for our sins," exclaimed one of the older maids as she tried to keep the floor clean of debris. I didn't know why she bothered, more stuff just kept falling onto it.

"The mountain has finally erupted," one guard pronounced. "We knew this day would come."

An elderly servant wandered to the open doors, staring at the ash that shrouded the sky. "The dragons have returned."

Those words kept spinning in my head as I climbed the stairs to the dorm rooms. Considering the man in the dungeons, and who he was revealed to be, I thought that maybe the old man was right. Was this the sign I'd been told to wait for?

At the top of the stairs, all the doors to the rooms were shut. I imagined the girls and their *hendeys* were safely sequestered behind one of them, so I tried the door to the first dorm room, but it was locked. Next, I tried the door to the common room, it was also locked, but agitated and worried voices came from the other side.

“It’s Onya! Open the door!” My fist banged on it urgently.

Before they could, another tremor vibrated through the fortress, shaking the entire structure. A painting fell off a wall nearby, and screams surged from some of the girls. Sigrunn grabbed me and pushed me toward the other dorm room as the door popped open from the quake.

“Get inside!”

“What about you?”

“I need to check on Rachel. She wasn’t feeling well and took to her bed. I need to make sure she is somewhere safe.”

“When you find her, come back here.”

Nodding, she shoved me inside and slammed the door shut.

I didn’t know what to do. Standing near the walls and windows seemed dangerous in case there was another tremor, and something fell. So, I dragged my bed into the middle of the room and sat on it, trying to stay calm and reasonable through the confusion of what exactly was happening.

Except, my body was vibrating all on its own, making me feel agitated and unsettled. My mind was reeling, thoughts of Saeldreon keeping me on edge. I thought about him down in the dungeons, unable to flee, unable to get to safety if the stone walls cracked and collapsed. None of the guards would risk their lives for him. Although, every rational thought demanded that I stay put, I felt the need to do something.

The buzzing in my body became unbearable, pushing me to my feet. Fully intending to leave the room, I turned to the door, when a panel in the far wall opened like a door and the queen emerged from the shadows.

Shocked at her appearance, I forgot to curtsy. “Your Majesty, what are you doing here?”

Instead of answering, she handed me a metal ring with two keys hooked onto it. “One key will unlock the cell door, the other will unlock the chain around his neck.”

I didn’t have to ask who she was talking about. The ally the Drecki had told me about was Queen Gudrin. The one who would help me get Saeldreon out of the prison and out of the city.

Too stunned by her sudden appearance, I gaped at her, unable to form any coherent sentence.

“There will be a covered wagon and horse waiting for you just inside the city gates. The driver will take you to the woods to rendezvous with Joakim.” Frowning, she took a step closer to me, and grabbed my hand. “Are you listening to what I’m telling you?”

Blinking out of my shock, I quickly nodded.

“The wagon will only be there for a short time. You’ll have two hours from now to get there. If you are late, the wagon will have to leave without you, and you will be on your own to get out of the city.” She tugged on my hand, jostling me out of my stupor. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Releasing me, she turned to leave through the hidden door in the wall.

“Why are you doing this? If Saeldreon has his way, he will usurp the king. You will no longer be queen.”

“My husband is a terrible king,” she replied, glancing at me over her shoulder. “He is unfit to rule. As was his father before him, and his grandfather before that. The throne of Andlang belongs to the dragons. It always has. And now that

the last living Dragon Prince has been found, it's time to heal this country and its people.”

“If it comes to war, you won't be safe.”

“Don't worry about me, child. When the time is right, I will escape Jarlstad and disappear.” She gave me a thin-lipped smile then vanished through the wall, shutting the panel behind her.

I clutched the key ring tightly, conflicted about what I should do. A few minutes ago, I had wanted to leave this room and go to the dungeons to help Saeldreon, but now, with the opportunity in hand, I was petrified to act. I knew that once I did that, helped him escape, my life would be altered in ways I couldn't comprehend.

The marks on my arms flared to life, as if I was being burned for the first time. My flesh throbbed, heat washed over my skin, starting at my fingertips, and swelling over every part of my body until I couldn't think and reason beyond the sensation.

Would it get worse after I freed him? Would the bond grow stronger? Would I ever be able to break it?

A fresh image of him stalking toward me, his hair flowing back, his muscles quivering like he had in my dream sent a piercing twinge right between the thighs.

Maybe I didn't want to break it?

Whatever my decision, I couldn't stay in this room. Opening the door, I ran out into the corridor just as the ground rumbled again. The entire second floor swayed back and forth like an ocean wave. I had to grab onto the railing to stop myself from falling. Using that for stability, I carefully made my way to the staircase, where two steps near the bottom had fallen away.

I thought about waiting for Sigrunn to return, but I wasn't sure how she would feel about my plan to release the dangerous man from the dungeons. She might've even tried to stop me, and I didn't want to fight with her. She'd been the closest thing to a friend as I had in the capital, but I didn't



think that would stop her from sounding the alarm about my treasonous behavior.

No, I had to go on without her, hoping that she would find safety after this.

Carefully, I went down the stairs, then jumped over the missing steps to land on the floor. I thought I would have to be stealthy to avoid the guards along the way, but they were all too busy, trying to prevent the walls from falling in on them every time a quake surged through the fortress.

It seemed like they were getting stronger with each one, and it scared me to think of what was going to happen when it reached its pinnacle. Would the ground open and swallow us all?

I reached the stairway down to the dungeons without any obstacles, walking carefully, my hand on the wall, as the ground started to shake again. When I reached the bottom, I had to step over a chunk of stone that had crumbled from one wall. Around the corner to the cells, I heard the shouts of the prisoners. As I got closer, I saw them all clamoring against the metal bars, pushing on them, hoping they could break them and flee from disaster.

Without thinking, I unlocked their cell first, letting them out so they could run. They did, gratefully. Turning to Saeldreon's cell, I thought I would see him at the gate, waiting, but I found him slumped on the ground with his back against the stone, like he'd been a few days ago when I gave him water.

I unlocked the door, rushing to his side.

His head came up as I neared. "I knew you could come for me, *drotning*."

"If I free you and I get you to your people, will you promise to release me from the bond between us?"

He looked at me for a long, suspended moment. I didn't know what he was thinking, but I thought his eyes looked suddenly sad. "If that is what you wish."

"It is."

Finally, the Dragon Prince nodded.

Crouching next to him, I slid the other key into the lock on the silver collar and turned, an audible click announcing his freedom. Carefully, I removed the collar from his neck and tossed it aside, noticing the angry red marks around his throat—some of his skin had been rubbed raw.

I helped him stand, seeing him stretch his neck, then arched his back, as if he was sloughing something off his body. He moved his head around, twisting it side to side, then let out a long sigh. His gaze settled on me, and another shiver rushed down my back.

By the Gods, he was intense.

“We need to get to the city gate,” I urged. “A wagon waits for us. But we need to hurry, as it won’t wait long.”

The Dragon Prince took a couple steps toward the open gate, but weakened, dropping to one knee—his form was so weak due to malnourishment and the underuse of his limbs. Taking his arm, I slung it around my shoulders so he could lean on me a little while we moved out of the cell and into the corridor.

As we were about to go up the stairs, one of the guards came down, his eyes widening in horror when he saw Saeldreon up close. Immediately, his hand went to the baton hanging from his belt but didn’t have a chance to use it because I punched him in the face, landing a kick between his legs. He fell forward and hit his head against the wall, knocking himself out.

“You should probably put his clothes on, so you don’t stand out so much.”

“If you want me naked so badly, *drotning*, you only have to ask.”

“Don’t be crass.” I reached down and stripped off the guard’s jacket, then unbuttoned his shirt. Once I got his pants off, I tossed everything to Saeldreon, giving him my back so he could change in private.

“This is the best I can do.”

When I faced him, I noticed the shirt was tight across his chest and shoulders, and the pants were short. Regardless, I thought it was better than him walking around bare-chested, and with torn trousers.

We went up the stairs and into the main corridor, stepping around broken glass, wood beams, and stone pieces from the walls scattered on the floor. Still in panic mode, guards and others ran frantically. I didn't blame them, as what was happening had never happened.

No one really looked at us while we moved through the hallways of Brull House and into the Great Hall. I hoped the others thought I was helping an injured soldier out of the rubble of the fortress, as that was what it was starting to look like. Like a war had already taken place.

Once outside, I started to panic again, not knowing where to go. I'd only been out in the city streets twice before and wasn't exactly sure what road led to the main gate, or how far it was from here. However, I figured we needed to start somewhere, so I took us out to the square in front of the fortress walking along the road I remembered taking in the carriage to the temple. I could at least get us that far.

Before we made it across the square, someone called my name behind us, and I turned to see Sigrunn running toward us. I didn't know what she was going to do once she saw who I was holding onto, who I was helping.

"Sigrunn, I can explain—" I immediately started to excuse when she got near, but the shake of her head stopped me.

"I'll lead us out to the gate, but we should go through some of the back streets."

I gaped at her. "I can't expect you to help us."

"I'm not. I'm helping myself because I'm coming with you."

## ONYA



So many questions for Sigrunn whirled in mind, but they would have to wait, because time was ticking, and we needed to get to the gate.

Saeldreon carefully eyed the *hendey*. “Can we trust this woman?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

Eyes narrowing, he kept looking at her, which I could tell made her uncomfortable. “You seem familiar.”

“I assure you,” she replied, avoiding his gaze. “We have not met. You don’t know me.”

“You have the look of someone I do know.”

Something passed between them and I glanced from one to the other. “What’s going on?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Sigrunn shook her head. “We need to get going. Despite the chaos in the fortress, it won’t be long before they realize that *he* is missing.”

She led us to the right, down a narrow lane between two-story, row houses. There was some debris scattered across the path—sizable pieces of stone from walls, pieces of wood broken off from signs and glass from windows. A couple of people were busy picking up the pieces and checking in on

neighbors. It was startling to me how much damage the tremors from the mountain had caused, and I feared if the shaking got worse, entire buildings would collapse.

No one paid us much mind as we trekked past them. Sigrunn made a turn to the left, then to the right again, taking us on a zigzagging path. During the trip, Saeldreon gained more strength. After making it through a quarter section of the city, he no longer needed to lean on me.

I didn't know how much time had passed, but I knew we had to pick up the pace if we were going to make it. Just as I veered toward the bustling street, I suggested we get back onto the main road, but a series of long, horn calls echoed from the fortress, making me instantly stop.

"It's an alarm," Sigrunn announced. "They know he's escaped. And I suspect they know you're missing as well."

"She's right. They'll be looking for us now." Saeldreon agreed, glancing at Sigrunn. "How far to the gate?"

"Not too far. We're almost at the temple, then it's a straight shot down the street to the gate."

My attention went to the Dragon Prince. Despite the guard uniform he wore, he stood out because of his long, wild hair and scruffy face. "We need cloaks to cover ourselves."

Sigrunn nodded. "Stay here." She pointed to the recess in the building next to us. It was shadowed and covered by an awning. "I know of a vendor not far from here."

Not waiting for a response, she ran down the lane to the main merchant street.

While we waited, I spotted a barrel just outside a residence and ran to it, scooping up some water with a broken piece of pottery and handing it to Saeldreon. He took a hardy drink, then pushed it back to me. I was going to insist he drink it all, but his expression gave me pause, so I finished the water.

"If we're caught before we make it to the wagon..."

He set his hand on top of my head, forcing me to look at him. "I won't let us get caught. Trust me."

I wasn't sure I trusted him completely, but I did believe him.

Sigrunn returned with three, dark grey cloaks and we put them on, pulling up the hoods to cover our heads and faces. We continued through the streets, running since we didn't have much time. Thankfully, the ground stopped shaking, so we only had to deal with any guards who happened to get in our way.

Even from a few streets away, I spotted the temple, as it was an impressive stone structure that rose above the other buildings. Once we passed it, Sigrunn assured us it would be no more than fifteen minutes to reach the gate. I hoped she was right, the thought of getting caught, or having to find another way out made my stomach clench with worry.

Not for the first time, I questioned whether releasing Saeldreon had been the right thing for me to do. Had I just signed my own death sentence? But had I even had a choice? I wasn't sure the brand on my arms would've let me make any other choice.

Once we made it past the temple, I started to feel hopeful. Because we were cloaked, we decided to get out onto the main road. We couldn't run, or we'd attract unwanted attention, but we did hustle as fast as possible. People jumped out of our way, probably because of Saeldreon's size, and the intense look on his face.

The towering wooden gate could be seen just past the slight incline of the street. We were almost there. Sigrunn and I shared a look of relief. She even gave me a quick tight smile, then turned her attention back to the road.

When we reached the crest of the pathway, I spied a covered wagon and horse parked just west of the open gate. The cloaked driver stood near the horse, patting its flank while his gaze carefully swept the area in front of him. He was on the lookout for us.

"He's there." I had to resist the urge to point, as I didn't want to draw attention to him, but both Sigrunn and Saeldreon's gazes tracked him.

I picked up my pace, eager to be free of the city, free of the Dagmar, and my obligation to wed and get pregnant. I wasn't sure what kind of life I could have now, but anything was better than what I would've been forced to accept.

We were not far now, and the driver spotted us approaching. Claspng the reins, he immediately climbed onto the driver's bench of the wagon in anticipation, ready to make a quick getaway. I almost let out a bubble of gratified laughter, but it stuck in my throat as four guards with spears rushed out from a side street to take up a stance directly in front of us.

All three of us pulled up short. Beyond them, the driver snapped the reins on the horse, pulled the wagon around and headed toward the gate. We'd definitely lost our easy way out of here.

One of the guards pointed his spear at Saeldreon. "Stop!"

Grabbing my hand, the dragon yanked me to the right, and we ran down another back street. I looked over my shoulder to make sure Sigrunn had followed. Instead, she turned and ran back the way we'd come. Her move divided the guards, three coming after us while one went after her.

Saeldreon's powerful legs propelled him so hard and quickly that I had trouble keeping up with him. Twice, he had to slow so he didn't pull my arm out of my socket, and his frustration was palpable. He was the one who would be killed if caught, maybe they would be more lenient with me.

"Go!" I shouted as we rounded a corner and sprinted toward the back of the temple. "Leave me! I'm slowing you down!"

His gaze was fierce as he turned to me. "Shut up," he growled.

Quicker than an average man could move, Saeldreon scooped me up into his arms and I suddenly lost my ability to breathe. Startled, I instantly wrapped my arms around his neck, and most definitely hung on as he picked up speed, leaving the three guards lagging.

As he came up alongside the temple, a flash of movement drew my attention. I turned to see the Shaman waving her staff at us, and then pointing to an opening in the rear of the temple. The Dragon Prince immediately changed his course and dashed up the stone steps. She frantically waved us toward the door.

“Sigrunn, my *hendey*,” I shouted at the woman, pointing to the street in front, “she’s in danger!”

The Shaman nodded, then sprinted around the side of the imposing stone building, as Saeldreon took us through the door and into the temple. The door instantly shut behind us.

After setting me down, he frantically searched the main chamber with his gaze. “We need to get on top of the tower.”

I realized he was searching for a set of stairs and ran into the center of the space, my gaze going to the statue of Freya. When I brought offerings to the Goddess and saw the Shaman standing to the side, I’d noticed an opening behind her. The first three steps, I assumed, were a staircase leading upwards, so I pointed to the location.

“There!”

We both dashed to the aperture in the back wall. I was right, it led upstairs. Saeldreon pushed me to go first, following closely. When we reached the top, we found a landing that stretched out into the open air. We were on top of the temple. I ran to the edge where I could see some of the city, but the rest was shrouded in grey smoke and ash. Beyond the city border, the mountain rumbled with the steady stream of steam emerging from its top, cracks extending along the rock face.

I flinched out of my reverie as Saeldreon stepped up beside me. He’d shucked off his cloak.

“We need to go.”

“Go where?” I frowned, waving my hands in front of me. “We’re trapped up here.”

“You’re going to have to trust me.”



“You keep saying that, but I really don’t.”

His strong hands gripped my waist, and he pulled me to him. “You’re going to want to hang on for this.”

“For what?”

Without another word, he picked me up like he was carrying a sack of potatoes and sprinted toward the other side of the tower.

Urgently, my hands grabbed onto his side. He took one giant leap toward the ledge, his feet pushing off the edge of the roof, before he sprang high into the sky. My lungs nearly burst open as I screamed.

I closed my eyes while we plummeted toward the ground, not wanting to see the stone street coming up on me before my body broke apart on top of it. I couldn’t believe this was how I was going to die.

Saeldreon had killed us both, and I didn’t know why.

After a few more moments, I stopped screaming, wondering why I hadn’t hit the ground already. Then my body jerked, like being on a string, and I no longer felt like I was falling. Instead, it felt like I was being lifted higher into the air.

My eyes snapped open to see that I was indeed not falling, but flying, while clutched inside the large claw of a giant red dragon.

“Help me, Mim.” I invoked the *God of Courage*, hoping he would grant me enough strength, so I didn’t panic.

The sensation of being out of control, was not one I enjoyed, my fate in the literal hand of another. Even if that other was a fierce, fiery beast. My heart pounded hard as I gripped the scaled claw making sure I wouldn’t fall out of it.

“*Be calm...*” His voice reverberated in my head.

“I’m trying.”

I looked back at the roof where we’d just jumped. It was so far away now and I couldn’t settle it in my mind that only moments before we’d been standing on top, looking out at the

world. While I processed that, I saw a figure run out from the staircase landing. She'd lost her blue headscarf somewhere along the journey from the fortress to the gate. Sigrunn ran to the edge and waved her hands in the air toward us.

“We have to go back! We have to save Sigrunn.”

*“No. I can't risk it.”*

“She helped us escape! We must go back for her.”

*“No.”*

My hands smacked his claw, hard. “I'll pry myself out of your grip. I swear to Mim, I will!”

His whole body heaved, like he was sighing, before he veered to the side and swooped back to the temple. As we flew closer, I could actually see the relief on Sigrunn's face.

Saeldreon drew closer and closer, flapping the vast expanse of his wings forward to slow himself down, so he could hover over the rooftop. Once he was positioned right, he reached down with his other claw intending to grasp her in it.

Her eyes got big as one of his talons slowly curved around her body.

“It's okay,” I yelled to her. “He won't hurt you!”

That seemed to calm her a little, and she stood still as Saeldreon attempted to pick up my friend. I kept my gaze on hers, nodding, letting her know it was going to be okay, and we were going to get out of here. The look on her face changed to confusion then shock, as she glanced down at herself.

I followed her line of sight to find an arrowhead grotesquely protruding from her chest, blood and gore coating the metal. Beyond her I saw three guards running across the roof, brandishing their spears. The bowman who'd shot her was knocking another arrow.

Screaming, I reached a hand out to her, but it was too late. The arrow had already done its damage.

Her body slumped forward, but Saeldreon caught her with his claw before she could hit the ground and scooped her, flapping his wings to lift us into the air. By the time the guards reached the edge, we were already flying away. They thrust the spears upwards, trying to stab the dragon, but he was gone.

Another arrow was loosed, and I helplessly watched it pierce the underside of Saeldreon's tail. His grunt of pain reverberated in my head as he flinched, but it didn't stop him from ascending higher and soaring over the city.

Surprised shouts surged from below, the sight of the mighty red dragon revealing the truth to the city folk. Seeing a dragon fly the skies, soaring over the city wall and leaving the kingdom behind must have been utterly shocking.

A few minutes later we headed toward the deeply wooded forest beyond.

Cautiously, I turned inside his claw so I could see Sigrunn. Her body was limp, eyes closed and mouth hung open, while her arms and legs swayed due to the dragon's propulsion through the air. I watched her, scrutinizing every inch of her, hoping to catch the rise and fall of her chest.

The further the prince flew away from the kingdom and over the forest, his flying dipped lower and lower, until we were barely above the treetops. If he wasn't careful, I was going to slam headfirst into a tree.

Another grunt of pain left him. *"I'm going to fall."*

"What?!" I screamed.

*"I can't keep my dragon form for much longer."*

"Can you land somewhere?"

He didn't answer, but I felt him change directions slightly, toward a gap in the trees far ahead. It had to be a clearing. Or at least I hoped it was.

*"Hang on!"*

I was barely able to grip him around the top of his foot before he did a nosedive into the trees. His body flipped over,

and I wondered if it was because he was trying to protect me from the brunt of the impact.

His big head hit the first tree, splintering the wood, then he crashed straight down through the branches. What was happening wasn't clear, but the next thing I knew, I was released, soaring through the open air and landing on my side in a grassy knoll. Sigrunn's body landed close to me.

I lay there for a few moments, struggling to get air back into my lungs. Pain radiated up and down my back and leg from the impact. Slowly, I moved my leg to make sure it wasn't broken. It was sore, but I thought the bones were all in one place.

Turning onto my hands and knees, I crawled over to Sigrunn. She'd landed on her stomach, the shaft of the arrow breaking off during the fall, so only an inch of wood stuck out of her back. Gently, I rolled her over onto her side, arranging her arms and legs to look like she was merely sleeping. Leaning in, I kissed her softly on the cheek.

"I'm sorry." I sat beside her body and let my tears fall.

A short time later, I heard rustling from the nearby tree line. Saeldreon limped out of the woods, in human form, fully naked, an arrow through his right hip. I slowly got to my feet, my back spasming, and met him halfway trying hard not to look at him fully. Taking his arm, I slung it over my shoulders to help him walk the rest of the way.

"I'm going to need something to stop the bleeding," he croaked.

I looked him over, avoiding everything below his navel, but didn't see any other wounds. "What bleeding?"

Without preamble, he gripped the shaft of the arrow pushed it further through his side, enough so that he could snap the arrowhead. Then he yanked out the rest of the arrow. Blood instantly gushed from the wounds. Biting my bottom lip, I stopped myself from reacting.

I reached down and tore two strips of fabric off the bottom of my dress, folding one piece and pressing it against the hole

on the front of his hip. He held it there as I compressed the other piece of cloth against the wound on his back.

As I held it, I could feel his intense eyes on me, so I lifted my gaze to meet his—it instantly softened.

“Your friend was brave.”

More tears streamed down my cheeks as I nodded. Wiping them away, I checked his wound. “The bleeding is slowing.”

“It should stop soon. Now that I’m out of that silver collar, I can heal my body.”

Not knowing what to say to him, I nodded again. I was thankful that he’d gotten me out of the city, but somehow, I didn’t feel much gratitude beyond that. I still felt like I’d been forced into this situation, and I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do about it.

“Now, what do we do?” I asked.

“Find the Drecki. Mobilize an army and go to war.”

I considered reminding him about the promise he made me, about releasing me from the bond between us. Now that we were out of Jarlstad, he was relatively safe, but before I could speak up, more rustling came from the woods—this time on the other side of the clearing. Every inch of me tensed, thinking it was the royal guard coming for us.

Three men in red robes and scarves came out of the trees instead, and I recognized them as the *Asatora Drecki*, led by the older man I’d met after being taken from the carriage. The man who’d asked me to free Saeldreon.

Their leader bowed his head. “I’m glad we found you, my lord.”

Saeldreon returned the bow. “As am I, Joakim.”

The old man’s gaze landed on Sigrunn’s body on the ground, and his expression instantly changed. He rushed over to her, dropping to his knees—his hands cradling her head and shoulder.

“Oh, Sigrunn...” he wailed. “Oh, my sweet, darling daughter.”

A shaky hand cupped my mouth to stop my gasp of horror. My stomach churned, and I felt sick. I had to turn away as the man grieved his daughter. I didn't want to see the results of my failure to protect her.

Unexpectedly, a large hand settled on my shoulder.

I turned to Saeldreon as he tugged me gently into the crook of his arm. I hadn't realized how much I needed comfort until I sagged against his body. He was the last person I expected to console me, but as I cried into his shoulder, I felt his emotions swirling inside him.

Empathy mixed with anger. Responsibility mixed with rage.

The Dragon Prince would never say it out loud, but I knew that as he watched Joakim cradle his dead daughter's body, he'd find a way to avenge him, and Sigrunn. In this we were united.

## SAELDREON



Our journey to Myrkwater, a sacred place to honor the dead, took a day on foot, but carrying Sigrunn's body there was the right thing to do. She'd died helping me escape Jarlstad, and she deserved a hero's funeral.

Together, Joakim and I built a stretcher to transport her through the woods and to the lake. Tradition dictated that an Andlanger had to be burned near water, and it had been done for thousands of years. It was the only way a soul could reach the shores of Empyrean, where the Gods lived.

I watched Onya carefully while we trekked to the sacred place. She remained quiet and reserved, hardly speaking. Thankfully, the Drecki had given her other clothes to wear instead of her lady gown, which ended up ripped and torn anyway. I too, after dunking myself in a stream nearby, was able to change into comfortable clothing, for what we needed to do going forward. I'd also taken a razor from one of the packs and shaved off the beard that had grown while I'd been imprisoned. Catching a glimpse of my reflection in the water, I looked more like myself.

Dark circles spread around Onya's eyes, revealing her exhaustion, but she never complained or asked to take a break. At one point, she even insisted on carrying one end of the stretcher when we had to cross a stream, and then climb a hill

covered with bramble. Even when she slipped in the water and nearly fell, she refused to let anyone else take the stretcher.

I understood her resolve because it filled my heart too.

She was punishing herself, that much was obvious. I imagined she blamed herself for Sigrunn's death. Even if I'd told her over and over again that she was not at fault, that the soldier who fired the arrow and the system that had oppressed her friend were to blame, I knew she wouldn't hear it, wouldn't accept it.

Onya was so much like me in that regard.

After a grueling, ten-hour trek, we made it to the lake. With seven of us building the pyre on the shore, it didn't take long. Joakim lifted his daughter onto it, waving off any help from me or the other Drecki. Once she was settled, he grabbed a lit torch and set the flames to the wood and grass altar.

We watched Sigrunn burn, the flames lighting up the night sky. Onya stood off to the side, and I saw her wipe away tears. I wanted to go to her, but something made me hesitate. It wasn't clear if she would accept my comfort right now, and selfishly, I didn't want her to know how I ached to hold her.

Since our escape, I'd been waiting for her to come to me about the bargain we'd made in the dungeon. Her desire to be released from the bond I'd branded on to her. In all honesty, I regretted making such a promise, because I didn't want to keep it. I didn't want to release her.

When the flames finally snuff themselves out and there were only ashes left, I and the other Drecki made camp near a cluster of boulders that provided a natural wind barrier. It would also mask the smoke from the small fire. We needed to eat and sleep so we were clear headed enough to start making plans for war.

Joakim remained standing by the pyre, his head bowed.

"Onya, come sit by the fire and eat," I called, worried that she wasn't getting enough nourishment.

Turning, she began to walk forward, yet instead of coming to me, she went to Joakim. It was the first time she'd



approached him. His head came up to look at her.

“Sigrunn was the strongest person I had ever met,” she offered, her voice small and quiet. “She saved my life more than once.” Fresh tears streamed down her face, but she wiped them. “She didn’t deserve what happened to her.”

Joakim’s hand softly settled on top of Onya’s head. “You didn’t deserve what happened to you either, child.”

A sudden intake of breath echoed from her lips, and I knew Joakim’s words had surprised her.

“I vow to get revenge for her death.”

“We both will.” Joakim took his hand from her head, accepting her unspoken plea for forgiveness.

After we dined on rabbits and the roots we dug up from nearby, which compiled more food than I’d had in a month, the five of us sat around the small campfire. Passing the wineskin to each other, we made plans.

“Are you sure others are gathered at Gray Valley?” I asked Joakim.

He nodded. “After you were taken by the royal guard, we spread the word to all the factions around the country for them to make their way to the valley. It’s naturally fortified by the mountain, has a good source of water, and it’s the best place for a camp. That is where we will form our army.”

It was a good plan. He was right about it being a good basis for a stronghold since the mountain protected that area. It was sacred ground. That was where I had burned my brothers’ bodies, along with their families after they were slaughtered by Espen Runebrooke, the current king’s ancestor, and his rebels.

“How far is it?” I asked. I hadn’t been there in a very long time, and I’d never gotten there on foot. I’d always flown.

If I weren’t in this weakened state I would’ve piled everyone on my back to fly us there, but the last shift had just about drained me dry, and didn’t care to draw attention.

“About a two-day trip since we have to swing north to avoid Jalstad,” the youngest Drecki member, Davin, answered. “If we can procure horses from allies of the order along the way, then it would cut down on that time.”

“We can’t guarantee that though,” Joakim wisely added. “I imagine Runebrooke would’ve sent out troops to all the neighboring villages and homesteads since your escape, to make sure they aren’t conspiring against him and harboring you.”

“I agree with Joakim. We can’t take any chances. Let’s stay off main roads and away from any farms and towns.”

“What about food and provisions?” Larsen, who was the biggest Drecki member, asked. He was even taller and wider than I was.

“We can get everything we need from the land,” I assured.

“All right, we will break camp at dawn.” Joakim handed the wineskin to me. “Let’s drink up, since this is the last of the wine.”

I took a hefty drink, it had been too long since I had wine. Then I handed it to Onya, who had been sitting quietly next to me. At first, I didn’t think she was going to eat much, but she ate her fair share, which made me thankful. I hoped that her talk with Joakim helped relieve some of the guilt she carried over Sigrunn. She took her drink, then passed it on to the next.

Once the wineskin was empty, everyone settled down for sleep. The Drecki always carried rolled up furs attached to the leather rucksacks on their backs, so Larsen gave his to Onya to sleep. Joakim tried to offer me his, but I refused it. When he continued to insist, I told him he needed it more since he was old. Thankfully, the jest landed well, and he kept the fur roll for himself.

In truth, I’d hoped that Onya would share hers with me. Even though we were bonded, and her body responded to me, I didn’t think she liked me much. Not that I’d given her any reason to dislike me.

She took a bed roll and set it down on a flat spot away from the others. I was about to tell her to stay close to the fire to keep warm, but for now, I let her have the space she needed. If she got cold, she'd move.

Sighing, I perched myself up against one of the boulders. I'd gotten so used to sleeping sitting up during the last month that I knew I would have a difficult time adjusting if I lay down flat, and I needed to sleep if I wanted to recharge my powers. It would take some time for me to regain full strength, considering I'd been choked with silver for so long. The toxin needed to be flushed out of my system, and that took food, water, and rest.

There was an easier, faster, and better way to gain my power back, but it meant completing the bond between me and Onya. Our bodies needed to intertwine, to physically connect like a man and woman could. Nevertheless, I didn't think she was ready for that, and I wasn't about to force her. I wanted, no needed, her to come to me.

In the warm orange glow from the fire, I watched her for a bit as she got as comfortable as she could on the fur. She moved around from back to side to back again, and then she finally seemed to settle.

*"Sleep well, drotning..."* I sent to her through the bond.

Her head moved slightly, and I wondered if she had turned it to look at me. I hoped she had.

After a few more moments of surveying the surroundings and checking on the others, I closed my eyes and drifted to sleep, wondering if I would find Onya in her dreams.

SOMETHING JERKED me out of sleep, and I immediately opened my eyes. Had I heard a rustling in the trees? Had I sensed movement nearby? It could've been a deer having a late-night snack of leaves, or a mole digging a new home in the dirt. Or I could have just sensed something wrong.

I checked on the others to find the three Drecki men were sleeping—Larsen heavily snoring. My gaze then moved over to where Onya had bedded down, and at first, I saw the shape

of her lying on the fur, but when I leaned forward and really looked, I realized I'd mistaken a cluster of bushes for her form.

Onya wasn't there.

Getting up, I immediately moved to where she had been. The spot was empty, even the bed roll was gone. I did a quick scan of the area, searching for the easier route out of the camp. The rocks, and the lake were behind me, so she wouldn't have gone that way. That left three possible paths into the woods.

I stood at the treeline and reached out through the mental link we had.

*"Onya... You can't leave."*

No response came through the link. I was going to have to make it really uncomfortable for her so she would instinctively pull on the thread connecting us, to try and break it.

*"ONYA! I demand to know where you are!"*

Relentlessly, I began to shout her name over and over, and over again. The sound so loud in her head, like getting an ax cracked into her skull.

"STOP IT!"

Her shout sounded distant, but I heard it. It came from the eastern path into the woods.

I charged into the trees, running at full speed, leaping over rocks, and fallen branches, until I spotted her leaning against the trunk of a large, popular tree. Her head was in her hands, and she made small groaning sounds.

"Onya." I approached her gently.

"Why did you do that?" she whined.

"You can't leave."

She raised her head and glared at me. "Why? Why can't I?"

"It's not safe."

“You’re not safe.” She poked me in the chest. “I would’ve survived just fine if I hadn’t met you. If you hadn’t possessed me.”

“I know you’re angry, but I had no choice.”

“You could’ve picked someone else! Why did it have to be me?”

Fists flying, she came at me, pummeling my chest and arms, before trying to slap me across the face, but I grabbed her by the wrists.

“Let me go!”

She thrashed about, but it didn’t do her any good, I wasn’t going to let go. Still holding her wrists in a tight grip, I lifted her arms above her head, and pushed her against the trunk of the tree. She tried to kick me, so I pressed my body against hers, rendering her immobile.

Clearly, she didn’t like that one bit, because she started to squirm around, shrieking. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that she was just making it worse. Every movement of her body against mine, inflamed me. It had been too long since I’d been with a woman.

Yet, Onya wasn’t just any woman. She was my woman; she just hadn’t accepted it yet.

## ONYA



Why was there a rush of heat surging through my inner core?

It was embarrassing that I was responding to Saeldreon's body pressed to mine like this. I hated that a spear of desire stabbed me right between the legs. It was almost uncomfortable how much I ached for him.

"Let me go!" I struggled against his hold on me.

The muscles along his jawline tensed. "No."

"You promised you'd release me."

"I know I did."

"You're a liar!" Hoping to wear him out, I jerked my body back and forth, so he'd give up on trying to keep a hold on me against the tree.

"For the love of Mim, stop moving!" Wincing, he adjusted his stance, biting his bottom lip.

Was he in pain? Had I disturbed the arrow wound on his hip? Suddenly concerned, I looked down between our bodies. That's when I noticed that he had an erection, and it was pressing quite impressively against the fabric of his pants.

Shocked, my gaze sprang back to his face. The skin on every part of my body flushed with heat. "You're...you're

aroused!”

“That I am.”

“Why?” I sputtered.

“Because your body is rubbing against mine.”

“Is that all it takes? For some woman to just bump into you?”

“You’re not just some woman, *drotning*. You’re my woman.”

Open mouthed, I stared at him. I couldn’t believe his audacity to proclaim ownership over me. I didn’t belong to him, or anyone. Yet, I couldn’t deny that hearing those words had made the ache at my center stronger. I felt the need to cross my legs to ease the throb, but his big body prevented me from moving an inch.

“I am most certainly *not* your woman!” I sputtered.

“Like it or not, Onya, you belong to me. I branded you as mine.”

“I don’t like it! I hate it!”

The look in the Dragon Prince’s eyes shifted. Before, there had been worry, frustration even, but now, all I could see was hunger. A ravenous need for me... and it made my knees weak.

“Who’s the liar now?” He leaned in closer, his nose an inch away from the side of my throat. “I can smell your desire for me. I imagine that if I slid my hand between your thighs, I would find you wet, eager for me to touch you.”

However vulgar I found his words, my body still responded. Desire washed through me like a waterfall. My nipples hardened, my belly clenched tightly, and the throb between my legs intensified. I couldn’t stop the little mewl of pleasure that burst through my lips.

Shamed by my wantonness, I turned my head to the side. I couldn’t look Saeldreon in the eyes. He would see, he would

know that his words were the truth. I did want him in that way. I did want him to touch me all over my body.

“Your shyness is making me want you even more.”

I didn't know what to do. I couldn't possibly ask him for what I wanted.

*“Do you want me to kiss you?”*

His voice was a caress in my head, silky and soft. As though he understood that I couldn't speak aloud the things I wanted. He'd made it easier for me to submit to him.

Swallowing hard, I nodded.

He leaned in even more. The tip of his nose brushed along my skin. Pressing his lips to the sensitive spot between my neck and shoulder, Saeldreon released one of my wrists and brought down his hand. Light and feathery, his touch slid over my stomach, and up toward my breasts, cupping one in the palm of his hand.

My entire body jolted at the pleasure of being touched in that way for the first time.

It intensified as he nibbled on the side of my neck. His one hand moved down my body, sliding in under the fabric of my robe.

With the tip of one finger, he traced my navel making my muscles jump. Slowly, Saeldreon dragged those fingers down to where the apex of my body blazed. Gasping as his caress lowered, my knees nearly gave out when he slid his fingers into the heat between my thighs.

“Oh, Gods,” I moaned.

“Fuck, you're so hot,” the Dragon Prince panted in my ear as he slid his fingers up and down my slick cleft. “I want to make you come.”

I'd never heard someone use that crass word but another soft mewl escaped me, my body reacting to hearing it. The muscles in my thighs and belly quivered as he continued to stroke the sensitive spot between my legs, and a hard, liquid ball of heat swelled deep inside me. It was something I'd



never experienced, and I didn't know how to handle it. It was almost too much to take, and I tried to press my legs together.

Except, his hand stopped me from moving.

“It's okay, *drotning*. Open for me. I promise you will enjoy what I do to you.”

My heart hammered in my throat as I slowly parted my legs for him. His fingers immediately slipped into my slick core, edging in more and more until I could barely breathe. He trailed his tongue over my ear and groaned.

“Give in to it, Onya. Let yourself go.”

Breath hitching in my throat, I could hardly stand. Hot, fevered pleasure rushed over me, through me. Every muscle in my body shuddered and quaked, just like the ground shook when the mountain spoke.

Saeldreon had become my mountain, and I trembled before him, submitting myself completely.

Thrusting his fingers deep inside me, I lost all thought and reason. My hand fisted behind his neck as I held onto him, unable to move even if I wanted to. It felt like the build-up to a sneeze, but in my core. I gasped again and again as the fire between my legs got bigger and hotter.

His hand movements quickened, his fingers burying deeply until I was no longer in control of my body. It acted on its own, thrusting my hips, grinding on his hand. I was beyond reason, as my head flung back into the trunk of the tree.

A long, low groan ripped from my throat when every muscle in my body clenched tightly, like a fist. Clenching, clenching, clenching, then releasing. A rush of liquid heat poured out of me.

My whole body quivered, from head to toe. I couldn't describe the sensations that continually washed over me. Heat and pleasure. Light and euphoria. I took in a ragged breath while the world stopped spinning, and I slowly lowered the leg that I didn't realize I had lifted, back to the ground.

As Saeldreon pulled his hand away, he pressed his lips to my neck. I turned my head toward him to capture his mouth with mine. His kiss ignited my senses all over again, making me very aware of how he tasted, how he smelled, the feel of his hot breath on my skin. And I was acutely aware of his hard erection pressing into my hip.

If the Dragon Prince could do that to my body with just his fingers, I could only imagine what he could do with his cock.

With all my shyness dissolved, I lowered my hand to his pants, and rubbed my fingers over the hard length of him. He flinched, and his eyes rolled back a little. Then he pulled away from me, pressing his lips together.

“We should return to camp,” he said, breaking the spell that had been weaved around us.

“What?”

He straightened my robe, and tugged up my pants, so I wasn't exposed. “The others will wonder where we are.”

For some reason, I felt like crying. After all of that, how could he reject my affection?

“Don't... don't you want to have sex with me?”

“Oh, sweet girl. Of course, I want to. I want nothing more than to have you.” He cupped my face with his hand. “But I don't want to take you like this. I want to be able to take my time with you. To show you how much I care for you.”

I understood his reasoning, but I still felt the sting of rejection in my heart.

“I will warn you though, that if we intertwine our bodies as one, that will make the bond between us unbreakable. You'll belong to me for the rest of your life.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I want you to be sure. You made me promise to release you once you helped me get out of Jarlstad. I will still honor that if it is truly what you wish. I won't be able to do it now, but if we get to the Gray Valley, and you still want to leave, I will let you go.”

I appreciated that he told me, but it still made me sad. I thought he would just take what he wanted from me, but knowing that he cared about my wishes, cracked open something inside of me. My heart, my soul? It wasn't clear which.

Regardless, my opinion of him had changed.

Before starting back to the camp, I looked him over, saw that he still had an erection making a mountain in his pants.

“Doesn't that hurt?”

“A little.” He gave me a wry grin. “But don't worry about it. I'll survive.”

When we got back to the camp, the others were awake, waiting for us to return. My cheeks flared hot, wondering if they knew what we'd done in the woods. By the way Davin in particular, avoided looking at me, I assumed they knew or had guessed.

“Since we're all awake,” Saeldreon began. “We could get a head start on the day.”

Joakim looked up into the sky. “It'll be dawn soon anyway.”

It didn't take long before we were all packed up and ready to go. Joakim returned to the burned-up pyre, bowed his head, and said his final goodbyes to Sigrunn. When he was done, I too spoke my final words to her with a heavy heart.

“I'll find you again, and we will drink wine on the shores of Empyrean.”

I wasn't sure if she could hear me, but I hoped she knew before she died that I had considered her my friend, and that she had saved me in so many ways. Without her firm guidance, I probably would've died, not my body but my spirit. Now I had the resolve to join the fight against the king instead of trying to run away from my fate.

Sigrunn had shown me what true strength was.

WE DIDN'T GET AS FAR as everyone hoped during those first few hours in the predawn. The terrain had been difficult to

navigate in the dark. Despite the three Drecki knowing a bit of the area, it was still slow going.

I didn't want to consider that it was me who had slowed us down, but I realized I wasn't as formidable as the others. Larsen had offered to carry me on his big back, but I declined the offer, my pride feeling a bit damaged.

Eager to show them that I had worth as part of the resistance, I borrowed Davin's bow when we stopped midday to eat and rest, shooting three quail and a duck for roasting. They were all impressed with my hunting skills, so much so, that Saeldreon put me in charge of the hunting from that moment. Surely, he did it to appease me as Davin was a fine bowman, but I appreciated it more than he could ever imagine.

I needed to feel useful, and not like a burden.

After we ate, Saeldreon and Joakim went over some strategy for the upcoming battle. I was thankful to be included, especially when they asked me about the fortress, its layout, and structure. Happy to be able to contribute, I told them everything I knew, including the number of guards and where they were stationed.

"Well done, Onya," Joakim offered with a respectful nod. "You'll make a fine member of the *Asatora Drecki*."

Saeldreon nodded at me after that, and it relieved the tension I'd felt about our situation. It had been extremely awkward between us since we left camp. He had avoided talking too much to me, and I thought it might be because he didn't really think much of me besides being a warm body to sink himself into then leave.

Silently, I worried that it wouldn't be all that different from how I was viewed in Jarlstad. Relegated to nothing but property.

However, now I saw that it wasn't how he thought of me. Even though he'd claimed me as his, it didn't feel entitled, like he owned me, instead it felt protective.

After an hour's rest, we got back on the road. We'd made it out of the wooded areas, now traveling through open fields.

Some had been used for crops, but now lay empty with only yellowing clumps of shrubby grass and tall weeds. It was a lot harder to stay hidden, so we used stealth and speed.

We came upon one long stretch of land that we had to cross, or tack on a few more hours to swing around to avoid it. In the distance, at the corner of the plot, there was a small A-frame house. Beyond that, along the horizon, was the dark green line of a forest. From here we couldn't tell if the house was inhabited or not since there was no obvious evidence of it, except for its presence.

"We should spread out, but stay low," Saeldreon suggested. "And run quickly." As the others made room between them, the prince stuck to my side. "We'll go together."

Hunching over slightly, I ran into the field with him close behind, crouched low. It was hard to run like that, my legs started to ache halfway, but I kept going, I could rest once we reached the tree line on the other side.

As we got closer to the homestead, I heard the clang of a bell. The type of bell that usually hung around a goat's neck since they were always prone to wander off on their own and get lost. The house was definitely occupied. No farmer worth their salt would abandon a goat on their own. They were too precious nowadays.

Unsure if the others were aware, I glanced behind me at Saeldreon, hoping he understood, as I couldn't risk speaking.

*"I heard the bell. It's okay, keep going. We can't stop now."*

I turned back and picked up my pace, veering to the right a little to avoid running into the animal. Saeldreon followed my lead. Relief surged through me as the woods grew closer and closer. Another ten yards and we'd have made it safely.

A male voice rose close to the house. Then a second one. And a third. Stopping, I lifted my head to risk a peek, only to see the blue and white colors of the royal guard. I immediately ducked back down, my heart pounding so hard that I was sure anyone near would hear it.

*“Lay flat. Now!”*

Holding my breath, I dropped onto my belly, turning my head just a little so I could sort of see the grass move if someone walked toward me. My body stiffened when I sensed movement behind me.

*“It’s just me.”*

Saeldreon crawled to my side, his body naturally protecting me. If one of the guards spotted anything, he would see Saeldreon first, and maybe not even notice my presence at all.

As we waited, I thought about the others, hoping they too had heard the voices and dropped to the ground to hide among the weeds. I had to have faith that they knew what they were doing. They had been Drecki for years, successfully avoiding getting caught by Runebrooke’s soldiers.

“I wonder if that Brull bitch is still with him,” one guard snarled. “I hope so. I’d love a taste of her.”

I stiffened again, but Saeldreon’s hand gently squeezed me on the shoulder.

*“I won’t let anyone harm you. I’ll kill anyone who tries.”*

Dipping my head, I tried to let him know that I’d heard and understood him.

“Yeah,” another one piped up, “those Brull girls are so easy to take advantage of. I had my way with the pretty, tall one with the blond hair. She didn’t even scream, just laid there, and let me do whatever I wanted.” He laughed cruelly.

My stomach roiled over. If it was true, I felt absolutely sick about it. Despite Margo being horrible to me, she didn’t deserve that. No one did. I imagined being the prideful person she was, that she probably kept that assault to herself, thinking she would be looked down upon for it. That was just one more reason upon a hundred others that I would do whatever I could to aid the usurping of the king.

We waited for what seemed like hours, but was probably only a few minutes, until it was evident that the soldiers had

left. When we didn't hear anymore voices, Saeldreon patted me on the back and pointed forward.

*"I'm going to check. Stay here."*

He crawled ahead, and I watched the back of him until he vanished in the tall grass, counting down the seconds that he was gone. When I reached forty, I saw the weeds sway as he returned. Facing me now, he gave me a tight smile and a nod.

"Let's go." He mouthed. Waiting until I crawled by him, he then followed behind me.

Thankfully, the woods got closer and closer, until I could see the outline of every tree that lined the edge of the field. Eager to be safe, I finished the rest of the way, crouched over and running.

Once safely among the trees, Saeldreon and I stood and kept an eye out for the others. I saw Larsen making his way, surprised about how small he was able to make himself. When he reached the woods, Saeldreon waved his hand at him. He waved back.

It wasn't long before the five of us reunited, continuing on our way.

After traipsing through a fairly easy path through the woods, we came to a steep hill roped with thick roots, and broken, rotting trees that we needed to climb. Being the most agile, Davin went up first. He slid down a couple of times but safely made it up. Larsen climbed next, his thick legs working for him.

The Dragon Prince insisted that I follow, promising he'd help me from behind while Larsen could heft me when I neared the top. I nearly fell twice but both times, true to his promise, he caught me and pushed me up again.

Once we all made it to the top, we took a moment to rest. Saeldreon decided to scout up ahead, as he was sure we were getting close to the mountain. He said he could feel the rumblings of it when he pressed his hand to the ground.

When he was gone, Joakim got me some water, and sat beside me on a fallen log overgrown with lichen and moss.

“The life of the Drecki isn’t easy.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry it’s been forced on you.”

I eyed him and wondered if he was thinking about Sigrunn.  
“Was Sigrunn Drecki?”

He drank then wiped at his mouth, nodding.

“Did she choose to be?”

“Not at first, no.” His gaze lifted at the high canopy of leaves. “She was taken to the capital like you were, to wed some nobleman who most definitely didn’t deserve her.”

“How did she end up a *hendey* instead?”

Joakim still wouldn’t look at me, but I could see the way his jaw tightened as he spoke. “I was able to get a letter to her, telling her to do what she needed so that she could remain in the fortress, close to the royal family to gather information.”

I recognized then that his apology to me, was the one he couldn’t give to Sigrunn.

“You didn’t force her, Joakim. I suspect she did what she knew was the right thing to do. I don’t think anyone could have forced her to do anything, she was that strong.”

Regarding me, he patted my shoulder. “You’re going to have to be even stronger to be at Saeldreon’s side.”

“I know.” A burdened sigh left me, realizing it more and more as each day passed, and we were getting close to the Gray Valley.

“He picked you to brand because he saw the strength in you. He knew he would need a woman with a strong will and moral fibre.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know about that. I think I was just a convenient vessel.”

He smacked me at the back of the head. “Don’t be daft. Only a formidable woman would’ve been able to survive his power. Others haven’t.”



“He’s branded women before?”

Joakim nodded. “Many years ago, in the Imeiny Islands, way before you were even born he branded a woman and then married her. They were together for twenty years. But the next woman he branded wasn’t as lucky.”

“Did... did she die?”

“Yes.”

That was not something I expected to hear. Saeldreon had accidentally killed someone trying to mark them as his. Had he not cared about the risks?

Joakim must’ve seen the horror on my face because he grabbed my hand. “Not by his hand. She’d begged him to release her, that she didn’t want to be bonded to him so deeply, so he did. Or at least tried to. Driven mad, she ended up killing herself.”

He scrubbed at the stubble on his face warily. It looked like he’d aged in the past couple of days.

“Later, he discovered that she’d sold information about him to bounty hunters who were hired by Runebrooke to find him and bring him back to Andlang. The bond it’s not something Saeldreon would do on a whim. He wouldn’t risk it if he didn’t truly know that you were worthy to be a dragon’s mate.”

He seemed certain about it, but I truly had my doubts.

## ONYA



When Saeldreon returned from his scouting trip, he let us know that it was easy terrain from there. No more hills to climb, just maybe a stream or two to cross but nothing impassable.

As we walked, he kept his probing gaze on me. I wondered if he could sense my uncertainty and turmoil after the conversation that Joakim and I had. He wouldn't have known that it was from that conversation, but it looked like he sensed something had happened while he'd been out scouting our path.

He definitely wasn't the type of man to ask, and I wasn't the type of woman to offer up my emotions freely. So, we both stubbornly went about the journey at odds with each other.

After another five hours on the road, we camped for the night. We were so far off the main trails and in the woods, that there wasn't a risk of our fire being seen. While the others built the campfire and collected water, I took the bow to hunt for food. The way Saeldreon watched me collect the arrows, I thought he was going to suggest for someone else to go—like Davin—but he didn't, and I left the camp to track game that we could eat.

In a way, letting me go alone was a way of telling me he trusted me, and that I didn't need his or anyone else's help. I

did appreciate that, but still, I felt the distance between us. To be fair, we didn't really know each other. Fate had forced us together and we had to figure out a way to live with it.

Getting upset about it was no use, considering he had other things to worry about, like building an army to usurp the king and claim the throne. I couldn't imagine the amount of pressure and concern that put on his shoulders.

I managed to shoot a couple of ducks this time. Davin had found a raspberry bush while collecting water from a nearby stream, so he picked a whole bushel for us to eat after the meat. It was an unexpected treat that everyone enjoyed, seeming to lift our spirits. Larsen lamented the lack of wine, but Davin reminded him about all the ale he'd be able to drink when we reached Gray Valley, as he knew the Drecki brothers would be brewing some in preparation of our arrival.

Everyone was exhausted, so it was no surprise that we all laid down right after eating. I lay on my fur roll, trying to get comfortable when I felt Saeldreon lay in behind me.

"What are you doing?!" Startled, I tried to sit up, but he wrapped an arm around me, tugging me close to his body.

The moment he touched me I felt all the worry and doubt melt away into nothing. I was uncomfortable with how easily I just surrendered to him. Was it the marks on my arms responding, or was it just me?

"I can't sleep," he admitted. "I'm thinking about too much."

I wasn't exactly sure how to act with him, or even what to say to help him. So, I just went with what my gut said.

"Tell me about your brothers," I asked softly, curious but not wanting to hit a nerve. "I read about them as a child in the storybooks, about the great dragon lords, but the stories don't really say much about them as people. I used to think that they weren't real, that you weren't real. Obviously, I was wrong."

He chuckled softly, which was a surprising response but not unwelcome.

“Tomiss was known as the *Lord of the Mountain*. When I was younger, he always seemed as large as a mountain. He just radiated that kind of unflinching power. His presence was commanding to be sure, but he was gentle with those he loved.” A deep sigh left him. “He was a good king. Andlang flourished under his rule. No person went hungry, no one lived on the streets in poverty. Neighbors looked after each other.”

“I would’ve liked to have lived under his rule. Maybe my childhood wouldn’t have been so difficult.”

The Dragon Prince stiffened a little at that, but he settled his face into my hair, and breathed me in. A shiver rushed down my spine, but I fought back the urge to wiggle even closer to him, not only for warmth, but other more private reasons.

“My other brother, Haakon, was called *Lord of the Skies*, and he commanded the royal army. He was really the most majestic dragon. He could outfly both of us without batting an eye. Haakon was a bit of a jester, he liked to play around. His troops had really loved him... a lot of them died during that battle, defending him and the throne.”

“I’m sorry I brought up a painful memory.”

“It’s good for me to remember them. For too many years I tried to hide away from their memories, riddled with guilt for not being there to protect them. It wasn’t until Joakim saved me from drowning in my own misery that I accepted what I needed to do to honor them.”

My hand instinctively covered his to comfort him. He swept my hair from my neck and settled his face there until I could feel his warm breath on my skin. After a few moments, his breathing slowed, and I realized he’d fallen asleep.

Feeling unexpectedly safe in his arms, I closed my eyes, also drifting to sleep and hoping to follow him into my dreams.



THE NEXT MORNING, we woke at dawn, ate what was left of the meat, and then got on our way. Saeldreon assured us we’d

reach our destination by midday if we maintained a good, even pace.

After a few hours of walking, I heard Davin whisper to Larsen, wondering why Saeldreon didn't just shift into a dragon and fly us the rest of the way there. He thought it would have been a glorious way to greet the people who had been praying for his return for decades.

If Saeldreon overheard him, he didn't make any indication of it. Yet, I did notice a dark look cross his face. It wasn't anger that had washed over him, I didn't think, but concern. Earlier, he'd mentioned about the drain on his powers while in captivity, which made me question if he was worried that his powers wouldn't return.

How could he be the Dragon Prince without the dragon?

His prediction of when we would arrive at the valley was accurate. The sun was high in the sky when we emerged from the woods, drawing close to the edge of the hill to look over the valley below us.

What I saw nestled in the valley, among the rocky embankment of Fire Mountain stole my breath. Tents were erected as far as I could see while hundreds of people, dressed in the red robes of the *Asatora Drecki*, went about their daily chores. Smoke danced above several fires, and there was also a line of people returning to the camp, carrying what I assumed was buckets of water. Others were in the makeshift paddock, tending to about twenty horses, a couple of cows, and a few goats.

Joakim pumped his fist in the air and smiled at Saeldreon. "I knew they'd all come. Here is your army, Lord Saeldreon."

The Dragon Prince took a step closer to the edge, his gaze sweeping over the scene. A deep breath expanded his chest, and I wondered what he was thinking as he looked out at the hundreds of people who had risked their lives to come here. Because of him. To fight for him.

I imagined it was overwhelming. He was the type of man who wouldn't take this monumental moment lightly. He was a

man who harbored a lot of responsibility for Andlang and its people.

Approaching him, I timidly set my hand on his arm, hoping my presence gave him the fortitude to be able to go down into the valley and face his destiny.

Turning to me, he covered my hand with his. “*Thank you...*”

I nodded, and together, we started down the path into the valley.

By the time we made it halfway, three Drecki, armed with spears and axes, intercepted us. They likely recognized the red outfits we all wore, and maybe Joakim, which was why their weapons weren’t drawn.

The moment they saw their prince, who stood out with his formidable stature and distinctive red hair, each of them halted in their tracks. They bowed so low that I could see the top of their heads.

“Lord Saeldreon,” one of them exalted, “I can’t believe you’re finally here.”

It was clear to me that he wasn’t comfortable with the honorific and the exaltation of his arrival. Still, he nodded to the men.

“Sorry I’m late,” he joked.

It was the right thing to say, immediately putting the men at ease. He’d confessed to me that he didn’t know if he had the right type of character to lead, but I saw a man who possessed all the right traits to be a fair and conscientious ruler. He might not have been the warmest of men, but I could tell that he cared for others.

The three men led us down to the camp. The closer and closer we got, the more people took notice, and then the word spread like wildfire that the Dragon Prince had arrived. The buzzing crowd made way for us, bowing as Saeldreon passed. My hands started to shake, my gut tightening at the attention.

I received a few wary looks, as if they couldn't figure out who I was, or why I was even there. As I understood it, the majority of the Drecki were men, but I'd spotted a few women among the masses. I also recognized the looks some of those women were giving Saeldreon, and I didn't like it. That thought came as a big surprise to me, making me frown.

As if he sensed my feelings, Saeldreon took my hand and wrapped it around his arm while we continued to move through the camp. This elicited a few surprised looks, some envious ones, but mostly appreciative and satisfied. When we got to the middle of the camp, everyone gathered around their prince, Joakim, Davin, Larsen, and me. I supposed we'd become his inner circle by default.

Saeldreon looked around at everyone, making eye contact with them. To the Drecki, he looked confident, but I could feel the nerves fluttering through him. Gently and discreetly, I squeezed his arm to give him the strength he needed right now.

"I imagine you are all waiting for me to make some great, rousing speech, but the truth is I'm not good at talking. I don't have a way with words like my brother Tomiss had. Of course, none of you were alive two hundred years ago, so at least you won't be able to compare us and find me lacking."

That got a round of laughter out of the crowd, and I didn't think he realized that this was exactly what these people needed. A break from the tension, and worry, I imagined they carried with them every day.

To be part of the Drecki meant being invisible, hiding all the time, not trusting the people around you in case they snitched on you to the royal guards. It meant knowing that one day you would take up arms and go into battle for the Dragon Prince. That you would die for the possibility of a better world. One where all prospered and not just an elite few whose ancestors had committed treason, murdering all the dragons they could find so they could never reclaim the throne.

Except, that they missed one, and now he had returned to avenge his people, both dragon and human alike.

“I know that you have sacrificed much for the idea of helping build a better country. I also know you have been waiting for the dragon to return to Andlang.”

Everyone nodded at that. Lots of “Yes” spoken among the people.

“I want you to know that I have arrived. And I will fight with you, for you,” he raised his fist, “so that we can prosper and heal this land. All of us, together!”

A surge of loud cheers went through the crowd. It was almost deafening, and I felt a rush of awe come over me. To see this many people willing to fight and die for this cause. I never imagined that my destiny would lead me here, to this moment, standing next to this man.

I’d never believed in fate or destiny, always turning my nose up at the mere mention of it. Yet, here I was, fully immersed in it.

The leader of the camp, an older man named Matthias, who was missing an eye, led our small party to the tents where we could sleep. Saeldreon got his own tent, naturally, and I was about to follow Matthias to go to my own tent, when Saeldreon snatched my wrist.

“This is your tent, Onya. As my mate, you will sleep here with me.”

If Matthias was surprised by the proclamation, he didn’t show it. He gave us a nod, then left. Saeldreon and I went inside to rest. Not long after, someone brought us food and the ale Davin had promised we’d find. We sat on the fur bed rolls spread out on the ground to eat the food. Hungry, we devoured it in silence.

When Saeldreon was done, he drank a good portion of the ale, then lay back on the furs, using his arm to prop up his head so he could still look at me.

“Are you scared to be here with me? To be a part of this war,” he asked.

There was no right answer to that, so I just shrugged, laying down beside him. “I guess I don’t really have a choice.”



He turned his head to look at me. “You do have a choice. I told you I would release you if that was what you wanted.”

The story Joakim shared, about the woman who had gone mad and killed herself, echoed in my mind. Had it been because she wasn't really released? Because she couldn't be with him, but at the same time, she wanted him so badly that it drove her insane? I didn't want to be that woman.

I thought about not being near Saeldreon, not being able to feel his presence all the time, and it surprisingly filled me with despair. He was so ingrained in me, on me, in such a short period of time, that I imagined being without him would be like removing a piece of myself. I wasn't sure I could live like that. Though, if I dared to admit it, I didn't want to live like that.

For better or for worse, this was my life now. And he was at the center of it.

I risked it and linked fingers with his. “I'm with you. My... my prince.”

“Don't call me that...” he muttered.

“Then, what should I call you?”

“Dre. That's the name my brothers used to call me. That's the name I want you to use when we're in private.”

“Okay, Dre it is.”

He rolled over, wrapping an arm around my waist to pull me closer until we were face to face, nose to nose. Slowly, he moved in closer, until his lips lightly brushed against mine. Bringing a hand up to my cheek, Dre pushed open my lips with this tongue and deepened the kiss, leaving me breathless.

I realized right there and then that I kind of liked this man. And if I was truly honest with myself... I was falling in love with him.

It was the last thing I thought I would ever do with any man, let alone one who was gruff, rude, egotistical and destined to be a king.

## SAELDREON



Over the next few days, I met with various members of the Drecki to strategize our battle plan to invade Jarlstad and usurp the king with as little bloodshed as possible. I refused to do what the human rebels had done two hundred years ago, when they slaughtered everyone connected to my family—whether they were dragon or not. More than five thousand people died over the course of two days. Soldiers, royal guards, attendants, citizens, and all the members of the royal family, my family, and the people who had served them. I didn't want a repeat of the tragic past.

I made sure Onya was involved in the planning, as she had valuable information about the layout of the fortress, names of *hendeys*, the girls at Brull House, some guards, and even the serving staff. She also knew about secret tunnels and passages throughout the building. As did I, having been marched through one after being tortured.

Matthias brought in a middle-aged woman named Rachel, who was a *hendey* for years. She was rail thin, with uneven tufts of hair sticking out over her head. There were also a few scars along her scalp where her hair hadn't grown anymore. It was no secret that *hendeys* weren't treated well, and more often than not, received the brunt of any punishment meant for the Brull girls.

Onya confirmed it when she told me about what happened with Sigrunn. Matthias said that she'd just recently escaped. Rachel filled in all the blanks, providing information that Onya didn't have. Together, they gave enough for us to draw a detailed map of the city and of the fortress. It would serve us well, as my idea was not to do a full-on assault that would get innocents killed, but to sneak in and take the king and his supporters down one by one.

When I wasn't meeting with the inner circle of the Drecki, I was out on the field, training with the men. My body was still in a weakened state, so I needed to rebuild my strength and stamina for the upcoming war. I knew everyone assumed I would be fighting from the air as my dragon, and I desperately wanted to, but I wasn't sure that was possible.

My dragon and I were disconnected, and I needed to find a way to change that.

I thought about the old ways, and whether I was going to have to travel that path. As I looked up at the mountain that loomed over the valley, gray smoke still plumed out from the summit. It had been quiet for a few days, no rumbling or shaking the ground, but I sensed it wouldn't remain that way for long. It was calling to me, but I was afraid to answer that call.

Onya had also wanted to train. The others tried to persuade her that only the men needed to fight, but she pushed their arguments aside and went out onto the field anyway. I cheered her all the way, silently of course, as had Joakim, Davin, and Larsen who had already seen how proficient she was with a bow. I was of the mind that women needed to know how to fight and defend themselves, and Onya was definitely a fighter.

I watched her now, as she out shot every man, hitting the intended targets, which were bales of hay, right where she aimed. She laughed as one of the men cursed with great color and enthusiasm because she beat him.

*“Well done, drotning.”*

She looked over at me, smiling, but then it faded a little, before she wandered over to where I stood, watching.

“I don’t think Hans is too happy,” she admitted. “He spouted off curses I’d never even heard before.” She laughed again.

Her steps synced with mine as I walked through the training field, inspecting the instruction and practice of the men who I would be asking to fight for me in a few days. Some of them were barely men, still holding the fat of their childhood on their faces and bodies. Others were fathers and grandfathers, members of the secret order for most of their lives.

That weighed on me, because I would be failing them and marching them to their deaths if I couldn’t be the dragon they all needed me to be.

I stopped, my gaze lifting to the mountain again. There was an imperceptible rumble beneath our feet, as if the mountain was restless, waiting for me to make a decision. I glanced discreetly at Onya, to see if she’d felt it. She wasn’t a dragon but I wondered if our bond made her sensitive to such things without her knowledge. Her brow furrowed briefly, like she sensed something strange, but I couldn’t be sure that was the reason.

Still frowning, her gaze met mine. “What’s wrong?”

The question surprised me. She was getting bolder with me, and I had to admit that I liked it.

“I’m not getting stronger fast enough. And I’m not healing as I usually do.” I touched my hip, where the arrow had gone through during our initial escape from Jarlstad. The skin had knitted together, but it was still a bit raw. Normally, that wound would’ve just been a pink scar by now.

“What does that mean?”

“It’s possible I still have too much silver in my system. I’d never been silvered for that long before, and I don’t know what that has done to my powers.”

Her next question was the one I' been asking myself for days.

“Will you be able to shift into your dragon form?”

“I don't know. I've tried to sense my dragon, to reach inside and touch its power, but every time I do, it's fleeting. Like mist through my fingers, it's impossible to take hold of.”

“Is there a way to fix it?”

“I don't know. I need to talk with a Shaman who has studied the old ways.”

She turned to look toward the main camp. “Is there one here?”

“No, but I know of one who lives not far from here, at the base of the mountain. I will go today to see him.”

Her brow furrowed as she eyed me intensely. “Do you wish for me to come with you?” Onya spoke carefully, as if testing dangerous waters.

Truthfully, I'd thought about leaving her here and I didn't like it. “Yes.”

She nodded. “I'll go pack us some food and water for a day trip.”

“Good. I'll talk to Matthias about borrowing horses.”

AN HOUR LATER, Onya and I each rode a roan mare west of the camp, through a sparse outcropping of trees. With each passing minute, as we got closer to the mountain, I could feel its power vibrating over every inch of my body. I could feel it in my head, speaking to me.

“*Saeldreon,*” it rumbled, “*you're finally ready...*”

We stopped only once to give water to the horses, then we were on the road again. An urgency prickled deep in my gut, like ants crawling under my skin. I needed to do something to relieve that itching sensation before it drove me mad. I drove my horse harder, forcing Onya to as well to keep up with me.

I was impressed with her horsemanship. I hadn't known many women who could ride that well.

After riding for another hour, the trees got sparser, until we came out of them onto a flat, barren plain that stretched all the way to the bottom of the mountain. I didn't know how anyone could live out here in the wasteland, but as we got closer, a small wooden shack appeared—butted right up against the rock.

I slowed my horse down into a cantor. The closer we got to the hut, the more it started to whinny and snort, pulling slightly on the reins. Onya brought her horse in beside me, her eyes narrowed.

“Is that where the Shaman lives?”

The horses slowed even more, turning their heads, fighting against moving forward. Then my horse just stopped, stamping its hooves. Onya's horse did the same.

“I don't think they want to get any closer,” she added, patting her mount on its flank to calm him.

Dismounting, I tried to quiet my horse as it still stamped and snorted through its big nostrils. Also patting its cheek, I looked around for something to tie the reins to, so the horse didn't wander off while we were inside the Shaman's shack.

The only thing within five feet of where I stood was a yellowing shrub. I kicked at it, and it seemed sturdy enough, so I wrapped the reins around it. Onya got off her horse and did the same, soon opening her leather bag to take out an apple. Using her dagger, she cut it in half and gave each horse a piece before we walked the last bit to the hut.

I'd almost chided her for wasting food, but the look on her face as she fed the animals gave me pause. She was kind and compassionate, and I didn't want to change that about her because I liked it. It gave me balance.

A series of wooden staffs stuck into the ground leading up to the door, bones from an animal hung from the top. Various runes were etched in the wooden frame around the door, and carved into the wood was a dragon.

I lifted my hand and was about to knock when the door slowly creaked open, seemingly on its own, as there was no

one on the other side.

“You may enter, Saeldreon,” a rough, guttural voice came from the darkness inside the hut. “But your woman must wait outside.”

“Don’t go in alone.” Onya grabbed onto my arm. “How does he even know who we are?”

“I’ll be all right.”

“If you’re not out in one tick, I’m coming in and nothing will be able to stop me,” she whispered into my ear, before releasing me.

Onya drew lines in the dirt, then stood with her back to the sun, casting a shadow onto the first line. The expression on her face was so fierce that I wanted to kiss her, but I refrained. It was not the time for such things. I’d save that kiss for later.

When I entered the Shaman’s hut, the door automatically shut behind me, startling me a little. I’d been alive a couple hundred years and seen various forms of magic in the world, but a Shaman’s power still unnerved me.

I moved a few more steps inside, expecting to see the man, but all that I noticed were tables and shelves of various glass jars filled with Gods knew what. Animal skulls, both small and large hung down the ceiling. There was dust floating in the air, and I could see it in the narrow swatch of sunlight that came in through the small window. Earthy scents of lichen and elderberries mingled with the sweet, sickly stench of rotting meat.

Movement in the corner of my eye startled me. I turned to see two ravens, each perched on top of a wolf skull, watching me. In the dark depths of their soulless black eyes, I saw a flicker of fire.

“Come closer, dragon,” the Shaman demanded, his voice coming from the shadows that lingered at the back of the hut.

I took a few more steps into the gloom, then I saw him sitting on a stool by a small fire, smoke curling around his form. There was another stool across from the fire, and he pointed to it for me to sit.

When I was seated, I took in his presence. He wore the traditional horned helmet over his bald head. A black mask was painted around his eyes, and he had the thick black markings from his bottom lip, over his chin, and down his neck, that disappeared under the blue wool of his ratty robe. There were runes tattooed on his wrinkled forehead, on his saggy neck, and all over his thin arms. I imagined if he lifted his robe, I'd see runes burned into his legs as well.

“You have come for answers to old questions.” He poked the fire with what, at first, I thought was a long, curved stick, but on closer inspection, I realized it was a leg bone. Though, too long to be from any type of animal.

“My powers have dwindled. I've been doing everything I thought would work, but still, I'm too weak. I need to be my dragon to raze Runebrooke to ash.”

The Shaman grabbed a leather satchel from a nearby table, opening it and dumping the contents into his hand.

“I will cast the bones to see your fate.” Tossing the handful of small bones onto the dirt floor, next to the fire, they landed in a circular shape, and I could see the different runes etched into the bone.

I didn't know all the runes' meanings, but I did recognize the lightning bolt shape that represented the dragon.

Leaning forward, the Shaman stared at the configuration the bones made on the ground. Using his bone stick, he poked at a couple of the small ones—one of them being a spinal bone, and the other a flat, squared shape with an oval hole in the middle. After a few more seconds of inspection, the spinal bone burst into flames. It was so sudden and unexpected that I flinched away.

Seemingly satisfied, the Shaman poked at the burning bone, then nodded and sat back on his stool.

“You must go into the mountain, to the place from where dragons come. There, you can be reborn as Saeldreon, *Lord of Fire*.”



It wasn't as if I had been expecting a different answer, the mountain was calling to me, but to be faced with it as the only way to regain my powers was daunting. No one had ever gone inside it. Not even my brother, Tomiss, who had been named the *Lord of the Mountain*.

"How do I get in?"

"There is a path up the mountain on the west pass, take it to the top, then you will have to climb down into the center."

I shook my head. The journey sounded impossible.

"Go alone, as it will be treacherous..." He picked up the bones, but one dropped to the ground, cracking open. Blood oozed out of it, which was impossible.

With wide eyes, the Shaman stuck his finger into the pooling red fluid, then lifted it over the rocks surrounding the fire. He watched avidly as the blood dripped onto the rock, sizzling as it hit. After a few more drops, he sat back with a reverent gasp.

When I looked at the rock, I found the blood had splattered in the form of a B symbol. It was a rune, representing Freya.

"You must bring your woman into the mountain with you."

"You said it will be treacherous even for me."

"She is the connection to Freya, whose blessing you will need for the future. You will forge a blood connection that can never be broken." He stared at me with such intensity that it sent a ripple of fear through my body. "You must do this, or you will never become the Dragon King."

Having received my prophecy, I got up from the stool and moved toward the door.

"You must go now, while the mountain is calm. If you wait, you will never be able to get inside."

"I have no provisions..."

"There are cloaks by the door, a rope, and a bag full of bread and dried fruit. You will need all these things."

Glancing at the bag, I saw the things he mentioned, as if they had been put there just for me.

“Leave four gold coins on the table as payment.”

After collecting the items, I dropped the gold on the table as was custom. The two ravens hopped onto the table and picked up the coins in their beaks then hopped away.

When I opened the door and came out of the shack, Onya had been standing right there, her hands fisted. She looked about ready to fight someone.

“I was just about to storm through the door,” she confessed.

“No need. I’m in one piece, as you can see.”

“I-I could feel your... I don’t know what it was, but it was intense.”

I suspected she was going to say, “your fear”, but thought she would be insulting me if she said it out loud.

“What happened?” she asked when we returned to the horses.

My attention lifted to the mountain again, feeling the pull of it on every muscle of my body. It wasn’t a pleasant sensation. “I have to go inside the mountain.”

“What?” She gaped at me.

“And you have to come with me.”

## ONYA



I stared at him even harder. “I have to do, what?”

“Go into the mountain with me.” As if he hadn’t just asked me to risk my life doing an insurmountable thing, like climbing a mountain, Saeldreon handed me one of the cloaks he’d been carrying, slung a leather satchel over his shoulder, and a thick coil of rope around the other.

“Why?”

He took the reins of his horse in hand, and then mounted the animal. “The Shaman said that you will help me connect to the mountain so I can regain my power.”

“How?”

“Stop with all the questions, woman, and get on your horse.”

Grumbling, I did as he demanded, although I was still confused about what he was asking me to do. “Do you trust this Shaman? I have heard of some being charlatans, only after the money they can make from offerings.”

“I trust his visions.”

Saeldreon kicked his horse into motion, but instead of turning and heading back the way we came, he started toward

the western pass of the mountain. I had to press my horse to catch up to him.

“Where are we going?”

“To the mountain.”

“Now? But we don’t have any provisions.”

He patted the leather bag hung around his shoulder. “We have food and water. I gave you a cloak. We have enough to make it.”

I wasn’t so sure, but I knew arguing with him would be a waste of time. He was a stubborn man with an inflated sense of importance. All I could do was follow him, trusting that he’d keep me from dying in the mountain.

When we reached the pass, the wind had picked up and it whipped at our faces and cloaks. A cold settled into my bones. We had to stop at the base of the pass and dismount, there was no way the horses could climb the rocky incline. We’d have to travel on foot now for the rest of the way.

Craning my neck, I looked up at the summit. and at the gray smoke that swirled around the top, obscuring the view. Every notion in my body told me that it was a bad idea. That it was much too dangerous to even try to reach the top, but I knew Saeldreon wouldn’t listen to reason. He was determined, and the only thing he cared about right now was getting his power back. So, against my better judgment, I put my faith in him and followed him up the path.

At first, the trail was walkable, a subtle incline, with only a few stones to climb. Then it became steeper, and I struggled with keeping my balance. By then, we had changed positions, with Saeldreon coming in behind me. Every few steps, my feet slipped on the rock, and I would stumble back into him. However, he always managed to stay firm, making sure we didn’t misstep backward.

Halfway up, my body shook so violently from the biting wind and high altitude, that my legs became stiff and hard to move. Saeldreon draped his cloak around us when we

crouched on a boulder, drank some water, and ate some dried fruit from the satchel he took from the Shaman.

The water quenched my dry throat, and the food filled my belly, replenishing some of my energy, but I still didn't know if I could continue climbing. Not without risking Saeldreon's safety when he had to constantly grab me to stop me from sliding down the side of the mountain.

"I don't think I can make it." My teeth chattered as I couldn't dispel the cold that had settled into my body. "Leave me here."

"Don't be stupid. You'd die out here."

"I'll climb back down." He knew as well as I did, that I'd basically just slide down, letting the force of the ground pull me to it.

"I won't leave you." Wrapping his cloak around my body, he crouched in front of me. "Get on my back. I'll carry you."

I shook my head. "No, Dre, it'll be hard for you."

Not taking no for an answer, he grabbed my arms and pulled them up over his shoulders. I had no choice but to get onto his back or else have my arms pulled out of the shoulder sockets. Once I was positioned, I gave in, and wrapped my legs around him as best I could to make it easier for him to climb.

And climb he did.

Even when the wind really started to blow, and the gray smoke swirled around us, making it both hard to see and breathe, he kept going. His legs shook with each step, but still, he didn't falter. I'd never known a man so strong and determined. It might have been because he was more than a mere man. He was the Dragon Prince.

Nearing the summit, Saeldreon slowed a little, each step careful and measured, but he never stopped. I squinted to see through the thickened smoke, but all I could discern was gray rock beneath and ahead of us. At that point, I didn't know how he could trust where he was walking, and I hated that I was a burden to him. Having to carry me when he struggled so hard.

Even though the wind got worse, pushing at us, as we got higher on the mountain, the temperature shifted. It was no longer cold. The air got warmer and warmer until I could actually feel it in my nose and smell the heat.

“We made it to the top,” Saeldreon heaved.

Coming to a crawling stop, he slowly lowered me to the somewhat leveled ground. My legs buckled, and I sunk to my knees while he sat next to me, breathing hard. I reached into the bag I had around my shoulder and handed him the waterskin. After, taking a big drink, he handed it back. I, too, drank my fill, hoping the water would alleviate the dizziness in my head, caused by the thick cloying smoke.

“Now what?” I asked him once I caught my breath.

He crawled along the rock, then stopped not more than six feet away, pointing to a dark gap. “We go inside.”

I joined him and peered down into the crater. There were layers of colorful rock along the inside of the hole, red, orange, and dark brown meddled together, creating a pretty mosaic. It was a long way down the throat of the mountain, and at the very bottom I saw a red and orange lake of molten rock and earth. Jets of steam shot out of it, forcing me back from the crater. Sweat instantly popped up on my face.

“We can’t go inside. It’s too dangerous.”

Unfortunately, he wasn’t listening. Instead, he got busy looping one end of the thick rope around a large, cone-like boulder, then tying it. He tossed the rest over the edge.

“Get on my back,” Saeldreon demanded.

“No.” I shook my head. “I don’t want to die, Dre. Not like this.”

His intense, golden gaze bored into my eyes, and I felt a pull inside that I hadn’t felt before... on my heart and soul. “Trust me.”

*“Trust me, Onya.”*

The voice inside my head was louder, more compelling, capturing my body.

Sighing, I scrambled onto his back, letting him heft me up higher, more centered, and wrapped my legs around his waist.

“Hold on tight.”

I did, folding my arms around his neck, and hooking my hands into the front of his shirt, as he grabbed the rope. My eyes squeezed shut, when he jumped into the crater. With the sudden drop, my stomach lurched into my throat. I tried not to scream each time we swung violently to the right, then to the left, but once we finally stabilized, Saeldreon started the climb down the rope.

Heat immediately wafted over us, sweat slicking the back of my neck and dripping down my spine. Then a constant, mechanical drone echoed all around us. It sounded like the bellows of a forge, puffing away, building a fire to make it higher and hotter.

I opened my eyes, thinking it would be better than not seeing what was coming—I just wouldn’t look downward. Instead, I concentrated on Saeldreon, watching the expressions on his face. In my mind, I sent up a prayer to the Gods to give us strength to survive this descent into the unknown of the mountain. Normally, I didn’t ask for blessings, but figured it wouldn’t hurt. My mother often said I’d been blessed by Freya since birth, so I hoped that was true, and the goddess would hold me in her hand and guide the both of us to safety.

As we descended, I noticed that the color on the rocks got more vivid, and I even spotted a few patches of moss growing through the cracks in the stone. The fact that anything would grow in an environment like this, seemed odd to me.

Shouldn’t it have been barren in the throat of the mountain?

Curiosity got the better of me, and I twisted my head so I could look. Where I had expected to find more rock, and the lava flowing, I saw more greenery—moss, and lichen. In a few spots along the ground, there were bushes and a tree growing out of the side, its trunk twisted but alive, green leaves growing from buds along the outstretched branches.

How could that be possible?

Before I could say anything to Saeldreon, a deep and guttural rumble came from below us. It was as if a giant, hungry beast had just awoken, and wanted to devour whatever food was closest. Meaning us. Then everything around us started to shake. The sound was deafening, and I winced, not being able to cover my ears with my hands.

The rope shook back and forth, making Saeldreon struggle to hold on tightly. Like a pendulum, we swung from side to side, but the momentum also sent us spinning. Rocks crumbled from the walls, bits of it hitting us, making it that much harder to hang on. We were going to fall and we were going to die.

It felt as if the whole world slowed while. I saw every hued rock, and every fissure in the stone. Air fluttered over my face, as though a thousand butterflies brushed against my lips, nose, and cheeks. Every panicked breath of oxygen I took into my lungs reverberated in my ears.

I wondered if this was what it felt like to know and understand that you were facing death. To be ultra-aware of every millisecond of time.

There were things I wanted to say to Saeldreon, but I couldn't form any words, being acutely aware that they wouldn't be heard before we dropped into the lake of fire. I wanted to tell him how much I admired him, how much I believed he would make a great king just as his brother, Tomiss, had been.

I ached to tell him that if things were different, I could have found myself falling in love with him.

A new voice thundered between us, and I had a sense it wasn't talking to me. It didn't belong to Saeldreon, it was deeper, louder, almost like an echo bouncing off the rock.

*Come to me, Saeldreon.*

Then his responding voice filled my ears.

*I've let down the Dragon. I'm not worthy of my brother's throne.*



It was a conversation between the mountain and the Dragon Prince.

The mountain rumbled and shook around us. More rocks fell. It was angry, that much I could feel through my bond with Saeldreon.

*FREE YOURSELF! YOU ARE THE DRAGON PRINCE!*

Something had changed. I sensed a calm gently wash through Saeldreon, as if he had made a decision. He shifted his hold on the rope.

“What are you doing?” Panic grabbed hold of me, and I tightened my grip on him.

*I won't ever let you go, drotning. You ignite my heart, my being, my fire.*

“I trust you.” I closed my eyes, and put all my faith in him just as he willingly let go of the rope.

The air got hotter and hotter as we fell, causing the bottom of my feet start to burn. Squeezing my eyes even tighter in reverence, I sent a last prayer to the Gods, to protect my mother and my brother. I gathered all my wits, preparing for the pain that was sure to come when we plunged into the molten lava.

The pain never came.

After a sudden jerk on my body, I was no longer falling.

Slowly, I opened my eyes to see we had reached the bottom of the mountain. I was still clinging to Saeldreon—my arms and legs fiercely holding onto him—as we hovered in an orange glow.

We were right in the middle of the lake of fire.

How we hadn't been burnt to ashes, was a mystery to me.

Saeldreon walked across the molten stream, until he reached a solid ground and leapt onto it. When we were safely away from the lava flow, he crouched, so I could slide off his back. Obviously, he knew I was going to collapse from the shock, for he took hold of my arms to support me. His fingers

pressed against the marks on my skin, and even through the cloak and my shirt, the heat exuding from him scorched me again.

Being face to face, I saw a red-gold glow around his head. At first, I thought it was the lava surrounding him that cast the light over his sharp, angular cheeks, square jaw, and hair, but securitizing him from head to toe, I realized that the light was actually radiating from within him.

My eyes widened just as he let me go. Taking a step back from me, the Dragon Prince seemed to grow. Though, it might've been the light that got bigger, brighter, shooting out of him. His eyes lit up as if real flames flickered inside his irises. The ends of his hair lifted by the heated wind that swirled around us.

He splayed his arms to the sides, raising his head to look up at the summit's opening, and fire and light pulsed out of him. It surged over the rock floor and walls, lighting everything in a red and orange radiance. Then, like a wave, it flowed over every inch of my skin, sinking into every pore, and I gasped out loud.

Saeldreon looked like a God, newly birthed from the fiery depths of the mountain.

The overwhelming sight of him forced me to my knees. I felt the urge to bow before him, pressing my face to the stone floor in awe of his presence. I'd heard of elders and Shaman having a spiritual euphoria in the face of the Gods' power, and I wondered if this was what it felt like. An overpowering rush of heat and fervor. My entire body tingled from the intensity of it.

"It's not the Gods' power that touches you, but mine."

The Dragon Prince took a few steps forward, calling my gaze to his when he stopped right in front of me. My being ached to feel his power surge through me again.

"Touch me," I begged. "Fill me with your fire."

His hand fell upon my head, and another wave of heat flowed through me. My back arched, a moan escaping me

from the ache that developed between my thighs. His eyes flared as he watched me. He didn't have to speak aloud or in my head for me to know what he wanted.

I reached for him, setting my hands on his stomach, and dragging them down, over his groin. He was already hard, lusting for me. Being bold, I unbuttoned his trousers, slid my hand inside and wrapped my fingers around his thick cock.

“Onya,” he moaned, his hand sliding into my hair.

Loving the way he throbbed against my palm, I stroked him once, then twice. I loved that I had this type of power over Saeldreon. The power to please. I continued rubbing my hand up and down his shaft, getting faster and faster with each stroke. The muscles in his stomach flinched, and quivered, until he pulled me up by my hair.

Releasing his hold on my strands, he moved that hand around my body, cupping my rear end. As he lifted me up into his powerful arms, I wrapped my arms around his neck, and my legs around his waist. His other hand went up under the cloak, yanking my pants down enough that my rear end and my sex were exposed. Spinning me round, he brought us down onto a carpet of moss on the ground.

Saeldreon pushed his pants down farther, and gripping his cock, he nestled the tip against the soft folds between my thighs. I knew I was wet with desire, and open to his touch. Slowly, he pressed into me. At first, there was a bit of pain, as I stretched to accommodate him, but soon there was only pleasure as he filled me completely.

While he slid up and down along my core, he licked the side of my neck, moving his mouth down to nibble on my chin, then up to capture my eager lips with his. Bringing a hand up to my hair, he buried his fingers as he kissed me.

Every muscle in my body responded to him, to his touch, to his taste. I moaned into his mouth and nipped boldly at his lips. A wild kind of sensation surged through me, and I wanted to devour him whole. Raw, animalistic need consumed me. Deep inside the very essence of me, I yearned only for him.

I moved my hips to match his strokes, meeting him inch for inch. The back of my heels dug into his legs, urging him to go faster, to take more of me. I wanted him to know that I wouldn't break, I could handle whatever he had to give.

He must've sensed what I desired because he moved faster, pumping harder. Each thrust of his hips sent an electric bolt over my body, sizzling every inch of me inside and out. His glow intensified as he loved me, until the entire chamber was shimmering with red and gold.

The entire mountain started to hum with new life.

After a few more quick, hard thrusts, Saeldreon buried his face into the side of my neck and groaned. The vibrations of his voice against my skin sent shivers down neck, over my shoulders and down to my breasts. It was like being plucked like a bow string.

My whole body started to tremble, my muscles bunching as he took me higher and higher, until I found release. It was the most intense sensation I'd ever felt in my life. I clamped my eyes shut against the explosion of pleasure bursting through me—like having a fire inside me without the burn. Just sizzle and flash.

Saeldreon collapsed on top of me, breathing hard against the side of my head.

“You are as bright as the fire inside of me,” he whispered into my ear, caressing my hair.

I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but at that particular moment, I didn't care. I just wanted to hold onto this moment for as long as I could.

Except, the mountain didn't give us any time to bask in the afterglow of our love making. It rumbled, the ground shaking beneath us. Cracks formed in the rock all the way up to the crater.

“The mountain is angry.” Saeldreon rose, and I marveled at the exquisite beauty of him.

There couldn't have been a more perfect man. Forged by fire, and dragon born.

“We need to leave. It’s time to take back what is rightfully mine.”

Craning my neck, I looked up at the passage we were in, and wondered how we were going to get out of it. I didn’t have to worry, as Saeldreon moved across the chamber, placing himself well enough away from me. I didn’t know what to expect, since my eyes had closed when he shifted before escaping Jarlstad, but I would soon find out.

Funneling all the power he possessed into his body, the Dragon Prince transformed.

His whole body exploded with light, blinding me. When I refocused on him, I saw his back split open and wings sprout from within, his limbs twisting, breaking, and elongating until Dre had vanished and Saeldreon, the dragon appeared.

It was a mixture of magic and nature, but wholly extraordinary.

Once again, I felt like dropping to my knees in worship, I’d never seen something so breathtaking as the red dragon standing in front of me.

He stretched his wings, both tips hitting the sides of the chamber, then shook his head, the tufts of fur behind his horns fluttering with the motion. When his mouth opened, baring his long, razor-like teeth, his tongue flicked out. It looked like he was testing all his parts to see if they worked.

I couldn’t stop the grin that spread across my face. “You’re beautiful.”

Puffs of black smoke burst from his nostrils when he snorted.

*“Fix your clothes, before I decide to shift back and have you again.”*

I did as he asked, slowly approaching him. Even though I knew the beast was the man I’d fallen for, I was still cautious, not knowing how cognizant he truly was.

*“Climb on my back. It’s time to return to the camp.”*

Gripping one of the spikes along the flank of his back leg, I pulled myself up, and then climbed from scale to scale, managing to reach the base of his neck. I looked around but couldn't find anything to hold onto safely.

*"Sit on my head and hold on to my horns."* His husky voice ordered in my head, realizing my predicament.

Carefully, I did so, immediately clutching one of his horns with my hands. It was far more stable up here, as the back of his skull was flatter, and I didn't feel like I could topple off the second he moved.

When I was settled, he flapped his wings once, twice, and we lifted into the air. With every flap we rose higher and higher, until we emerged from the crater of the mountain. Smoke swirled around us, and I imagined that to an observer, it would look like a fiery tornado inside a gray mist.

Once he was high enough above the summit, he swooped around to grab the horses with his talons and flew us back to camp.

## SAELDREON



It was invigorating to have Onya riding on my head, her small hands wrapping firmly around my horns. She felt like an extension of my human self. Our joining in the mountain had connected us fully. Now, I could even feel her emotions, especially when they were heightened.

Right now, as I soared around the west pass and over the Shaman's hut, she was engrossed in the thrill of flying. At first, when I came out of the crater, she'd been terrified, probably from the thought of falling off, but the lower I flew, the steadier I soared, exhilaration surged through her, and by extension, into me.

It didn't take long before I glided over the rise, the Drecki camp coming into view. By now, I suspected I'd been spotted in the sky. As I flew closer, judging the best place to land, I spied a few of the members coming out to greet me. There was a small hill just above the training field, and I decided that was the best, easiest spot to set down the horses and land.

Surprisingly, even in this form they had sensed it was me as I picked them up, enduring the flight calmly.

When I landed, Onya's relief washed over me. Although, she'd been mostly excited about flying, she'd also been afraid. I understood that strange mix of emotions very well.

*"I'll lower my head so you can jump down safely."*

She carefully slid down once I did, just as Joakim, Matthias, and Davin, came up onto the hill. Larsen stayed below receiving the horses that trotted toward him—his eyes unable to get any wider as he gazed up at me. Joakim approached Onya, to make sure she was all right.

“Flying is thrilling, but I definitely like my feet on the ground,” she replied.

“We were starting to get worried after you left for the Shaman’s hut,” he admitted.

“He gave us information that Dre needed to act on immediately.” Her hand settled onto my flank, sending a slight shiver over my body.

Even in my dragon form, she ignited me with passion.

Black smoke rose out my nostrils when I snorted, which made the three men jump back a few paces.

Joakim looked up at me. “I guess you got your power back.”

*“Tell them I’m going to shift so be prepared.”*

Onya nodded. “He says he’s going to change back to human, so you may want to move farther away.”

All three men looked at her, stunned.

“You can communicate with his dragon form?” Matthais asked.

“Yes. I can hear his voice in my head.”

Matthias bowed his head to her, which made her frown comically. “You truly are the Dragon Princess.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” She shook her head. “I’d just rather be Onya, if that’s all right.”

When everyone moved a good distance away, I focused my power inward, willing my dragon form to bend, shrink, and retreat into my body. The transformation was easier this time, and quick. I felt no pain at all while shifting. My powers had truly returned, but I also felt more commanding and in control. I knew it was because of Onya.



Human once more, I nodded to the men. “It’s time to fight.” I started to go down the hill to the camp when Onya grabbed my arm.

“You’re naked.”

“I know. I don’t care.”

“Well, I do,” she took off the cloak I’d given her and handed it to me. “I don’t want any other woman looking at you like that.”

Repressing my amusement, I took the cloak from her and put it on me. I liked that she was acting possessively of me. It meant she’d claimed me, just as I had claimed her. Our bond was stronger now after connecting in the mountain. It would make for a powerful union once I took back the throne of my ancestors and became king.

Back at the camp, I met with Matthias, Joakim, Larsen, Davin, and a few other Drecki leaders. Despite Matthias’s grumblings, I told Onya to stay and listen. I didn’t want her to fight, but she needed to know the plan. In the event that our plan failed, and we were either captured or killed, I had instructions for her to lead the remaining Drecki to safety.

Now, it was time to put together the various contingents that we would need to be able to take on the royal army in Jarlstad. A full-on, out in the open attack on the city would fail. There were too many of them, too few of us, and the walls of the city would stop any assault in its tracks. We needed to breach the wall without any violence. It had to be quick and quiet. The Drecki had people in positions in the city that would help us with this, and once I was inside, I had a person who would be pivotal when it came time for me to kill Runebrooke.

Although it was midday, I gave the order for everyone to pack up the camp and for us to move out, heading to the capital. It would take us a couple of days to get there with the wagons that carried our provisions and weapons.

We would send an initial squad ahead of the rest, on the horses that weren’t pulling any wagons. It would be our first

group to breach the wall, making it so the rest of the Drecki could get inside when the time came to fight.

I would be part of the first unit. Which then, made Onya demand to be included as well. We argued, quite loudly, as we marched through the camp to help pack up the provisions and load them onto the wagons.

“I’m going with you.”

“No. It’s too dangerous. You need to stay behind with the others.”

“You mean with the other women, the elderly, and the children? Those who can’t fight?”

I sighed. “I know you can fight, Onya. It’s not that.”

“What is it then?”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Her gaze softened, and she grabbed my hand. “Nothing is going to happen. I’ll be safe.”

Despite her reasoning, I shook my head. I wouldn’t be able to fight in the way I needed to if I was worried about her. “The answer is still no.”

“You might as well let me come with you, so you know where I am, because I *will* end up following you anyway.” Crossing her arms, she lifted her chin in defiance.

Unfortunately, I knew that was the end of the argument.

An hour later, the first unit headed out of there. The group of ten consisted of Joakim, Davin, Larsen, five other Drecki men who proved to be good fighters and stealthy, Onya, and me. She was happily riding a horse at my side, knowing I would likely give in to all her demands no matter how much I argued.

Matthias stayed behind with the next group; he would lead them into battle once we secured dominion over the city walls.

We rode hard as the sun went down, then continued under the cover of darkness resting only once to feed and water the horses. We rode again for another day until we reached the

wooded glen just outside of the city of Jarlstad as the sun set. There was an open field between the tree line and the west wall. Joakim told us about a small, unguarded gate right where the wall sloped toward the rocky shoreline of the sea, and Jarlstad's harbor. They would have to be quick and careful to make it across without the sentries in the towers spotting them and sounding the alarm.

After tying up the horses in the trees, we stood at the treeline and surveyed the situation. The smoke from the mountain had obscured the sky so there was no moonlight cascading down onto the grassy field to expose us. I decided that Larsen, Davin, and I would go with three of the other men to the gate. It was Davin's contact that would let us in, so the others would stand watch, making sure nothing went wrong. They would also be here when the large contingent arrived.

Onya opened her mouth, but I frowned at her.

"I let you accompany me, but this is as far as you go," I declared before she could speak.

"I'm a good shot with an arrow. I can help."

"I know, but I need you to stay here, away from the fight."

Her bottom lip jutted out in a pout, and I couldn't help myself but lean in and kiss the pout away. I pulled her close to me, as I kissed her long and hard. The feel of her in my arms never failed to make my heart race. I wanted to take that feeling with me into battle as a reminder of what I was fighting for...

The future, with my *drotning*.

After I let her go, Joakim patted me on the shoulder. "I'll make sure she's safe, my lord."

I thanked him, knowing he would stand true to his word. After losing his daughter, I believed he started to look at Onya as an extension of Sigrunn, maybe even another daughter. Because he couldn't protect Sigrunn, he would protect Onya.

Once we armed ourselves as much as we could without sacrificing stealth and speed—Larsen refused to give up his double-edged ax, but he was so big that it fit comfortably on

his back—we set off into the field. We all ran at top speed until we neared the wall, then it was stop and go while the guards paced back and forth along the wall. It looked like there were more sentries than usual, and I wondered if Runebrooke was expecting an incursion since my escape. I had to assume he would prepare for it.

We reached the wall without being spotted. With backs pressed to the stone, we slowly made our way down to the rocky embankment of the shoreline, and the hidden door. Davin set his hand on it, and lightly tapped three times, stopped, then tapped three times again.

“Our man checks the door once every hour while he’s on night duty,” he explained.

“So, we could be standing here waiting for an hour?” Larsen asked.

Davin nodded. “Surely, you can handle that, big guy.”

Pulling his ax from the rig on his back, Larsen spun it in his hands. “I can handle anything, little man.”

They shared a quiet chuckle, and the light comradery between the men felt good. Although, it looked like they were relaxed, I knew they were ready to jump into a fight without hesitation. I was blessed to have been gifted this army of good, loyal men at my back. I suspected they were going to need that determination and fortitude before this was all over. Glancing at their faces, I knew that some of them might even die in the battle.

In that moment, I promised myself that I wouldn’t let their pain and deaths be in vain. I would usurp Runebrooke and heal Andlang, bringing it back to its former glory. With Onya as queen, our people would thrive because of her courage and inner strength.

Every ten minutes or so, Davin would knock lightly on the door. After the third time, the door finally opened and a young face, much like Davin’s peered through the opening. When the man spied Davin, he grinned from ear to ear, pulling the door wide so we could all enter.

Once we were in, he shut the hidden entrance, then hugged Davin, smacking his back, hard. “*Min* be good. It’s been too long brother.”

After the men hugged, Davin introduced his younger brother, Patric, to the rest of us. Once Patric caught sight of me, he bowed low.

“We’ve been waiting for your return, Lord Saeldreon.”

I clasped arms with him. “I promise your wait will not be in vain.”

“There are many of us in the army, and the guard, who are loyal to the dragons. I’ll spread the word to the men to be ready for battle.”

“Look to the sky,” I instructed. “You will see the signal.”

Patric directed us to a nearby house where we would change our clothes into city wear, and from there, we could make our way to the fortress and the royal guard’s quarters nearby. That was where we needed to focus our first line of attack. He assured us that when we started, several guards would join us.

Trusting his word, I hoped we could do this without much bloodshed. I knew there would be guards who would fight for Runebrooke no matter what, so there would be sacrifices to be made, but I had faith that the majority of the men would see reason and lay down their weapons.

After Patric returned to his sentry rounds, we crept through the dark streets to the house that had clothes, and upon closer inspection, we found other provisions like food, water, and even weapons. We quickly dressed, then I instructed the men to split up, each approaching different guard stations near the royal fortress.

“Where are you going?” Larsen asked.

“To find enough space for a dragon.”

We said our goodbyes and I took one direction, and the others went in the opposite one. I knew exactly where I had to go.

Carefully, I silently crept through the streets. At this time of night there weren't many people out. A small group of young men came out of a pub, but they were too much in the cups to notice me as I stalked along the shadowy back lanes.

I moved past houses and shops with darkened windows, holding my breath when a couple of guards marched down the road. Their banter sounded stressed and on the edge as they walked by me. They were definitely on high alert.

Once they disappeared down the road, I continued on my way. After crossing two more streets, I reached my destination. I crept around a row house and peered across the street at the temple. The two cauldrons out front of the main door were lit, casting a golden glow onto the walls and stone steps.

Distrustful of the stillness surrounding the building, I waited before crossing the road. After counting to ten in my mind, I saw what I'd expected—two armed guards circling the temple.

Watching them disappear around the corner of the building, I sprinted across the street, up the stone steps to the front door. As quietly as I could, I opened it a crack and slipped inside, shutting the door behind me. The inner chamber was lit with candles, several of them on each of the Gods' altars. Holding still, I waited to see if there was movement from any corner, from another guard or one of the Shamans. When there was none, I dashed across the chamber floor to the staircase near the altar of Freya.

Right before I started up the steps, a Shaman appeared from one of the antechambers. He froze on spot when he saw me. My hand went to the knife sheathed on my belt, ready to draw it. Thankfully, I didn't have to, as the Shaman bowed his head to me and turned, continuing on his way. I quickly went up the stairs to the temple's roof.

Once there, I walked to the edge to look out toward the fortress. From here, I could see the roof of the main residence. As far as I could tell, there was no indication of a call to arms. The bell at the royal guard house remained silent. I still had

time to shift and take out the guard towers at each critical point on the wall, then burn the main gate to the ground so that the others had no barrier to enter the city.

Before I leapt off the side, I spotted the bloodstain from when Sigrunn was shot with an arrow. I thought of her now, as well as Onya and all that she'd been through here. That moment, I vowed I would avenge their suffering at the hands of the pretender king, Runebrooke. Arms out to the sides, I stepped onto the ledge and jumped. For a moment, I felt the thrill of falling, and called to my dragon.

I immediately transformed.

Spreading my wings, I swooped over the tops of the buildings, reveling in my ability to fly. It was a feeling of exhilaration that no one would be able to understand. The sensation belonged to only me. Pulling out of my selfish indulgence, I flew up higher, swinging around to dive toward the east tower.

Startled shouts and cries from the citizens and guards erupted as I soared overhead, focused solely on my target.

As I got closer, the guards who had been stationed there cried out in fear, running as fast as they could. Opening my mouth, I drew the fire forged in my gut, and spewed it with a long rasping hiss over the wood and stone tower. Wild flames instantly burned the wood, and blackened the stone, crumbling into ash. The tower fell.

I razed the other three towers, then flew to the main city gate. When I approached, I looked down to find guards and soldiers fighting each other. One guard raised his bow, an arrow notched on the string, but he never got a chance to shoot it because a sword went through his belly.

Holding the sword, Patric waved at me.

I hovered in the air, right in front of the large gate. Arching back my neck, I drew more fire and sprayed it over the wood and metal. The flames instantly reduced it to cinders, melting the iron instantly. The gate had been destroyed. Lifting back

into the air, I spotted an approaching wagon and several men in red on the main road toward the city.

The Drecki had arrived just in time.

With those critical targets destroyed, I turned my attention onto the fortress and what I'd come here to do. As I flew over the city, I saw people running in the streets, shouting, and pointing up at me. I also saw soldiers and guards trying to stop those people from fleeing. Opening my mouth, I laid down a stream of fire, separating the people from the guards, and giving them a chance to run to safety.

The fortress came into view, and I flew harder toward it, eager to avenge my brothers. However, movement below made me stop midair.

A line of women and girls, some dressed in lady attire others wearing servants' garb, ran out of the fortress and toward the west wall. Leading them out while shouting at them to hurry, was Onya. Royal guards chased them out on the streets.

For a split moment, I saw her head come up, and her eyes locked with mine. I could feel her anger and fear as she helped the women escape. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw those guards get closer, and I let out a roar. Unfortunately, she was too focused on me and the others to notice.

One of the guards swung his sword at her, cutting her across the back. As she stumbled forward, another guard was able to grab her.

Before I could react, several arrows came flying toward me. I had to veer to the side to dodge them, though one arrowhead grazed the tip of my right wing. When I swooped back around, I lost sight of Onya, and my whole world started to spin out of control.



## ONYA



The moment Saeldreon and the others started across the field, I began to plot how I was going to get away from Joakim and follow them into the city. I couldn't stay behind, not when I had people I needed to save. Despite how I felt about Margo, she and the other girls didn't deserve to be caught in the middle of a war. If I could get them out of the fortress, then I had to try at least.

While Joakim and the other men busied themselves, making a temporary camp in preparation for when the others arrived, I made the excuse of having to relieve myself in private then quietly, and sneakily, procured my bow and quiver of arrows from the pack on my horse. Making sure they were not watching for me, I crept down the line of trees until I reached the seawall that separated the woods from the rocky beach.

I knew of another way to get into the city that I wished I had thought of before now.

Knowing I had a short window of opportunity, I climbed down the embankment and onto the rocks, quickly making my way to the harbor that was located behind the Great Fortress of Kings. During my conversation with Herr Brakken, he'd casually mentioned a path from the private grounds to the

harbor that he'd taken to arrive conveniently early for my luncheon with him.

No one would anticipate a city breach from that direction.

As I expected, I didn't see any extra guards along the harbor. There were two standing on one of the docks, talking and smoking tobacco, and not paying any attention to the shadowed path that led up to the garden. I easily stepped across the rocks, then onto the grassy hill that the path cut through, climbing up the narrow path to emerge into the garden.

Some of the flower beds had been disrupted by the mountain tremors, but it looked like most of the damage had been fixed. The tent that Herr Brakken and I sat under had been taken down, and the table moved. If I didn't have the memory, I would've thought that had never occurred. Honestly, it all felt like a distant nightmare and not an event that actually happened to me.

I didn't want anything like this to happen to another young, innocent, village girl brought here against her will to be sold off to some nobleman. Marrying and having babies should have been a choice for women, not forced.

Luckily, there were no guards positioned in the garden, I imagined the nobles didn't want to see evidence of the threat they were under. This was fine by me; it meant I didn't have to worry about being caught.

Once I managed to reach the back of the fortress, came the tricky part—going around the building, to the front doors, without being spotted. I was just about to make a run for it when I heard voices coming up from behind me. Whirling around, I raised my dagger just as Margo and a much older nobleman walked down the path. I acted before either of them could shout out a warning.

I punched the nobleman as hard as I could in the face, clocking him on his pointy, fragile looking jaw and knocked him unconscious. He slumped into Margo, nearly toppling her over, but she pushed him off her. He landed on the ground. Her eyes widened in shock as she gaped at me. I grabbed her with

one hand and slapped the other hand over her mouth, dragging her backwards into the shadows. I'd gotten stronger in the past few days, so she had no hope of struggling out of my hold. Instead, she clamped down hard on my hand with her teeth.

Cursing wildly, I snatched my hand back from her. "I should've remembered that you were a biter."

"Tell me why I shouldn't scream and alert the guards?" she said it quietly, so I had a small hope that she really didn't want to see me imprisoned and then executed for treason.

"I came to get you and the others out of the city."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Because a war is going to break out tonight and I don't want to see you get caught in the middle. When it comes down to it, the king won't protect you or the other girls. If you're killed in the battle, he will view it as an acceptable sacrifice for his own wellbeing."

"There's a rumor going around that you joined the *Asatora Drecki*, and you helped the criminal Dre the Dread escape."

"It's true."

She sucked in a breath, probably wondering why she wasn't screaming traitor already. "They executed the Shaman who helped you in the town square. They said she helped him murder people."

That information was like a hammer to my heart. I rubbed at my chest, the pain of her death hitting me hard. Guilt flooded my body; she wouldn't have died if it hadn't been for me and Saeldreon.

*No.* I shook my head. She died because of the king's cruelty. His madness to hide any evidence of Saeldreon's existence. It was just another way he exerted control on the citizens of Jarlstad.

"Dre the Dread isn't a criminal, he's Saeldreon, the Dragon Prince. He returned to take his rightful place on the throne. The king has been lying to the people for a long time. He used

her execution as a deterrent to anyone who would seek out the truth.”

“You’re lying to justify your treason.” her words remained quiet, so I still had hope.

“All right, say that I am lying, do you really want to have this life, to be married to *him*.” I gestured to the fat, balding man unconscious on the ground. “Don’t you want to be able to choose who you wed? Don’t you want to actually love the man who’s worthy enough for you?”

“That might’ve been attainable if Andlang wasn’t dying. It’s our duty as women to do whatever we can to see that there is a next generation.”

“Andlang has been dying because the dragons were gone, but now that Saeldreon has returned, the land, and its people, will thrive...” I sighed, glancing earnestly into her eyes. “A fortnight ago I wouldn’t have believed that myself, but I’ve seen the dragon, and I’ve seen what his presence means for our world,” I confessed. “I witnessed nature grow right in front of my eyes because of his power.”

A sudden quickening happened in my body. It was an odd fluttering sensation, but I knew deep within my heart and soul what it meant. My hand curved over my belly, feeling life growing inside it, where everyone, including myself, thought was barren.

Margo’s eyes followed my movement. When her gaze returned to me, awareness illuminated her eyes.

“What do you need me to do?” she finally asked.

I let out the anxious breath I’d been holding. “Get me inside the fortress to find the others. We don’t have much time...”

As if to make a point of my words, a shout rang from the guard house near the front courtyard. “He’s here! The dragon is in the city!”

“You can’t go in like that.” She crouched next to the noblemen and removed his jacket, handing it to me. “It’s not perfect, but it’ll hide some of what you’re wearing.”

After I slid the jacket on, Margo took my arm, and we quickly walked along the path to the main door of the fortress. No one stopped us from entering, because the guards were rushing about, panicked by the dragon's sighting in the city. It wouldn't be long before everything devolved into chaos.

One young guard glanced at us. "Get to your rooms and barricade the doors. The dragon will kill you if he sees you."

Together, we ran down the corridor to the east wing, then up the stairs to the Brull House dormitories. The panic hadn't quite reached the girls, but they all knew something was happening. There was a collective gasp of shock when the other girls saw who had come into the room with Margo.

Linn ran to me, pulling me into her arms. "By Freya's blessing, I'm so happy to see you, Onya. What happened to you?"

"We haven't got time for questions." I pushed her back. "You all need to come with me to get out of the city. War is coming."

The other girls looked at each other, then at Margo.

"What do you mean?" Dagny asked.

"Just listen to her." Margo grabbed Dagny and pulled her toward the door. "We need to leave, now!"

"If there's a war, the royal guard will protect us," Mina argued.

I shook my head. "No one is going to protect you. You're expendable, we all are. We're hired help at best, cattle at worst. We have to look after ourselves."

Margo pushed Dagny toward the door, then grabbed hold of Mina. "Do as she says."

The fact that Margo was listening to me, made the other girls question themselves. After a few more minutes, they all followed Margo out into the corridor. I ran to the other dorms and convinced the girls there to come with us too. Some immediately left the room, while a couple decided to remain. I thought about grabbing each of them and dragging them out

myself, but there wasn't time. Dragon fire could be seen from the window of the dorms, the flames climbing the wall.

Saeldreon was taking out the towers, and it wouldn't be long before the rest of the Drecki stormed the city. I'd given the girls a way out, at this point, I couldn't force them to take it.

Leaving the room, I headed to the stairs, with Margo and the other girls following me. Once we were in the corridor leading to the door, the panic had settled in the fortress. Guards rushed about, armed with swords and spears. Some of the girls yelped and pressed against the walls as they ran by us.

I urged them all to get moving, ushering them into the Great Hall. We were almost out but the Dagmar stood in the way. Her headscarf had been removed, her long gray braids draping over her shoulders. She held her staff out in front of her like a weapon, looking formidable and fierce. A warrior from the old times when dragons had freely lived in Andlang.

"I won't let you corrupt these girls," she seethed. "They will be needed even more if there is war."

I moved to stand between the girls and the old matron. "Move aside. You can't keep them as prisoners any longer."

"They are not prisoners. They are treasured members of the royal household. They are cared for and loved."

"The way you cared for Sigrunn, and had her nearly beat to death for some ridiculous transgression?"

The Dagmar flinched at that. "Sigrunn is a *hendey*, it's not the same—"

"Was."

She frowned.

"Sigrunn *was* a *hendey*. She's dead now. Murdered by the royal guards, who you would have us believe will protect and care for us."

"She was a traitor, just like you are. There is no mercy for treason against the crown." Like she had so many times

before, when she'd struck me or one of the other girls for no reason, she tapped her staff on the floor.

More shouts came from outside, and I could see more flames rising in the distance. War was quickly approaching. There was no more time for niceties.

I took another step forward. "Move. Now."

Her gaze went past me to the others, who stood behind me, unsure. "Girls, return to your rooms. Don't listen to this treasonous wench. She will be the one who gets you killed, just as she did her poor *hendey*."

I had enough of her nasty venom.

I snatched the staff from her hand. My sudden movement tugged her off balance and she stumbled forward. She tried to clutch my arm to stop her fall, but I pulled it away from her as her unsteady legs gave out, and she fell.

Glaring down at her, I raised the staff over my head and envisioned the wooden rod smacking her across the face, breaking her nose, cutting open her lips and chin. Just like what had happened to Sigrunn. My friend's face bloomed in my memory, and how knowing I was made to feel responsible for her pain had torn my heart.

But I hadn't been responsible. It had been the Dagmar. It was the Brull House. It was the king. They were all to blame for the agony we, all the village girls over the decades, had experienced since coming to the capital. Made to believe it was for the good of Andlang. That our pain and suffering was righteous, that the Gods had commanded it in order for the world to prosper.

It was all bullshit.

I brought the staff down with all my rage. It broke in half against the wall, the pieces falling onto the floor next to where the Dagmar cowered.

Without another thought to her, I lead the girls out of the fortress.

Chaos had totally taken over now. Guards and soldiers formed lines of defense around the courtyard, so I pointed for the girls to take the path to the garden where we could escape down to the harbor, and back to the woods where the Drecki camp was. Margo led the way, but she was stopped by two royal guards. I recognized one as one of the men who was part of Saeldreon's torture by the king.

He grabbed a hold of Margo. "By order of the king, you are to be taken to his chambers to be protected."

She tried to get away by kicking him in the shin, but that earned her a backhand to the face.

I withdrew my dagger, waving it in his face. "Let her go!"

He laughed, drawing his sword. The other guard did the same.

"Go!" Margo yelled. "Get away!"

The other girls turned and ran. For a moment, I thought about attacking the guard, but I knew I wouldn't win. It was two to one and they had swords. Our gazes met, and I knew I couldn't save her. At least, not right now.

Turning, I ran after the other girls. Other guards tried to stop us, but I pushed past them, urging the others to do the same and follow me across the courtyard. Since we couldn't get to the garden pathway, we would have to find the hidden door along the west wall.

As I lead them across the courtyard, I heard the whoosh of something large moving through the air above me. Looking up, I saw a majestic red dragon hovering over the courtyard. Even in the darkness, he was devastatingly beautiful. I didn't know if he realized it or not, but even as a dragon he had the red-gold aura shimmering around him.

The others started to scream when they saw him in the sky, but I couldn't tear my gaze away from him. I knew he would be angry that I had disobeyed him, yet I would make him understand how important it had been for me to rescue these girls. Girls like me, who had been taken from villages like mine, sold to the capital because of ignorance and greed.



I went to lift my hand to wave to him, to let him know that I was all right, not hurt, when I felt the hot sting of a blade across my back. The pain was instant and flooded my head with agony. So much that my vision blurred, and I found it hard to keep standing. Then I was picked up by dirty, calloused hands and carried away.

Saeldreon's roar shook the very air around me. I wanted to return his call of rage, but I didn't have the strength. My vision blurred even more. My head started to feel full of cotton and grass. Then everything went dark.

## ONYA



**I**t felt like I was floating on a sea of darkness.

Although I couldn't see anything, I knew that I was actually being carried by two royal guards back into the fortress. My back was on fire, the agony of that wound rushed over every part of my body. My gut churned, and I was sure I was going to retch. Turning my head to the side, I did just that. I vomited until I was empty, heaving so hard that it felt like my throat had been scored by hot gravel.

"Ew, gross!" A male voice whined, before I was dropped onto the floor.

The impact of it rattled my teeth, and I bit down on my tongue. Blood instantly filled my mouth, mixing with the remains of the bile and food bits that I'd just expelled.

"Pick her up. Don't leave her like that!"

I recognized that voice. It belonged to the king, Runebrooke.

Two sets of hands hooked under my arms and pulled me off the floor.

"I told you not to kill her."

"She's not dead," the same guard who had voiced his revulsion explained. "I had to cut her down to stop her from

running.”

“She may not be dead right now, but if that wound gets infected, she will be soon enough.”

They handled me a little gentler, laying me down on something soft.

“How can you be so cruel?” This was a different voice, but one I also remembered. A small, cool hand caressed my cheek, and I slowly opened my eyes to see the queen looking down at me.

“She’s a traitor to the crown,” the king spat, “She’s in league with the dragon to try and usurp me.” He came into view, pointing a fat finger at the queen. “You should be worried as well, my dear. If they manage to kill me, they will kill you too.”

I raised my hand and covered hers on my cheek, giving her a little headshake to let her know that what he said wasn’t true. I wouldn’t let Saeldreon or anyone harm the queen. I would make sure she was safely sent away to live out the rest of her days in peace. She had suffered like we all had under Runebrooke’s rule.

“Where are the rest of my guards?” he raved, while pacing around the room. “They should be here to protect their king.”

“The Drecki have entered the city,” one of his men informed. “They are fighting them back in the streets.”

The king continued to pace around the room, wringing his hands together. He mumbled under his breath, but I couldn’t tell what he was saying. By the looks on the others faces, they didn’t know either, and they were getting concerned.

I wanted to scream at him, that Saeldreon would come for me. That he would cut down every living creature to get to me, but I suspected that was what the king wanted, and why they had taken me. I was going to be used as leverage to save the king’s life.

*“I’m in the king’s chambers. It’s a trap. Don’t come for me. Find another way...”* I reached out to Saeldreon in my head.

I didn't know if he heard me, yet I hoped he did and headed my warning. I couldn't live with myself if he died trying to protect me. Saving the country was more important than I was, saving all the people and healing the land.

Acquiring a wet cloth, the queen tried to clean my wound as best as she could. I appreciated her effort but Runebrooke was right—if it wasn't treated soon, I would get an infection and most likely die. I needed to see a healer if I was going to live.

The king continued to ramble, a wild look in his eyes as he moved around the chambers. The two guards had their swords drawn and stood near the doors in case it was breached. Except, they didn't look too eager to die for him.

A commotion rose just outside the doors, then they opened. The two guards raised their weapons ready to defend themselves, but slowly lowered them when Herr Torin, head of the royal guard, marched into the room... with Saeldreon in chains.

"Nooo!" I tried to sit up, regrettably, the motion pulled at my wound, sending a wave of pain over me.

Saeldreon flinched at the sight of me, seeing the anger and agony clear on his face. Why hadn't he listened to me? Now we were both going to die.

Runebrooke clapped his hands gaily. "Torin! Well done, man. I knew I could count on you to protect the realm." His eyes then narrowed as he looked over Saeldreon. "Are those silver chains?"

*"Be ready, drotning."*

Heart pounding, I met his gaze. What had he planned?

"I will always protect the realm," Torin vowed, pulled his sword from its sheath and whipped around, cutting open both guards' stomach in one swoop. They collapsed to the floor, blood and guts pooling out of their torn bodies.

"Treasonous bastard!" The king rushed to the lounge I lay on with the queen by my side, just as Saeldreon broke through the chains.

Runebrooke pulled a dagger from a discreet sheath on his wide belt, lifting his arm to plunge it into my chest. When it came down, I reached for the blade, as did the queen. With our hands connected, we stopped the knife from piercing my body. The blade cut into our hands, blood dripping down both our wrists, but we didn't relent.

The Dragon Prince leapt at Runebrooke, wrapping his arms around him and squeezing. The sound of bones crushing echoed around us, and pain instantly distorted the king's face until he let go of the weapon—the dagger falling onto the floor. His face stern, muscles twitching along his jawline, Saeldreon kept crushing the king with his arms and the aura that glowed around him intensified until he was as bright as a red star.

A shriek ripped through Runebrooke's mouth. The sound as horrible, as a dying animal. The queen slammed her hands over her ears to block it out, but it cut off when he combusted into flames. Saeldreon kept his hold on him until the king was nothing, but gray ashes sprinkled on the floor.

Dre came to me then, his face and arms streaked with Runebrooke's ashes, and the queen immediately moved out of the way. I didn't care, as he carefully cradled me to his chest. All I cared about was being in his arms.

He kissed the side of my head. "Don't ever scare me like that again."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"I know, my love. I know." His face settled into the crook of my neck, his warm breath caressing my skin... and I could also feel his tears.

"I promise I'll never put *us* in danger again."

He stiffened, his head lifting to look me in the eyes. "Us?"

I nodded, a small smile blooming on my face.

Glancing down at me, he settled a big hand over my stomach.

“Our little prince grows inside my belly.” I laughed, tears rolling down my cheeks. I never thought I would be so happy to say I was pregnant.

“Get a healer in here!” the queen urgently called.

Commotion stirred around us, but I didn’t see it, or hear it. Didn’t even care about it. All I knew was I had everything I didn’t know I needed right here in front of me.



## ONE FORTNIGHT LATER

I never knew how excited I would be to see my homestead come into view on the road ahead of the carriage.

“We’re here,” I announced to Saeldreon, poking him from his sleep.

After everything settled down in Jarlstad, and we were crowned king and queen, I told him about the promise I made to my mother and brother. He’d wanted to fly us here right away, but I convinced him that it would be best to come by carriage, so he didn’t scare all the villagers who’d never seen a dragon. Besides that, I wanted a couple of days to just lay in his arms without a care or worry in the world.

The carriage stopped by the small gate to my old home. While waiting for our driver, I opened the door, and jumped out onto the ground. Joakim, who had been riding with us, dismounted from his horse.

“Do you want me to accompany you?”

I shook my head, gratefully patting his shoulder before nodding to Larsen, who also rode with us. They had both insisted to come on this trip.

Saeldreon lazily emerged from the carriage, stretching and yawning. “Do you need my help, *drotning*.”

I liked that he still called me *princess* even though I was now his queen. “No, I got this.”

I hefted up my long skirt in one hand, and pushed through the gate, walking up the dirt walkway, now muddy from the previous day’s rain. Something that hadn’t occurred in this part of the country in a very long time.

Already, the grass was turning green from the nourishment.

When I got closer to the house, the front door opened, and my mother came out. Her face brightened when she saw me, tears springing from her eyes as she opened her arms to embrace me. I gladly snuggled into her familiar hold—her scent filling my nose, and inciting my own tears.

“Oh, my daughter. My beautiful Onya.”

“What are you doing here? I told you where the gold was.”

She pressed her lips together, and it was then I noticed a scar just under her nose. It hadn’t been there before. “He caught me in the barn. I couldn’t get away.”

I patted her back. “It’s all right now, Mama. You’re safe from this moment on.”

WHEN WE PULLED APART, her gaze took me in, from head to toe. I hadn’t worn my crown today, but I was dressed in the royal dragon colors of red and gold. “A courier came days ago to pronounce your wedding and your coronation. Should I bow?” She started to but I stopped her.

“No, never. I will always be Onya to you.”

“Onya!”

I turned to see my brother race across the field toward me, a mangy stray dog nipping at his heels. When he reached me, I hugged him tightly, picking him up into my arms.

“You got so big since I’ve been gone.”

“Really?” His eyes grew big, and he tried to look at himself to see if I was telling the truth.

The front door opened again and my stepfather sauntered out, as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

“I never thought you’d ever amount to anything,” he mocked. “But look at you now.”

“Yes, look at me now.” Placing my brother down, I moved toward him. “I’m your queen, you should be on your knees, begging me to forgive you.”

“I’ve done nothing but support your mother and you two. You would’ve been on the streets if it hadn’t been for me.”

My hand flew to his throat, and I gripped it, squeezing. He tried to pry it away, but I’d become even stronger since he last saw me. Growing the next Dragon Prince in my belly blessed me with a lot of power. I tossed him to the ground, watching him cough and rub his neck where my fingers left marks. It gave me some satisfaction.

“I thought about killing you so many times over the past ten years. But I won’t.”

He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Instead, I’m going to take everything from you, so that you will have no choice but to survive on the streets.”

My stepfather jerked to his knees. “No, you can’t.”

“I can do whatever I want. I have the power now, and you don’t.” I took my mother’s hand in mine. “Go pack any essentials you want to take with you. You’ll be living with us in the Great Fortress of Dragons now.”

My brother bounced on his feet. “Me too?”

“Yes, of course, you too.”

Making whoop with his little fist, then raced into the house.

I put my arm around my mother and walked with her to the house so I could help her pack what she needed.



“I won’t let you take her!”

I turned just as my stepfather tried to reach for me, but he was instantly stopped when Saeldreon snatched him back, holding onto the back of his shirt. When he flung him away, the back of his shirt tore. My stepfather went sprawling into the dirt again.

“I could incinerate you with one touch for hurting my *drotning*.” Dre’s hand lit up with his familiar red-gold glow and my stepfather bowed his head, starting to cry.

It made me want to laugh how pathetic he was.

“What do you want done with him?” Saeldreon asked.

“Have Larsen ride him out into the woods and drop him there.”

“As you wish.” He whistled for Larsen to come fetch the groveling man at his feet.

The front door slammed open, and my brother came racing out again. He skidded to a stop right in front of Saeldreon, his neck craning all the way to look up at him. “Are you really a dragon?”

“Sure am.” As Saeldreon leaned down toward him, I saw that he shifted his eyes and mouth only. He grinned, showing off razor sharp fangs. His eyes sparked with fire.

My mother flinched and grabbed my hand, yet I patted hers in reassurance.

I thought my brother would turn and run, instead, he let out another whoop. “That is the best thing I have ever seen! Can you show Brock?”

“Who’s Brock?” Saeldreon asked.

“He’s a big, fat bully. When I told him that my sister wed a dragon and became queen, he told me I was a filthy liar and then pushed me into a mud puddle. Right in front of Sonya.”

“Hmm, I see. Where does this Brock live by chance?”

“Right down the road.” My brother pointed with enthusiasm at the dirt road.

“All right, let’s go see this kid.” Saeldreon held out his hand to him.

“Really?”

Saeldreon nodded.

My brother took his hand, leading him back to the road.

Saeldreon turned to smile at me. “We won’t be long.”

I watched him walk hand in hand with my little brother, and a flash of what the future would look like bloomed before my eyes...

My husband, the Dragon King, gently holding the hand of my son, the Dragon Prince, and the two of them going off on some great adventure together. The thought filled me with a happiness I never thought was possible, and I rubbed a hand over my belly, feeling it flutter in response.

“Soon, my Dragon Prince. Soon.”

Thanks for reading *Branded By The Dragon Prince*. Join my mailing list in the next page to see what comes next! And if you loved this book, consider leaving a review on Amazon. Just one or two lines would be very helpful to support me.

Hugs,

Kiera Legend

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kiera Legend** writes Urban Fantasy and Paranormal Romance stories that bite. She loves books, movies and Tv-Shows. Her best friends are usually vampires, witches, werewolves and angels. She never hangs out without her little dragon. She especially likes writing kick-ass heroines and strong world-buildings and is excited for all the books that are coming!

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