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DRAGONS OF ESTONIA

DRAGON SECRETS

NOVEMBER SWEETS

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BOOK TWO

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Kicking ass isn't just for the boys anymore.

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GLOSSARY

KINGDOMS OF ESTONIA

Areola-Neutral Human Kingdom

Located in the center of Estonia

Colors-Yellow & Brown

Hailstone-Ice Dragon Kingdom

Located Northeast of Areola

Capital City- Silver Moon

Colors-Silver & Purple

Drumfire-Storm Dragon Kingdom

Located East of Areola

Capital City- Rainfall

Colors-Black & Gold

Aquapura-Water Dragon Kingdom

Located South of Areola

Capital City- Sea Ember

Colors-Blue & Green

Inferno-Fire Dragon Kingdom

Located Southeast of Areola

Capital City- Sandcastle

Colors-Red & Orange

Tranquil-Healing Dragon Kingdom

Located Northwest of Areola

Capital City- Peace

Colors-White & Pale Pink

CHARACTERS

- Daria Littlefoot-** Thief and Lowborm
- Spindle/Spin-** Daria's Guardian Snapdragon
- Rye-** Prince of Tranquil
- Drax-** Prince of Aquapura
- Bast-** Prince of Drumfire
- Xander-** Prince of Hailstone
- Raider-** Prince of Inferno
- Bartholomew/Lo Sterling-** Highborn/Daria's best friend
- Abina-** Head Guard of Areola Castle
- Henry-** Daria's adopted father
- Phillip-** Boy from the orphanage next to Daria's home
- The Doms-** Six identical brothers that run the pawn shops in Areola
- Sofia Herrington-** Competitor in the Dragon Games
- Ana Sterling-** Lo's sister/ Competitor in the Dragon Games
- Granny-** Elderly Dragon woman, full of knowledge, takes care of Rye.

DRAGON TONGUE

Calari- Sweetheart/Darling (Term of Endearment)

Kimlees- Nubs on a dragon's member, come out when aroused by mate.

Draken- Position of honor, chosen to watch over and help competitors in the Dragon Games.

CREATURES OF ESTONIA

Snapdragon- Small dragon about the size of a cat thought of as a pest amongst most.

Dralore- Black panther like creature with dragon features, dragon snout, tail with barbs, and protective scale along the underbelly

Redspies- Small dragons (much like Snapdragons) live in Inferno, spit acid and have stingers on their tails like to blend in with the sand so most are brown in color. Not friendly.

Rabid Nocturnes- Small ferret-like creatures that come out at night in the fields of Tranquil. They prey on anything in their territory including people. They have black fur and long skinny bodies, six small legs and razor sharp teeth.

PLANTS OF ESTONIA

Moonlight Glades- Harvested in the Moonlight, because it turns pink, harmless, looks identical to Winter's Gloss in the daylight

Winter's Gloss- Extremely toxic, one drop taste and you die, identical to Moonlight Glades.

Dragon's Breath- Odorless and tasteless clear liquid that will make you sick to drink it

Hailstone Tears- Odorless and tasteless clear liquid that will kill you with a sip, slight pinkish tint in the sun.

Pussywillow Tea- Tastes bitter, helps you sleep

Rasha Bush- Green bushes with leaves shaped like smooth ovals, irritates the skin and gives a long lasting rash.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

This book is not suitable for anyone under the age of 18 due to language, violence, and sexual situations.

There are things that might be triggering for some such as:

Kidnapping

Murder

Abuse (between adult child and parent)

Assault

Emotional Trauma

PROLOGUE

TEENAGE BAST

“I love you Drax,” I tell him, my heart pounding wildly in my chest as he kisses my neck. A shiver runs down my spine and my cock hardens in my pants. This isn’t the first time that we have met like this in Drax’s room in the castle but today is the first time that we have decided to go all the way.

Neither of us has been with other people before but Drax swears he knows what he is doing. He’s my best friend and I fell for him deeper than I should have but I trust him with my life. Why shouldn’t I? He would never do anything to hurt me.

“I love you too. Now get on the bed,” he says and I do without question trusting his every word. Looking back at him, his blue eyes sparkle with love and adoration that I hope mine reflect the same to him. Just as he touches me and my body alights with excitement.

We laid there after, filled with the pleasure of what we had done. We just couldn’t seem to keep our hands to ourselves, Drax just kept stealing kisses as I snuck out the door back to my own room where I was supposed to be studying.

It’s been only a few hours since I have seen him and still the thought of putting my eyes on him again as I head down to dinner is making my heart flutter. My parents love me, and I, them, but I never imagined that it would be a completely different feeling to love someone like Drax. My every

waking thought is consumed with him and I can't stop picturing how his face looked when we made love.

"You are smiling brightly tonight my dear," my mother says, her dark hooded eyes sparkling with joy as she smiles at me brightly.

"I think I did well on my test," I tell her, feeling my cheeks heat. She smirks in return but otherwise doesn't say anything. I'm pretty sure she knows about Drax and I but so far she has kept it from my father. He's a good man but he is very determined for me to not get distracted and become the best future King of Drumfire.

"Good job son!" my father says and I can't help but smile proudly even if it was a lie. I'll just try hard on my next test and make sure it turns into a truth.

"Thank you father," I say just as I spot Drax standing by the entrance to the dining hall. He signals me with his hand and then walks down the hall away from the food, which is unusual for Drax. He is always the first one ready to eat.

"I'll be right in, in a moment it looks like Drax needs something," I tell my parents and they nod, excusing me before I turn and follow my lover down the hall.

Lovers? Is that really what we are now?

I'm not sure what to call us, all I know is that I have never felt more alive in my life than I did just mere hours ago in his arms. I'm more than ready to feel that feeling again if that is what he wants.

"Drax slow down," I say, catching him by the sleeve. I spin him around and plant my lips to his knowing that no one will see us in this hallway while dinner is happening. But Drax doesn't kiss me back with the enthusiasm that he usually does. In fact he pulls back from me and scowls.

"Don't do that," he says, wiping his mouth on his blue shirt sleeve.

"What? Kiss you? Why not?" I ask confused, my palms start to sweat as he stares at me, none of the love from before there. Nothing but hate shows from his blue eyes right now and it turns my stomach.

"Yes, don't kiss me or touch me again. It's gross," he says and I feel like my heart has stopped beating in my chest.

"What are you talking about? If this is one of your jokes it's not funny Drax," I say reaching out to him, but he slaps my hand away hard. My skin stings with pain but I can't look away from him.

"What we did was disgusting, it was a fun little experiment but I'm done

playing with you now. So don't touch me ever again. In fact, we can't be friends anymore," he says and I feel my heart shatter. My eyes fill with tears and slowly trail down my cheeks. I'm frozen in place for a moment feeling like I might be dying.

"Pathetic," he spits, before turning as if he is going to walk out of my life forever.

"Wait!" I cry reaching out but before I can grab his hand he turns and slaps me in the face.

My body hits the stone floor hard, jarring my bones and my cheek stings from his hit, but nothing is as painful as the agony of my heart being ripped from my chest as he says nothing before turning and walking away.

CHAPTER ONE



“**W**hat are you doing, Daria?” one of the Doms asks when he spots me snooping around his place. I wouldn’t say that I broke in since they did give me a key for emergencies but I still feel a little guilty about snooping when I know they are extremely private. I agonized over it when I packed a bag at the house. Grabbing whatever I could get my hands on while making a plan in my head.

Unfortunately, there is no time to go back to the castle and get my daggers. Which really pisses me off since I could really use the comfort of the familiar blades in my hands right now. But I can’t give the bastards that took Henry more of a lead than they already have. Which is why I didn’t ask

the brothers permission before pawing through their things.

A quick change into a new set of leathers and packed a bag with some food for me and Spin. Weapons were also packed in the bag or on my person because after what those men did to Henry's shop and poor Phillip I didn't figure they would just hand my dad back over without a fight. That is all I had time for if I wanted a chance to get Henry back soon.

'You should tell them. They might be able to help,' Spin says, and as much as I would love help in this situation, I don't want the Doms on anyone's radar. Especially if it's the King of Tranquil that's the mastermind, every run-in I have had with the man has shown me how evil he truly is. He could make them disappear with just the snap of his fingers. If anything happens to Henry, the brothers are the last family I have left. I just can't take the chance involving them in this.

'No, I have to keep them safe. We already talked about this on the way over here Spin,' I tell him, I know he wants to argue, it's what he has been doing the entire way here but this time he finally lets it go.

"I need the eye," I say, glancing around the room wondering where they might have it stashed away. Though with the magic they have in their shops I wouldn't be surprised if the dragon eye is sitting in front of me and I just can't see it.

"I told you that it's dangerous to be walking around with that," the Dom with the scar above his lips says, crossing his arms over his chest and studying me. I believe him when he says that it's not a good idea to walk around with something that could get you locked up for treason but my plan is to catch up to the guy that took Henry and offer them a trade. The dragon's eye is basically priceless; they could disappear and live a very comfortable life on what they could sell it for. I'm just hoping that they are willing to take the trade. Otherwise I'm not sure what I will do.

"Yeah well, it's still mine and I need it, so just get it for me please," I say trying to keep the panic out of my voice. The longer we stand here arguing about the dragon eye the further Henry's kidnappers are getting ahead.

I'm probably at least a couple hours behind them already!

Not only did I have to pack and change but I also had to take Phillip back to the orphanage and explain to one of the nurses what happened. Or at least give them a believable explanation of what happened. To them Phillip fell out of a tree and I found him and carried him home. Luckily I was able to get him to agree not to say anything and stick to our lie before he passed out in my

arms. Poor kid could barely walk after everything so I scooped him up and took him home.

Those bastards better hope that they didn't cause any permanent damage.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you need the eye Daria?” Dom says stubbornly.

“You don't need to know that, just give me the fucking thing and I will be out of your hair,” I say.

“Daria—”

'Found it!' Spin says before landing on my shoulder with a small satchel hanging from his mouth.

'Thanks Spin, now we can get the hell out of here,' I tell him with a sigh.

“Just a second you two!” Dom shouts.

“No! I've already wasted enough time here!” I shout back at him. The look on his face makes my heart squeeze uncomfortably. We've had spats in the past but I don't think I have ever yelled at any of the Doms like that before. I can't think about that now though, when everything is settled and I have Henry back I can apologize then.

“I'm just worried about you, I've never seen you like this before. Just tell me what's wrong and we can help you,” Dom pleads but I just shake my head.

“We're like family, so right now I need you to trust that I know what I'm doing,” I say, but he just looks even more skeptical. So instead of arguing with him further I just shake my head and walk out the door with Spin following close by.

'Let me put that thing in my bag,' I tell him and he drops the satchel in my hands so that I can hide it in the bottom of the pack I'm wearing.

'Do you think you were a bit rude to Dom?' he asks but I ignore the question entirely. I know I was rude, but it couldn't be helped.

'We have more important things to worry about than whether I ruffled some feathers or not. Besides, the Dom's will forgive me eventually. I'm too cute to stay mad at,' I tell him, picking up my bag and heading towards the edge of town that will lead to Tranquil.

'That's only if we make it back alive, and don't go getting a big head about your looks, it's only luck that you happen to be mated to five Princes,' he snarks.

'Thanks.'

The Princes are not what I want to be thinking about right now. Sleeping with Rye was probably a big mistake but when I think back and see the look on his face in my head I can't bring myself to regret it. The scars on his back are terrible and I can't imagine living with that secret his whole life, but it doesn't make him any less in my eyes. In fact it just makes me like him more. He's stronger than he knows.

I feel bad about leaving the way that I did, but I just needed to think. I felt so close to him in that moment. I'm not sure I understand all the ins and outs of loving people. My experience is limited to the family type of love I have for Henry and Phillip. Romantic love, I barely admitted I have that for Lo and I've known him for years. Feeling that for Rye was a fucking shock to say the least. Is it the bond? I'm not sure but the connection is real. That's why I needed to talk to Henry. There is no way that I could have known that this is how my night would end up.

'Someone's coming,' Spin says, bringing me from my troubled thoughts. Quickly I duck into an alley and hide myself in the shadows.

Lo

He walks by not even bothering to check his surroundings. *Idiot*. I want to call out to him more than anything right now. A comforting hug from him would be amazing right now but for the same reason I can't tell the Doms I can't bring Lo into this either. Besides after everything that went on at the castle with the Princes I'm sure I'm the last person he wants to see right now.

Watching him pass my stomach sinks and my eyes sting, but I ignore both. Now is not the time to fall apart. There is too much to do. When everything is said and done and I have Henry back, then I can let my emotions take over. Until then I have to hold it all together for my dad.

The only man that has never let me down, and has loved me unconditionally my whole life is counting on me. I refuse to let him down no matter what I have to sacrifice. I will get him back. Those bastards fucked with the wrong woman.

CHAPTER TWO



“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I mutter under my breath as I make my way back to the castle. I left Daria to deal with everything mate related and went home with my tail tucked between my legs. It’s the dumbest thing I have ever done all for the sake of jealousy. It just fucking hurt that all these years I’ve loved her and she just kept brushing me off because of my family and suddenly she is telling the Princes she’ll think about it.

I get it, my family is horrible. The level of which I didn’t truly understand until I participated in the Games. Watching Ana, my younger sister, who I saw grow up, try to kill Daria just because I love her was eye opening. My family had plans for me, I knew that, but I thought, or I hoped I could get

around being married off to someone that I didn't like. Being Daria's Draken was a good way to do that. Or so I thought.

As soon as I walked through the door I regretted leaving the castle not only because I already missed Daria but the verbal assault from my family was a lot. The only person that didn't get on my case was my grandmother who patted me on the back and wished me luck before leaving the room.

I always had a feeling that she wished she hadn't married into the Sterling family. The way things are though she never had much of a choice. At least with my grandfather gone she can live out her days in peace. Most days she spends up in her room knitting scarves and things just keeping her hands busy as she looks out the window. I've never had the nerve to ask her what she is looking for, but she is the kindest person in my family.

The wind blows, bringing the smell of smoke from the evening fires, shaking me from my thoughts to the present. The night is cool but not cold and my boots echo off the walls of buildings as I walk down the empty cobblestone street towards the castle. It's late and most people are probably relaxing after a nice hot dinner but not me. I'm headed towards the fight of my life because I was a jerk to the woman I love.

Daria deserves more than that from me. I know most of her struggles better than anyone and yet I still let my emotions rule me. She should kick my ass when I beg her for forgiveness. That's what I deserve.

Approaching the castle, I wonder for a moment if I am going to run into the same angry guard as Daria and I did before but there is no one around when I walk through the gates.

That's strange.

When I reach the castle I do see a few guards hanging around but they just nod at me, probably recognizing me from escorting Daria around. Returning the gesture I enter the building and find the surroundings that I had gotten used to over the week of the Dragon Games feels the same and yet different somehow. Probably because Daria isn't by my side making jokes about all the stuffy people around us.

God I miss her.

Hopefully I can talk her into forgiving me, and if that doesn't work I will drop to my knees and plead with my tongue. There is no way she is so pissed she would turn that down, especially in a stressful situation like being mated to all five dragon Princes. She will need the release and I'm more than willing to give it to her.

The castle is quiet, and the only people that I see are guards doing their evening checks as I make my way towards Daria's room in the guest quarters where she chose to stay. It's just like her to want space when she has a lot on her mind so it didn't surprise me at all that's what she wanted. What did shock me though was that none of the Princes tried to force her to move to their wing. Made me think maybe they paid attention to her in the Games more than I thought.

It's not late enough that Daria would be asleep, so when I reach her room instead of knocking I just walk right in. The scent of her hits my nose when I enter and I take a second to breathe it in. I expect for Daria to yell at me as soon as I walk through the door, which is why I didn't knock in the first place but not a sound comes from the room. Looking around I don't spot her or Spin anywhere.

Where is she?

Walking further into the room I see that some of her things are still spread around the room, so it's not as if she packed up and left. The door to the right leading to the bathroom is closed so I make my way over and slowly peek inside. Daria had become quite fond of the water stall so it wouldn't surprise me if she was in there, but again the small washroom is empty.

Did she get close to one of the Princes and is staying in their room?

The thought makes my stomach drop and my heart squeeze painfully. It would be my own fault abandoning her for my male pride, if she happened to find comfort with one of them. It still hurts though. I always thought deep down that the two of us would find a way to be together in the future. My family may hate the idea but they can't force me to marry someone. Especially Sofia Herrington, I would rather be dead.

I have to find Daria and convince her to give me a second chance.

Leaving the washroom, I take one final look around her bedroom to see if it would give me any clues to where she might be. Nothing stands out so I walk out the door and close it behind me.

"What are you doing here?" a gruff voice calls out of nowhere. Turning quickly I come face to face with Raider, the asshole from Inferno.

"I was looking for Daria. You haven't seen her by chance?" I ask, trying to be civil. He treats Daria like crap and yet is still one of her mates. How is that supposed to work? They hate each other.

"Come to beg for forgiveness, after running away to pout?" he asks with a smirk on his face that makes me want to punch the shit out of him. Maybe

Daria is rubbing off on me a little too much, I'm not usually prone to this need for violence.

"Pretty much," I comment with a shrug.

"Good. She may act tough but it really hurt her when you left," he says, shocking the hell out of me. Looking at him I really study his features for a moment. Raider is still wearing that arrogant smirk on his face but there is something different in his eyes. A small shadow that I hadn't noticed before. Makes me wonder if under all that asshole there is actually a small part of him that cares for Daria.

"I know. Which is why I came back to apologize. What are you doing loitering outside her room?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest and leaning against the door behind me.

"Do you think that you have the monopoly on saying stupid shit and needing to apologize?" he counters, raising an eyebrow.

"No, but I never actually thought you would. I thought you hated Daria," I say, and he lets out a sigh before mirroring my stance.

"What happens between my mate and me is none of your business. I don't hate her, but I'm not going to explain the reasons behind my behavior to you. I don't owe you anything," he states, staring me down, as if waiting for me to argue with him.

It's almost like this guy just runs around looking to start fights with people. Probably the reason that he and Daria butt heads is because in that aspect they are a bit alike.

"You're right it's not my business, however if you keep treating her like shit, I will make it my business," I tell him stupidly threatening a dragon that could kill me in the blink of an eye. I guess love really does make you stupid like they say.

"We will see little human," he says before turning and walking away. He doesn't look like he has a care in the world as he struts away from me confidently. Shaking my head I turn in the opposite direction and head towards the Princes' wing hoping to run into a friendlier face like Drax or Rye. Neither of them seem threatened by having me hanging around. Actually Drax and I get along quite well.

I might even say that I consider him a friend. He has a fun sense of humor and doesn't seem to take everything so seriously. That is someone that Daria can use in her corner, since she is serious most of the time. Rye is just kind of sweet. He's quiet and Daria took a liking to him right off the bat. At first I

admit I was more than a little jealous but I even found myself feeling for the guy when he showed up with marks on his face.

The Princes' wing is quiet as I walk down wondering whose door I should try first. There is no way that I'm giving up my search until I find Daria and talk to her. Even if it means that I might enter an uncomfortable situation. I'm going to say my peace tonight and beg her to give me another chance.

"Umm hello Lo," Rye says softly walking out of his room with Bast at his side. Not a pairing that I pictured but I guess I really don't know much about these Princes.

"Hey, I'm looking for Daria. Have you seen her?" I ask and Rye's already pale face turns almost deathly white. For the first time I notice that his eyes are red and puffy like he's been crying.

"Are you—"

"We were just about to go look for her ourselves," Bast says, interrupting me. When I glance at him he shakes his head slightly as if warning me away from asking Rye about his appearance.

I wonder what happened to him.

"Well she isn't in her room," I tell them with a shrug, hoping that I'm acting oblivious enough for Rye to relax a little.

"I'm pretty sure that she left the castle," Bast says, running a hand up and down Rye's back in a comforting manner as Rye stares at his feet.

"What makes you say that? Not that I'm surprised, she has a habit of escaping," I say with a chuckle to myself remembering the first night she escaped out of the castle.

"It's my fault," Rye mumbles under his breath.

"It's not," Bast tells him, showing a softer side than I have witnessed.

"It is. We mated and she left because I'm not good enough for her. I'm worthless and it drove her away," the smaller man says and when he looks up at me it makes my heart hurt when I see the pain and tears filling his eyes.

"Wow. I'm not sure what happened but Daria really cares about you and she has a really big heart. She wouldn't just abandon you without a reason. She probably just got stressed out about the whole mating Princes thing and needed some space," I tell them both, completely pushing the part where she had sex with Rye to the back of my mind.

"That's what I told him but he won't believe either of us until he actually hears it from Daria. She went out of his bedroom window a couple hours ago

I think,” Bast says with a sigh. Seeing him actually interact with Rye and me, I can tell that he isn’t used to being around people this much and it’s starting to wear him down.

He is just going to have to get used to it, because there is no way that I will be able to deal with Rye on my own. Tears make me uncomfortable and I don’t know how to make the Prince of the Tranquil kingdom feel better. As sweet as he is, that’s not something that I signed up for.

“My guess is that she’s at home, Henry, her dad, is her safe space, the only one that can talk her down when she gets overwhelmed,” I tell them, planning to find my escape from them and go check there myself.

“See Rye, maybe she was just home sick,” Bast says.

“Maybe.”

“I’ll go check it out and bring her back if she’s willing,” I say slowly, backing away from them.

“If you think that we are going to stay behind and trust you to bring her back then you are mistaken, little human,” Raider says from behind me. When I glance over my shoulder I see that he is accompanied by Drax and Xander as well.

Fuck. This is going to be a long night.

CHAPTER THREE



S ticks snap under my feet as I stomp through the forest determined to get Henry back. We have been walking for about twenty minutes and I'm already sweating mostly from rage and not from the temperature of the night.

'You know stomping the ground like that won't get you there any faster, it just uses more energy,' Spin says, taking off from my shoulder where he was perched so I can't swat him for being snarky right now.

'Shut up, you aren't helping,' I tell him, but even as I say the words some of the tension leaves my body and my steps become more normal.

Damn it! I hate that he's right.

My anger and rage at the situation is my only comfort right now, because allowing any other emotions out would make me crumble. The truth is that I'm scared. Even more so than I was through the Dragon Games, because the person I love most in the world is in danger and I don't know if all the training I have will be enough to save him. It's an all consuming feeling but I can't let it win. Instead I choose to hold on to my anger with all my might hoping that it will get me through.

'I am helping, because what if all your stomping and loud breathing gives away our position to the enemy? Did you think of that while you are having a pity party for yourself,' Spin says, and I groan because I hadn't even thought about that.

'I'm sorry, I'm upset and not thinking straight,' I tell him with a sigh, slowing my pace, and watching more carefully where I step to make less noise.

'Think of this as just another Game. They won't kill Henry because they need him to get to you. We need to be smart about this, not impatient,' he explains, and I can't argue with his logic.

Getting to me is the only explanation for someone taking Henry, so Spin is right killing him would do nothing to further along their agenda because instead of rescuing Henry I would be plotting my revenge. I already owe that wretched King for what he has been doing to poor Rye. Spin is right though, I need to be smart about it and not just burst in there recklessly and demand Henry back even though that is what I want to do and stab anyone that gets in my way.

There is more at stake here than just Henry's life.

I don't know much about Tranquil other than it is known for being a peaceful place. Even though I know now that the King is a two-faced dick, the kingdom itself is supposed to be really nice. So why would he take Henry knowing that I would come for him? Is it all to maneuver me into mating with his son or keep me from mating with his son? What does he gain?

If the King thinks I will just turn into some kind of puppet on a string then he obviously wasn't paying attention when I won the Games. I'm no one's pawn.

'Except you kind of are because you are probably doing exactly what they want right now,' Spin comments on my private thoughts.

'Ass. What other option did we really have except to follow them back to Tranquil to try and get Henry back?' I ask glaring at him flying ahead of me.

He toned down his normal white to a gray so he is a little harder to see except when the moon hits him, but he knows I'm glaring.

'We could have gone back to the castle and told the Princes what happened. They are your mates after all. Or are you trying to protect them as well?' he suggests, making me shake my head.

I mean he's right. For some reason I felt the urge to protect the Princes too. Even that jackass Raider. Why? Well I'm just going to blame whatever this bond is that we have started. The thought of putting any of them in harm's way just sours my stomach. Especially Bast and Rye, they have been through enough with their families. Besides this is my fight.

'I'm not sure when you got wise and all knowing, but could you just turn it off for a while it's starting to piss me off,' I say looking off in the woods for any indication how far we might have gone by now.

'I knew it! You are going to mate with all of them! Guess Lo had a reason to be jealous after all,' he says, making me growl in response.

'That's not true! I told Lo that I wouldn't kick him out of my life for them. He chose to remove himself from the equation, not the other way around,' I say and then shut off the link between us so that I don't have to listen to his response.

I'm not even sure where we are right now in terms of how far we are from Tranquil. There is a map in my pack but we aren't exactly taking the main road. I've never even left the boundary of Areola before now, so I'm entering a whole new world that I know nothing about. The last thing that I want to do is fight with Spin, my only ally right now just because I don't want him to be right. It's not his fault that the bond with me and the Princes is so strong it makes me question a lot of things.

The wind blows through the tree just as I hear the snap of a twig nearby. Pulling my coat over my leathers closer to me, I keep up my casual pace pretending not to notice the sounds of someone near.

'Spin.'

'I heard but I'm pretty sure that it's just an animal,' he reassures me, hovering closer than he was before.

'You sure?'

'We're upwind, so I can't smell anything other than plants and animals. But I don't hear anything that sounds human,' he says. Since he hasn't really led me astray too far in the past, I let it go and allow my body to relax.

The stars and moon are bright tonight lighting our way through the forest.

Not one I'm familiar with but it has the same feel of the forest I used to hunt in. It's a little more eerie at night with the nocturnal predators on the prowl for their meals but it still feels like the place I loved to visit.

It's been a few months since I just took a day and came out to the woods. Stealing had really become a full time job, and the money for not only me but the kids wasn't too bad either. None of us were wanting for much as long as I kept it up. Though the Dragon Games kind of flipped my whole life upside down now so I'm not sure what will become of the future. The orphanage is taken care of with the prize money so at least I don't have to worry about all the tiny mouths going hungry.

But where exactly does that leave me?

Being mated to one Prince would be complicated enough, but all five of them. Put aside the fact that they don't get along, and one of them is an asshole. How would that work? Would I get passed around once a month from kingdom to kingdom? Would I live in Areola and they take turns visiting me? There are so many questions and I honestly don't think anyone has answers.

The politics of this situation are way over my head.

'That isn't the only thing over your head Daria. Your love life is a mess with or without the Princes because you don't open yourself up willingly. I don't blame you with your abandonment issues but it's not going to get better if you don't try,' he says, giving me more uninvited advice.

'You know, no one asked you smartass,' I tell him.

I love Spin but there are times like right now when he knows me so well it hurts. Nothing like getting your mail read by a tiny annoying snapdragon. Why couldn't the universe see fit to give me a nice sidekick that just dotes on me. Instead I got a smartass that loves to point out all of my flaws.

'I'm not tiny! I'm the perfect size for a snapdragon and honestly if one of us gets to complain about the other it should be me. You are the biggest pain in the ass for a human pet I can even imagine,' he snarls and shoots a small flame in my direction.

Instead of getting pissed, I just laugh and jump out of the way. As much as we may fight I can't imagine my life without Spin by my side.

'You're mean but I love you.'

'I know.'

'That was the part where you say you love me too, jerk,' I tell him but he doesn't answer. It's dark enough that I can't see him but I'm pretty sure he

just rolled his beady little eyes at me.

'Not happening, you have been nothing but annoying tonight,' he sneers but there is no malice in his tone. I know that he is just play fighting with me to try and get my mind off of things and that just makes me love the little lizard even more.

Letting the argument drop I concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other, keeping the sounds to a minimum if I can. Spin is right that if I'm trying to sneak up on them that I need to not let my emotions cloud my judgment. As hard as that is with Henry's life on the line, I have to try. All the things that he taught me about hunting I bring to the front of my mind, ignoring my heart when it gives a painful tug. There will be time to feel everything later when I have my dad back.

The cool night brings back memories of Henry taking me camping when I was young. We only went a couple times and set up camp by a creek. The days were spent hunting and swimming and the nights we would sit by the fire and listen to the sounds of the forest. Henry told me stories about growing up in Areola and about the creatures that live here. Those were some of the best times in my life.

I wonder why we stopped going camping?

The wind picks up and my face feels cold and wet when it hits me, making me realize that while I was thinking about Henry silent tears had escaped. Quickly I wipe them on my jacket sleeve hoping that Spin doesn't see them. Though I suspect even if he did this time he might let me slide. I'm only human after all and Spin loves Henry too.

'Duck!' Spin shouts and I hit the ground without a second thought just as a blade flies by and sticks into a tree behind me.

'That was close! Where did it come from?' I ask Spin when I see him hovering over in a tree nearby.

'I'm not sure, stay still for a minute and I'll check it out,' he says before disappearing, blending himself in with the night.

Holding my breath I lay on the forest floor and listen for any movement that might come my way. My heart is beating rapidly in my chest and my palms are sweaty. I'm itching to reach for the blades in the holsters on my thighs but I don't want to draw any attention to me. Right now I'm well hidden in some tall grass, but if the person throwing the knife can be that accurate in the dark. I'm betting that they're a dragon.

'Spin?'

'There are three of them, I don't see Henry anywhere so I'm betting these guys were left behind in case you came after them,' he explains.

'So basically we walked right into a trap. Shit,' I say.

'Pretty much. Good thing you have me or you would be dead right now, that dagger would have gotten you right between the eyes. I think that deserves a reward, like a big jar of honey,' he comments and it is a good thing that he isn't close to me right now or I would smack the shit out of him.

'I can't believe you are thinking about your stomach at a time like this! We are in real fucking danger Spin!' I scold him but he scoffs in my head.

'You would think this is the first time you have ever been in danger, geez. We do this all the time, have a little faith in us. I will distract the three nasty dragons and you will run,' he says and I find myself rolling my eyes.

'That is your whole plan?'

'Yes.'

'Fine. Let's do it,' I tell him with a sigh. As far as plans go it's not a great one but I'm willing to give it a try. 'What's the signal?'

'Oh you'll know,' he says, and knowing him it will probably be someone screaming fire.

"What the fuck is that?" a male voice shouts.

"You're on fire!"

"FUCK!"

As soon as the loud commotion starts, I pop up off the ground and run to the right, figuring that if I get a few miles away I can switch directions and head north once again. I'm not worried about Spin catching up; he can fly faster than I can run. The trees are thicker here though and it's hard to see where I'm going. I keep stumbling over rocks and things but I don't want to slow down and give them a chance to catch me.

I'm not sure how far I have gotten but there isn't any sign that they are chasing me. Slowing my pace, I take big mouth fulls of air in relief. Running is not my favorite form of exercise, I'll do it when I have to but long distances are difficult.

'Spin, where are you?' I ask but he doesn't answer me.

Spinning on my heels I look back the direction I ran from wondering if something happened to him. It would be stupid to go back and check when he was the one that said run, but there is no way that I would just leave him there if he's caught. I can't lose anyone else important to me right now or I will lose it.

A branch snaps under my foot as I take a step in that direction, and suddenly something wraps tight around my foot and I'm suddenly flying in the air. My head hits a tree nearby hard enough my eyes water to the point I can't really see.

"Look at that boys, we caught a little mouse in our trap and she even brought us a snack," a man says walking out of the trees with two others following behind him.

Spin is held upside down by his feet not moving and from this distance I can't even tell if he's alive.

'SPIN!'

CHAPTER FOUR



Oh Little Spark what kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into now?

Following her after I spotted her leaving the Blacksmith's shop I knew that something was wrong. She dropped a child off injured to the orphanage and then took off for the shady black market shop that she is known to frequent. I had some clues as to what was going on from overhearing bits of the child's explanation but I still had many questions. So many times I wanted to just step out and offer my assistance but I held back.

The first time that we met I was angry at all the spoiled brats that had taken over the castle and kept demanding things from the staff. I didn't make the best first impression on Daria, and then when we spoke again I also

messed it up somehow. So there was really no telling how she would react to me butting into her business.

It's not as if she knows that I'm her mate. Frankly I have a hard time believing that myself. Female Dragons aren't supposed to get mates. Not because we aren't allowed to love or anything like that. Female dragons can take human males as lovers and mates but most choose not to. It's hard to love someone and know that you can't have a family with them.

Female dragons are sterile. It's the reason that the male dragons choose, for the most part, to find a human mate. It wasn't always this way but many years ago during the uprising someone crossed a witch and all female dragons were cursed never to bear children. Part of me thinks the witch was actually trying to save us all by making the dragons need the humans. Her true motives don't really matter though as she took something precious from every dragon female from then on. Causing us as a species so much pain and suffering. We have adapted, but I can't say that seeing a baby and knowing that I will never have one or probably even hold one doesn't hurt. That's why I chose to be a guard. If nothing else I could at least protect those around me and fill my heart with that.

I would never aspire to find love, instead I focused all my energy on my work and finding fulfillment in that. It worked for most of my life, but all it took was a touch from Daria for all that to come crumbling down. The emptiness that I refused to feel all those years was suddenly filled with nothing but yearning for her. I'm not sure if it's love, I mean how do you love someone you've barely spoken to? There is however a need in me to be close to her, to protect her and cherish her.

That's probably the closest thing to love that I have ever dreamed of experiencing. So there is no way that I can just let that go.

"You were a lot easier to catch than we thought. Maybe your performance in the Games was just a fluke and you are just a scared little girl," one of the men circling Daria sneers.

My instinct is to go out there and cut them all down for even thinking about laying a finger on her but my training holds me back. Right now I have the element of surprise and I would like to keep it that way.

"Yeah well, from here you three look like you've eaten one too many meals and smell like you haven't bathed in a month. So we are both a little disappointed," she snarks and I can't help but shake my head at her brazen behavior even though she is vulnerable to them right now hanging there.

The wind blows moving the bush I'm hiding behind and obscuring my view, but I don't miss the sound of one of the men slapping her. My dragon ruffles inside of me filled with irritation and rage but still I hold back. But just barely.

"Wow, for a big manly dragon you hit like a bitch. Actually, that's an insult to bitches everywhere. I think it hurt more that one time I got stung by a bee on my ass," she says with a laugh, and if this wasn't a dire situation I might find her bravado amusing. She doesn't let anyone push her around and I admire her for it. Even if it is incredibly stupid and reckless.

"Why you little—"

"Stop! We are just supposed to capture her, we aren't supposed to hurt her. She is the mate of the five Princes after all. I'm up for causing trouble and following our orders but I don't want to die in prison tortured for treason," one of the dragon men says, grabbing the one that was going for Daria again.

Interesting.

There seems to be a bigger plot than I would have guessed. If only they would just tell us who it is I would know who I need to protect Daria from. They aren't wearing uniforms and if what Daria said is true about the smell of them then I suspect they are just hired thugs. The question is who hired them and why? What idiot would be brazen enough to mess with the woman that not only won the Dragon Games but is basically mated to all the kingdoms future leaders?

Something that I will have to figure out later as soon as I rescue my little spark. I'm not sure how to be a mate or even someone's friend, but what I do know how to do is protect people. So that is how I will have to show Daria that I care. The mate thing will just have to wait until the right time to come to light.

"Of course you guys are just someone's lackeys," Daria scoffs and the dragon males growl in return getting more irritated by my mate by the second.

Pulling a dagger from my boot, I send it flying through the air as hard as I can. It does exactly what I want it to do and cuts through the rope Daria is hanging from. Running from my hiding place I catch Daria in my arms right before she hits the ground. Her green eyes are huge as if in shock when she looks at me. Her facial expression I would love to laugh at but I don't have time for that now.

Quickly I place her on her feet so that we can get ready to fight even though I already miss holding her smaller frame in my arms. This is not a feeling that I'm used to, so it shakes me at my core slightly, but I'm the Areola Head Guard nothing will shake me enough that I forget how to fight.

Drawing my sword I stand tall in front of Daria as she struggles to get out of the rope on her ankle. She is probably dizzy from the blood rushing to her head and then being quickly upright not to mention she hit her head when she set the trap off. Hopefully nothing serious is wrong.

"Who are you?" one of the men asks, drawing his own sword.

"You idiot, how can you not know who she is? She's wearing the Areola Castle Guard uniform and the insignia shows she's the head guard. My God she is famous for being ruthless in a fight," the one guy explains and I watch as the one who asked the question takes a small step back. The third man is holding Daria's pet from his hand and he hasn't spoken yet, making me wonder if he is the smarter one out of the three.

"I'm going to give you one chance to hand over my friend's pet and leave. After that I can't guarantee that you will be breathing anymore after this," I warn the men but apparently they are stupid.

"Oh this you can have," the man who has been quiet says tossing the little snapdragon at me. His little limp body lands in my arm not holding the sword and I cradle him for a moment. Not taking my eyes off the enemy in front of me I listen and am relieved to hear his heart is still beating.

"Daria take your pet, I'll deal with the scum," I tell her, before gently moving him behind my back so that she can grab him. After a few seconds she doesn't move or make a sound. I have no choice but to glance back. My heart starts beating in my chest when I see she passed out on the ground and I start to worry that she might have been more hurt than I originally thought.

There is no way that I can stop and check her right now so I set her pet on her chest and turn quickly back to the three men. Speed and strength have always been easy for me so they don't even have a chance to attack before I'm facing them again and ready to battle.

"You may be a famous guard but there are three of us and just one of you. Even you can't beat those odds," one of the men sneers, pulling his sword just like the other two.

Men are stupid. I'm glad that if I have a mate it's a woman.

"Do you really think that I beat out all the other guards for my position by merely taking on one at a time? You are fools but since you didn't heed my

warning I guess I will just have to make do on my promise to you,” I say widening my stance and moving my weight to the balls of my feet so that when I need to move I will be able to quickly.

“What promise?”

“The one where I promised you wouldn’t be breathing tomorrow,” I say before pushing off the ground. I barely have to even think about my movements as I use my speed to move behind the first man, slitting his throat with my sword before he can even blink. The second man swings at me clumsily showing that he is not trained at all but just a thug.

I really hate people that don’t even take the time to learn how to use a sword properly before swinging it at someone.

My sword connects with his hand making him drop his weapon and shout as he bleeds. Kicking out with my leg he lands on the ground the air whooshing from his lungs and before he can even take a breath I’m sinking my sword through his heart.

Still aware that there is another target I pull my sword from his chest and look for him, but he has disappeared. I still hold my position for a few moments listening for a sneak attack but it never comes. If anything the sound of footsteps running further away is confirmation that the smarter one abandoned his friends to save his own skin. No honor among thugs I guess.

I’m not worried about the other two men, as I’m very efficient in my kills and there is no sign of life left in the bodies. Now they will either turn to dust or be eaten by the scavengers in these woods. Wiping my sword clean on one of the dead men’s tunics I sheath it and make my way back over to Daria.

She is still passed out, her red hair is fanned out on the ground above her head and she looks beautiful. Her skin is pale and though she is fierce when she’s awake, right now she looks delicate and fragile. Brushing the little bit of hair on her forehead back I can see a bruise and a bump starting to form.

“It’s alright Little Spark, I’ve got you,” I tell her.

Neither her nor her small pet react when I pick them up and carry them away from the dead bodies. I can hear a creek nearby so I turn in that direction and start walking. With every step I can feel myself becoming more determined to keep her from ever getting hurt again. Daria may talk a good game and she might even fight like a demon, but in the end she is one small human fighting things much larger and stronger than her. With me at her side she will never have to fight alone again. I never dreamed of happiness or a mate, but having Daria in my arms makes me wish for both.

I just hope that she will have me.

CHAPTER FIVE



“There’s something wrong,” Lo says as soon as the group of us enters the Blacksmith’s shop. It’s in complete disarray, weapons are tossed all over the place and tools are broken and scattered about. There isn’t a soul in sight and no one responds when Lo calls out. The scent of blood is in the air but thankfully it’s not Daria’s. It still has my dragon feeling restless and my palms sweating.

I can’t lose another person I care about.

“No shit,” Raider sneers at the smaller human, but there is fear in his eyes. He, like the rest of us knows exactly what will happen if we lose our mate.

“Easy Raider, we’re all worried about our mate, no need to be so hostile,” Drax tells the asshole, who growls in response but at least he stopped saying antagonizing things. As much as I hate to admit it, Drax is pretty good at handling situations like this with his light humor.

I’m standing close to Rye just in case he needs my strength as we all stand there staring at the wreckage. The youngest Prince seems to be holding it together pretty well. Silently taking in the room with a sad look on his face. It’s the first time that I noticed that he has really grown into his looks. His face is handsome but there is a softness about him that is sweet. It makes me want to protect him.

“You seem to be the expert on our mate, do you know any place that she might go?” Xander asks calmly, examining the room before looking at Lo. There is no malice in his tone when he speaks, just general curiosity. He’s always been the level headed one of the group using his brain way more than his heart and never letting his emotions get the better of him. I admire that about him.

There were so many times in the past that I wish that I had that quality. Then maybe everything wouldn’t hurt so much. Just thinking about it I glance over to where Drax is standing. He’s still as handsome as ever but it hurts to look at him. Even after all these years, that heartbreak still lingers in me.

And now I’m stuck sharing a mate with him for the rest of my life. Fuck, the universe can be so cruel.

A warm hand taking mine has me looking away from the handsome nightmare that haunts my dreams. When I glance over at Rye he gives me a reassuring smile and squeezes my hand slightly. He’s the only person that I told about what happened with Drax and that’s only because he is the one that found me. Curled up in a ball sobbing on the ground, Rye didn’t ask any questions and helped me to his room. He listened while I told him everything and he hugged me swearing everything would be okay.

After that I abandoned him. We were all pulled to our respective kingdoms to learn how to be the next rulers. There were ways that we could have kept in touch even if our parents told us not to but I chose to cut everyone off completely. Poor Rye suffered all these years at the hands of his father and there was no one that he could reach out to. I regret that now. So the only thing I can try to do is make up for it by being there for him now.

“It will be okay,” I tell him, holding on to his hand firmly.

This time I won’t let go.

“We could see if she went to the brothers for help,” Lo says hesitantly.

“Why do you seem unsure about that?” Drax teases Lo who looks at the ground and mumbles. “Sorry, what was that, even with my dragon hearing I couldn’t pick that up?”

“I said the brothers hate me. They think of Daria like a little sister and they know we have been messing around for years and they hate me for it,” Lo says and Drax bursts out laughing.

“How long have you been with our mate?” Xander asks, again his tone is even, but this time his eyes show a little emotion.

“Daria and I were friends for a while before we ever took things there, I would say sleeping together probably six years give or take,” he says with a sigh running a hand through his brown hair. “I’ve known her all these years, but I still managed to fuck up really bad lately.”

“Love will make you do crazy things,” Drax says with a sigh looking at me from the corner of his eye with the same expression that I haven’t been able to read since we arrived in Areola.

“Love is definitely blind and stupid,” I say before turning and pulling Rye with me out the door. As soon as I’m outside I take a deep breath of the night air trying to calm my racing heart. All these years I held everything in, but tonight I actually let myself speak.

“Just breathe, we are here for Daria, our mate not anyone else,” Rye says, reaching up he puts his hands on either side of my face and makes me look at him. His hazel eyes show nothing but sincerity and care and I wonder for a moment why I couldn’t have fallen for him instead. “Good. Like you said it will be okay. I’ll be the buffer you need as long as you keep being the strength I need.”

“Deal,” I say with a sigh leaning my forehead against his and just breathing for a moment. Shutting my eyes I take in Rye’s scent and I’m not surprised to find that Daria’s is mixed in. It’s calming having her scent near even though she isn’t here herself. “Thank you.”

A clearing throat nearby has me pulling back from Rye and looking over to see the rest of the group standing there staring at us with different expressions on their faces. Lo looks confused, while Xander’s face is blank as usual, Raider is both confused and impatient, and finally Drax who actually looks hurt and uncomfortable. I’m not going to read too much into that though as I already know how he truly feels.

“If you two are done making out, the little human is going to take us to

these brothers,” Raider says, his voice filled with sarcasm.

What an asshole.

“Lead the way,” I say, taking Rye’s hand again, not caring what any of them think about it.

“My name is Bartholomew, my friends call me Lo, you can call me Mr. Sterling, jackass,” Lo spits at Raider before turning and marching off. Irritation comes off the human in waves and I can’t help but shake my head at the fact Raider never learns. Even as a child he was a little jerk always running around with a grim expression on his face. It’s crazy to think that in all this time he hasn’t changed at all.

“Try not to anger him too much, we need him to find Daria since the rest of us don’t really know that much about our mate,” Xander chastises the fiery dragon who just glares daggers back at him. It doesn’t faze Xander at all though, he just turns and follows the direction Lo took off in.

“We all have the same goal, Raider please don’t make it harder on everyone,” Rye says softly as we walk around the still sulking man.

“Fine.” he mumbles under his breath before I hear him following along behind us.

“Drax, hurry your ass up!” Raider shouts and I glance over my shoulder to see he is still standing at the shop looking at the spot where Rye and I were. It makes me feel uncomfortable seeing him look lost, so I look away.

This is going to be a long night.

The shop that Lo leads us to is coated in magic and I’m not even sure it’s safe to knock on the black door on the side of the building. Lo, though hesitant, walks up and gives a special knock cringing when he hears footsteps inside.

“Did you come to your senses—” a large man asks, stopping mid sentence when he stops who is standing there. “Oh it’s you. What do you want?”

“Have you seen Daria tonight? Henry’s shop is trashed and we can’t find any of them. If there is anyone that Daria would come to for help it’s you guys,” Lo tells him and the man sighs before opening the door wide enough that we can all enter.

“I can’t believe you brought the Princes. Don’t you need like guards or

something before you go out?” the man who has yet to introduce himself says with a sigh.

“I snuck them out,” Lo says with a shrug.

“At least you made them leave the crowns behind, and had them dress in commoner clothes and cloaks, but they still stick out. Even their commoner clothes are too nice for this part of town,” the man retorts.

“I did the best I could Dom, stop busting my balls and help us find Daria,” Lo says, the rest of us stay quiet just observing the two men.

“You are lucky that I’m worried about her too, or I would kick your ass for giving me lip,” Dom tells him in warning. “She was here, honestly she broke in and took something that we were holding for her. She wasn’t acting like herself and then she took off. I knew something wasn’t right but I couldn’t stop her either,” he says, putting his head in his hands.

“Do you have any idea where she might have gone?” Lo asks, looking more worried than before.

“No, she didn’t say much. You might try asking that kid from the orphanage that she loves so much,” Dom suggests.

“Thanks,” Lo says heading for the door.

“Thank you for your assistance,” Xander says and the rest of us bow in agreement.

“Just do me a favor and forget you even know about this place,” Dom says as we take our leave.

“We were never here,” Rye tells him as we follow the others back out into the alley. Once there, he takes my hand again as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. Surprisingly for me it’s not strange at all. My parents were very affectionate, I think that since their deaths I cut myself off to everyone.

Maybe I’m more touch starved than I thought?

“Who is this kid that Daria loves?” Drax asks, sounding more like his normal self. So whatever was going on with him earlier he must have shaken it off. Same old Drax.

“Phillip. He is a bit wild with a mouth like a sailor, but he is a pretty good kid and he took to Daria really quick. Loves her and Henry like family. I think if she was more settled she would have adopted him a while ago, but with her job and Henry being so busy he wouldn’t get the attention that he deserves. So they do their best while he still lives at the orphanage,” Lo explains and it makes my heart warm to my mate even more to know that she is such a kind and loving person.

“There is no way that a person that kind would ever find fault with you Rye,” I whisper to him as we follow the other back towards where we came from earlier.

“Thank you,” he says, and I’m relieved to see him straighten his shoulders a bit as if getting more of his confidence back.

“Why didn’t we ask the kid before we came all the way over here?” Raider asks, sounding just as grumpy as always.

“Are you serious? Obviously I’m fucking panicking because something bad is going on! Of course I’m not thinking as clearly as I should. Give me a fucking break fire lizard!” Lo shouts before stomping quickly ahead.

“You know if you piss him off too much and he decides to leave us behind we don’t know where the fuck we are right? And either way Daria is still missing. Maybe pull your head out of your ass and think,” Xander says, and even though his words are cutting his tone is still pretty even. He just turns and hurries after Lo and Drax leaving the three of us in the street.

“Raider, I know you aren’t a bad person even if you pretend to be. We are all worried but please just try to calm down before you drive everyone away,” Rye says, and I’m not surprised that he is the one to speak kindly to Raider. After all the times the guy has lashed out at Rye he still tries to be nice to him. Makes me wonder if their friendship was close back in the day.

“I’m sorry, you’re right I will try harder not to lash out,” Raider responds, his tone growly as if his dragon isn’t quite on the same page.

It will have to be good enough for now.

“Someone is coming,” I say quickly, pulling Rye into the shadows of a nearby alley.

“Why are you hiding?” Raider asks joining us.

“We may be the Princes but you know as well as I do that we aren’t just supposed to run off on our own,” I say quietly, reaching out I put a hand on his arm and cloak the three of us just as three castle guards walk by.

“I can’t believe we lost all of the Princes and their mate, we are going to be killed when Abina comes back,” A shorter male guard says with a sigh.

“Well it’s not like it’s completely our fault they ran off. Maybe to have a mating orgy, who knows. They are all old enough we shouldn’t have to babysit them,” the female guard says.

“Both of you shut up and do your jobs. We find them and we take them back because that is what we were ordered to do,” the other male guard says just as they round a corner far enough away that I can’t hear them anymore.

Letting go of Raider, I drop the cloak but still keep Rye's hand in mine. Slowly we exit the alley and take off in the direction of the orphanage. We have to make sure that we warn the others.

"Thanks for back there, and I'm sorry about my remark earlier about you two. Now is the time to lean on each other, I just keep pushing everyone away though," Raider says, and Rye reaches out and tentatively pats him gently on the back.

"No matter how hard you push you know I will always come back. There is no way you can be worse than my father and I've lived with that man my whole life," Rye tells him and the mention of his abusive father makes me see red. If he wasn't the King of Tranquil I would have no issues killing that man.

Raider turns and gives me a look that has me believing he can read my thoughts right now.

"Thanks for that Rye," he says and I can't help but hope that our sweet healer finally got through to him.

"Where have you guys been?" Drax asks when we finally make it back to the Blacksmith's shop, he and Xander are just standing there waiting. I don't see Lo anywhere so I assume he went to talk to the child alone.

"The castle guards are out looking for us, we had to keep ducking into alleys and having Bast cast his shadows," Raider tells him, his tone more neutral. I don't think that I have used my powers this much with other people in a long time, I can actually feel a bit of exhaustion trying to creep in. Perhaps I need to practice more to increase my stamina more?

"Are you okay? That had to use a lot of energy," Drax asks, looking concerned even though he has no right to.

"I'm fine."

"Bast—"

"Where is Lo?" Rye asks, interrupting whatever Drax was about to say and giving my hand a squeeze.

"So I have some bad news and some worse news," Lo says, jogging out from behind the building, a grim look on his face.

"Just hit us with it," Drax tells him.

“So Henry was kidnapped, and Daria has gone to rescue him.”

“From where and who?”

“According to Phillip, she is headed to Tranquil.”

“Fuck,” I say under my breath, just as Rye turns white as a sheet and his grip on my hand goes slack.

“Rye!”

CHAPTER SIX



I'm on the ground, my head is pounding but I'm warm. Blinking my eyes open I try to clear them so that I can get my bearings, but my head won't stop pounding.

What the hell happened?

'Spin?' I say but he doesn't answer. Visions of him hanging there limp go through my mind. 'SPIN!'

'Shut up! You aren't the only one that got knocked on the head, give me a freaking break,' he grumbles and I feel him moving around on my abdomen.

'I'm just glad you are okay. I thought you were dead,' I tell him, barely holding back the tears.

'You aren't getting rid of me that easy,' he snarks, moving up my body until he flops down on my chest. Lifting my hand I start to pet his small frame checking for any injuries.

'What happened?'

'Damn dragons. I was gonna light a second one on fire when all of a sudden a spray of water hit me and sent me crashing into a tree, hard. Next thing I know I'm awake on top of you,' he says and my heart gives a weird little thump. Sometimes I forget that Spin isn't as invincible as he makes himself seem.

'So who has us?' I ask, glancing around for the first time. There is a fire roaring to my right and I can hear a stream nearby but other than that I don't see or hear anything.

'No one, but we owe the guard from the castle our lives,' he says and I'm confused.

'What?'

"Oh good you are both awake," a familiar voice says, making me jump. The dark skinned beauty that I had been avoiding in the castle the last week steps around a tree and walks towards me.

Abina.

I'm not sure why I got these strange feelings being around her lately but with everything going on with the Princes there wasn't really time to unpack that. She is intimidating for sure with her build and mostly blank expressions, but I still find her to be gorgeous. It's the first time in my life that I have been this attracted to another woman. I've thought them pretty before and even kissed a couple girls but this is very different. Kissing isn't all I want to do with her.

'Stop staring like a horny moron and say something, for fuck's sake,' Spin comments with a sigh.

"What are you doing here?"

'Not that you idiot! Thank you would have been better. You just made yourself sound like a jackass. She is never going to sleep with you at this rate,' Spin says.

'Shut up! You aren't helping!'

"I saw you leave the castle in a hurry and I thought something might be wrong so I followed you and it's a good thing that I did or those three men would have captured you," she says, taking a seat by the fire and looking over at me with one raised eyebrow.

“I can take care of myself,” I tell her.

‘Who raised you? You have the worst manners!’ Spin says before crawling off of me and hopping on the ground over to Abina where he rubs his head against her leg.

“You’re welcome snapdragon,” she says, patting his head. When he turns he glares his beady eyes at me.

‘Fine.’

“Thank you for saving us,” I say even though it ticks me off to think that I needed someone to rescue me when I’m supposed to be saving Henry.

“You’re welcome, little spark,” she says, surprising me with the smirk on her face.

Why does everyone give me weird nicknames?

Now isn’t the time to think about that or fight about how exactly it makes me feel. Which is, annoyed and yet warm and fuzzy inside. My head hurts too much for these kinds of contradictory emotions.

Slowly I sit up, closing my eyes when the forest starts to spin around me. I take deep breaths in and out for a few minutes before opening my eyes again. When I do, Abina is closer than she was before.

“Shit!” I say almost falling over from the shock.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you, I just want to offer you some water and make sure that you didn’t fall over,” she says, handing me a leather waterskin. “I just filled it up in the river so drink your fill, if you need more let me know.”

“I wasn’t scared... I was just surprised that you moved so quietly because of your size,” I say and as soon as the words leave my mouth I want to crawl in a hole and die.

‘Oh my god. Why did the universe give you so many mates when you can’t even manage polite conversation with the person that saved your ass?’ Spin asks, kicking me in the side before taking off.

‘I know! Shut up!’

‘I can’t watch this, I’m going to get something to eat, hopefully she doesn’t kill you before I get back for saying stupid shit,’ he comments and I pick up a rock next to me and throw it in the direction he flew.

“I’m sorry that’s not what I meant to say. You are very light of foot and there is nothing wrong with your size,” I say before taking a pull from the waterskin so that I can’t say anything else.

I’m blaming the bump on the head for this.

“It’s fine. I have heard worse things in my life,” Abina says with a shrug, and I can’t imagine being a female head guard is very easy. I’m sure there are many people that have tried to take her down by being spiteful with their words, and yet she still stands tall.

“So why did you follow me exactly? I know you said you saw me leave the castle but doesn’t that kind of not make me your responsibility anymore?” I ask, taking another drink of the refreshingly cold water.

“You are the mate of the five Princes, there are bound to be people after you now. It’s my duty to watch after you and make sure that you don’t come to any harm. The last thing Estonia needs is a war,” she says, and I’m not sure why but her explanation is kind of disappointing. I didn’t expect her to declare undying love or anything, but being relegated to duty sucks. Though honestly I haven’t really managed to be anything but a pain in the ass since we met so I don’t blame her. There is nothing wrong with having a strong sense of honor and duty.

“Well thanks, really, I was so worried about Henry that I didn’t take very good care of myself or Spin,” I admit. “From now on I will keep my head on a swivel like I did in the Games. So you should be good to head back to the castle. No telling what trouble the Princes will get up to without you there,” I say giving her what I think is a friendly smile, but instead of returning it she actually growls.

“No.”

“Really, I’m sure—”

“I will accompany you on your journey,” she says and there is such finality in her tone that I don’t bother arguing.

“Okay.”

Taking another drink I stare into the fire and wonder what is going through her head right now. I’m not that important, she needs to come along and protect me, and I’m definitely able to take care of myself. At least for the most part. Henry is the one that taught me how to not only survive in this world but to overcome every obstacle in my way.

That’s why I can’t let him down now. He’s my family, my father and I won’t let anything happen to him because of me. I know it’s my fault for being greedy and entering the Games, otherwise Henry would have never been caught up in this mess. The Princes as mates, that’s something no one could have guessed. Everything else though is all on me. Henry would kick my ass for blaming myself like this but I just can’t help it. I miss him and I

want him back.

“I’ll get you more water, you should rest,” Abina says, taking the waterskin from my hand and walking off towards the sounds of the river nearby.

My people skills definitely need some work.

My everyday life consisted of Henry, Lo, the Doms and Spin. That’s not exactly the most talkative bunch, for the most part we make jokes with each other and sarcastic remarks. There aren’t a lot of heart to hearts or just casual conversations. How exactly am I supposed to treat Abina? She is older than me, so definitely with respect. Her temperament seems to be serious but levelheaded. Let’s not forget the fact that I’m extremely attracted to her, and it’s making me awkward as all hell.

‘You are giving me a headache worse than the tree with your overthinking,’ Spin says, dropping down from the sky and landing on a log nearby. *‘Just talk to her like she is a person, it’s not that complicated.’*

‘Sure. When was the last time you talked to anyone other than me?’ I ask.

‘Don’t remind me. It makes me wish that I could talk to Rye, he at least seems nice. Instead I’m stuck with you,’ he snarks, and I turn to glare at him.

‘Yeah well you are so mean you would probably make him cry, that’s why I got stuck with you,’ I tell him, and he returns my glare.

‘I think you are the one that made me mean. Before I met you I was the nicest snapdragon around,’ he says sticking his nose up in the air and I can’t help but laugh.

‘Keep telling yourself that buddy, I’m sure all the other snapdragons were glad to be rid of you,’ I sneer.

‘When you fall asleep tonight I’m burning off all your hair,’ he fires back, making sure to shoot a mouth full of flames in my direction.

‘Yeah well I’m never giving you jam or honey again. Good luck with getting some from someone else when I’m the only one you can talk to, Dick.’

‘That is below the belt Daria!’

“Are you two fighting?” Abina asks, surprising both Spin and I, causing us to whip our heads in her direction and both groan internally from the pain.

“Yes, but this is pretty normal for us. How could you tell?” I ask curiously.

“I’ve been watching the two of you not just now but in the castle and he is no ordinary pet. Even in the pit he was always there when you needed him without you giving any visual signals. It’s actually quite amazing. You make

the perfect team. You are lucky to have one another,” she says and now I feel like shit for yelling at Spin when I’m just frustrated about the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

‘Spin–’

‘Yeah me too.’

“We should get some sleep, it’s a long walk to Tranquil and I’m sure the three men you faced tonight will not be the last trap set for you,” Abina says calmly walking over and laying down behind me close enough that I can feel her warmth.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my voice cracking a bit on the end and my face heating with embarrassment.

“I think that we should sleep together,” she says so casually I end up choking on my spit from shock. My palms instantly start to sweat and my heart is beating like a damn drum.

“What?”

“You are still not up to full strength so I will sleep close to you and keep you safe,” she offers, and I sigh in relief realizing she is just doing her job. Maybe a little bit of disappointment rears its ugly head but I push that way down.

“Okay,” I say before my arm gives out and I basically fall on the ground. Luckily Abina is fast and she sticks her arm out and catches my head before it hits the ground.

‘Smooth moves,’ Spin snickers, as he makes himself comfortable closer to the fire.

‘Shut up!’

“Rest, I will watch your back,” Abina whispers, her breath tickling my neck and making a chill run down my body.

Yeah like that’s going to be possible.

The sounds of the forest surround us as I lay there with Abina wrapped around my back. As strange as it sounds I actually feel safe for the first time in a while. Slowly I drift off to sleep wondering what kind of new hell the next day will bring. No matter what it is I think I can face it with Abina at my side.

I think I just made my first female friend.

CHAPTER SEVEN



When I wake the next morning or at least I think it's morning since the sun is shining. I realize very quickly that sometime during the night I rolled over in my sleep and my face is pressed tightly right between Abina's breasts. My eyes shoot open and I abruptly try to roll in the opposite direction which almost lands me in the fire pit that for some reason is still going.

"Easy," Abina says as her arm catches me before I end up roasting.

'What is wrong with you?' Spin says his voice sounding more amused than anything.

'So many things,' I tell him with a sigh and he just snickers.

“Sorry, it was just instinct, I’m not used to someone with breasts holding me when I sleep,” I say before I can stop myself.

Next thing I know Spin is laughing in my head and rolling around on the ground like he has fleas. I slap a hand over my face and groan in frustration.

When did I become this person?

After a few minutes Abina hasn’t said anything, I peek through my fingers at her face. It’s blank. Of course it is. She probably thinks that I’m a complete dumbass but is just trying to be polite because she is stuck with me.

“I’m sorr—”

“Please stop apologizing for every little thing, that’s more annoying than your verbal outbursts,” she comments before getting up and walking away.

‘*You really are good at making friends,*’ Spin comments and I pick up a rock nearby and throw it at him.

‘*Shut up.*’

‘*Ow. You know I was nice enough to gather some things for breakfast but now I’m not sharing anything with you,*’ he tells me rubbing his wing on his chest where the rock hit him and bounced off. He is just being dramatic because I didn’t actually throw it that hard.

‘*I’m sorry I hit you, please share your food,*’ I tell him, turning my head so that I can roll my eyes without him seeing me.

Getting up from the forest floor, I stretch and move closer to the fire to warm up. I’m feeling a little stiff from sleeping on the ground after a couple of weeks in that luxurious bed at the castle but other than that I’m surprised that nothing else hurts. If nothing else I expected my head to hurt but running a hand over where I got hit last night there isn’t even a bump.

‘*Fine. I will share with you, but just because you look kind of pathetic this morning, not because of your shitty apology,*’ Spin says. Instead of arguing with him because my apology was half assed I sit back down by the fire and soak in the warmth as he ruts around in the bushes nearby.

The forest is pretty quiet except for the river close by and the crackling of the fire. I can’t help thinking about Henry and how he would have loved this spot. Between his business and my activities we haven’t really spent any quality time together in the last five years. I regret that now. What if that stupid mating banquet is the last memory that I have of him? He hugged me so tight and told me he was proud and loved me, but that’s not good enough. That can’t be my last moments with my dad.

Stop thinking like this Daria. You are going to save Henry if it’s the last

thing that you do.

'It's not a lot but I picked some berries and nuts, and you should have some jerky in your pack,' Spin says gently pulling over a scrap of material he used as a pouch. His eyes tell me that he can feel my emotions right now even if I'm not letting him read my thoughts.

'You're right. I did pack some,' I tell him looking around for my pack but I don't see it anywhere.

'Abina hung it in the tree so the animals wouldn't come sniffing around,' he explains before I start to panic. The last thing I need to do is lose the dragon eye and have some random stranger find it and assume things about me.

I thought it was a good idea to trade it with the kidnappers but now I'm thinking that Dom was right and it was a bad idea to carry that damn thing around. It's too late now though, I will just have to be extra cautious from now on and make sure no one sees it.

'Yeah so far you haven't proven you can be careful with anything, not even your words,' Spin says, looking at me and then turning his head in the direction that Abina went, as if hinting I should go after her.

'You're right. I'll go talk to her. Grab my bag down for me please,' I say before getting off the ground. My body is a little stiff but other than being hungry and embarrassed I'm feeling okay right now.

I'm not sure what time it is but the sun is shining down through the trees warming up the cool temperatures. The sky looks clear as if it is going to be a nice day. Or it would be if I wasn't in such a dire situation. Finding Henry takes priority over everything else, even enjoying the weather. Abina and Spin are right though, I need to keep my head on straight or I will run into more trouble.

I just won the Dragon Games and I fell for one of the oldest tricks in the book just because I was rushing. My emotions got the best of me and that almost got Spin and I killed. I'm responsible for both of us so I can't let shit like that happen again. Focusing on the goal ahead of me is a good thing but narrowing my vision too much can also be deadly.

The water from the river grows louder and just before I reach it I spot Abina standing on the bank pacing back and forth. I'm sure she is pissed at me for being so dumb and she has every right to be. I owe her an apology and a huge thank you, I'm just not sure how to talk to her for some reason. She isn't like the other women I have had to deal with over the years. Abina is

strong and independent, a fighter like me. Not to mention that she's beautiful and I am very attracted to her.

Time to face the music.

"Hey Abina, can I talk to you for a second?" I ask stepping out of the tree line. Her face is blank when she stops to look at me but nods her head anyway.

"So the thing is, I've never really had any female friends before so I'm struggling with how to interact with you. Heck, my only real friend until now has been Lo and well that kind of turned into more. So what I'm trying to say is give me a chance to adjust. I can't promise that I still won't be an ass from time to time, but I'll try to do better," I say and I'm not sure if that even made sense.

"Do you think a castle guard captain has many opportunities to make friends?" she asks and I hadn't even thought of that. She must feel awkward around me too. And here I am making it all about me.

Way to go Daria.

"Well if that's the case then I guess that we will just stumble our way through this new friendship together," I suggest, sticking out my hand for her to shake. She hesitates for only a second before taking it and giving it a gentle squeeze. "You don't have to be so gentle with me."

"Actually I do. Because strength is one of my dragon powers so it wouldn't take much to break the bones in your hands. I'm not used to physical contact let alone with a human so for now I will be as gentle as possible until I get used to it," she says before letting go and looking back at the water. "Should we wash up before we eat and get on our way?"

Nope. If I was stupid with her fully clothed, I can't imagine the kind of trouble I will get myself in with her naked.

"I think just my face and hands will be okay. I don't want to delay more than we already have," I tell her, and her mask falls for a moment and I think she actually looks disappointed. Just as quickly though it's back to blank and I almost think I must have been seeing things.

"Okay," she says, before turning and walking back in the direction of camp.

I have a feeling I'm going to be awkward the entire time we are traveling alone, I'll just have to figure out a way to make it up to her later. Maybe once we rescue Henry he wouldn't mind making her a special weapon or something? That seems like something she would like. It will have to do.

Getting closer to the bank, I crouch down and scoop some of the cold water into my hands and bring it to my mouth. Normally I would test it on a plant to make sure it's safe and not contaminated by one of the forest's monsters and could make me sick but I'm pretty sure Abina already did that. Being a dragon she would most likely be immune to that kind of thing but I'm sure she still checked. She seems to have pretty high survival skills and it makes me wonder about her background.

The water tastes great and I scoop more and scrub my face until it feels as if I have washed off all the sweat and grime from yesterday. I was a mess last night crying and sweating as I ran through the woods. Not only that though I was stupid and didn't have my head on right. Henry would shake his head if he saw the trap I stepped into. He taught me better than that. Hell he taught me everything including how to survive in the woods. I forgot everything last night in my haste to rescue him. Today I'm starting over with a clear mind.

'Since when do you ever really have a clear mind,' Spin comments once again listening in on my thoughts.

'So maybe clear isn't the right word. Focused. Right now I have one goal and that is Henry, all my other problems are going to have to wait until he is safe. Are you satisfied with that? Nosy,' I ask and I hear his wings before I feel him land on my shoulder. The weight of him is something that I'm used to now but I'm sure someone else might have a problem with it.

'Are you saying I'm fat?' he asks, looking at me blinking his beady little eyes.

'Nope. I meant you are sturdy, but you do eat a lot of jam, I don't think other snapdragons are as spoiled as you,' I tell him and he snorts at me before nipping my ear and taking flight before I can slap him.

'I'm the perfect size, humans are just weak,' he scoffs and I just roll my eyes before taking another drink of water. It's so refreshing, I wish we did have time to bathe fully, but Henry is waiting and I don't know what they are doing to him.

'Let's get going. I promise from now on I won't remark about your size. You are the perfect weight, blah blah blah,' I say and he shoots a bit of fire my way. Not enough that it would actually reach but just let me know that he isn't happy with my teasing.

Plus in the end I wasn't even talking about his weight, I was talking about myself and being stronger than an average human but of course Spin had to make it all about him.

Getting up I stretch my arms towards the sky and try to get the stiffness out of my joints. A few pops and additional stretches have my body waking up for the day. I'm still feeling some soreness in random spots on my body aside from my head which makes me think I probably have a few bruises starting to form under my leathers. I'm used to it after training for years, but the Games really taught me how to deal with pain and keep moving. This little bit is nothing compared to that.

"Before we go I want to make sure you can move as well as the games and there aren't any effects from the bump on the head last night," Abina says coming out of the woods she tosses a sword at me and draws hers.

"Wait. What?" I ask, picking it off the ground, but instead of answering she lunges at me. Luckily my body knows what to do and I block her just in time. The clank of metal echoes through the woods around us and I can feel my muscles ache from the strength of her first strike.

"Very good," she says and I'm surprised to see that she is smiling at me. Stepping back she nods and signals for me to come at her. My adrenaline is pumping and I'm not sure why but I'm smiling like an idiot as I move towards her.

Nothing like a practice match in the morning to get the heart pumping.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Blinking my eyes open I find myself looking at a ceiling that I don't recognize. It's rough wood and bits of sunlight are peaking down at me.

My head feels a little fuzzy but I'm comfortable and warm. Turning my head I see the reason that I'm warm is that Raider is tightly wrapped around me holding me to him. He is sleeping soundly and I don't want to wake him, so I only turn my head in the other direction and I find Bast standing by the door of whatever building we are in.

"Glad to see you are awake, you scared me for a minute," Bast says walking over to the bed he sits on the edge and pushes the hair from my forehead. He's so gentle about it that I'm not sure what to say. Since he found

me crying in my room at the castle he has been so kind to me despite everything that's going on.

"I'm sorry. Where are the others?" I ask and he sighs.

"After you passed out we decided to split into two teams. The others went ahead into the forest and we decided to wait for you to wake up. You and I got stuck with Raider because they didn't want him," Bast says and I'm not really surprised since he doesn't get along well with anyone. Hopefully spending time with us will change that though.

"I chose this team asshole," Raider grumbles before pulling his arm back and sitting up. "You two don't annoy me as much as the others."

"Whatever you say," Bast says, getting up and moving away.

"So what is the plan?" I ask changing the subject before anyone starts fighting. I know that times are hard for all of us not only with our new mate now missing but our home lives and past still hurt us too.

"We will catch up to the others when we can," Bast says.

That's not really a plan. But who am I to argue?

"Since the three of us are a team and we will be working together, would it be a good idea to know each other's powers?" I ask, wanting to get to know them a little bit better. Not only because I missed our friendship all these years but we all now share a mate so we are going to have to get along eventually. Daria won't take kindly to all the fighting that has been happening.

"Storm control and shadow manipulation," Bast says, giving me a small smile. I know that he is just humoring me but it still makes me happy. For the longest time I have been either ignored or abused and nothing in between. Daria being kind to me was the first time I felt something positive in my life.

I really hope that she is okay.

"Healing and I can talk to snapdragons, except for Daria's because they are bonded," I say.

"That will come in handy as we make our way through the forest. You will be able to scout ahead with those little beasts," Raider says and I'm shocked that he is trying to be encouraging after all the times he made me feel small and worthless.

"Fire and I really don't want to say the second one because it will probably just make you feel more uncomfortable around me," Raider comments.

"If you don't want to share that's fine, I know our secondary powers are

supposed to be a secret because only royals have two,” I tell him, giving him a pat on the leg. Just having us talk calmly like this is enough for me right now. I’m not strong, my nerves are shot from years of my father’s abuse, but I’m going to push forward and help as much as I can to get Daria back.

“You are killing me,” Raider sighs.

“My secondary skill is mind reading,” he says, not looking at either one of us.

I’m shocked, but thinking back there were times when I swore that he answered my thoughts out loud. It also means that he knows all of our secrets including my defectiveness.

“You are not defective. And yes I know all of your secrets and I’m sorry the only time I can shut it off is when I’m sleeping,” he explains and I’m not sure how I feel about it, but we all have things about ourselves we would like to change so it’s fine. At least I won’t have to verbally explain anything. I think voicing my pain is worse than anything.

“It’s fine. Not as if everyone in the Kingdoms doesn’t know about my parents,” Bast says and I give him a sad smile.

“You have more pain than that and that’s why I chose this team. Not only because the others hate my guts but being around you two I feel like I can breathe. Your thoughts are sad most of the time but also you don’t harbor a lot of hate even towards the people that hurt you. It makes it easier for me,” Raider explains, and I never thought my thoughts could be comforting but okay.

“Okay, then should we get going now?” I ask, getting out of the bed, I stretch, and end up having to sit back down. My head is still a little woozy.

“Not with you still about to fall over with a stiff breeze,” Raider says.

“I’m sorry. Maybe you should just leave me at the castle. I’m probably more of a liability—” I start but Bast interrupts.

“No. There is no telling who all is in on this plan so splitting up is not a good idea. Besides what Raider said about the snapdragons is true, it will help us not only find the others but maybe even find Daria before she reaches your castle,” he explains. I know they are just trying to be nice but I will take it.

“Thank you,” I say, and Raider gives me a pat on the back before getting up and looking around the room. Actually that reminds me I still have no idea where we are.

“This is Daria’s house, we thought it would be best to stay here for now.

So far the guards haven't come so it's been safe for us," Raider explains without me even having to ask.

That will take some getting used to.

"We should eat and see if that will help with your lightheadedness," Bast suggests and I think I had lunch yesterday but I can't remember eating after that.

"You don't even remember when you ate last, that's probably why you passed out so easily from stress," Raider says, and Bast nods. I guess I haven't been taking very good care of myself, I just had a lot of other things to worry about.

"I'll use the shadows to get some food," Bast says.

"Where from?" I ask. We don't have any money and taking from the town just feels wrong. A lot of the people especially in this area seem to be fighting to make ends meet. I wouldn't want to take anything more from them.

"Don't worry, he's planning to go to the castle. There are things he needs to get for us besides just food like weapons and money for the journey," Raider explains and I let out a sigh of relief.

"Do you think you should grab Daria's things too?" I ask wondering if since she went out my window if she even took any of her weapons or jewels with her. I'm sure that she hadn't planned on running off to Tranquil instead of spending time with her father.

"That's a good idea. I'll check it out," Bast says before disappearing into the shadows. As much as he helped hide us last night I'm still not used to seeing him disappear like that. Seems getting to know my old friends again is going to take some time.

"That's the truth," Raider says, still wandering around Daria's small room. I'm not sure what I expected but aside from the bed and a closet there isn't much in here.

"I actually expected her room to look like an armory but it's a pretty normal room," Raider comments, before opening the closet door. "Never mind."

Out of the small opening blades of all shapes and sizes tumble out and he has to jump out of the way so he doesn't get stabbed in the foot. Hanging in there is nothing but different leathers and a few other odds and ends clothes. I haven't had much interaction with females but this doesn't seem typical. Though for Daria it makes perfect sense.

“Our mate is definitely not normal, but as much as she hates me I actually like her,” Raider says and I’m surprised he would say that after all the nasty things he said to her.

“I’m an asshole and there isn’t really a good excuse why I take my frustrations out on the people around me except that my head gets overwhelmed with constant thoughts and I just snap. It’s shitty of me but the continuous flow of all the people in the castle when the Games were going on was fucking hard to deal with,” he says and I can’t imagine having to hear every little thing the people around you are thinking.

“There are only a few people that I can’t hear and that’s the Kings and Queens, otherwise I would have done everything in my power to stop what is happening now,” he explains.

“Why just them?” I ask not that I would want anyone to have to listen to my father’s evil thoughts, that would really make them go mad.

“I’m not sure but I think the protection is in the rings, because even though Bane isn’t the King of Drumfire I can’t hear him. He wears the royal ring. The Queens have matching rings to the Kings so that is the only thing that I can think of that it could be,” he says and it makes sense.

The royal rings have been passed down for generations, and they are imbued with magic. It would make sense for that to block not only mind reading but many other types of magical abilities. Though it is only the royal heirs that receive two attributes it would be a good deterrent to kingdom disputes. Not that I actually know much about things like that since my father was against my ascending since my birth. I bet Xander knows all the histories though.

“I think your theory is probably pretty close to spot on. You are smarter than you think you are, so have a little faith in yourself,” Raider says. Crouching down he picks up everything that fell out and tosses it back in before closing the door and coming back over to sit by me.

“All this time I thought you hated me and everyone else but the truth was that you were just in pain and no one could help you with it. I think I understand that more than a lot of people,” I tell him and he sighs.

“You have had it way worse than me and you are still the sweetest guy that I know,” Raider says and I can see the guilt written all over his face for his behavior.

“It’s not about who’s had it worse. Pain is pain and you are allowed to struggle through it. Lashing out at others wasn’t the best way to handle it no,

but I can't judge you for it. When we were young you were the one that always stood up for me with the others, it's something that I've never forgotten," I tell him and he looks shocked.

When we were young I was not only the youngest but the weakest due to my lack of wings and sometimes as kids do the others would pick on me and try to get me to fly when I couldn't. It was hard but Raider was always there sticking up for me. It's probably because we didn't get our powers until we were separated that made it possible for me to make that connection with him. Because he was grumpy even before he could read minds, sometimes I was the only one that would play with him.

"So my disposition hasn't changed much since we were young except that I have become even more jaded," Raider says with a chuckle, clearly reading my thoughts. "You were always my favorite back then because you were quiet and adorable."

My face heats at his comment, and I find myself looking away. I'm not sure how to respond to that. Raider has always been someone I looked up to. Being younger than the others I didn't get as much time to bond with them. Through the really hard times with my father I always thought back on the good times I spent with them and the drawing that I just can't seem to get rid of. Those memories got me through the beatings and the constant loneliness.

"You aren't alone anymore, and as long as I'm around your father isn't laying another finger on you. I'm sorry you had to suffer alone in silence," he says, before pulling me into his arms. I'm not sure how to react, it feels nice being held but also a little foreign. I've had a lot of physical contact with other people lately that has been like this, warm and kind and it makes me feel safe. Not at all what I'm used to but I find myself liking it and craving more.

"Thank you," I say before pulling back. "I think I'm going to find the bathroom." I move to get up but he pulls me back and pushes me down on the bed before covering us with the blanket.

"There are guards entering the house, since there is nowhere in the room to hide and we don't want to start a fight I think the best thing to do is pretend like we are having sex," Raider whispers in my ear and a shiver goes down my spine as his breath blows across my neck.

"How should I do that?" I ask. The only person I have ever had sex with is Daria and I can't remember if I made noises or not. It was all overwhelming and over before I knew what was really happening.

“Shit. Well just try moaning,” he says before his fully clothed body moves on top of mine. I’m not at all prepared for the friction of his movements and before I know it I feel myself getting hard. My cheeks heat to the point they are probably bright red and my embarrassment stops me from participating in the farce.

“I’m sorry about this but it’s the only way that we won’t get caught,” Raider says before placing his lips on mine and kissing me. Noises leave me as he plunders my mouth with his tongue giving me pleasure as he continues to rub my cock through my clothes. I’m not sure how to feel about this but my head is filling up and I can’t help that my body is enjoying this so much.

Reaching up I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him closer. I just need a little more.

“They are gone,” Raider says, pulling back from my lips. But before my rational mind can catch up to me I pull him back down and lift my hips rubbing harder against him.

My body is on fire and I’m overcome with need, even though I know it’s Raider I can’t stop myself.

“That was not my intention with this but fuck it,” Raider says pulling back for a second I feel him rustling with our trousers and his warm hand feels like live flames as he pulls my length out and uses his large hand to rub his cock against mine.

Taking my mouth once again, he continues his motions as my body heats to the point where I think I might explode. I cry out into his kiss and my spine sparks and I feel myself explode just as wetness coats my lower stomach and Raider grunts before I feel more. We stare at each other in shock for a moment, I’m not sure what to do or think.

“Are you two done now?” Bast asks and I only realize now that the blanket is gone and he can see everything.

“It’s not what you think, there were guards and we were pretending and it got out of hand,” Raider says, grabbing the blanket and using it to clean us both up.

“I’m not judging you, if anything I’m jealous,” Bast says, and my face heats up even more.

If only there was a hole to swallow me right now.

CHAPTER NINE



“F uck! You hit harder than Henry,” I shout after our swords clank again. “I’m a dragon Daria, never forget that, because the people you will be facing from now on are also dragons,” she says, not even breaking a sweat as she beats my ass.

I really wish I had my daggers right now. The sword isn’t really my best weapon. I’m not terrible with it but I’m definitely not going to beat Abina.

‘Pay attention,’ Spin shouts before Abina’s blade slaps the back of my hand hard.

“Ow!” I whine barely able to keep a hold of the grip.

‘You are not helping!’ I say, just as she swings at me again. I’m just fast

enough to avoid the strike completely.

“Good, your reflexes seem to be fast for a human,” she says and I growl under my breath. I’m not sure why but the fact that she is beating me so thoroughly is actually pissing me off. Even though I know in my head that she is an amazing dragon guard. My pride thought for just a moment that she wouldn’t be this far out of my league.

‘Someone is delusional. There is no way in hell that you will ever beat her. You haven’t even won against Henry yet,’ Spin says and I flip him off in my head instead of saying anything, staying completely focused on Abina’s next move.

“I was impressed by your fighting in the ring but it seems different now,” Abina comments, pulling back for a moment.

“Well for one, I’m better with my daggers, and for two I’m not fighting for my life. I don’t actually want to hurt you,” I tell her and she has the nerve to chuckle.

“I see. Then I guess I will just have to make you fight for your life,” she says before lunging at me so quickly I barely have time to roll out of the way.

“I know you are trying to help, but can’t we talk about this—” I say but instead of answering she swings her sword again. The wind from the blade whizzing by kisses my face and has me blinking in shock at her once I get to my feet again.

‘Looks like you better take this seriously or you’re gonna have a new crack in your ass,’ Spin snarks from where he is watching a safe distance away on a branch.

‘No shit!’ I tell him before shutting the wall between our minds. I don’t have time to listen to his snarky comments while facing off against Abina because she is not fucking around. As shocked as I was at first, now I’m feeling kind of excited facing such a terrifying opponent on my own.

“Now it looks like you are finally taking me serious,” Abina says before moving towards me quickly. I don’t think I have ever seen someone move so quickly.

My body reacts on its own as she swings her sword down on me and I block her just in time. I have to use both hands one on the grip and one on the flat surface of the blade to withstand the impact but my muscles are still screaming when she backs off. Adrenaline rushing through me as I move off to the side trying to give myself a second to catch my breath before her next attack. Right now I am completely on defense and that kind of pisses me off,

but there is no denying that Abina's skills far surpass my own.

"You didn't really give me a choice since you are trying to cut off my head," I tell her, backing up a few more steps and mirroring her as she moves left. Now we look like we are circling each, but I'm just trying to give myself time to think. Unfortunately for me Abina is having none of that and before I can blink she is a blur moving towards me.

Fuck.

I block once again with my sword but this time she doesn't stop there. She kicks out with her long legs and before my body can react I'm flat on my back in the grass with Abina sitting on top of me, the tip of her sword aimed at my throat.

"You lasted longer than most, but you never even tried to hit me once," she says, but my mind has gone completely in the opposite direction. I'm breathing like I ran a marathon and it's not because she is heavy, I'm actually surprised because of her height and muscles that she is light. That might just be because I'm used to Henry sitting on me when he wins a fight.

"Daria," she says and I blink only to find her face right over mine, her lips mere inches away. I have this alarming urge to grab her and kiss her and I'm not sure what to do with it so I just stare at her beautiful face like an idiot. "Are you okay?" Her breath on my face drives the need even more but I think she might actually kill me if I try something like that.

Get it together Daria.

"I'm fine, now that you have seen I'm able to fight still, perhaps we should get going. I don't want Henry with those bastards any longer than he has to be," I say, and she frowns but quickly gets off of me and offers me a hand up.

"You are right. But we will have a practice match every morning from now on so that we can improve your skills. By the time we reach our destination there should be no enemies that can stand against you, and if there are any I will take care of them for you. I will be your sword from now on Daria, wield me well," she says, kissing the back of my hand before dropping it and walking off towards camp.

My face heats up and I'm not sure why. Her sincerity in offering her services surprises me but maybe it's simply because I'm the Prince's mate? That would make sense. If something were to happen to me then I'm not sure they would be able to mate again. Actually I'm not sure what the rules are, no one ever talks about the mating rules in general but fated mates is even more

rare.

'Stop daydreaming and let's go. No matter what the reason she has for coming along it's better for us to have someone that strong on our side,' Spin comments and I nod my head in agreement.

'You're right. Whatever the reason is, she is here and willing to help and that's all that matters,' I tell him before walking off in the direction Abina headed.

Now if I can just get my crazy feelings under control and stop acting like a moron we might actually have a chance.

'Good luck with that,' Spin snarks as he flies by and hits me with his wing.

Why did I bring him along?

We have been walking for about a half a day and so far we have avoided the simple rope traps; like the one that got me the first night; along with some covered pits, and even a few bear traps meant to snap our ankles. I'm even more glad that Abina is here since she is the one that noticed most of them ahead of time, but what I want to know is who had time to set up all this shit? The bear traps I could believe a hunter put out here but the others, there are just too many for it to be hunters.

This is really a lot of effort just to kill me off.

'Hey watch where you are going,' Spin says, pulling me from my thoughts. Just as I'm about to snark back my ankle catches on something and I fall to the ground. Spin snickers and I flip him off but when I look back to see what it was that got me the first arrow hit the ground right between my legs, digging deep into the ground. Looking at that I know that arrow was meant to be a kill or maim shot just from the sheer force of impact.

'Don't just sit there move!' Spin shouts grabbing the pack on my back he pulls me to my feet and I start running as I hear more bolts echoing behind me. Abina is scouting ahead so I'm on my own as I run for my life.

I'm breathing hard as silence takes over the forest signaling that the arrows are finally done. Leaning up against a tree I take stock of my body making sure nothing hit me. Knowing the people we are dealing with the tips were probably poisoned.

'Thanks Spin,' I say and he comes down and lands on my shoulder.

'You owe me jam when we get to civilization once again,' he says and I just shake my head.

'Fine, you did save me, so I guess you deserve it,' I say with a sigh.

"I heard a noise, are you alright?" Abina says, appearing out of nowhere. I jump a little but I'm kind of getting used to the fact that she is so quiet. Her face is full of concern but still as beautiful as ever.

"Yeah I just hit a trip wire and almost got skewed by some arrows, but I managed to get out of the way," I tell her pointing back to where there is a small trail of arrows stuck in the ground. She frowns when she sees them and walks over quickly to snatch one out of the ground.

The head shines in the sun as she studies it carefully. I wonder what exactly is going through her head as she sniffs it and scowls more fiercely.

"The tips are made from dragon scales which are able to pierce through skin as if it is nothing and they are also laced with Winter's Gloss to make them even more deadly," she says before snapping the arrow and tossing it on the ground in anger.

"Apparently they aren't just trying to slow me down anymore they are just trying to kill me outright now," I say with a sigh trying to make light of the situation. It is a good thing that I am strong and know a bit about what I'm doing. I can't imagine people with no survival skills trying to come through here, they would die very quickly.

"I'm concerned that things are only going to get worse from here," she says, walking over to stand in front of me once more. Her almond eyes look me over for a few seconds before she sighs. "From now on I want you to stay in my shadow, it's the only way that I can protect you." With the serious expression on her face, how can I argue with her?

'If she's in front, that's the best shield you could ever have,' Spin comments and I get that. It would be the smartest thing to do, but I don't want Abina to get hurt either. We may not have started out on the best of terms but I respect her and like her now. *'If you respect her then you should listen to her.'*

'Why are you only smart when I don't want you to be?' I sigh, because there is no beating his logic.

"Fine. But when I get strong enough to beat you we walk side by side," I tell her and she gives me a smile.

"I will look forward to that day," she says, giving me an approving nod.

“Now let us go, it will take us at least three days to get to Tranquil on foot and with these traps it may take longer having to go around.”

“That’s just to the border right? Then how long before we reach the castle?” I ask. Not having traveled much or even studied a map of Estonia as much as I should have, my idea of the distance and the actual distance are probably two different things.

“I would say another two or three days as long as we don’t run into too much trouble. It is hard to estimate since I usually shift and fly but I know that you do not wish that kind of attention to be on us. It is too bad that your small one can’t also help you blend with the surroundings,” she says more freely speaking than she usually does.

“I don’t think we have ever tried that before. What do you think Spin is it possible?” I ask out loud forgetting to hide the fact that we can communicate. There is no point trying to hide it when we are going to be with each other for days on end and I think that I can trust Abina to keep our secret.

‘No. I can’t spread my abilities to you, that’s not how our bond works,’ he says, swooping down to land on my shoulder.

“He says our bond doesn’t work that way,” I tell her and she nods her head as if already suspecting that would be the case.

“How is it you can talk to him? Can you talk to other snapdragons as well?” she asks as we start walking slowly through the woods.

“So it’s kind of an odd occurrence, Spin and I bonded when he bit me when I was young and he is the only one I can talk to. Rye can talk to all snapdragons though, well except Spin,” I explain, watching my feet so that I don’t stumble on any rocks or branches.

“It’s interesting how you and he have a similar talent,” she says and I thought the same thing when I found out too. But I’m just a lowly human in the first place, I technically shouldn’t have any magical like talents in the first place.

“I have no clue,” I say with a shrug but since I’m behind her there is no way she can see it so I’m basically just shrugging for myself.

“Are you from Areola originally?” she asks, apparently in a chatty mood.

“No, I’m not sure where I was born, but when I was five or six I woke up here and Henry found me and took me in. From that day he raised me without a single thought for himself,” I tell her and my heart clenches thinking about my dad and how he might be being treated right now.

“We will get him back for you Little Spark, you will be able to hug your

father again, I swear it,” she insists and I hope with all my heart that she is right.

“What about you?” I ask, wanting to know more about the beautifully strong warrior in front of me.

“I was born and raised in Areola, I started out as a maid when I was young and then picked up a sword and never put it back down again. It seems like it was always my destiny to fight and defend my homeland and the people I care about. Though all of my family is gone now, I have other people I care about now,” she says, and I can just imagine a young Abina holding a sword for the first time and smiling.

“Is it rude to ask how old you are?” I ask. She is probably at least five years older than me but I’m not sure the exact number.

“I will tell you but you will probably be shocked, dragons live very long lives,” she says pausing to look at me over her shoulder. “I just celebrated my fifty-fourth year a few months back.”

“No way!” I say before I can stop myself. I blink and then look her up and down trying to see any sign that she is that old.

‘*Close your mouth you look stupid,*’ Spin snarks but I’m too shocked to even yell at him.

Fifty-four! That’s almost as old as Henry! Damn she looks good!

“Now that you are mated to the Princes your aging will slow down to where it looks as if it’s paused. That way you can live as long as your mates, because if you die they will too,” she says and I’m shocked once again.

“Wait. What do you mean if I die they die?”

“Did no one explain the basics of mating to you?” she asks, and as I recall both some of the staff and Xander tried to explain a few things but a lot of it went in one ear and out the other.

“I don’t think I’m a very good student when it comes to loads of information all at once,” I say and I hear Spin snicker.

‘*You should have just stopped at I’m not a good student,*’ he says, laughing loudly in my head.

‘*Shut up, Jackass. It’s not like you knew all this either,*’ I tell him before looking back at Abina. She is looking at me more curiously than anything and my face heats wondering if she thinks I’m just a stupid kid compared to her.

“Well we have a long trip ahead of us, why don’t I tell you more about the things you need to know,” she suggests, giving me a small smile.

“I would appreciate it.”

I have a feeling I'm about to learn a lot of things I didn't want to know.
But it beats walking in complete silence.

Mates are even a bigger pain in the ass than I thought.

CHAPTER TEN



I wanted to stay behind to make sure that Rye was okay but I didn't think leaving Lo and Xander on their own was a good idea, and Bast wouldn't let anyone else near the sleeping man. Watching those two interact, a white hot ache forms in my chest and I hate it. I have no right to be jealous of their closeness but I am. I'm the one that messed everything up with us but I didn't exactly have a choice back then.

Walking through the forest in silence I have nothing to do but think about everything. My mind should be on Daria though and not Bast and the past I can't change. No matter how hard I try though I keep picturing Rye and Bast together like we used to be and it turns my stomach.

Life truly isn't fair.

Pain radiates from my nose as I run into Lo who has come to a complete halt without saying a word. Grabbing my throbbing face I blink and look around and honestly all of the forest looks the same to me. I'm way more at home in the water but that's not on the agenda this trip.

"Oww," I whine.

"You should watch where you are going and quit spacing out," Lo says and Xander nods his head in agreement.

"We have been walking in silence for hours, what else am I supposed to do but think?" I ask.

"I honestly didn't suspect thinking was your strong suit," Xander says with a straight face, making Lo laugh. Frowning, I turn and look out into the forest that seems to go on forever and I wonder how Daria is fairing right now.

I know that she is the toughest woman that I ever had the pleasure of meeting, but with her dad in trouble I can't imagine that she is having an easy time right now. All alone except for her pet mini dragon and on a mission from hell. If she would have just said something to us we would have helped her in a heartbeat, she is our mate after all. As much as she doesn't want to be we would do anything for her.

"Everyone thinks, especially in situations like this when the stakes are high and none of us know what to do," I say before taking a seat on a large tree root and leaning back against the trunk with my hands behind my head. Since we haven't moved in a few minutes I assume that means we are taking a break, which is good. As much as I'm fit I'm not used to walking through the woods like this and my boots are starting to dig at my feet. Flying would have been much faster than trying to follow after Daria on foot like this.

Without another word Xander takes a seat on a different root and lets out a small sigh. I'm actually surprised that he has made it this far without complaint. Not only is he very much a bookworm but Hailstone is in the north and the temperatures are much cooler there. An ice dragon like him is probably overheating in this weather.

"Oh brave guide, do you know if there is any water nearby? I don't know about you but I'm parched," I say and Lo scowls at me over the map in his hands before looking back at it. Even with a map I'm not sure how he can tell where we are going. It's not as if there are any distinct landmarks that I can see.

“You are a water dragon right? Can’t you just make some?” he snarks but that’s not really how it works. My dragon form can create water but my human form can only manipulate water that is already there. Or at least that has been my experience so far. I’ve heard rumors that when you mate your powers can increase so maybe that will change in the future.

“Hey Xander, you’re the smart one. Have you read anywhere if our elemental magic will increase to where we can make magic in human form instead of just dragon form after we mate?” I ask and he stares at me with his dark eyes for a moment as if pondering my question.

“I do think that is a possibility, there is a lot that is still unknown about fated mates since it’s a pretty rare occurrence. We will just have to experiment after the bond is complete to really see the expansion of our abilities,” he says with a slight smile on his face as if he can’t wait to do all the nerdy things.

“Is that your way of saying you can’t make water?” Lo asks, his tone more than a little dry.

“I can’t make water. Sorry I just got off track with my thoughts,” I say, closing my eyes and taking a few deep breaths.

“But what about the dragons at the Games? Didn’t they make water and other things?” Lo asks but that is just a bit of show for the humans. Dragons know differently.

“Actually the Earth elements who are rare and come from Areola only manipulated the materials that were already there and the same for fire and water. If even a small amount is present then we can manipulate it but it has to be there first,” Xander explains, while I listen to the forest around me and push my hearing to the limits searching.

There it is.

The slight sound of water trickling down either a stream or river. It’s about two hundred yards to the east of us right now. Still a bit of a hike but at least we could get a drink and cool down. The only one that really packed for this trip is Lo and I don’t think that he thought about the rest of us when he did.

“I found water two hundred yards to the east of here, I think we should head that way, get some water and regroup, otherwise we aren’t going to make it much further today,” I suggest and Xander nods his head in agreement. Lo looks hesitant to stray from the course he has in mind but ultimately agrees in the end.

“We can’t break for long since Daria has an entire day ahead but I agree that we won’t get far without water,” he says with a sigh before waving his arm at me. “Take the lead, I don’t have dragon senses.”

“Okay.”

Getting up from my fairly comfortable seat I stretch before turning and heading in the direction that I heard the water earlier. Lo and Xander silently follow behind me and I wish even more that I would have stayed with the other group because at least fighting with Raider would have been entertaining. Instead I’m stuck with the silent scholar and the brooding human.

“Lo why don’t you tell us a little bit about yourself since you have interest in our mate. Knowing Daria the little bit that I do I’m betting that means we will be stuck with you the rest of our lives,” I say just hoping for a little conversation.

“My family is influential among humans, but I hate them. The only decent one is my grandmother, even my younger sisters have been tainted by greed and social status. I’ve known Daria for a long time, we actually met in woods much like these. She saved me from sharing the same fate as the rest of my family by becoming my best friend. I’ll always be grateful for that,” he says and I can hear the affection that he has for her in the tone he uses. For some reason it doesn’t make me jealous though. It just has me wishing that I will have a chance to get to know her and love her too.

“Seems our Firefly has a knack for saving people without even knowing it—” I say just as something wraps tightly around my ankle and I find myself flying through the air. My back hits a tree and the impact stings as I start swinging, held in the air by a rope.

“Fuck,” I say as the blood starts to rush to my head as I look down at Lo and Xander who are staring up at me in shock and surprise. “Don’t just stand there, cut me down.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think there would be traps out this far,” Lo says as he walks over to the tree the rope is tied to and cuts it.

Now that I’m free falling I’m wondering if there would have been a safer way to do this without me hitting the ground.

“I got you,” Xander says, jumping up and catching me like I’m a princess before I can hit the ground. Not something I expected from him but I’m grateful.

“My hero,” I say, giving him a sloppy kiss on the cheek in thanks and

then I hit the ground with a thud.

“Ouch. What was that for?” I say taking the rope off of my ankle before tossing it to the side and getting to my feet. I reach back and rub the pain in my tailbone groaning a bit from the ache I feel.

“I’m not into that kind of thing,” he says looking uncomfortable.

“It was a thank you kiss on the cheek, it’s not like I was hitting on you,” I say and he just shakes his head.

“What I mean to say is that I’m not good with affection that isn’t family or Daria. I just don’t feel comfortable receiving it. Not that I think there is anything wrong with any kind of relationship dynamics. I don’t want you getting the wrong idea about me. I don’t hate people like that,” he explains and I never thought about it sounding that way.

“It’s okay, I’m sorry for making you feel uncomfortable when you were nice enough to catch me. I like to joke and tease but I won’t push boundaries that people set like that if I know ahead of time,” I tell him seriously not wanting him to feel weird around me.

“Thank you, I’m sorry I dropped you,” Xander says.

“Well as fun as it is to watch you two be awkward we should probably keep going but this time I will take the lead to watch for traps and you just point me in the right direction of the water,” Lo says and I am one hundred percent on board with that plan.

“We just need to keep going this way,” I say pointing straight ahead. Lo turns and heads out in the direction I point and I give a good ten foot gap before following after him with Xander next to me.

My back is throbbing as I walk and I really wish that Rye was here right now. A little bit of healing love would be awesome. Even if I am a little jealous of the way he and Bast are getting close, I still love Rye. He is the youngest and most fragile of all of us. It’s almost impossible not to love him. I wish that I would have made more of an effort to get to know him again while the Games were going on, but like always I was too busy chasing a woman. It’s worth it since she turned out to be my fated mate but I also have to share the rest of my life with the others too if things go according to plan.

Which means at some point I’m going to have to hash things out with Bast about the past. Wounds will be opened once again and it’s going to be ugly, but I don’t want to live with this weighing me down anymore. I’m not expecting his forgiveness right away, I’m sure I will have to work for it, but I’m more than willing.

“Almost there,” Lo says from up ahead and I can see a break in the trees up ahead, and the rushing water is much louder now.

“How’s your back?” Xander asks as we step through and find ourselves next to a fast moving river. “Let me look at it in case we need to wash it.”

“It’s probably just bruised but okay,” I say, tossing off my cloak and the tunic underneath, I sit on a boulder by the edge of the river and let Xander examine my wound.

“Can you bring some water over and let it run down your back? You have a few cuts that should probably be rinsed out,” he says and I trust him, though he may not have a lot of practical experience; he’s read both his family library and the one in Areola.

“Alright, incoming,” I warn before reaching my hand towards the water and directing it with my magic to come my way. It’s easy now after years of practice pulling the small amount of water out of the river and into the air. I can feel the warmth of my magic running through me as I aim the cool water at my back and then release the hold.

A shiver racks me from the temperature difference between my hot skin and the cold water and it stings when it hits the cuts but I also find myself feeling a bit refreshed as well. Xander uses something to pat my back dry and I try not to flinch at the sting.

When I glance up to see what Lo is up to having been silent for a while I see that he is staring at me.

“Again,” Xander says and I assume he means the water so I do it again and Lo’s green eyes widen as he watches the water move from the river to my back once more.

“Not used to seeing dragon magic?” I ask and he shakes his head and fixes his shocked expression.

“Growing up in the human territory there weren’t many chances to see dragon powers up close like this. The Games, it felt different for some reason, like it should be used there. But watching you use it so casually like that just hits different I guess,” he says with a shrug.

“That makes sense I guess. The Games are like a big spectacle, a show put on for everyone. It’s expected that it would be something fantastic. I assure you though dragons use magic in their everyday lives as well,” Xander explains and I just nod in agreement. For us this is our normal lives, well, aside from being in the middle of the forest on a mission to save our mate.

“You’re right, sorry for staring,” he says, clearing his throat and looking

away.

“Guess Xander and I aren’t the only awkward ones,” I tease before pulling more water from the river and this time directing it into my mouth.

“I guess not. It’s weird, now that I cut ties with my family for good I feel a little amiss on how to act,” Lo comments almost to himself.

“You don’t have to act any kind of way with us. We may be royalty but I hope more than that for Daria’s sake we can be friends. You and I got along just fine at the dinners. I’m sure it will be the same anywhere else. Just relax and be yourself and we will do the same,” I say, giving him what I hope is a reassuring smile.

“Thanks, that actually does make me feel a little better,” he says. “You think you could spot me some water?”

“Coming right up,” I tell him before pulling more water from the river and aiming for his mouth. I have to hold myself back from playing a trick and splashing it on his face. It would have been funny but we kind of are walking a tightrope with our newfound friendship so I will save that for later.

“I think your back should be okay. They weren’t bleeding too bad to begin with and now that they are clean I would just let them dry in the sun for a bit and then you should be good to go, though I can’t do anything about the pain you will probably feel,” Xander says before moving back a bit.

“It’s fine I can handle it until the others catch up then I will beg Rye to heal me,” I say, turning so my back is completely in the sun. I’m not sure how long we plan to rest here or even what the plan is to try to catch Daria but if the rest of the way is filled with traps like the one I ran into I don’t have much faith in us Princes getting very far.

“Can I see your map?” I ask and Lo looks at me curiously for a second before pulling his map from his pack and handing it to me. “Can you point out approximately where we are?”

Just like I thought.

“I’m going to suggest something and you can turn me down if you want but I think it will be the safest way into Tranquil,” I start and Lo nods for me to continue. “I think that we should stick close to this river and follow it all the way there. It’s not the fastest route and I doubt that is what Daria is doing but neither Xander or I have any experience with navigating the forest so the more traps we run into the more we will inevitably slow you down.”

“As much as it pains me, I’m in agreement. I could name all the plants in these woods but I couldn’t spot a trap in front of my face,” Xander admits.

“It looks like it might add an extra day on to the trip but not much more than that. If Daria is slowed by the traps then we still have a chance to catch her before she reaches the castle. It’s not a bad plan and this way we always have a water source close by,” Lo says with a sigh.

“Agreed.”

“Then put your clothes on and let's get moving, we are losing daylight,” Lo says, picking up his pack and heading north.

“I guess the boss has spoken,” I say and Xander nods.

Don't fly too fast firefly, we are right behind you.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The more traps we avoid the angrier I become. Someone spent a lot of time and effort setting all this up to kill my mate and when I find them they will no longer be breathing. What I don't understand is what she could have done to piss off someone this much. I get that she has an attitude and could rub people the wrong way, but to this level. I just don't see it.

Actually now that I think about it I have been along for the ride on this trip but I never asked her anything. I know her father was kidnapped but by who and for what purpose? Having a mate is strange. I would never just follow someone into a dangerous situation without more information before.

"Do you know who has taken your father?" I ask before I can stop

myself. We are still walking slowly through the forest, but it's almost time to stop for the day. I wish we would have made it further but between the traps and the wild animals we have practically been crawling. It's making both of us frustrated.

"I didn't tell you?" she says, and I glance over my shoulder to see a bewildered expression on her face.

"No, I just know he was taken and we are chasing the men into Tranquil," I tell her and she sighs.

"Well I don't have any proof but I suspect Rye's father has something to do with this. The men that took Henry had Tranquil insignia on their clothes and he made no qualms about disliking me during the Games, but again I have no proof so they also could be citizens that acted on their own," she explains and I'm a little shocked that the King would be so obvious in his treachery.

He has always been a ruthless cunning man who put on a good show for the people but behind closed doors became a monster to those closest to him. I've always felt sympathy for Rye and his mother but as a lowly palace guard there was never any way for me to help them. Outside threats were what I was supposed to protect them from not inside. Things have changed now though.

"Why do you think he hates you?" I ask.

"I have no clue. Maybe he doesn't like red hair? Your guess is as good as mine though. He kidnapped Spin during the Games for his own amusement and I know that he put his hands on Rye. Personally I would like to kick his ass for calling me a whore but I don't want to lose my head yet. There are still so many things I want to do yet in life," she says with a laugh but I would not put it past the King to set her up like that.

"Like bonding with all your mates," I say. I know I shouldn't bring that subject up since she doesn't even know I'm one of her mates but I just have this deep need to connect with her as a mate. An urging from my dragon that is consistent and starting to grate on my nerves. Apparently now that we have a mate my dragon can't help but be greedy for more, without even knowing if Daria even likes women.

"The whole mate thing is a lot to take in. I mean it's not that I don't like them or feel drawn to them somehow. I do. It's just over my head with how complicated it all is. Like how would it even work? Would they just pass me around from kingdom to kingdom hoping that I can pump out a baby for each

of them? Or would they come to me in Areola? There are a lot of things to consider and I don't have the brain power for it right now," she says and I understand. My heart flutters a little knowing that she isn't turning down the idea entirely just putting it on hold for now.

"I don't know much about it either but if you would like to talk about it I will listen," I tell her, trying to offer my ear as a friend and confidant. Perhaps if I become closer like that the next step of becoming mates won't be that hard?

"So Rye told me he's not my mate and I slept with him anyway," she says and I stop dead in my tracks to turn and look at her in shock.

"What do you mean he isn't your mate?" I ask ignoring the part where she slept with him because I think there is something wrong here. There is no way that he isn't her mate.

"It doesn't make sense to me either because there are five flowers and five Princes right but he swears that he isn't one of them," she says with a shrug.

"Take off your shirt," I say, crossing my arms over my chest. Seeing the tattoo is the only way that I can confirm what she says is true.

"We are kind of in the middle of—" she starts but doesn't finish. Instead she takes off her pack and then the shirt she is wearing. She ditched the leather she had over it a while back, complaining about being too hot she put it in her pack.

Dropping my arms I walk closer and inspect the outline of the flowers starting at her elbow and going up her arm and over her shoulder. Lightly I run my fingers over the design counting the flowers as I go there are in fact five of them on her arm. Her skin is soft and her body gives a shiver at my touch, which makes me want to touch her more, but I just continue the gentle brushing.

"You have six flowers," I tell her when I spot the white one on her back that is filled in unlike the rest. Which means that must be Rye's mark since he is the only dragon she has slept with. I'm not sure if telling her that now will make her feel better so I will keep that detail to myself.

"Wait. Then who is the other flower for? I swear I didn't touch any other male dragons," she says, staring at the design with wide eyes. "And why did he say that he didn't feel the burn when the first touch happened during the ceremony?"

"I'm not sure about either question. Put your shirt back on and let's continue. We should make camp in a couple hours and then perhaps we could

talk about this more in depth,” I suggest backing away and turning so that she can redress. Not that it matters since I have seen her body already, but hopefully it will help me fight my dragon to resist more.

I want her. She’s mine, and I want to make her completely mine, but I can’t. Not yet.

“Thanks. I feel better about Rye now. Not that I don’t care about the others but I just feel the need to take care of him. Since the first time I saw his cute face in the castle I just wanted to be around him. That’s why I thought it was strange he said we weren’t mates,” she says, and I feel jealous of the fondness that she talks about him with. I want her to talk about me that way.

Don’t be this way Abina. Being by her side is more than enough.

“I have known the Princes since they were young, Rye has always been the most gentle. Some of that is because he is a healer; they aren’t meant to be fighters. There is a reason the kingdom is called Tranquil; they are known for being peaceful. I’m not sure what happened to the current King that he is such a monster but it started after Rye was born,” I say, giving her some of my knowledge about the world she is now a part of.

“I kind of have an idea about that but I promised to keep it to myself,” she says and I’m curious what she means but I won’t press her to confide in me. Even though I feel closer to her now we are still practically strangers it makes more sense that she would keep things to herself.

Logic, of course, doesn't mean my dragon and I like it.

“That is fine. I will not pry,” I tell her even as my dragon grumbles and pouts inside of me. I’m finding her to be more active than she has been in the last fifty years to be a little disconcerting.

“Thanks. How much further until we make camp?” she asks changing the subject.

“I thought we might walk for another hour and search for a water source to camp near,” I suggest and she sighs. “Are you tired? Do you need to rest?”

“It’s not that. Spin is complaining that he is hungry and his wings are tired. The thought of listening to that for another hour is what has me sighing,” she says and I can’t help but smile, once again witnessing the closeness of her and her pet. They act more like siblings than anything, it’s quite amusing.

“If he wants, he can rest on my shoulder for the rest of the walk today, unfortunately I can’t do anything about the food until we make camp,” I tell

her and almost before I finish my sentence I hear his wings flapping and feel the breeze as he lands on my shoulder and rubs his head against mine.

His weight is more than I expected, though it doesn't bother me much. I wonder how Daria can walk around with him and not have any problems. Most humans would find this to be a burden. She must be much stronger than she appears. If I train her more it won't be much time at all before she can face dragons without having to fear their strength. At least in a physical fight, magic I can't help her with since my powers are only good for combat.

There is more than one reason that I became the head guard at the castle, but the biggest is that my skills weren't useful for anything else and I was not about to become some nobleman's mistress. I was lucky that the old head guard found me in the forest taking out my frustrations on the trees and offered me a spot as an apprentice guard. Otherwise I'm not sure how my life would have turned out. I know for sure I wouldn't have a chance to meet my mate, so there is even more to thank him for.

Perhaps when we get back to Areola I could take Daria to meet him and have a meal together once again? I've been so busy the last few years that I haven't checked on my mentor in his retirement. That makes me quite the neglectful student. I wonder what Daria would think about that? Most likely she would frown and say I should get my ass over there. As she seems like the kind of person who would go to the ends of the earth for the people she loves. The fact that I can't even spare a few hours to fly to the edge of Inferno really says something about my priorities.

Glancing over my shoulder, I watch as she follows behind me without reservations. She just trusts that I will lead her on the safest path and doesn't question it.

I'll do better, Little Spark, just you wait and see. I'll be worthy of your love and trust.

CHAPTER TWELVE



I *shouldn't have done that. What if Daria finds out and she hates me now.*

Rye's thoughts assault me and make me feel even worse about what we did in that house. Out of the two of us I have more experience; clearly, and I should have been the one to rein myself in. Things with our mate are up in the air as it is, and who knows what her reaction will be to this. She already hates me and that's my own fault, I'm so used to keeping people at arm's length, I didn't even give her a chance.

"Daria isn't going to hate you. If it comes to that I will take the blame so please stop worrying," I tell him and he looks at me with wide eyes.

Apparently he was so lost in his spiral that he forgot I could read his thoughts.

“Personally I don’t think Daria will be bothered by it,” Bast says walking on the other side of Rye. It was our plan to have him sandwiched in the middle just in case that way we can protect him. We may not be battle hardened like a soldier but the two of us have at least had some training unlike Rye who I’m sure is very sheltered.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I think she will just accept it for what it is, a heat of the moment thing that got out of hand. I wouldn’t be too worried about it. Plus no one could ever hate you,” Bast tells him and his cheeks turn red.

He is so starved for love and affection it’s no wonder he practically begged me not to let go.

If only I would have fallen for Rye all those years ago things would have been a lot easier.

Bast’s thoughts are a mixture of regret and sadness and I feel bad for him. Not only did he lose his parents but now he is stuck being tied to the person who broke his heart all those years ago. It’s no wonder at the Games he looked so depressed and kept himself away from everyone.

“Daria is one woman, I don’t think she is going to have a problem with us connecting with each other,” I say and hope that it doesn’t come out in a way that can be misinterpreted. I’m really tired of everyone misunderstanding me just because my tone is more aggressive.

“I think you are right, Daria is very kind. But I still would like to ask her first,” Rye says and I’m fine with that. Not that I think what happened before will happen again. Like Bast said it was just something that got out of control. No one’s fault. It’s not like one time touching Rye will make me fall for him. We’re just in the same mate group now so no reason to be uncomfortable with one another.

Don’t fall for him.

Bast’s thoughts are loud and clear and when I look over he is looking at Rye but also at me and I wonder if he is trying to tell me not to fall for Rye or convince himself. Either way, now isn’t the time to think about this. We have been walking for a while and the forest seems almost too quiet.

“Rye do you think you can talk to any snapdragons? Something about the forest feels off,” I ask and he nods his head before stopping and closing his eyes. I’m not sure what he is doing but right now I can’t hear his thoughts.

Does it have something to do with his power? Maybe because I can't communicate with the small creatures I'm blocked when he tries?

"There is one nearby, he is coming this way so don't frighten him," Rye says just as a small blue snapdragon pops out from behind a tree and slowly makes its way over to land on Rye's arm.

Rye is smiling as he talks with the snapdragon for a few minutes and I can't help but admire how cute he looks. I wish he would smile more often, but I also know why he doesn't. His father is evil. I really hate when his thoughts come into my head, though for some reason he is really good at keeping his true self hidden. Not that my skill would have been able to pick up any of his thoughts, but he still hides and acts uneasy around me. Makes me wonder if my parents got drunk and let my secondary power slip.

Stop thinking about how cute he is when he smiles, this is not the time to get your feelings mixed up. Daria is your mate, Drax broke your heart there is no room to let anyone else in.

Bast thinks before looking away. He and I are so similar in thinking right now it's almost scary. I know what Drax did to him, I've known for years but it's not my place to butt into that mess. Those two will have to figure out how to work through this for Daria's sake. Hell, for all of our sake's this whole arrangement of being connected by one mate is complicated enough without all of us fighting all the time. I know that I'm a bad instigator in this but I'm going to stop letting my anger get the best of me. I've finally connected with long lost friends and I don't have to suffer alone anymore.

"He says the forest is too dangerous right now. Bad men set traps everywhere and that is why most animals are hiding now," Rye tells us and I'm a little taken back that whoever did this would go that far to slow Daria down.

"Ask him if the traps are only between Areola and Tranquil?" I say and Rye and Bast look at me curiously. "There is no way we will make it through the forest avoiding traps, so if the West is clear I'm thinking that we detour that way and go through Inferno because it shares a border with Tranquil as well.

That would actually be a smart move. I don't want anything to happen to Rye if we miss a trap.

Bast thinks and I try to ignore it and wait for him to answer out loud. Hearing thoughts can be annoying to me but having someone constantly read your thoughts I'm sure is down right frustrating. Ignoring people's thoughts

is what I have tried to do my whole life since I can't shut this shit off unless I'm sleeping but it's really not that easy.

How is Daria managing on her own?

"She has her pet with her. Didn't you see them during the Game? They make a great team, I'm sure she is just fine," I answer Rye's question out loud.

"He's right, Rye, she is much better suited to making it through these woods without a problem than we are," Bast tells him, patting him on the back gently.

"Well the snapdragon says that West is clear of traps after a couple of miles. So I think Raider's idea will work the best. We might even be able to catch up to the others since we won't have to fight traps along our route," Rye says plastering on a smile even though both Bast and I know that he is faking it. I'm not going to call him out for pretending to be okay.

"Do you think your friend would be willing to guide us along a safe path West?" Bast asks and Rye communicates with the creature for a moment and then nods his head.

"He says he will, but only to the border of Inferno," Rye tells us and that's fine.

"Once we get to my lands I will have no trouble getting there, I'm just not familiar with these forests," I say. "I do hope you can handle the heat though because the desert isn't for everyone."

I forgot he lives in that hot place. At least Xander isn't here or he wouldn't enjoy his time on this trip. If I get uncomfortable, I'll just hide in my shadows.

Ignoring Bast's thoughts, I shake my head and pray that we don't have any problems reaching the border.

We are actually closer to Inferno than walking through the whole forest to Tranquil, so eight hours of walking later we finally hit the border. You can see the difference immediately: the trees thin out and what you can see is mountains and sand. It may be void of color but this is home. I can feel the temperature even in the evening time is warmer than what I have been experiencing in Areola. My dragon is happy, if even just for a moment to be

back in our homeland.

“Tell your friend thank you,” Bast says to Rye and I nod my head. A few seconds later the little snapdragon takes off back into the forest probably heading back to his home.

“That little guy was very helpful,” Rye beams and I make myself look away before clearing my throat.

“He was. There are desert snapdragons as well but I’m not sure we will run into any today. They tend to be more inland where it’s warmer,” I explain.

“We won’t need them since we have you Raider,” Rye says so innocently with a huge smile. I don’t think he is doing it on purpose but he’s killing me.

I think I might be just as starved for affection as he is. Now that I think about it, only Drax, Xander, and Bast had really loving parents.

“I don’t know about you all but with the sun going down soon I think we should find somewhere to camp tonight and rest up for the long hot walk tomorrow,” Bast suggests and I agree.

“If we walk for another hour there should be a cave near the base of the mountain which will be better for keeping us safe while we sleep,” I say.

How does he know that? Does he have every inch of his land memorized? I’ve barely even left the castle grounds.

“My parents were never around and didn’t really care what I was doing so oftentimes I would just take off and fly to clear my head. I have been to every corner of our kingdom, but I remember this area especially because I got caught in a bad sand storm once and had to seek shelter in the cave. I’m talking about, for two days I just sat there and waited. After that incident where I didn’t have any food or water I made sure to carry an emergency pack on my travels from then on,” I say smiling fondly, remembering that those trips were the times when I felt most at peace, since I didn’t have to listen to other people's thoughts.

“Wow that must have been fun but also lonely,” Rye says and then covers his mouth quickly.

I shouldn’t have said that he already said that he was all alone for a long time. I hope I didn’t make him mad.

“You’re right it would be nice to take trips like that with people I care about. So we will have to do something like this when we aren’t in a hurry to chase down our crazy mate,” I tease Rye hoping my words will reassure him I’m not upset. At least I had the freedom to do whatever I wanted. Rye was

basically held prisoner by his sadist father. I think I would rather take the loneliness than the outright abuse.

“If I were you I wouldn’t call her crazy to her face,” Bast says with a laugh.

“I won’t. I’m not suicidal. Though I have said some pretty awful things to her already so crazy isn’t that bad,” I say with a sigh trying not to think about what an asshole I was to her and everyone else. There is really no excuse, I just get overwhelmed with the voices and lash out. Maybe with some help I can change though?

“I don’t think she would actually kill you. Daria is really nice,” Rye says and I can’t help but laugh.

“She is, but mostly to you. Any other time I saw her interact with people she had this attitude, but with you she turned soft in a heartbeat. It’s not a bad thing, she just treated you gently compared to others,” Bast explains, and from what I saw he isn’t wrong, though with his shadow skills I’m sure he observed much more than I did.

“Plus you are the only one that she slept with even with Drax chasing her around like a dog in heat. That probably means that you are special to her,” I say and he looks at me in shock and then his face falls.

She probably only likes me out of pity. I’m a pathetic dragon that doesn’t even have any wings. How could she possibly want me when the rest of you are perfect?

Rye’s thoughts hit me right in the gut and I regret bringing up the sex. I know he doesn’t have wings, I’ve known since we were teens and my power showed up out of nowhere, but I never thought less of him because of it. Even with dragons things can happen and there is nothing you can do about it. Though I’m sure Rye’s father didn’t waste any time making him feel like shit about it.

“There is nothing wrong with you,” I say but he looks away. Before I can think twice about it, I grab his face and make him stop and look at me. He looks like he is on the verge of tears and it sours my stomach. “Whether you have wings or not, you are still Rye, the sweet person that we all care for. Including Daria. The rest of us may not have physical scars like you but we are far from perfect. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Raider is nicer than he lets on, or he has a thing for Rye and can’t help but make him feel better. Can’t say I blame him.

“Thank you Raider, that does make me feel better,” Rye says and I let go

of his face so we can start moving again. Before I get a couple steps away though he puts his hand on my arm and stops me. Quickly he gets on his tip toes and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“You’re welcome,” I say, stepping back, I turn away feeling my cheeks heat from embarrassment. This is going to be a long trip if he keeps doing things like that.

Feeling a little bit like a third wing.

Bast comments in his head of course, but I’m sure that feeling doesn’t last long when Rye does the same to him and then takes hold of his hand.

“We should get going so it’s not dark when we get there,” Rye says as he starts to pull Bast along behind him in the direction I pointed out earlier.

Nevermind.

Shaking my head I follow after them wondering if either of us are going to make it through the night with Rye being all sweet and innocent.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Tonight we found a small pond to camp next to and I will definitely be taking a dip tonight. I've been sweating for two days in these clothes and I just can't take it anymore. Not to mention that Spin keeps making comments about how he could smell me from miles away. Not like he smells any better. I'm usually the one that has to bathe him so I know his ass is crusty too.

'I am not! Snapdragon's don't sweat,' he complains hearing my thoughts about him.

'Whatever you say,' I tease relaxing while Abina is out hunting for our food for the night. I offered to go with her but she told me just to keep the fire

going and that would be enough help. I get that she can see better in the dark than me and react to the traps faster but it makes me feel useless.

'Just know when you are beat and be grateful that she is here to help us. You would already be dead by now if it wasn't for her,' he says and I roll my eyes.

'I think you would also be dead. Don't forget about the net she had to climb a tree to cut you out of buddy. You are just as useless as me,' I tell him before tossing another log on the fire.

'That was one time! She had to save you dozens of times, or have you forgotten when you insisted that you could go pee on your own and almost fell bare ass naked into a pit with spikes?' he says, reminding me of one of the most embarrassing moments of my life.

Luckily the pit was small enough I could put out my arms and legs to stop myself from falling on the wood spikes but my pants were down under my cheeks and Abina had to fish me out with my white ass hanging out. I wanted to just let go and die at that moment but I didn't. That's how determined I am to save Henry.

'Shut up! We are never speaking about that again! Or you will never see the inside of a jam jar in this lifetime!' I tell him. Even though it's only the two of us and no one can hear our conversation, my face still heats from embarrassment. I don't want to go through that ever again.

When are we going to get out of these fucking woods?

I'll do anything to save Henry but the traps are wearing me down. How did they even have time to plan something like this? There is no way they could predict everything that happened so far, is there? I suppose the time I was sitting around the castle after the Games would have been enough prep time but still. I would rather they just come straight at me and try to kill me, not play all these fucking games. Now that I think about it, I shouldn't be surprised I guess, dragon royalty really likes toying with people. That's why they make the Games so brutal.

Is this like some kind of test to see if I'm worthy of their sons? Another set of games after the tournament is over. If it is, my in-laws are in for a rude awakening. Nah. That doesn't seem right, this has to be some kind of underhanded thing to try and keep me from mating all the Princes.

'You are going to break your brain thinking like that. Why don't you go wash up and I will watch the fire. I can smell your stink over the smoke,' Spin says and I snatch a small stone off the ground and throw it at him making

sure to miss.

'You are a jerk but I do feel gross,' I say before getting up and walking through the bushes that surround our camping spot.

On the other side I find a nice pond that is lit up by the moonlight and looking very inviting. It's surrounded by big boulders and there is the slightest trickle of water from where the river is feeding into the still water. The blackness of the water would be frightening but since I saw it when it was still light out I know where to step so I don't fall and hurt myself.

It takes a few minutes to get my crusty clothes off and my face wrinkles at the thought of putting them back on again but I don't really have a choice. The cool night air hits my skin and gives me goosebumps, but even that feels nice after sweating all day. I dip my toe in the pond water and it's cool but not cold so I'm sure I can survive washing off in it. Lukewarm water at Henry's never bothered me before, however, the water stalls in the castle with the different temperatures that really did spoil me though.

Magic really does make life easier.

The only sounds that can be heard is the water splashing as I quickly get in and dunk myself under. It's chilly at first but it doesn't take much time for my body to adjust to the temperature. I don't have any soap so the only thing I can do is just scrub at my skin and hope that is enough to help with the smell. After a few minutes I'm scrubbed as good as it's going to get, I swim over to a section of boulders and find one I can sit on while still staying mostly submerged. The moss tickles my ass but I ignore it and lean back against the hard surface.

The canopy of trees is open above me and I can see so many stars. It makes me think of Henry and the times we went camping. Even if I had already fallen asleep for the night he would still wake me up long enough to gaze at the stars together. I have no doubt in my mind that he and I will be able to do that again sometime, because I am going to rescue him no matter what it takes.

"Mind if I join you? Dinner is going to be cooking for a bit longer," Abina says, scaring the shit out of me. So much so that my foot slips and I find myself under the surface taking in a mouth full of water.

Two hands grab me under my arms and pull me up where I start hacking and choking on the water that had tried to fill my throat. A warm hand rubs my back and I finally relax enough to remember that I'm naked.

Why is my ass always hanging out around her?

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” she says and I look at her to say that it’s okay but that is the moment that I realize I’m not the only one naked and her warm body is pressed ever so gently up against mine.

“It’s fine,” I manage to squeak out, my voice weirdly high pitched fills me with even more embarrassment and I’m glad that it’s dark so that she can’t see that I’m probably as red as a tomato right now.

“I just wished to also wash up and thought perhaps we could keep each other company. I didn’t know that you would try to drown yourself to get out of it,” she says but unlike her usual straightforward tone she actually sounds like she is teasing me.

“I swear I was just surprised, I’m not trying to get away from you. I promise,” I say and she chuckles slightly under her breath.

“That’s good to know, but does that mean you want to be closer to me instead,” she whispers in my ear and I’m too stunned to speak.

Does she mean what I think she means? Wait. Does Abina like me in like a sexual way?

The hand cupping my ass and pulling me closer kind of makes me think that things are going in that direction. But I don’t want to guess wrong and make things uncomfortable for the rest of the trip. She is absolutely beautiful and I really am attracted to her more than I should be, but I’m not smooth enough to actually make a move. What the hell do I do here?

Almost as if reading my thoughts Abina cups my face and brings her lips close to mine.

Are we gonna kiss?!

“You are very beautiful,” she says, and I close my eyes preparing for our lips to meet. Before they touch though, something large splashes into the water nearby and breaks the moment.

‘Dinner is ready,’ Spin says, flying out of the pond to land on a rock close by.

‘You clam blocking lizard chicken! Get out of here!’ I tell him but it’s too late. Abina is already out of the water and putting her clothes back on.

We didn’t even get to kiss.

‘What? Did I interrupt something?’ Spin asks.

Narrowing my eyes at him, I make my way over to the edge of the pond and flip him off before getting out. The only thing I want to do to him right now is wring his neck while cursing him out so it’s better just to remain silent and not commit murder.

'Don't be that way Daria. If she tried to kiss you once then I'm sure it will happen again,' he says, and I just sigh as I struggle to pull on my under clothes over my wet skin.

'That's not really the point. If you would have waited then it would have already happened,' I tell him slipping my boots on and grabbing my leathers. I will wait to put those back on later after I'm completely dry.

'Yeah, but dinner would have also been burned. We just have different priorities. Mine is my stomach, yours is between your legs,' he says before taking off towards camp.

He's not wrong but he also doesn't need to point it out like that and make me sound like some kind of horny animal. In fact we probably would have stopped at a kiss. I mean I've never been with another woman before and I'm not sure Abina has either so if we did want to take things further we would have to talk it out first. But also should I really be trying to hook up with the person guarding me when I have mates and that jackass Lo waiting on me?

"I caught a few rabbits, I hope that is to your taste," Abina says when I plop down by the fire. Since she has apparently decided to act like nothing happened between us then I guess I should too. Even though I really just want to come out and ask her what is going through her head, I'll wait.

"That's perfect. Thank you," I say, giving her a smile when she hands me the stick with the roasted rabbit on it. It smells good and my stomach actually grumbles as I bring it up to my mouth.

'See aren't you glad we went with my stomach,' Spin teases taking his own stick and flying over to perch in a tree nearby.

'No.'

Taking the first bite I'm surprised at the flavor of the meat. It was cooked over the fire pit without any spices and yet it tastes great. I was probably hungrier than I thought, but I still don't agree with Spin. You can still kiss on an empty stomach.

A sigh leaves my lips as I continue to pout while finishing my food and Abina gives me a look, but I just smile. It's not her fault that Spin is a jerk or that my brain is in chaos right now. So I'm not going to take my sour mood out on her.

"The food is really good, thanks for all your hard work," I tell her and she nods, before looking back at the fire.

The light from the flames is casting shadows on her face and making her even more alluring. It's hard for me to believe that she is actually still single.

Her stern voice might make her seem unapproachable but once you get to know her she is quite kind. I can't believe that no one took the time to figure that much out and snatch her up. Man or woman anyone would look at her and see that she is gorgeous right?

'You better stop staring, you are starting to drool,' Spin says, swooping down to land next to Abina instead of me. Probably knows that if he did I would knock his ass over.

'I'm not drooling, I'm just admiring her features,' I tell him before looking at the fire.

'Say what you will, but I know drool when I see it,' he snarks, and if he wasn't sitting so close to Abina I would throw a rock at him.

'I should have left you at home,' I say and he scoffs.

'You would have died already. You need me, so stop pouting about a stupid kiss and give me something sweet from the pack,' he says and now it's my turn to scoff.

'You really should have thought about who is in charge of the sweets before you acted like a turd tonight,' I tell him sticking my tongue out at him.

"It's funny to watch you two talk. You make the strangest expressions with your face. Must be something really fun," Abina says and I feel my face heat up. I'm not used to other people noticing when I talk to Spin. I can't even imagine what my face looks like when I'm yelling at him in my head. It must be something really creepy.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude and not include you," I tell her but she just shakes her head.

"No it's fine, I actually enjoy watching all the different emotions cross your face when you are talking to him. It's amusing," she says and I really just want this day to be over.

One embarrassing thing after another has me wanting to hide my face in shame.

"I'm glad that I could entertain you. I'm going to get some sleep," I say, flopping on my side and putting my back towards the fire. I got nothing left today.

"Goodnight Little Spark."

"Goodnight."

Please let tomorrow go more smoothly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



I've read about camping in books but I've never actually spent a night in the wild before. It is both exciting and terrifying. There are so many unfamiliar sounds that I am constantly looking around to make sure nothing is coming to eat us. On the surface I'm trying to keep my calm demeanor but internally I'm wishing that I was back in the library talking to Daria about history and things while she lays across the table and pretends to listen.

Or even better if I had her hands tied behind her back and she was bent over the table reading out loud while I pound her from behind. Any time she stops I get to slap her ass and watch her cheek turn red.

“Are you okay, Xander? Your face is looking a little flush,” Drax asks, pulling me from my less than gentlemanly thoughts.

“I’m fine. It’s just been a long day,” I tell him, leaning back on my hands and staring up at the night sky.

As strange as it is to be wandering around in the forest as we are, Lo has actually turned out to be a fairly competent guide, and the idea to follow the river has kept us away from any more traps. I’ve also enjoyed seeing all the plants and animals that I read about over the years and found that to be more interesting. Though this isn’t a sightseeing trip I’m still learning many things.

“I feel you there. It still sucks that we can’t fly to Tranquil and be done with it. It’d only take us a couple hours to get to the castle that way,” Drax complains, and I agree flying would have been much more efficient however we would be discovered quickly as well.

We are definitely pampered Princes.

“You’ll survive. We are making good time following the river; we might even beat Daria,” Lo says, throwing another log on the fire.

“How do you figure we will get ahead of her? She has a head start and she might have taken the river route as well,” I ask. My curiosity of his thought process getting the better of me.

Though Lo may be a decent guide he is not very personable for being from the upper class of humans. His answers are usually curt and he doesn’t seem to want to make unnecessary conversation; though Drax keeps trying.

“I know Daria probably better than anyone; that’s how I know that she is taking the straight path to Henry no matter the obstacles,” he says and from the little I know of her he is probably correct in his assumptions.

“She is stubborn, isn’t she,” Drax says with a laugh.

I’m not sure how he can be so upbeat in a situation like this but I almost envy him. Being carefree would be nice right now, instead I’m worried about all the possible dangers that lurk in the forest surrounding us. I’ve read too many books to think of this excursion as fun, even if seeing the plants is educational I would prefer to see them in a garden.

If I’m having this kind of reaction I wonder how Rye is holding up.

“How do you think the others are doing?” I ask, wondering if we should have waited for them instead of splitting up.

“Personally, I hope Raider gets caught in all the traps. Arrogant asshole,” Lo comments and Drax laughs.

“I’m sure between the three of them they are okay. Raider might be an

asshole but he's not stupid and Bast will make sure nothing happens to Rye. Over all they probably have the best team since they have a healer," Drax says and I hadn't thought about that.

If there are threats Bast could hide them and I know Raider is a good fighter compared to the rest of us. Maybe Drax is right and they do have the better team? They were getting along well when we took off, even Raider seemed concerned for Rye. I'm sure that they are doing just fine now that I think about it.

"So what is our plan for food?" Drax asks as his stomach growls loudly.

"I can hunt but it's not going to be the fancy food you all are used to in the castle," Lo says, getting to his feet. His tone is hostile which is confusing because I thought he and Drax got along well at the banquets.

"It's going to be hard to hunt at night. Perhaps Drax you could grab some fish from the river for tonight and then tomorrow Lo can hunt along the way," I suggest hoping to lower some of the tension in our camp.

"Oh yeah, I can do that no problem," Drax says confidently, getting up and strutting over to the river.

This should be interesting to watch.

"Thanks," Lo says, taking a seat once again. Perhaps he was angry because he didn't want to fail at his hunting trip and look bad in front of us? I'm not sure, but he shouldn't worry about that. Drax already looked like an idiot when he fell into the trap and we moved on from that so no big deal.

"How many do we need?" Drax calls over his shoulder.

"That depends on the size. Smaller ones we might need six or more, larger ones we might only need three," I tell him and I hear the water moving from where he is trying to manipulate the fish onto the shore. It's a good thing we can see well at night and the moon is so bright or he wouldn't have a chance.

"Can I ask why you seem to be so hostile towards Drax now? I can understand why you don't have much to say to me. We hardly know each other, but I thought a friendship had bloomed between the two of you at the banquets," I ask Lo in a low voice and he sighs.

"It's not like I hate the guy; Raider is the only one I want to punch so far. I just feel like I have to compete with you guys for Daria's affection now and it rubs me the wrong way," he says and I know that they had a relationship before we became mates so I can understand his frustration.

"You should know that none of us expected things to turn out this way

with all of us being tied to one mate for the rest of our lives. It's hard to digest, and I don't blame you for feeling uncomfortable, but please remember that Daria is the only one that gets to decide. Making an enemy out of us won't do you any good in the end," I tell him just as Drax shouts.

"Holy shit! This one is huge!" he says happily and I can't help but smile and shake my head.

"He really is like a big puppy," Lo comments and I nod my head in agreement.

"I'm not sure he is as cute, or innocent as a puppy, but as you can see no matter how you treat him he is still going to act the same," I say with a shrug.

"I see what you mean. No point in me being hostile when it's no one's fault this happened. I'm the one that got pissed and left. I'll just have to hope she will give me a chance to make it up to her, because I'm never going to let her go," he says, tossing another log on the fire. "Plus we are stuck with each other for now so we might as well work together to help Daria."

"Xan look at these fish!" Drax declares proudly, bringing three large fish over to the fire for me to take a look at.

"Now you just have to gut them," Lo says, holding out a knife to Drax whose face drops and he looks a little pale.

"Umm I don't know how so someone else will have to do it," he says and I find myself struggling at the face he is making.

"It's a rule of the forest. You catch it you have to clean it," Lo insists, and Drax looks like he wants to throw the fish back into the water and just go hungry.

"Nope. I can't do it. Just thinking about it makes me nauseous," Drax says, turning as if he might actually toss the fish back.

"Wait. I'm just kidding," Lo laughs. "I never expected you to do it, I was just teasing you. It will be better to do it by the river so everything washes downstream and we don't attract animals to camp." Getting up Lo laughs and pats Drax on the back. I'm glad to see that he took my words to heart.

"That was just mean, I almost cried," Drax whines and I just shake my head.

At least things are starting to come together for us, let's hope the others are having good luck too.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



‘D aria.’
‘Daria.’
‘Daria.’

‘What?’ I grumble, when I open one of my eyes I see that it’s still dark out so I don’t know why Spin is bothering me. ‘Go back to sleep.’

‘Daria, someone is here,’ he says, his tone is serious so I don’t question that he is lying or playing a joke.

‘Where is Abina?’

‘She is still sleeping, they are being so quiet I don’t even think she noticed them yet,’ he explains and I lay there still pretending to sleep.

'Where and how many?' I ask, not sure how I'm going to quickly defend us with my weapons stashed in my bag.

'They are still a good distance away so you can move and arm yourself. You probably have about five minutes. There are four of them and they will be coming from the West,' he says and I jump into action before I can think better of it. I pull on my leathers and grab some daggers before walking over to wake Abina.

"Be very quiet, there are four men headed our way from the West. Spin spotted them, they will be here soon," I whisper in her ear and she nods.

"Since they don't know that I'm here, you should pretend to sleep and let me take them out discreetly," she suggests and as much as I hate to play the bait it's a solid plan.

'Spin be the lookout,' I tell him before laying back down on the opposite side of the fire from their approach.

Something like this would normally put me more on edge but knowing that they are about to face Abina has me more than a little relieved. I don't mind fighting, in fact I enjoy it a lot of the time, but after the Games I thought that I would get more of a break from fighting for my life.

'One down,' Spin reports, and I can't help but smile at how fast she is.

'Two down. At the rate she is going, you might be able to just go back to sleep,' Spin comments and I almost laugh. I know this is a serious situation but just the way he said it is in a very dry tone almost as if he is disappointed in the lack of action I find amusing.

'She's on the third one but the fourth one slipped past, I'm going to follow him,' Spin says and I feel my adrenaline actually spike.

The fire is still going behind me just a lower flame but still this person shouldn't have a problem spotting me laying next to the burning embers. My first thought is to jump up and stab him when he is close but it might be a good idea to capture one of them alive so we can get some answers. And I know that Abina did not leave any of her opponents breathing, just not her style.

'Spin, I think I should capture instead of kill,' I tell him just as I hear footsteps coming my way. They are so faint that if I would have been sleeping there is no way that I would have heard them.

'Why do you always want to make things more difficult?' he comments, but I ignore him. It might be harder but getting information about what is ahead might be worth the hassle.

How should I do this?

If I spin around and trip him he might fall into the fire and that won't get me what I want. No one wants to smell burning flesh and in that much pain I don't think they will talk anyway. It's hard to make a plan without being able to see the approach.

'He is reaching for you,' Spin says and almost as if a reflex I roll over, grab the hand reaching for me, and pull the man to the ground away from the fire. Quickly I crawl on top of him and put a dagger to his throat. His eyes are wide and my breathing is labored as I look down at him. My adrenaline is running high and I can feel my palm starting to sweat but I don't let any of that show on my face.

"Who sent you? And where is Henry?" I ask, but he doesn't answer. Hell, he isn't even looking at me, he is looking behind me and seems a little scared.

"Abina, if it's you behind me I would rather you say something than scare this asshole to death," I say not looking just in case he is faking.

"Sorry. Why did you not kill him?" she asks and some of the tension leaves my body but I don't pull back on the dagger.

"I thought maybe we could ask him some questions instead of continuing on completely blind," I say and the guy's eyes dart back and forth between us as we talk.

"Oh. That is a good thought," she says and I almost laugh at her tone. It's casual but it also makes me think it never even crossed her mind to leave anyone alive.

"Now tell me who sent you," I say, putting all my attention back on the man I'm currently sitting on.

"We were paid to do a job," he says.

"Okay well who paid you and what was the job?" I ask. I'm actually starting to lose my patience.

"I don't know who paid us but we were supposed to capture the redhead girl and bring her to a meet up," he says and I kind of figured that would be the case. Since the first group also tried to capture me, but then why were all the traps set up to kill me?

"Where is the meet up?" I ask, and now that I think about it the man underneath me is a human unlike the first group who were all dragons. I will file that information away for later.

"Only the leader knew and he's dead now," the guy says, his voice shaking as he glances at Abina.

“Oops,” Abina says and this time I do laugh because I did not expect her to say that.

“Okay, but what about Henry?” I ask and the man looks at me confused.

“Who is Henry?” he asks and I let out a sigh, it’s obvious that this idiot doesn’t know anything and he was just following orders.

“He seems worthless, should I kill him?” Abina asks and I wonder if that is the best idea or if we could use him for something.

‘Spin, do you think you could ask another snapdragon to trail this guy and see where he goes if we let him go?’ I ask, not sure where he has gotten off to.

‘Give me a few minutes,’ he says as I hear his wings flap from him taking off.

“So if you don’t know anything about Henry, what do you know besides that you are supposed to kidnap little ol’ me,” I ask and he swallows hard.

“I don’t know anything, I swear. I just took this job to get into the group so that I can earn some money. This is my first time doing anything like this I swear,” he cries and I would feel bad for the guy except for the fact that he clearly went out of his way to join a bad group of people. He had to know they were into shady shit like kidnapping.

“I should just kill him, he is too stupid to live anyway,” Abina says with a sigh.

“It kind of feels like a waste of energy to kill him,” I say, pulling my dagger back but staying seated until I hear back from Spin.

“Please let me go,” he begs, crying like I’m the one who tried to kidnap him. It’s obvious this guy is not cut out for this kind of work. Too much of a weak constitution.

‘I have one willing to do it,’ Spin tells me and with that I climb to my feet and make a shooing motion with my hand.

“Get out of here before I change my mind,” I say and he turns and crawls away, tripping a few times as he stumbles to his feet before taking off into the forest.

“Was that a wise move?” Abina asks, and I turn to see she is cleaning her sword with a piece of cloth as if nothing happened.

“Spin asked another snapdragon to follow him, so we will see where he goes if he makes it through the traps in the forest,” I say with a shrug. He will either live and give us valuable information or he will get himself killed, either way I’m not that worried about him.

“That is good thinking. I’m sorry I didn’t think to catch the leader so we could have gotten more information,” she says but I’m not the least bit upset, it was only at the last minute that I thought about keeping the wimp alive.

“It’s fine, I’m sure this won’t be the last group we encounter, we can always catch another one,” I say with a shrug, taking a seat by the fire and adding a new piece of wood.

“You are more calm than I thought you would be after waking up to something like that,” she says tossing the fabric to the side and sheathing her sword.

“If it was just me and Spin I would be a mess, but having you here I feel safe,” I say with a yawn.

‘If it was just us you would be dead by now,’ Spin says, coming over to land next to me.

‘You’re probably right, we should try to get some sleep now. I don’t think anyone else is coming tonight,’ I tell him, giving him a few pets before laying on my side facing the fire this time. Spin jumps on top of me and curls up into a ball and doesn’t say a word. Not even a minute later he starts snoring and I smile.

“You should get some rest too Abina,” I say. She doesn’t respond so I glance in her direction to see that she is staring at me with a strange expression on her face.

“I will, I just want to make sure he doesn’t try to come back,” she says though from the look on her face I can tell she is thinking about something else as well. I’m not going to bug her about it though, everyone is entitled to private thoughts.

“Goodnight. Don’t stay up too late I’m almost positive he isn’t coming back anytime soon,” I say before closing my eyes.

The fire is still going when I wake up next and see the sun shining through the forest. I slept pretty well after all the excitement but I still feel exhausted for some reason. There is no time to rest though, I’m not any closer to finding Henry and we are still in the fucking woods.

“Oh you are awake, I have some food for you to eat and then you can wash up and be on our way,” Abina says and I see her sitting a few feet away

sitting next to the fire eating something.

“How are you so chipper in the morning?” I ask, sitting up and rubbing the crust from my eyes.

“I don’t think anyone has ever called me chipper before. Perhaps it is because I don’t need much sleep to feel fully rested and so it seems as if I’m full of energy?” she ponders and my brain is not open for service yet so I just nod in agreement.

“What about practice?” I ask. She said she was going to keep drilling me everyday until I can fight like a dragon or something, but it sounds like we aren’t doing that today.

“Oh we will do that later when we take a break on our travels, that way you can know what it is like to fight in the hottest part of the day,” she says and I now regret asking. It would have been better to be surprised later, instead now I will be waiting all day for the fight.

‘*Spin, did our spy come back?*’ I ask, taking the food that Abina hands me. Berries and dried meat spread out on a big leaf like a plate.

‘*Apparently the man went back towards Areola,*’ Spin says and I find that curious.

‘*Did he meet with anyone along the way?*’

‘*No, and he is still working his way back to town through all the traps, but the fact he went that way instead of Tranquil says something,*’ Spin says and I have to agree.

‘*For now we will have to put him on the back burner, our priority is finding and rescuing Henry,*’ I tell him and he nods before stealing a berry and flying off.

“So the man that we let go is heading towards Areola, so I don’t think we need to worry about him for now. He has nothing to do with Henry,” I explain to Abina and she nods.

“If that is what you think then we will just continue on with our mission,” she says and I almost laugh at her straightforwardness.

“Thank you. I’m glad that you are here,” I tell her and once again she gives me a funny look before blanking her face once more.

“We should get going after you wash up,” she says before getting up and walking off into the woods.

‘*Did I say something wrong again?*’ I ask Spin, wondering why she walked off like that.

‘*No I actually thought you were doing pretty well this time,*’ he says,

dropping down next to me so he can steal another berry.

'At least it wasn't something I said but I still wonder why she took off like that,' I say, eating the rest of the dried meat.

'The truth is we don't know her very well, so maybe she just needs some time by herself. I know dealing with you on a daily basis can be exhausting,' he teases before flying off again.

'Like you're a ray of sunshine,' I scoff, tossing the leaf off to the side, I walk over to the pond and wash my hands and face.

'Do you think we will reach Tranquil today? And if we do what might be waiting for us at the border?' Spin asks, when I glance up I see that he is floating around on his back in the pond using his wings to propel himself around.

'I can't remember how many days she said it would take but we have to be close right? And I don't know what to expect. We know the men that took Henry were wearing Tranquil uniforms and headed in this direction but we have no proof they actually went to the castle. All we can do is go with the flow for now,' I tell him and he springs out of the water and lands on a rock next to me.

'What the hell. It's what we are best at anyway, besides your plans never work out and I'm left flapping in the breeze while you try not to die,' he says and I would love to argue with him but the bulk of our plans do typically go in that direction.

"We should get going," Abina calls and I hurry back in her direction with Spin flying close behind me.

No matter what comes our way the three of us will make it through somehow.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



I nferno is dreadfully hot especially during the day time but the only one of us really suffering is poor Rye. Raider is used to the heat and actually prefers the warmer climate and I have my shadows I can wrap around myself to keep cool. I wish that I could keep Rye under the shadows with me for a long time but it uses too much power.

Glancing over my shoulder I see that Raider is carrying Rye on his back and actually smiling about it. We have taken turns for the last couple hours because Rye's weak physical conditioning makes it really hard for him to keep up. Luckily for us he is thin enough his weight isn't much of a burden.

"Do you want to switch?" I ask but Raider shakes his head.

“He’s sleeping so I would rather not wake him up. He didn’t sleep much last night,” Raider says with a smirk on his face. None of us really slept all that much last night but I don’t regret it for a second.

“The wind is picking up, we should hurry to the cave,” Raider says, picking up Rye like a bride and running towards the entrance of the cave. It looks like a sand storm is about to hit and if we don’t hurry we could get lost.

Covering my face with the edge of the cloak I’m wearing I push forward following Raider, trusting that he knows where he’s going. I’m actually surprised that I was able to trust him so quickly. I think knowing his secret and understanding him really helps to put things in perspective. He and I never had bad blood before this either which also helps. Plus watching him dote on Rye like he is there is no way that he is as big of an asshole as he makes people think he is.

“It’s just ahead, stay close,” Raider calls over the wind and I reach out and grab the back of his cloak so I don’t get separated from them. Sand bites at my skin as the wind picks up more and I have to close my eyes and just follow behind Raider.

“Are we going to make it?” I hear Rye ask over the sound of the wind.

“Don’t worry I won’t let anything happen to you,” Raider says, and I smile to myself. Rye has been through so much it’s nice to see how much he is loved. He deserves it more than anyone.

“We’re here, watch your step on the rocks,” Raider says and I finally open my eyes. Inside of the cave is a large open area mostly smooth but there are a few rocks near the front of the cave that could cause someone to trip. Raider doesn’t stop when we get in the cave though and leads us further in. It’s dark but I can still see where I am going for the most part, but I still keep a hold of his clothes.

I’m not sure how far in he is taking us but at one point I hear water trickling in the distance. Water? I never would have expected this cave would have a water source. No wonder Raider insisted on bringing us here. If the storm lasts longer than a day at least we will have water.

“All of my supplies should still be here since I made sure to put a royal seal near where I camped previously to keep scavengers away,” Raider says as he takes us around one last corner and I see what looks like a pretty nice campsite.

The water I heard earlier is off to the right, a pond or a small indoor lake, with water running into it from the wall. Raider's camp has a fire pit already built with wood and a pile of blankets off to the side. There are a few other bags around but I can't tell what their contents are from here.

He really is well prepared.

"Thanks, I have used this place more than just the time I told you about. It's my secret escape when I'm tired of dealing with everything at the castle alone since my parents are never there," he says, setting Rye on his feet.

"Wow this place is amazing," Rye comments, looking around in awe. I smile at his reaction, even though this outing isn't for pleasure I do hope that Rye gets to see and enjoy all kinds of new things.

The area suddenly lightens up and I have to blink to help my eyes adjust to the new brightness. When I look past Rye I see that Raider has already started a fire. Is it even safe to do that in a cave? I'm pretty sure the smoke needs somewhere to go or we will just end up choking on it.

"That's true, but if you look up you will see that there are a few air holes above the water. The rain gets in that way to fill the pool and the smoke can escape that way too," he explains and I see what he is talking about.

"Sorry, I haven't really camped before and definitely not in a cave," I tell him, walking over and taking a seat by the fire. My legs are feeling the long walk that we took today. Most of the time I either fly or travel by shadow for long distances so I guess I shouldn't be surprised that I'm feeling tired and sore.

"How are you feeling, Rye?" I ask thinking that if I'm this sore he must be too.

"My feet are sore and I'm hungry, but overall I'm okay. Do you think it would be okay if I took off my boots and soaked my feet in the cool water?" he asks and I actually think that sounds like a great idea, but we should probably check with Raider to make sure it's safe.

"It's safe. Soak your feet for now and then after we get some food we should all wash up and rinse out our clothes or we will be hating life when we have to put dirty clothes back on tomorrow," Raider says and that makes sense.

Rye happily kicks off his boots and rolls up his pants legs before sighing in delight when his feet are submerged in the water. He looks like he is enjoying himself so much, I decided to join him while Raider goes through the bags. I assume he is looking for food, since he mentioned eating before

bathing.

As soon as my sore feet hit the cool water I groan in pleasure. The temperature is just cool enough to feel good, but not too cold as to make washing up later miserable.

"It feels nice. I didn't think that walking would be so exhausting," Rye says with a sigh leaning his head on my shoulder. Wrapping an arm around his slender shoulder I lay my head on his and relax into the casual affection he gives so freely.

"None of us are used to this kind of thing, I'm sure we are all struggling in our own way with this trip, but all that can do is make us grow and learn," I tell him, not wanting him to feel bad about having a hard time keeping up.

"That's true. Everything is so new and exciting but also terrifying to me," he says and I wish that I could keep the frightening things away from him but I can't. I'll protect him the best I can but when we reach Tranquil there is only so much that we can do in another kingdom. Rye's father is still the King, his word is law and there isn't anything we can do about that.

"The three of us will figure out a way through this, so don't be too scared," Raider says, sitting down on the other side of Rye and dipping his feet in the water too.

"We make a pretty good team," Rye says with an innocent smile, and it stirs something in me that I long thought was dead. My heart. It's been more active as of late with Daria and now Rye and I'm not sure what to do about it.

I swore after Drax's betrayal that I wouldn't let myself fall into the trap of love again but here I am with my heart beating quickly at the thought of two different people. One my mate and the other my sweet childhood friend that I should have kept in touch with all these years. I know that the families decided to separate us so we could learn about our individual lands but I should have found a way.

"We do. So moving forward we should forget about the past and just do the best to help each other," Raider says and I know that some of that is answering the thoughts I was just having.

"I hope the others are doing well too, but I'm glad that I'm with you two," Rye says, happily kicking his feet in the water.

How does he just say that kind of thing so casually?

A few hours later dinner consists of dried meat Raider had stored here and stale crackers. Not at all what three pampered Princes are used to but we will survive somehow. I hope. The food isn't even the bad part, it's the thought of getting naked anywhere near Rye. I'm finding myself more attached to him and attracted to him as well and that is a problem.

He already felt guilty about what happened with Raider thinking that Daria might hate him for it. I don't want to put any more pressure on him. I don't even know if he has any of those kinds of feelings and attraction towards me. Letting anything happen will just confuse him more.

"Bast, just relax and get in the damn water. Whatever happens, happens. Stop being so scared," Raider says before walking over to the pool and getting in. He is the first one in the water because he said he wanted to check it to make sure it's still safe. I think he was just giving Rye and I a chance to wrap our heads around being naked in front of each other.

When I glance over my shoulder at Rye I see that he is naked except for his shirt which he has a death grip on. His hand is even shaking and it takes me a second to remember why he is reacting that way. His back. I'm the idiot standing here freaking out about being attracted to him all while he is panicking about his scars on his back.

I'm such a jackass.

"Hey you don't have to feel scared or ashamed about your back, neither of us think any less of you because of your scars. No matter what shit your father poured in your head there is nothing wrong with you," I tell him, before walking over and standing in front of him.

"I know. It's just hard," he says and it almost comes out a whisper.

"How about I show you something about myself that no one else knows?" I ask and he looks at me for a second and then nods his head.

Quickly I remove my shirt and watch as his eyes widen. After my parents died I covered myself in tattoos. My mate mark; the outline of my dragon is on my abs in black but my shoulders, chest and upper arms are covered in various black patterns and designs that remind me of them. I've never shown or told anyone but the artist that did the work and they were paid well for their silence.

"Wow they are so beautiful," Rye says, stepping forward and running his hand across the design on my chest. My cock twitches from his light touches and I have to grab his hand to stop him when he gets close to my nipple.

"We all have secrets but it's okay to feel comfortable in your own skin," I

tell him and he smiles brightly at me and nods.

I almost sigh in relief when I drop his hand and step back. Quickly I remove the rest of my clothes and get in the water where Raider is smirking at me. The water is cool and hopefully that helps calm my dick who thinks a little light touching is a call to action.

“The water is colder than I thought,” Rye says when I feel him sit down next to me. Our thighs are rubbing together and I almost groan. But looking at him sitting there with his shirt off and a smile on his face makes me feel warm inside.

“I don’t have any tattoos but I’m still pretty too right?” Raider teases, and I glare at him.

Why are you trying to be playful right now?

I ask the question in my head and he just smirks and shrugs his shoulders playing coy. There is not a coy bone in his body so I’m not falling for it. I think he actually wants something to happen in this cave between the three of us.

“Of course you are both so handsome and with all those muscles, I’m pretty jealous of you. My body is so weak and slender it’s a miracle that Daria found me attractive, and with my scars,” Rye says and I wonder if he even owns a mirror.

Forget about the scars, he is fucking adorable. He’s got a cute little face and his slender frame is perfect and attractive. Even his cute little ass is perfect. I really want to kill his father for making him feel like this.

“You are adorable just the way you are,” Raider says and Rye’s face flushes from the small compliment. “Why don’t you come sit between us?”

“Okay,” Rye says cheerfully, getting up to move but before he makes it there he slips on the stone floor and lands in my lap. I was at my limit before but now I’m completely done.

“I’m sorr—” before Rye can even finish what he is saying I have him flipped around and straddling my lap and I’m grabbing the back of his neck and bringing his soft lips to mine. He’s stiff for a moment in surprise but quickly melts into the kiss. I hear Raider chuckle next to us but I ignore him.

Reaching between our bodies I grab both our cocks and start stroking up and down. As much as I would love to just plop him down on my length and make him ride he’s not ready for that yet. At this point he is very new to physical affections and I don’t want to push past his limits.

“I feel a little left out,” Raider says and Rye pulls back from our kiss and

moans so sweetly. Before he can even think about catching his breath Raider pulls him in for a kiss. He also reaches over and grabs Rye's hand and places it on his hard member.

Rye blinks when he pulls back from the kiss, his hand doesn't move an inch as if not sure what to do.

"Just do to Raider what I'm doing to us, it feels good doesn't it?" I ask and he nods his head and finally moves his hand.

"Can you two kiss?" Rye asks and I look up at him curiously. "I want to see what it looks like so that I can try and do better."

His sweet reply has me looking over at Raider who looks as shocked as I feel but nods his head in agreement. I don't feel the same excitement as when I kissed Rye but it's still a pleasurable experience as Raider moves his lips against mine.

"I see," Rye says and we pull apart to see him watching us intently. It's almost comical how serious he is.

"If that helped you I'm glad, but just know Raider and I don't feel any kind of feelings towards each other except friendship," I say and Raider nods in agreement.

"Bast is hot but he doesn't do it for me," Raider replies with a shrug and I have to agree. I can admire his looks but we don't have that connection and that's okay.

"Okay, I understand. But I like both of you. Is that weird?" Rye asks and as much as I would love to sit here and answer all his questions I would rather finish what we started.

"It's not weird at all, you have a big heart so you can care for more than one person and there is nothing wrong with that," Raider says and Rye practically blinds us with his smile.

"Thank you."

"Good now that that's all set, can we go back to what we were doing?" I ask, giving Rye and my cocks a squeeze and making him moan.

"I think that's a great idea," Raider says before groaning, apparently Rye is now mirroring whatever I do to us onto Raider. If I wasn't in such a rush, I would use this to torture Raider but right now I just want us all to feel good after the long day we had.

I stroke our lengths up and down making sure to stop occasionally and rub my thumb over the tip. The sounds that Rye makes echo through the cave and turn me on even more. Pleasure moves through my body, sparking my

nerves and making me move my hand faster seeking the release that I need.

“Oh!” Rye shouts and his hips move almost begging for more. Without thinking I send a shadow out and into Rye to press right on the spot that I know feels good. “Something’s in me.” The words leave his lips before he shouts and I feel his cock twitch in my hand.

My own orgasm has been building and when I watch him explode in my hand I tip over with him. Fire races through me and my cock twitches before I come with a grunt. The water washes away the proof of our shared pleasure but my body still feels light from it. Rye falls against me with his head on my shoulder and I wonder if Raider found his release as well.

“Thank you,” he says leaning in to give Rye a kiss, and I guess that gives me my answer.

“What did you mean something was in you?” Raider asks after a few moments of silence.

“Oh that was my shadows, I hadn’t intended to do any penetration since Rye is new but I kind of sent my shadows to play with him,” I say and feel my face heat up. It was more embarrassing explaining it than everything we just did.

“Would it be weird to ask you to do that to me?” Raider asks.

“Of course it is.”

“It was weird but also felt really good,” Rye says with a sigh still sitting in my lap and I feel myself getting hard again.

“Okay just once, but this doesn’t leave the cave,” I tell them.

“Stop thinking about that, you’re going to make it hard for me to walk,” Raider groans and I forgot for a second he could hear all that.

“I forgot to ask, I know you hear thoughts but if I picture something in my head do you see that as well?” I ask, not bothering to apologize. There is nothing I can do about guarding my thoughts for now at least. I plan to ask Xander later if he read anything about it in all his library books.

“Not so far. And that’s a good idea asking Xander, thanks. Honestly I’m not sure what will happen to our abilities when we mate Daria. From what I heard they are supposed to get stronger so maybe that will be something that happens in the future,” Raider says.

“Rye has already mated with Daria but he hasn’t mentioned anything about getting more powerful,” I tell him and he sighs.

“That probably has more to do with the fact he can’t see himself clearly than anything else,” Raider says and I have to agree. Rye sees himself as weak so even if he got stronger he probably wouldn’t notice. Actually I’ve never seen his healing skills in action, but I’m sure they are impressive. His communication with snapdragons is a unique skill and very useful. I wonder if we will run into any in this desert hell.

“Snapdragons prefer the forest, out here we have these mean little bastards called Redspies. They are related to the snaps but not nearly as nice. Spitting acid and stinging you with their tail spikes is more their style. So stay away from them if you can,” Raider explains and it makes me want to leave this hot place even more.

“We should be able to reach the border tomorrow,” Raider says before I can even ask how long this will take.

“Do you have another spot picked out for tonight or will we be sleeping under the stars?” I ask. I turn to look at them once more over my shoulder and find that Rye is still sleeping soundly on Raider’s back. It’s cuter than it should be, but after last night I don’t think I could hide how adorable I find him even if I wanted to.

“Bast, stop walking,” Raider says, and I take a few more steps before I register what he said. “Rye wake up, I need you to stand on your own for a minute.” Rye opens his eyes and blinks at us, before his eyes go wide behind me and when Raider sets him down he falls on his ass.

I’m almost afraid to turn and look behind me. With the way both of them are reacting I’m going to assume that it’s something that’s going to hurt. Slowly I turn my head and come face to face with not one, but five of the Redspies Raider just described. Just like he said they do not look the slightest bit friendly and the sand under them is sizzling from where their acid saliva hits the ground.

“You two should get out of here, I don’t want Rye to get hurt. I’ll be fine,” I say and Rye gasps.

“We aren’t leaving you,” Rye says, he’s trying to sound brave but his voice gives him away.

“It won’t matter if we try to leave, as soon as one of us makes any moves they will attack,” Raider says with a sigh. “Things were going so well too.”

“Sorry that the threat to my life is bringing you down,” I snark, my nerves getting the better of me. My palms are sweating more than just from the heat and I’m not sure what I should do. All I know is that I don’t want Rye to get

hurt and I'm sure Raider feels the same way.

"They want to kill and eat us," Rye says, he sounds terrified. "I tried to talk to them but they are filled with so much bloodlust it hurts."

"Don't try anymore, it's not worth you hurting," I tell him.

"But I don't want you to get hurt either," he says, his voice sounding small, something pinches in my chest but I have to brush it aside for now.

"What about your shadows?" Raider asks.

"Shadows work best when there is some place to hide. The only shadows around here are ours so we will just look like a black blob instead of actually hiding," I explain hoping that makes sense. Shadow manipulation is complicated. Even if I turned myself into a shadow it's something I can only do for myself so that would leave the two of them facing this hoard.

"Is there any way you could buy me some time to shift?" Raider asks, just as the Redspies look over at Rye over my left shoulder.

"Something happened and I think you should shift quickly," I say before turning and running towards Rye and covering him with my body. I'm not sure if they sensed he is the weakest in our group or him talking to them pissed them off but as soon as they looked at him I just knew.

"What are you doing?" Rye says as I feel the first sting on my leg.

"Stay hidden under me, and everything will be fine," I groan as the next pain comes from my back and this time it's the acid.

"Fuck!" I say as the pain feels like all of my flesh is on fire.

"Wait! You are getting hurt," Rye says trying to move but I just keep covering him even as I feel like I'm dying. Rounds and rounds of stings from the tails of those little bastards hit me.

"It's okay Rye, don't cry," I tell him as his face crumbles under me and he sobs. I wish the last thing I was going to see before dying was a smile but it's fine knowing he's safe.

My body is filled with so much pain that my vision is going fuzzy and I'm no longer in control of my body. I'm slumped on top of Rye and I wonder for a second if I'm too heavy, when I hear a dragon roar and everything goes black.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I wonder what the guys are doing at the castle right now? Xander is probably at the library and Drax is probably looking in every nook and cranny for me. I'm curious what the others' reactions would be. Raider would probably throw a party, grateful I'm gone. Rye is probably crying which hurts my heart but there was nothing I could do. It's not like I could send a note to say what was going on. I'm not even sure who I can trust at the moment. Hopefully they will give me a chance to explain when things are settled and not assume I just ran off like a crazy person.

'But you are a crazy person and you did just run off without telling anyone,' Spin says and I roll my eyes.

'It was an emergency, just give me a break already,' I tell him feeling even more exhausted with each step.

We should make it to Tranquil today but then what? As fun as storming the castle sounds I don't think that will get me anywhere but tossed in the dungeon. Hell, I don't even know if Henry is at the castle. I'm making a lot of assumptions from what Phillip heard. He was injured and not fully awake, should I have taken off just on his small words alone? What if he saw the wrong insignia in all the craziness?

No. Doubting myself now is a good way to get myself killed. I will just have to believe him and go with what I suspect. Even if it's not all correct there is still some that has to be right?

'Stop thinking so hard you are going to blow up your brain,' Spin comments and he's right going round and round in my head is giving me a bit of a headache. *'We will figure everything out in time, but for now just concentrate on not dying in the traps, though they are pretty sparse now. They are still out there.'*

'You're right. I can't predict the future so I will just take it one thing at a time,' I say just as Abina stops in front of me.

"We are about to cross over into Tranquil. Once we enter there I have no more authority. So be very careful what you say and do because there is a limit to how much I can help," Abina explains, and I look around her shoulder to see that past the woods there is a guard station on the nearby road and there is no way around it. It's an open plain so there is nowhere to hide ourselves. From this moment on we will be exposed.

"I understand."

"Then let us go," she says before stepping out of the woods and heading towards the road. Her pace is casual and she subtly looks around probably searching for enemies but as we make it to the road none appear.

"I think it's strange that all those traps were set up but there isn't anyone here trying to attack us," I say quietly and Abina nods.

"I'm not sure either unless, they don't want their activities so blatantly seen by others," she says as our boots crunch along the dirt road.

The scenery is actually quite beautiful, I almost wish that this trip was for pleasure. The sky is bright blue with just a handful of white clouds and the land is all green fields and hills for miles. It's nothing like Areola which is mostly city surrounded by forest. This is completely different. The breeze is cool but not cold as it blows sending the tall grass moving this way and that.

It's almost mesmerizing.

'Pay attention,' Spin says and I bring my focus back to the little guard shack stationed next to the road. There are three dragons standing around, and I wonder for a second if they come out here everyday for their duties or if they like take turns camping out here for a week at a time or something. 'Dragons can fly, you know it probably only takes them ten minutes to fly to their post everyday.'

'That sounds really convenient but what about at night?' I ask curiously.

'No idiot would try to cross at night. These lush beautiful fields you were admiring are filled with creatures that come out at night and make anyone stupid enough to be out here their prey,' he says and I wonder how he knows that and what creatures he is talking about.

'How do you know so much about Tranquil?' I ask.

'I paid attention when Xander was trying to teach you things in the library, instead of napping like someone. He went through all the different countries and talked about interesting facts. You weren't awake so that I could ask questions so I only know what he read and talked about outloud. If only I could talk to someone other than you,' he says with a dramatic sigh.

'I was tired from Drax chasing me and Xander's voice was soothing and put me to sleep. I'm sorry I hindered your education. Now tell me what the creatures are,' I say, we are still a little ways away from the shack so he can tell me.

'What did he call them? Rabid Nocturnes I think. Small ferret-like creatures that come out at night in the fields of Tranquil. They prey on anything in their territory including people. They have black fur and long skinny bodies, six small legs and razor sharp teeth and claws. All in all you don't want to be out here at night because not only do they bite but they also will wrap around you like a furry snake,' Spin explains and I wonder why no one teaches about them in school if they are so dangerous.

'Good thing we showed up in the daytime then,' I tell him not wanting to face something like that right now. After all our traveling I would like to find an inn to eat a good meal and clean up before continuing on to the castle.

'I'm sure Abina planned it this way on purpose, she knows about all the kingdoms so she probably already knows about all the creatures too,' he says and I hadn't thought about that. Next time we stop I should ask her more about Tranquil just so that I have a better idea of what to expect.

"I think that we should act like a couple of friends traveling," I tell Abina.

“As long as they don’t recognize me I think that will work, however if they do I will just say that you are Rye’s mate and I am escorting you on a tour of the kingdom. Both stories will work so don’t worry,” she says. She is still wearing the Areola uniform, but it is hidden under her cloak so as long as they don’t know her then we can just be travelers.

“Will they search us?” I ask just now remembering what I have in my bag. *That fucking eye.* Dom was right, I should have left it with them.

“I don’t believe so but if you have something you wish to hide perhaps you should have Spin take your bag and fly around before they notice us,” Abina says and that is probably the best plan.

‘Spin.’

‘Yeah, yeah, pack mule duty. I got it, but you owe me something sweet tonight,’ he says, jumping off my shoulder and grabbing the pack from my back before flying off bitching the whole time about being used and abused.

‘Stop whining and I will give you a lot of sweets tonight,’ I tell him before shutting the wall between us so I can concentrate on interacting with the guards like a normal person.

“Good day,” one of the guards says walking over to stand in the middle of the road blocking our way. He has a smile on his face and doesn’t seem hostile so I try to relax and return his smile.

“Good day,” I say and Abina just nods in response.

Apparently I will be taking the lead.

“What brings you to Tranquil on this beautiful day?” he asks and I’m really not getting any bad vibes from him so I relax and answer him politely.

“My friend and I are traveling to the different kingdoms. I just turned twenty-five not too long ago and realized I had never left Areola before, so before winter hits we decided to do some light traveling,” I tell him, just making shit up. It does sound like something someone my age would like to do and heck I wanted to travel before so it’s not that far off from the truth.

“Well traveling in your youth is a right of passage, I hope that you enjoy our beautiful kingdom,” he says before moving and allowing us to pass without any more questions.

That’s pretty lax security.

“Thank you,” I say, giving him a wave before following Abina down the road.

“They seemed nice,” I say and she nods.

“You probably have the wrong impression about this kingdom after

meeting the King, but most people here are soft and gentle like Rye. Unless the King has people looking for you, they most likely won't be suspicious and treat you very kindly like the guard there," she explains and now I'm kind of looking forward to seeing this strange place.

"Perhaps that is why all of the guys in the forest seemed like hired thugs? Because the King had to go out of his way to hire people to do that sort of work. And it also makes sense why that one went back to Areola, it might be the only place he could hire those types of people. It is a bit rough there and people are way more jaded," I say thinking over everything we know once again.

If I think of it that way it makes a lot more sense why those guys seemed to know the forest. If they are from Areola then most likely they grew up hunting in them, like I did. Things are starting to become clear as mud.

"It's not a bad theory but what about the men wearing Tranquil's uniform?" Abina asks and I have no idea. My brain is not prepared for something like this. There are too many conflicting factors that don't make sense.

'Here, take your shit back,' Spin says, dropping down from a tree branch and throwing my bag at me.

Looking around I hadn't even noticed that the scenery was changing once again. Instead of endless fields there were trees all lined up in rows with fruit hanging from the branches. We don't have much farming in Areola so I never really thought about how it is grown.

'Thanks for the save buddy,' I tell Spin and he scoffs in my head before landing on my shoulder. He doesn't say anything but I hear him crunching and look up to see he stole fruit from the tree and is eating. *'Are you supposed to do that?'*

'Probably not, but I'm starving and the next town is still another hour or so walking,' he says and my own stomach feels a bit empty but I can wait until we hit a town. Last thing I want to do is get pinched for stealing fruit.

'You will survive. Don't take anymore,' I tell him and he pecks at my head with his mouth before flying over and landing on Abina's shoulder.

"Are you two fighting again?" she asks with an amused look on her face as Spin rubs his head on hers.

"Yeah he's mad I told him not to steal anymore fruit before we get to town," I tell her rolling my eyes as he plays innocent for Abina again.

"Actually if he picks the fallen ones off the ground I'm sure no one would

care. Once they touch the ground they are left there and just attract animals and bugs,” she says and I swear Spin tries to flip me off when he bats his wing at me before flying off into the trees again.

“He’s going to eat so much fruit now that we are going to have to carry that glutton later,” I say with a sigh.

“I will carry him,” she volunteers and I give her a thankful smile.

“I would like to be able to tell you he will stop before it gets to that point but when I had a fancy dessert date with Drax, I had to drag that little asshole out of a chocolate fountain,” I tell her and she actually chuckles.

“I can picture it in my mind,” she says, her smile almost blinding.

“Yeah to say it was a mess is an understatement, luckily Drax thought it was hilarious even when Spin flapped his wings and covered us in it,” I tell her. That night was actually pretty fun, even though I was worried about Lo, I was able to relax a bit and enjoy myself.

Lo, that bastard. I hope he has a rash on his ass right now.

“You looked like that was a happy memory for a moment but now you just look angry,” Abina says, giving me an odd look.

“Oh well I was thinking about Lo. The day of the chocolate fiasco he was sick in the infirmary, but then I just remembered how he yelled at me and left the castle and now the thought of him just pisses me off,” I tell her. She is probably used to my craziness by now right?

“I remember him stomping out of the castle. His physical movements were very angry but his face actually looked a bit sad,” she says and I’m still not letting him off the hook. He had more than a week to apologize and he chose to be stubborn so he will have to beg if he wants to be forgiven.

“He’s stubborn, and pigheaded. But he is still my best friend and lover I guess, so if he begs for forgiveness I’ll give it to him,” I say and she laughs.

“So magnanimous,” she teases and I laugh.

“What can I say? I’m the future Queen of all five kingdoms, I can be gracious when I need to be,” I say as a joke but it’s a truth that I’m still running away from so it comes out kind of flat.

“Basically you will be the Queen of all Estonia, and that is why people are trying to mess with you. Giving one person that much control and influence is making everyone in power nervous,” she says and I never thought of that.

Fuck. That’s a heavy burden to bear.

“I’m not sure I’m responsible enough for that kind of thing,” I tell her and

she nods.

“The beauty is that you will not have to do it alone. Your mates and I will be by your side the whole time. You will not have to carry your burdens alone from now on,” she says and that thought actually does make me feel a little better.

‘Hey Daria, I’m stuck in a tree,’ Spin says and I sigh.

A lot of things may change but some things never will.

‘Where are you?’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I've been in this dungeon for days, it's cold and damp and I don't even want to think about why it smells so bad.

I hope Phillip is okay.

When they broke into my shop that night I tried to fight them off but one old man against a bunch of dragons wasn't a fair fight to begin with. I should have known that Daria winning those damn games would mean people would come after me but I was just so proud of her I didn't think ahead. Or maybe it was the fact that she somehow found herself attached to all those little Princes. Either one would gain her enemies.

I just hope she is smart enough not to fall into their traps trying to save

me. I've lived a long life, I don't want her risking hers for me. Who am I kidding? My fool child would do anything for me, including recklessly risking her life to find me.

Anyone that's listening up there please keep my little one safe.

Sitting up, I look around and I can't tell if it's day or night my body screams in protest as I lean against the stone wall. My left arm is broken, and my head has quite a large bump. My back is raw from the lashes they gave me when I first arrived. Something about punishment for resisting. I'm still alive though and I intend to stay that way.

There isn't anything in this place that indicates where I am. I suspect Tranquil because that is what the soldiers hinted to, but I thought they were the peaceful kingdom. In the end where I am doesn't really matter I guess. The fact is I'm trapped and with the way my body is feeling right now I won't be breaking out any time soon.

"I see that you are awake," a voice says from the outside of the metal cage. It's so dark I can't make out any features but I know from the voice that it's a man.

"Why am I here?" I ask, not bothering to plead for my life. It's obvious that whoever this is has a plan that requires me to be alive or I'm sure they would have killed me by now.

"I have need of you," he says, his voice sounding sinister.

"What do you need me for?"

"You are simply bait for me to get what I want," he says, and that part I had already figured out.

"What is it that you want?" I ask, trying to push for some more answers. They won't do me much good in here but knowing is better than being left in the dark.

"I want to rule the world of course. Isn't that what all evil people strive for? Ultimate power," he sneers and I know now that I'm probably not going to get much out of him, but I still have to try.

"How does kidnapping me help with your cause?" I ask.

"Your daughter is now the key to controlling all the future Kings of Estonia. If I capture her then I will rule them all," he says and a shiver rolls down my spine.

I didn't know Daria would be in this much danger. I should have talked her out of those stupid Games.

"What, cat got your tongue?"

“No, I’m just wondering how delusional you have to be to think that you will ever control my daughter. She is more stubborn than anyone I know. If anything you should be afraid of her,” I tell him and he hisses at me.

“She is nothing but a common little girl, once she sees daddy is in trouble she will come running and fall right into my hands,” he says, sounding very sure of himself.

“She might come running but it will be to kill you, not to fall into any traps, so if I were you I would sleep with one eye open,” I tell him.

“We will see if your tune changes after a few more lashes,” he says before I hear footsteps stomping away and a door slam.

Provoking him was not the best plan but at least I know what he wants. I wasn’t lying when I said Daria will come for him either. I know that she sneaks around at night, she thinks I don’t but I let her think I’m fooled. She will come out of nowhere like some kind of avenging assassin and then whoever he is is done for.

I can hold out for her to get here. A few lashes won’t kill me, not when I have to live for my daughter.

So take your time and do the right thing, little one I’m not going anywhere.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



I never thought camping was this exhausting before but dragging two people along that have no clue what they are doing in the woods is pretty damn tiring. Getting along hasn't been an issue since Xander gave me a talk, and I deserved it, I was being an ass for no reason. Drax had always been a fun guy to be around in the castle and that hasn't changed out here either. Except the fun has worn me down a little.

"Hey look at this," Drax says, holding up a rock, again. I get that he was sheltered but literally everything is amazing to him. Including rocks he is finding along the river bank.

"Drax, it's a rock. Just put it back and try to keep up," I say, but Xander is

looking at the rock too. Studying it as if it's actually fascinating.

It's like taking care of two kids. How is Daria going to handle five of these guys?

"This here is agate, and this here is a bit of copper," Xander says, going through and pointing out all the different minerals in the stone. The same thing he does with all the plants and small animals we run into as well. Apparently they have lost the sense of urgency with all the new things they are discovering. It makes me want to rip my hair out and wish I could trade groups.

It's not that they are bad guys, they are just easily distracted by every damn thing in the forest. Saving them from touching poisonous plants has become a full time job. Drax was annoying the hell out of me this morning and I almost let him take a shit in the Rasha Bush which like the name indicates would have given him a terrible rash on his ass for days. When I thought about him whining in pain though for the rest of the trip I changed my tune and directed him somewhere else.

"Come on guys, I'm pretty sure that we are close to the border of Tranquil. If we just keep moving we should make it before nightfall," I say trying to keep the frustration out of my voice.

"Sure thing, chief," Drax says, sticking the stone in his pocket with the other ones and hurrying to catch up to me.

"Sorry," Xander mumbles looking at the ground as he catches up as well.

"It's okay but no more rocks please, Drax you should get rid of those before they weigh you down," I tell them, turning and marching on down the river bank. This route may have taken us a little out of the way but with no traps to worry about we are making a lot better time than we would have going through the thick forest.

"Are you kidding? I got these for Daria, she is going to love them," Drax says cheerfully, and I just shake my head. I'm sure the last thing Daria is thinking about right now is getting rocks from one of her mates. But I'm too tired to try and talk him out of it so I just let it go.

"Xander, why don't you tell us about Tranquil? I know the bare minimum, but I'm sure there is more we should know," I suggest hoping that if I get him talking it will keep him from getting distracted by stupid shit.

"Tranquil is known for being the most welcoming and peaceful of all the kingdoms. The people are kind and the atmosphere is overall relaxing. Pretty much the complete opposite of the King himself, but he puts on a good show

for his people. They do a lot of farming in this kingdom, a lot of the fruits and vegetables in Areola are imported from Tranquil. There aren't a lot of forests like this, instead the land is fields and orchards. Where Areola is one large expansive city surrounded by forest, Tranquil has a capital city where the castle is but they also have villages spread out and each community helps with the farming," he says and as much as that is all interesting, none of it is useful except that we will run into a village before we hit the capital.

"Are there any threats that we should watch out for?" I ask.

"From the people no, but they do have some small creatures that run wild through the fields at night and are quite vicious," he says and I think we will be fine as long as we make it to town before night.

"Thank you, that's helpful," I tell him and he gives a nod when I glance over my shoulder. Usually Drax is right there teasing him about being so smart but the spot next to Xander where he should be is empty. "Where is Drax?" I ask, stopping so abruptly that Xander almost runs into me.

"He was right here," Xander says, looking back and forth.

"For fuck sake," I sigh, wishing I would have put that one on a rope or something.

"I'm sure he hasn't gone far," Xander says, trying to be reassuring but it's not helping the headache that is forming in my right temple.

"Drax! Get back here!" I call, but he doesn't answer and after a few seconds I wonder if something actually happened to him. "Stay here. Don't move unless you are in trouble."

"But I can help—"

"No searching for one of you is bad enough, I can't have you getting lost looking for him. Please stay put," I say before breaking away and going a little deeper into the woods nearby.

Sometimes if Drax has to piss he just steps into the woods without saying anything which hasn't been a problem so far he usually catches up fast or at least answers when I call for him. This time he didn't let out a peep so I'm wondering if he got caught in another trap or something else happened to him. He may be an annoying puppy but he's Daria's annoying puppy and I can't let anything happen to him or she definitely won't forgive me.

"Drax!" I call again and wait for a response but the only thing I hear is the wind blowing through the trees and the animals scurrying around nearby. "Shit."

Weaving my way in and out of the trees I call out his name and watch for

traps as I search for him. I'm not sure where he could be and I'm afraid of leaving Xander too long and losing him as well so I make my way back out to the river to see if I can still spot him waiting. I'm relieved to see him still standing there and give him a little wave which he returns and then I turn back to my search.

Something in the river catches my eye and my heart gives a tug as I look back to see what it was. There I find Drax face down in the river not moving. I toss off my bag and bow before wading into the water and flipping Drax over. He's not awake so I drag him to the bank and check for a pulse. It's very light and I'm starting to panic when I put my head on his chest and notice he isn't breathing.

"Fucking hell!" I say before I start giving him mouth to mouth. It's something that I actually learned from Daria, and she is going to kill me if Drax doesn't come back from this. "You are supposed to be a water dragon, how can you drown?"

My anxiety is rising and I'm starting to panic when he finally starts coughing up water and I roll him over on his side so that he can get it all out. I feel like I can breathe again when he lays on his back and looks up at me.

"How the hell did this happen?" I ask, and he looks away.

If this is something stupid I'm going to kill him and tell Daria a bear ate him.

"Well... I saw a really cool purple rock and when I went to grab it I slipped on some slimy plants and hit my head on a rock and well this is where I ended up," he explains and I feel a murderous rage starting to well up in me.

"Drax!" Xander calls looking worried as he makes his way over to us. "Are you alright?"

I can't kill him with a witness around.

"He's fine. Just a water dragon that almost drowned," I say before backing away to make room for Xander. "It's that embarrassing?"

"Actually you would be surprised at the amount of dragons that are hurt by their own powers. Statistically one in fifty are hurt or killed..." Xander starts but I just tune him out.

My group is not going to survive. Sorry Daria I did the best that I could but I just couldn't keep them alive.

"Oh your head is bleeding," Xander remarks and sure enough there is a trail of blood going down the side of Drax's face now that he is sitting up.

“I have something we can wrap it with, but do you think you can keep going today or should we stop and make camp?” I ask walking over to my discarded pack, I pull out a spare long sleeve shirt and rip off one of the sleeves and then tear it into a few strips, before handing it to Xander who looks at the material and then back at me.

“Fine. I’ll do it,” I say with a sigh, taking the material back, I wrap it around Drax’s stupid head and make sure that it is in place securely. “Hold on to these two in case we have to change it later.”

“Okay,” he says, shoving them in the pocket of his pants.

“Your punishment for being stupid is that you only get to keep three rocks from what you collected and the rest have to go back. If you try to hoard more I’m not feeding you,” I tell him and his face falls.

“How can you be so cruel?”

“You have set us back even further by getting yourself hurt for a fucking rock. My patience is at a negative ten right now so do what I say or you might find yourself with an arrow in the ass,” I tell him and both his and Xander’s eyes go wide.

“Okay.”

“Now can you walk or are we camping here?” I ask, as Xander helps Drax to his feet. He’s a little wobbly as he pulls a handful of rocks out of his pocket, picks three and throws the rest in the river with a sad look on his face. But I’m not falling for it, he can buy the same damn rocks in the market in Areola when we get back, probably even better ones that have been polished.

“I can walk,” he says firmly and I’m not going to argue with him. If he thinks he can do it then I’m going to let him. This isn’t a vacation, we are trying to get to Daria so the playing around needs to stop.

“I’ll walk with him,” Xander says and I give him a nod before turning and leading the way again.

“We should probably stop here for the night,” Xander says as the sun is just starting to set over the fields.

We walked for a good four hours and just reached the edge of a field signaling that we are now at the Tranquil border. I really wanted to reach a village tonight and according to the map there is one about another hour or

two walk. So I really don't want to stop since we still have a bit of daylight left.

"Is Drax too tired to keep going?" I ask, but Xander shakes his head. Drax hasn't talked to me since the incident earlier. I'm not sure if he is pouting about the rocks or if he thinks I'm still mad but it's starting to weird me out how quiet he is.

"No it's not that, it's the creatures I told you about, we don't want to get caught in their territory when night hits, it will be bad news for us. We should stay in the forest and hit the fields when day breaks and they are sleeping," he says and it wounds my pride that he doesn't think I can handle some little field animals.

"If we move quickly we should be able to sleep at an inn tonight, won't that be nice with beds and a warm meal?" I say trying to get Drax on my side.

"That does sound nice," he says.

"It's really not a good idea to try and race the sun," Xander says standing his ground for the first time.

"I see your point I really do but what if we can catch Daria in the village? It's the closest one to the border so I would assume that she would stop there for the night," I say and standing around here fighting about it, isn't going to get us anywhere. "Besides, I'm sure that me and a couple of dragons can fight some field critters."

"I'm telling you—" Xander starts but I just take off into the field, I'm not going to wait around when I know we are close to Daria.

"It will be okay Xander just come on, Lo got us this far," Drax says following behind me.

"Fine, but if we die I'm haunting you and saying I told you so," he says reluctantly.

Luckily the tall grass is only up to my waist so I can still see where we are going as we head inland. We are racing the sun as Xander said but walking should be easier now than in the woods, not many obstacles you have to worry about. It's a really nice view and I wonder if Daria took a second to enjoy it too. She had always talked about traveling but I wasn't sure I would ever get the chance to join her.

My family's pressure to marry someone of high standing and have a family has been suffocating for years. Now it's all over though. I walked out of that house and I have no intention of ever going back. I'll miss my siblings; though they are a huge pain in the ass and my grandmother, but

other than that I don't need anything from them. I'm free now to live my life the way I want and that's both exhilarating and terrifying.

"We need to hurry," Xander says and I see that we still have a few hundred yards before we reach the grove of fruit trees and the sun is getting closer to setting.

"We'll make it," I say, picking up my pace.

"I think I heard something," Drax says.

"Just keep moving, don't stop for anything we are almost there," I say and I concentrate on just getting to the edge of the field. It's so close I can almost taste it but I think the sun is going to win.

"Run!" Xander shouts and I don't have to be told twice.

I start running even as I hear random sounds around me in the grass. Hissing sounds that make my skin crawl and I run with all I have to make it out of the field. When I reach the edge of the orchard I trip on something but as I land at the bottom of a tree I feel relieved. My breathing is labored but we made it.

Drax pops out of the field next and falls to his knees next to me a few feet away from the tall grass and I wonder if we should back up even further. Seconds later Xander comes out but stops before he can clear the area completely.

Before I can blink he is face first on the ground and looking at me with terrified eyes.

"Help me!" he screams, but before I can grab his hand something drags him back into the tall grass and he disappears.

This is all my fault.

CHAPTER TWENTY



The village of Lima is small with homes spread out and the main drag only hosting an inn with a bar underneath and a few small shops. It's pleasant just like Abina said it would be, everyone welcomed us kindly and we got our things stashed in our room before coming down to the tavern for a bite to eat.

Most of the locals that we saw as we passed through town showed up as the sun went down to have a pint before heading home to their families. As we enjoyed our meal I listened to see if there was any gossip that I needed to be aware of but it was just everyday work talk for the most part.

"I hear our Prince Rye has gotten himself a mate," one lady says and this

perks my ear up a bit.

“I’m sure she is beautiful and kind just like he is,” another lady says.

“I hope that she will like our kingdom, it’s not as busy as Areola. I hope she doesn’t get bored with our laid back lifestyle,” the first lady says, and it’s sweet to hear that they care so much about Rye and me too. Honestly I’m sure that I would love it here if not for the King.

‘Kind? You? They are in for a rude awakening when they find out what you are really like. They will probably be sending sympathy letters to Rye,’ Spin says, still pouting because I refuse to give him any sweets.

‘I could have left your gluttonous ass in that tree, but no I climbed up and got you down when your foot was stuck and then Abina carried you back because you were too full and couldn’t fly. So shut up,’ I tell him, but he still glares at me with his beady eyes.

We barely made it here before dark because we had to find him in the grove before rescuing him. It was a fucking chore and a half and I’m still not happy about it because I warned him to go easy. Not only that Abina told him to eat the fruit off the ground but somehow he was in a tree.

Yeah, he was clearly stealing the good fruit.

‘I said I was sorry,’ he whines looking at my dessert again.

‘I know but you still are cut off from sweets for tonight,’ I tell him with a sigh and roll my eyes when he flies up to pout on the rafters.

“So you are still fighting,” Abina says, taking a sip from her metal stine.

“Yes, apparently not letting him have dessert is the equivalent to cutting off a wing,” I say and she laughs.

I’m happy to see her feeling more relaxed now that we are in the village. The forest was the toughest on her since she constantly had to be on the look out for traps. Now at least for tonight she can breathe a little easier.

Or she could if we didn’t have to share a bed tonight.

Unfortunately, this inn only has rooms with one bed and I was so tired when I paid I just said yes without really thinking about it. When faced with the room and actually seeing the single bed reality hit pretty quickly. Abina didn’t seem to mind at all though, she just set her things on the side closest to the door and looked around the space with her normal blank expression.

I should have expected no less from her. After the almost kiss she treated me exactly the same as before. As if it wasn’t weird or embarrassing in the slightest. So I’m trying to take a page from her book and do the same. I’m probably making too much of it anyway, we’re friends now. Friends can

share a bed without it being awkward.

“Do you think they have a bath around here anywhere?” I ask, really wanting to get cleaned up and maybe even rinse off my under clothes so I don’t smell like a farm animal when we sleep together.

“Let me ask,” she says before flagging down the waitress.

“What can I get for you?” the young woman asks.

“We will have another round of drinks but we also were wondering about the bathing facilities,” Abina says politely and the girl stares at her a little too long, her face slowly turning red.

I don’t like it but I understand her pain.

“Oh I guess my mom forgot to tell you when you checked in, there is a building out back with everything that you need. I can show it to you later if you like,” the girl offers and blatantly flirting with Abina right in front of me.

“I’m sure we can find it, thanks. How about those drinks,” I say, raising my eyebrow at her. She frowns but turns and walks away without trying to set up another rendezvous with Abina.

“Weren’t you kind of rude to her?” Abina asks, and I feel my cheeks heat.

“Well she was flirting with you and I didn’t like it. Sorry if you were interested in her,” I say my stomach feeling uncomfortable from the mix of emotions rolling through me.

“I’m not.”

“Not what?”

“Interested in her, I was just trying to be nice,” she explains and for some reason I feel better hearing that.

I’m an idiot. It’s not like I have any right to tell Abina she can’t flirt with some cute girl. Grr. Why are my emotions confusing?

“Well at least we know where we can wash up,” I say and I’m sure it sounds just as awkward as I feel right now.

“Yes we should go after we finish our last drinks,” Abina suggests just as the waitress drops off our ales and leaves without saying anything. If we weren’t on our way to find Henry then I would have gotten absolutely hammered just so I could forget about my embarrassing behavior. It’s not like I own Abina. We are simply traveling companions.

“How long of a walk did you say it was to the castle from here?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Three days on foot,” she says, and I can’t help but sigh. That’s still a long time that Henry has to wait. I don’t like it but it doesn’t seem like we

have much choice.

“Did you ladies say you are heading to the capital?” an elderly man at the next table asks.

“Yeah my friend here would love to see the Tranquil castle, she heard how beautiful it is and has her little heart set on it. It’s just such a long walk,” Abina says, not sounding at all like herself, but at least she is sticking with the story we told the soldiers before.

“Yes, it is a beauty. I only asked because I’m taking some fruit to the market in the capital tomorrow and you are welcome to join me if you don’t mind a bumpy ride,” he says and my heart soars in excitement.

“We would love to! That’s so kind of you to offer,” I say, barely holding myself back from giving the old man a big hug.

“Alright then, I will see you two in the morning,” he says, giving us a wave before leaving the tavern.

“You accepted pretty quickly,” Abina says, taking a sip of her drink.

“Well you said the people are friendly and kind so I thought why not. And I just got really excited at the thought of being closer to Henry faster,” I tell her, and she nods.

“We should hurry and get some rest then, I’m sure when he said morning he meant when the sun comes up,” Abina says, and I don’t argue just finish off my drink and drop payment on the table.

“What did he mean about the bumpy ride though?”

“I guess we will find out tomorrow,” she says with a smile.

“Hey, some idiots were out in the fields and one of them got hurt pretty bad. Can we get a strong healer to help?” A man shouts, throwing open the front door of the tavern.

“It’s none of our business, we should let the village handle it,” Abina says and as much as I would like to help, I can’t heal so I would only be in the way anyways.

“Let’s go.”

I thought the bathing part was going to be awkward after the pond incident but turns out the system takes two people to work. One to pump the water while the other bathes. So we never were actually in the room together naked.

That was so much less stressful. Now with our clothes hanging to dry overnight by the fire and no extras on hand, we are now both clad in only a mere towel and sharing the same bed.

Even breathing feels uncomfortable right now because I'm afraid I might accidentally touch her. It's bad enough that I can feel the heat coming off of her skin this close. Looking at the ceiling, I wonder if I'm even going to be able to sleep tonight. The old wood rafters above remind me of home and make me wish I was there right now.

'Go to sleep, your wild thoughts are keeping me awake,' Spin complains from wherever he is sleeping outside the room. He said he couldn't watch the two of us be awkward again or he might throw up. I think he just wants to see if he can steal some treats from the kitchen without me knowing.

'It's not my fault my brain won't shut up,' I tell him, sighing to myself.

'It is your fault. Just stop thinking about Abina and go to bed. I'm sure tomorrow is going to be a long day too,' he says, and I have to agree. I'm not even sure what we will do once we get to the castle city. It's not as if I can barge into the castle and demand to see the King.

"Are you having trouble sleeping?" Abina asks and I jump a little not expecting her to be awake too. She's been lying there in silence for quite a while so I just assumed that she fell asleep.

"Yeah I've just got a lot on my mind," I tell her. The answer is vague but that's because I don't want to sound like a creep. How uncomfortable would it be if I just told her the truth.

I can't sleep because I keep thinking about you being naked next to me. No way I'm admitting that.

"Things will work out, but if you don't rest you won't be ready to face it all," she says, rolling over on her side to face me. Luckily we both have our heads on the pillows or I would have ended up with my face in her chest again. Just the thought makes my face heat and I'm glad that it's dark enough she can't see me clearly.

"I know. I'm just worried about Henry. Who knows what they are doing to him right now just because he took me in," I say. It's not a lie either I am thinking about him, he just isn't what is keeping me awake at the moment.

"It will be okay. We will save him, you aren't alone in this and I'm sure no matter what happens Henry will always be glad to be your father," she says before leaning over and kissing me on the forehead.

I freeze at the contact and look up at her through my lashes. I'm more

than a little surprised by her show of affection. Though I guess I shouldn't be because she was the one to make the first move in the pond too. Does that mean she actually likes me? It kind of felt like the crush was one sided at first but thinking back on it now anytime there was any physical contact she was the one that initiated it first. That has to mean that on some level she likes me too. Or is she touchy with all the people close to her? No. That doesn't seem right.

"Daria."

"Hmm?"

"I'm going to kiss you now, if you don't wish for me to do so then say something now," she says before her face almost as if in slow motion moves towards mine.

There is no way in hell I'm saying a word.

Her lips meet mine and they are softer than expected. Maybe that's because I'm used to kissing men, but there is something sweet about the way she tastes and the gentleness with which she is kissing me right now. A small moan escapes me and I feel her smile against my lips. It feels even better than I thought.

I'm not sure what made her think that I would push her away but that is never going to happen. To prove that I reach over and pull her body flush against mine, the only thing between us is the thin towels. Which is okay, I'm not sure either of us are ready for next steps. Kissing is enough for now.

Suddenly the door to our room flies open and Abina is up out of bed with a sword in her hand before I can even register what is happening.

"Bullseye."

"Firefly!"

"Babygirl."

Three random stupid nicknames assault my ears and I blink in surprise.

'*You could have warned me, Spin!*' I tell him.

'*I know how you love surprises,*' he snarks, probably getting back at me for not letting him have dessert.

'*You suck.*'

"What are you guys doing here?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Helping?"

More trouble just walked into my life than I am prepared to deal with right now.

"Get out."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“You can’t die Bast!” I shout, but he doesn’t respond.

In the background I see Raider in dragon form blowing fire at the Redspies and chasing them off. He’s amazing but I don’t have time to look my fill right now. Bast is still laying on top of me and I’m not strong enough to push him off. His handsome face is slack and I know that he took all the attacks from the little creatures to save me.

Why would he do that? I’m not worth saving.

But even as he was getting attacked he smiled at me as if I was worth every bit of pain. I don’t understand that. Tears are streaming down my cheeks as I lay under his still form trying to breath through the sobs. My

entire body is shaking and I can't move a muscle. I'm starting to panic when he is suddenly lifted off of me and laid down beside me.

Raider offers me a hand and pulls me from where I sank into the sand. Letting go of him I quickly move to Bast. His back is in tatters from the acid and the stinger and it makes me want to throw up just looking at it.

"Heal him," Raider says and I don't know if I'm strong enough. I've always been useless, weak, and nothing but a nuisance.

"I don't think I'm good enough," I tell Raider and he kneels down next to me in the sand and grabs my chin to make me look at him.

"You are more than good enough. Bast believed that and that is why he took all this. He had faith that you could heal him. Are you going to let him down?" Raider says and my chest hurts.

I have never had someone have this much faith in me before, I can't let him down.

"I'll do my best," I tell him and Raider smiles at me.

"Good boy," he says before letting go of me.

Turning back to Bast I put my hands over his body and pull my magic from every inch of my back and push it into my hands.

HEAL

I say the word in my mind and my hands glow white, brighter than they ever have before and as the light touches Bast his body starts to heal before my eyes. No scars to be seen on his perfect skin and even where the tattoo had been damaged on his shoulder was repaired, the same with his legs and anywhere else the Redspies injured him.

I did it.

"Bast, can you hear me?" I say wiping the long dark hair from his face.

When he looks at me his eyes are red and he looks evil.

"You killed me you worthless piece of sh—"

"Rye wake up, you are having a nightmare," Bast says, his voice calm and his eyes filled with concern.

It's just a dream. I didn't kill him.

After Bast healed he still needed to rest so Raider carried him while I slowly followed behind to the next place Raider said we could stay safely. It was a much smaller cave and didn't have a stash of things like the other but it would keep us safe during the night and that is what mattered most. I felt bad

that Raider had to do all the work but as soon as we arrived I laid down and passed out, not used to using that much healing magic at once. By the time I woke up it was night and Bast and Raider were sitting around a small fire chatting.

It's embarrassing to admit but I broke down crying when Bast smiled at me and invited me over to eat with them. I threw my arms around his shoulders and hugged him tight so grateful that he pulled through. Even though I saw his body heal it still scared me that I wouldn't be strong enough to save him.

I'm not sure what I feel for Bast or Raider for that matter. Doing what we did in the cave pool means something more than friendship though I'm sure of it. It's not the same way I feel about Daria, but it's something close. Do I call it love? Or is it just my need for people to care for me, making me see things that aren't there? Love is scary to me. No one really loved me before so I don't know what I'm feeling.

"What is with all the noise?" Raider asks, waking up on the other side of me.

"Rye had a nightmare," Bast says, not showing any of the signs that he hates me like the version of him from my dream. Why would he? I healed him and my spell was even strong enough it mended his clothing as well. Which has never happened to me before. I wonder if my emotions in the moment helped to make my magic stronger?

"Come here, we should sleep for a few more hours before we have another long day of walking, but at least we should be in Tranquil tomorrow," Raider says, pulling me tight into his arms and then promptly falling back to sleep.

"He's changed a lot," Bast says with a chuckle and I agree. Apparently he has decided that the facade he likes to put on in front of everyone else isn't necessary around us anymore because we know his secret.

"I don't think it's change, more like he stopped wearing his mask around us," I say and Bast nods. My back is to Raider's chest and I feel comfortable enough that my body finally relaxes from the nightmare.

"Do you want to talk about your dream?" he asks and I shake my head. It's not worth thinking about because the real Bast is lying in front of me now healthy and whole.

"No it's not real," I say, reaching out my hand I take his and close my eyes hoping that the rest of the night will be filled with happy thoughts.

“Wake up Rye,” Raider says and I blink open my eyes slowly and look around only to stop dead at the group of people standing a few feet away from us.

Tranquil soldiers.

“We got reports of a dragon in this area rampaging, and since it is close to the Tranquil border we thought we should check it out. I did not think we would find three Princes sleeping in here,” one of the men says. His tone is snide and I know that voice.

Eren. The captain of my father’s guard.

“We were simply escorting Rye home and ran into too much wildlife in the forest between Areola and Tranquil so we decided to go through my homelands,” Raider says, sitting up as if nothing is wrong.

“Why did you not call for an escort Prince Rye?” Eren asks me, ignoring Raider’s words.

Normally an inquiry like this would make my hands sweat and I would shake and stammer with my words as he glares at me but being with Raider and Bast I feel safer now. They would protect me if anything were to go wrong, I just know it. It makes me feel brave in front of this intimidating man.

“Has your title changed from guard to King recently?” I ask and Eren gives me a strange look.

“No Prince, it has not.”

“Then I don’t owe you an explanation, do I?” I say raising an eyebrow in defiance.

“My apologies Prince Rye, I was just concerned—”

“Please wait outside, we will be out when we are ready to leave,” I say and the men stand tall and tap their chests twice in salute before leaving the cave. Eren did give me a look that says I will pay for this later but for now I feel relieved.

“I did not see that coming,” Raider says, giving me a pat on the back.

“I don’t think they saw it either. The head guard’s face was very unfriendly when Rye interrupted him,” Bast says, patting me on the leg.

“I was frightened when I woke up and saw them but I felt safe with you here. Though I’m sure I will pay for it later when Eren speaks to my father,” I say with a sigh. Sticking up for myself like that felt really good.

“We won’t let him hurt you,” Raider says, but there is nothing anyone can do to save me. Soon enough everyone will go their separate ways again and I’ll be right back where I was before. Hiding in my room and hoping my father forgets that I even exist.

“No. I promise we won’t leave you to fend for yourself this time. Daria won’t either,” Raider says, reading my thoughts.

“Thank you. We should get going before they come back,” I say before getting to my feet.

“Hey. Raider isn’t lying. Aside from us all sharing the same mate we care for you. You don’t have to be alone anymore, so lean on us,” Bast says, and when I look between the two of them I almost feel a bit of hope.

“Okay.”

When we exit the cave one of the guards has already shifted and is waiting next to the travel basket that he will carry us to the castle in. It’s the fastest way to travel other than flying by yourself and human visitors really seem to love it. It was something my father started so that people wouldn’t catch on to the fact that I don’t have wings.

“So why is the Tranquil guard patrolling land that is clearly Inferno territory?” Raider asks, eyeing Eren. He doesn’t fear making the man angry as he questions his work, making him sound like the true Prince he is.

“One of our scouts just happened to be flying the border and reported that they saw a dragon going berserk. Even if this isn’t technically our land we can’t simply ignore possible threats,” he says. “Besides the King and the royals of Inferno are friends, they have agreed to a mutually beneficial corporation for the good of all the citizens.” His snide tone as if he knows everything has me rolling my eyes and letting out an audible sigh.

“Is something the matter Prince Rye?” he asks and normally I would just move on but I really don’t like the way he is speaking to Raider.

“Your tone and the way you speak above your station is giving me a headache. Lets just be on our way,” I say walking over to the basket and taking a seat inside leaving Eren standing there with a shocked look on his face. That’s twice today that I have talked back to him and I have to say it feels great.

“You sounded like a total badass putting him in his place just now,” Raider whispers in my ear as he takes a seat on my left. Bast finds a seat on my right and then we wait for the guards to load up including Eren who looks a little red in the face.

Before any signs of aggression would have sent me heading for the hills, but for some reason I just feel brave now. Either that or I'm just tired of being everyone's rug to wipe their feet on? I'm not sure this new found courage will hold up in front of my father but for now I can hold my head high. For the first time in my life I stood up for myself and my friends. It feels like something to celebrate.

Or at least it would be if I wasn't about to face my father again.

I will always fear him. It doesn't matter how brave I think I am, there isn't anything that will make me not fear my father and his wrath. My entire life I have lived knowing that at any moment something could make him angry and I will take the punishment for it. Actually being away from Tranquil and traveling with Bast and Raider, though there have been scary moments it's the most relaxed I have ever felt.

Daria gives me that kind of peace too, with her sweet smile and gentleness. But our time together has been too short, just small moments of love isn't enough to erase everything. That's why more than anything I hope she is safe. So that we can share more of those times together. Even if it means facing my father I'd do anything to be with her again.

"Take off," Eren shouts to the dragon guard and he immediately takes to the air, grabbing the large handle of the basket above us and pulling us into the sky.

These are the only times that I get to experience what it might be like to fly.

Closing my eyes I lean back against the side of the basket and enjoy the breeze blowing through my hair. The fresh scents all around me and I pretend for just a moment that I'm flying.

"I've never traveled like this before, it's actually very comfortable and pretty relaxing. I can actually take in the sights more easily than when I'm flying," Raider says and I open my eyes to see him looking around and smiling.

"Me either," Bast says, glancing around watching the world go by below us.

"This particular method of travel was specifically designed for Prince Rye," Eren comments, trying to take a dig at my lack of wings. He is one of the few people that know about my lack of flight.

"I think I might like to implement something like this in my country as well. The heat of Inferno isn't very welcoming to visitors especially if they

must walk everywhere. This would welcome more humans to my kingdom as well,” Raider says seriously.

“For my kingdom it is the rain that hinders people, so if I could make it so there is a canopy or cover on this transport that would work for me as well,” Bast says, and I’m shocked by both of their reactions to something that was built to make me feel small.

“Not just for humans,” one of the other guards says and we all glance at him. “To tell you the truth, for shorter trips or when I have my children with me these baskets are a lifesaver. Shifting can sometimes be taxing after long shifts so I usually take a basket home in the evening.” I’m staring at him in shock as some of the other guards around him nod their heads in agreement.

Something that was made to shame me actually turned out to help my people.

“I bet the other kingdoms would love something like this as well. Can you imagine trying to walk through the snow in Hailstorm? No thank you,” Raider says with a fake shiver. I can imagine for him being a fire dragon the ice kingdom sounds like hell.

“I’ve never thought about it this way before, but I’m glad to know that it is something that helps the kingdom’s people and I hope that it can help other kingdoms as well,” I say, holding my head high.

So many good things have happened to me along the way and I hope that things will continue to change for the better. Once we get Daria’s father back to her and figure out what is going on I hope that more good things will happen to our mate group.

As we near the castle though my stomach sinks into that old familiar feeling, because even if things are looking up I know that my father is waiting for me. He’ll do everything in his power to snatch what little happiness I’ve found and put me back under his thumb where he thinks I belong.

“Welcome home Prince Rye,” Eren says with an evil smirk on his face as soon as the basket touches down in the courtyard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“Are you ready to go miss?” the old man from last night asks looking around at the now larger group of people with me.

I kicked them out of my room last night for a few reasons; one; I was in a towel and not ready for two of them to see me naked, two; they almost caught me making out with Abina, and lastly there wasn't enough room for all of us in there and I really wanted a full night's rest in a bed for the first time in a week. I'm not mad at them for coming after me, I'm a little flattered and a lot confused by their decision.

Meeting at breakfast, the guys told me about their adventure through the wilderness and Drax gave me three pretty stones that he seemed really proud

of. But before they could finish telling me everything the old man showed up and it was time to load up.

“Can you handle a few more people? We will pay for the inconvenience of course,” I ask him and he just smiles and nods.

“There is plenty of room, don’t worry about paying. I’m the one that offered you the ride in the first place. You can just help me unload when we arrive and that will be enough,” he says waving for us to follow him around the back of the building.

The first thing that catches my attention is the fully shifted dragon staring at me. It’s all white and my first instinct is to reach for a weapon but I stop myself beforehand. This thing is fucking huge and even though I have been around a few dragons lately it’s still crazy to see them up close like this.

“This is my nephew, he will be carrying us with the supplies for the market. He’s a good boy so you don’t have to worry about him being reckless,” the old man says, pulling my eyes away from the dragon I look over to what I assume we will be riding in.

It’s like a wooden wagon without any wheels. One end is already loaded with crates and the other has benches. The sides are a little higher than a wagon; probably so things don’t fly out and there is a door on the end for us to enter and exit. There is a handle I guess you would call it in the middle sticking up high enough that the dragons’ talons won’t touch anything in the cart when they grab it.

It’s not something I have ever seen before and if I wasn’t hunting after the people who took Henry I would probably really enjoy the idea of riding in one of these things. My joy is overshadowed though by the thought of him suffering right now.

“What is this called? I want one in Aquapura,” Drax says, running around looking at the cart like it’s a sparkly new toy.

“It’s called a travel basket. They were first designed with poor Prince Rye in mind because he was sickly when he was younger and it helped him get around. Now we use them for everything from delivering goods to helping citizens get around,” the old man explains and my stomach drops a bit.

It’s because Rye doesn’t have any wings.

Most people don’t know that secret though, including the other Princes so I’m not going to say anything about it. I didn’t get to ask about the others at breakfast but hopefully on the way to the Castle town I can get some more information out of the three idiots in front of me. Xander is smart but also the

fact that he followed Lo blindly into the forest makes him an idiot as well. Drax and Lo, well those two are just dumb.

They all could have gotten themselves killed with all the traps and it has me hoping that the other three didn't try to go that way as well. Raider may be an asshole but I wouldn't want anything to happen to Bast or Rye. So I hope wherever they are right now they are safe.

'Spin, where are you hiding? It's almost time to go?' I say not having heard much from him since he stole a jar of jam from the breakfast table and took off. It's not like I hadn't already planned on sharing with him. The only reason I told him no last night is because of all the fruit he ate in the orchard.

'I'm not coming,' he says and I'm a little taken back. We've fought a lot over the years but he has never ditched me just because he didn't get dessert before.

'Why not?'

'I'm busy with things,' he says and I sigh.

'You got your head stuck in the jam jar didn't you?' I ask.

'No?' he says, and it comes out like a question, so I know that I'm right.

'I'll help you, just tell me where you are. We can get you fixed up somewhere no one will see so you don't have to be embarrassed,' I tell him trying to just get this over with so we can get going.

'I'm on the other side of the building by the trash heaps,' he says reluctantly. I'm not sure why he is making this harder than it has to be, this isn't the first time this has happened and it probably won't be the last either.

'Okay.'

"I'll be right back," I say to the others before taking off around the side of the Inn. I spot Spin right away sitting on a crate with the jar on his head and I have a hard time not laughing as his beady eyes stare at me through the glass.

It really never gets old.

For such a proud little Snapdragon he really is careless when it comes to food. It's no wonder that's how he got kidnapped at the games. *Such a spoiled glutton.*

'Should have this off in no time,' I tell him, taking his head in one hand and the jar in the other, I turn it back and forth and pull a little at a time trying not to rip off any of his scales. Even though it's his own fault I'll never hear the end of it if that happens. It takes a couple minutes but I finally manage to pull his head free. Spin shakes himself but there is still food on his face so I set the jar off to the side and use a rag nearby to wipe him up.

'Thanks,' he says, not looking at me.

'It's fine Spin, you are my partner and best friend, I'm always willing to get you out of sticky situations,' I tell him patting him on the head. He relaxes and rubs his head on my side and I think we are finally back to normal.

'Now let's go save Henry so we can go home,' I tell him.

'I don't think home is going to mean the same thing after this, but as long as we are together it will work out,' he says before taking flight.

I have a sinking feeling he is right and when I come around the corner and see who is waiting for me by the cart it only gets worse. But the Princes and the mating are a problem for another time. Right now there is only one thing on my mind and that is getting my dad back.

"Are you ready to go?" Lo asks but I ignore him. I'm still pissed at him for being such a damn stubborn ass.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Spin needed some snuggles before we take off, he's been feeling neglected lately," I say, teasing him but not letting out his embarrassment.

'I don't want any damn snuggles from you,' Spin protests but I'm the only one that can hear him.

"He's so cute, do you think he would snuggle with me too?" Drax asks, looking at Spin like he's a new toy.

"Maybe? You did give him a chocolate fountain after all," I say and I can almost hear Spin wondering if he sucks up to him if he can get one of those again.

"He was so funny, I wouldn't mind seeing that again but outside so the clean up isn't so bad," Drax says with a laugh, and not even a minute later Spin swoops down and lands on his shoulder.

"How does he like everyone but me?" Lo says with a sigh.

"Because he has good taste," I tell him before moving away.

"We should get going, so we don't miss the afternoon market," the old man says and Abina is actually the first one to get on the basket thing. She looks around for a moment and then nods. Apparently finding it safe enough.

I've been following her lead lately so I get on next and take the open seat next to her. Drax, with Spin still on his shoulder, sits on the other side of me, leaving Xander, Lo, and the old man to sit across from us.

"Let's go Bean," the old man shouts and the dragon that had been waiting patiently takes to the sky. The wind from their wings kicks up some dirt and has my hair flying all over the place but I can't seem to look away. No matter

how many times I see them I just think they are majestic. Bean slowly and carefully picks up the handle and pulls us into the sky.

The wood creaks but the old man doesn't seem worried so I relax as much as possible as we start getting higher. Looking over the edge of the wood wall I can see Lima small below us and all the fields and groves we walked past yesterday. I can also see the white castle way off in the distance shining like a beacon.

"It will take about a half an hour to reach the castle town so just relax," the old man says, leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

"So you told me about making it through the forest, mostly unhurt except for Drax, but how did you come to be at the Inn and find us last night?" I ask Drax, not even bothering to look at Lo. He hurt me when he threw a fit and left and I'm not willing to just let it go even though I could use him for support right now. I expect an apology and groveling.

"Well Lo got us into a bit of a pickle last night. We had to run through the fields with monsters chasing us. Xander even got taken and injured," he starts and I look over at Xander but he just smiles.

"I'm fine now. The best healers from the village showed up and saved my legs. They were in pretty bad shape. It would have been worse though if Drax hadn't run back into the field and dragged me out," Xander says, and I glance over at Lo who is staring at his feet, probably too embarrassed to look at anyone.

"Oh well it was easy for me since my secondary skill is invisibility. The animals didn't know what to do when they started getting hit by nothing. I was able to pick him up and carry him out and by the time we got back Lo had already brought back the healers and was waiting in the grove," Drax says and I now don't feel the slightest bit bad for thinking the three of them are idiots.

"I thought someone said it was common knowledge not to be in the fields at night?" I ask and Lo lets out a sigh.

"It's my fault, I didn't want to miss the chance if you were close so I kept pushing us and putting us in danger," he says, but Xander shakes his head.

"I told him that we should stop but I was also anxious to meet with you. If I had stuck to my knowledge I wouldn't have gotten hurt but we also would have missed meeting up with you. So I think it worked out the best way it could," Xander says, sticking up for Lo. They must have bonded on their journey.

“The nice people that healed Xander brought us to the inn and someone made a comment about getting more visitors than they were used to in one day, and they mentioned red hair. We told them you were the other half of our party that we got separated from and then busted into your room,” Drax says, tying up the rest of the story.

“And you don’t know what happened to the other three?” I ask, and they all shake their heads.

“After Rye passed out in Areola the three of us took off not wanting you to get too far ahead. They were supposed to try and catch up but I’m sure all the traps slowed them down,” Xander says, looking a little uncomfortable.

Glancing over at the old man I hear him snoring slightly and I’m glad that we won’t have to pay for his silence. Mentioning the Prince of Tranquil is bound to perk some ears especially when the people here seem to love him.

“Why did he pass out? Is he sick?” I ask hoping that my leaving didn’t stress him out enough to make him sick.

“When he heard that you were coming here, I’m sure the fear of his father...” Drax says letting his words trail off as if afraid to say anything slightly hostile about the King. I guess I don’t blame him since we are in his domain now and he has his people fooled thinking he’s a kind man.

“To tell you the truth I kind of hope that he stays in Areola, I don’t want him getting caught in the middle between that man and me,” I say and Abina who has been very quiet since the guys showed up pats me on the back. She knows that I care about Rye and worry about him because he is such a gentle soul.

“Now that I think about it, why is Abina here?” Drax asks, sounding more curious than anything.

“Well since I’m attached to all five of your royal pains in the ass, Abina followed me into the woods and rescued me the first night from some assholes. She decided to stick around after that and we have become good friends now,” I explain.

“That makes sense. I’m glad that you weren’t alone. Abina you have my deepest thanks,” Xander says bowing his head to her.

She looks uncomfortable with the attention as Drax also bows his head in thanks, but I think I’m the only one that can see past her blank expressions now. I will just have to ask her later why their thanks bothered her.

“Oh look we’re here,” Drax says looking over the side of the basket.

Laid out before us is a city larger than Areola or at least that’s how it

seems from up here. The castle is towards the back and elevated slightly with the town sprawling in front of it. Everything is white including the stone streets and there doesn't even look like there is a slum to be found anywhere.

I never thought that a city could be so clean. It's nothing like where I grew up. Even the rich part of town isn't this nice.

"Am I the only one weirded out by how pristine this place looks?" I ask and they all shake their heads.

"I've never been here either, I was expecting nice but not this," Xander says.

"Welcome to the castle town of Peace," the old man says.

Peace is such a nice name but I'm positive that's not at all what we are going to find here.

Bean angles towards the right slightly and slowly begins to get closer to the ground outside of the city. I hadn't noticed before because I was so concentrated on the vast town but there is a grassy area outside the city walls where there are other dragons and basket structures sitting. When we touch down on the ground there are a few bumps but other than that it was a perfectly smooth ride unlike what the old man said last night.

It was a short ride but I'm still a little stiff from sitting on the hard bench the whole time so when we are all set I am the first one to jump out after the old man. Only to have my eyes go wide when I find myself staring at a very tall muscular man who is completely naked.

"Bean, damn it, put some clothes on! Humans aren't used to shifter nudeness," the old man scolds him and his face turns red before he gets back into the cart and shuts the door. "I'm sorry about him."

"It's alright, I was a little surprised but that's not the first naked man I've seen," I say with a shrug and the old man chuckles.

"I like you miss, please come visit Lima again and we will have a drink," he says, giving me a pat on the back.

"I'll bring my dad next time, I think he will like you too," I tell him hoping that I can make that come true.

"I'm really sorry about that," Bean says, coming out fully clothed now. "I'm used to it just being me and pops." His face is still bright red but I find it kind of cute how embarrassed he is.

'Too bad your plate is already full, I'm sure that one is just your type,' Spin says sarcastically, but he's not wrong. Guess I will just have to look but not touch.

“It’s fine, we were the ones that crashed your delivery,” I say, giving him a friendly smile.

“My name is Lima, I was named after the town and also why my pops calls me Bean,” he says sticking out his hands.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Daria. This is Abina, Drax, Xander, Lo and of course Spin. We appreciate you letting us tag along,” I say, taking his hand and shaking it while pointing out who is who with the other.

“I have a question,” Xander says.

“Shoot.”

“If you have to drop your load off out here then how do you get your goods into the city?” he asks and I hadn’t even thought about that.

“Oh well just inside the wall there is a stable and most villages keep a couple horses there and a wagon, the rent isn’t too bad if the whole village chips in and we take turns using it,” Lima explains and that makes a lot of sense. It also gives me a clue as to where the old man took off to.

“Interesting, how is the town able to stay so clean when you have wagons coming and going pulled by animals?” Xander asks, trying to be polite I suspect, instead of just asking how they clean up the shit.

“Oh from what I heard the King has a contract with a witch and they cast a cleaning spell on the city every night so that it is fresh every morning. Since I don’t live here I can’t say for sure but it seems likely,” Lima says with a shrug.

“Very interesting,” Xander ponders and I can almost see the cogs turning in his head as he takes in all the new information.

“It will probably take my pops a good thirty minutes to get back with the cart if you all have places you need to be,” Lima says but I shake my head.

“We told the old man we would help in exchange for the lift since he wouldn’t take our money. So we will just wait. Plus it would be nice to get more information and directions from you when we get in the walls,” I say and the others nod their heads.

‘I’m going to scout the town,’ Spin says before taking off.

‘Be careful. People in Areola are kind of used to you but we don’t know how people here will react,’ I tell him but I can almost hear him rolling his eyes as he flies off. I know that he can change his color and blend in but there is still a chance with more dragon citizens that he could be caught.

“Can we talk?” Lo asks as I stand there staring after Spin.

“Now is not the time,” I tell him, not bothering to look at him.

“I have a feeling as soon as we go into that town things are only going to get more crazy. So for now I’m just going to say that I’m sorry for being an ass, I know you better than anyone and I let my pride cloud my common sense. I’m not giving up on you, so when the time is right just give me a chance to beg for forgiveness,” he says before turning and walking away.

Even though I’m not ready to forgive him, the fact that he apologized and is willing to beg later is appealing and does make me feel a little better. To show I’m not a pushover though I’m going to make him sweat for a while before strapping him to a bed and making him beg to come. Tying him up always makes me feel better.

“You could just forgive him,” Abina says, coming to stand next to me while the guys stand around asking Lima questions.

“I could but what would be the fun in that?” I say but she gives me a look. “He hurt me more than I thought ok. Aside from Henry and Spin he was the person closest to me. I told him I loved him which I don’t do, and he still was a jerk and took off leaving me to deal with everything alone. I think it would be easier to forgive Raider for being an ass because we don’t have the same deep connection. Does that make sense?” I say and she nods her head.

“When you let people in they can hurt your most vulnerable places that strangers can not reach. It makes perfect sense that you would need more time,” she says and I’m glad one of us understood all my blabbing.

“I know there are other things to worry about like all the Princes gone wild chasing after me, but right now I just want to focus on getting my dad back and worry about all the relationship drama later,” I say and she nods again, just as I hear horses coming our way.

“I will respect your wishes and protect your heart the best I can,” she whispers in my ear before giving me a kiss on the cheek and stepping back like nothing happened.

Something else to think about later.

“Thanks for waiting. Let’s get this thing loaded and into town so that we can make some money for the village,” the old man says cheerfully and since the guys tagged along without asking I make sure that they do most of the heavy lifting. It doesn't take long to get everything moved and get us all loaded up to ride along. For some reason I’m starting to feel a bit nervous but I push it down and try to think about how going through the big stone entrance is one step closer to Henry.

Just hold on, I’m coming.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Peace has a big wall encircling the town probably for protection sake, but it is daunting. Almost like once you enter you can never leave, but that's not really the case considering people are coming and going without any problems. Maybe it's just because I know the King is evil and it might mean something different for our group entirely.

Even if this does end up being a prison it sure is a clean one. My own castle town of Sea Ember is nothing like this place. We do try to keep things clean but we have a lot more colors than just white. This place actually makes me a little homesick. I hope my mother is doing well and isn't panicking with news that I have gone missing. I don't owe my father anything but I would

hate to cause my mother pain.

Maybe I will be able to send a note from here letting her know that I am okay, just chasing after my mate. I'm sure she will think that is the most romantic thing.

"The market is just ahead," Lima says. He's a really nice guy who had no problem answering all of Xander's questions while we waited for the old guy. Actually all the people we met since entering this kingdom have been nice. Even the lady that owns the inn that called us idiots was nice about it when she gave us a room for the night. It was a good thing that Lo has money stashed in his pack or we would have been sleeping with the monsters.

I may be able to joke about it now but last night I really did think that Xander might not make it. When I found him he was covered in the creatures and he had bite marks everywhere. His legs were the worst though, they were torn to shreds. I was almost afraid that he would never walk again as I carried him out of there with the little buggers nipping at our heels. Having healers there when we arrived was the only thing that saved him.

Lo apologized over and over on the way back to town and Xander forgave him but I'm pretty sure he is having the hardest time forgiving himself. Not only for what happened to Xander but what happened with Daria as well. I know what it's like to hurt the person you love and regret it more than life itself. At least he has a chance to be forgiven.

Bast won't even look at me and I don't blame him a bit. At the time I thought it was the best thing to do for both of us, but I didn't realize that it would cut this deep not only for him but for me too. There is no simply asking for forgiveness in our situation. Things will never be the same as when we were young and stupid. But maybe there is a way that we can at least be able to be in the same room again without it feeling so awful.

I'm almost grateful we are in different groups because then I don't have to look at my biggest regret constantly.

"Are you going to help unload or just sit there staring into space like an idiot?" Lo asks and I look around only to realize that everyone has already gotten down and is waiting for me.

"Sorry, lost in thought," I say before jumping down to join the group.

Everything about this place feels kind of creepy. Not the people, they all seem nice, but it's so quiet. We are on the edge of the bustling market and yet the people come and go without much noise at all. In Aquapura our market is so lively you can hear the people all the way to the castle. It's a culture shock

seeing how these people interact and it's weirding me out.

"Well thank you all for your help," the old man says when all the crates are unloaded. I feel a little bad I didn't do much but I'm just not in the right headspace at the moment.

"I'm going to find a bathroom," I tell Lo next to me before turning and walking off.

"Don't get lost, and we are only waiting here fifteen minutes for you," he shouts after me and I just wave. Really what I want to do is walk around and listen to the town gossip while invisible. Even though the people here might act pure and almost saintly, everyone loves to talk about the latest news. It might be the only way to see if anything funny has been going on here lately.

Going into an alley to my right I make sure no one is looking before I spread my magic throughout my body and cast my ability.

Unseen

I hold my hand up to the sky but even I can't see myself right now. Walking back out into the market I make sure to keep my distance from people and any sort of tripping hazard. The last thing I want to do is accidentally out my spying or secondary power. It's a big royal secret that the heads of the lines and the heir all have special abilities aside from that of a normal dragon shifter. Our normal skills are also much stronger than a regular citizen, though they vary as well.

"I heard Prince Rye got himself a mate at the Games," a woman in one stall says. She is smiling happily as if it was her own kid getting engaged.

"Then why did he show up at the castle with only the two other Princes with him? Are you sure you heard right?" the woman at the stall next to her asks, and I freeze in place.

"What? That seems odd, I really wanted to see him happy with a mate," the first woman comments.

"Well I'm not saying that part isn't true, I'm just saying that my cousin that works at the castle saw Prince Rye return and said the Prince from Inferno and the Prince from Drumfire were with him and they all looked a little strange dressed like regular folks," the second woman says.

So they are already at the castle. Will that make things easier or harder for us?

Either way that is probably enough spying for now I can feel my magic growing a bit tired. I'm not sure how Bast manages to play in his shadows so much, because going unseen drains me fast. It's why I always try to keep it

under twenty minutes. The longest I ever went as an experiment was an hour and I passed out afterwards and slept for twelve hours straight to recover. That's when I decided that shorter periods were better.

Popping into another alley, I make myself visible once more before quickly making my way back to the stall that the old man and Lima were setting up earlier. The others are still helping with prep, probably waiting for me. I'd feel bad if my spying hadn't come up with anything useful.

"There he is," Daria says when she sees me coming towards them.

"Sorry it took so long but I did get some information," I say and she gives me a funny look.

"I thought you were going to the bathroom?" she asks suspiciously.

"Yeah, I lied. I wanted to take the chance to listen to the town gossip to see if there was any information floating around about your father," I say and she nods.

"You are forgiven this time, but just be honest next time, especially if you are just being helpful." She pauses, and I nod. "Now tell me what you heard."

"Unfortunately I didn't hear anything about your father but I did hear that Rye, Bast and Raider are all at the castle," I say and she looks both disappointed and relieved at the same time. I'm sure it sucks not knowing about her dad but I'm also sure that she was worried about Rye after we told her what happened to him.

"At least they are safe and alive, but how did they beat us here? They left after you guys, right?" Daria asks and I have no clue.

"Do you think they said screw it after seeing some traps and decided to fly here anyway?" Lo asks and that sounds like something Raider would suggest but I'm not sure Rye or Bast would go along with it. As far as I know Rye was not in a hurry to come home.

"We can stand around and guess all we want but the only way to know for sure is to just ask them," Xander says calmly. He is always so straightforward, and logical. Even if that gets on my nerves a little bit the group of hot heads needs a voice of reason. Abina would be the logical choice for that but she really doesn't speak much to anyone but Daria. It's an odd friendship but I'm glad Daria has someone right now. Speaking of which, I haven't seen her pet in a while.

"Where is your little buddy?" I ask and her face goes blank for a second and then she looks kind of pissed, finally finishing up by rolling her eyes.

"He's on his way now, damn brat got distracted by someone giving him

sweets. He didn't even pause to think maybe this is poison and just ate it like the damn glutton he is," she mumbles to herself and I can't help but chuckle.

"How do you know all that?" I ask, I mean I have seen them interact before but it almost seems like she is talking to him and that's not possible. Right?

"Oh, just a feeling I had," she says, sounding uncomfortable. It seems a little fishy but I'm not going to push for more now. Not when we have other things to deal with.

"So what is our next move, Firefly?" I ask and she gives me a look, it's the same one she gives me every time I use her nickname so I just ignore it.

"I'm not sure. Maybe we just go to the castle and say we want to see Rye. Once we get invited inside it will be easier to search for Henry, and we can see what that bastard of a Ki—" I stop her by putting my hand over her mouth.

"I know that you hate him but he has the entire kingdom fooled, better not to call their beloved King any nasty names in ear shot or you might find yourself on the end of an unfriendly sword," I say quietly in her ear, and she nods her head so I remove my hand.

"Sorry, I'll be more crafty with my insults next time," she says, giving me a sly smile, not an ounce of fear in her. If she wasn't my fated mate I would have still fallen head over heels for her. I just can't seem to get enough of her wildness.

"Sure you will."

"Anyway as I was saying that abusive bastard needs to be watched, I don't want him doing anything to R because he is pissed at me," she says and I chuckle because I know that is the King's new code name.

"I'm sure with Raider and Bast present that the abusive bastard wouldn't do anything too stupid," Xander says, but I'm not so sure. I've seen him hit Rye in front of most of the royal families and no one said a word.

"We are mere Princes, none of us have taken the throne yet because we are required to be mated first, so I don't think that R is as safe as you think, unless things have changed and the other two decide to step in," I say and now they all look a little more worried.

I wasn't trying to freak them out but what I said is just the reality of what we are dealing with. It's not pretty but this is the life that we all have to deal with now. We're all mates of Daria which in my book makes us a family. A messed up one right now but still family nonetheless. So we need to be ready

to help each other whatever may come.

“I’m starving, should we find some food while we wait for your pet?” I ask looping Daria’s arm and dragging her down the aisle of stalls with me. My goal is just to help her relax for a few minutes before we storm the castle and things get crazy.

“Fine, but I want meat,” she says, rolling her eyes at me.

“Anything my lady wishes for shall be hers,” I say and I hear the others following behind us groan.

“That’s really fucking cheesy but at least you aren’t trying to molest me anymore,” she says and now it’s my turn to groan.

Chasing her around the castle was just kind of fun, but I didn’t know she would hate it this much. I never would have actually done anything she didn’t want. I just wanted to get close to her and maybe steal a kiss. More flirty than stalker is what I meant but apparently it didn’t come across that way to Daria.

“Sorry, I’ve never had a mate before, flirting and joking is who I am, if it made you hate me please forgive me,” I say and she stops and gives me a look I can’t read.

“I like the fun side of you. If I hated you I wouldn’t let you drag me down here and make you buy me meat. It’s looking like we are all stuck with each other for a long time so let’s just take things slow and get to know each other. Having to apologize at every turn is going to get annoying so let’s just see how it goes. You will know if you really piss me off, just ask Lo how the shit list feels,” she says and I glance over to see my new friend is looking kind of miserable.

“I don’t think that is the list for me, my tender heart wouldn’t be able to handle it,” I say and she chuckles.

“Then I suggest that you be a good boy for me from now on,” she says and my whole body is on board with that. Even my dragon who is usually silent gives me the feeling that he agrees with whatever our mate wants. He’s as needy for her love as I am.

“I promise to be your good boy from now on,” I say and she smiles at me.

“Okay the public flirting is making me a little nauseous,” Lo says under his breath.

Daria frowns and looks like she is going to rip into him right here in the middle of the street which will only draw unwanted attention in this peaceful town.

“He’s just jealous, pay him no mind. Oh look, a meat stand!” I say

dragging her along behind me over to the stand that smells like spices and fresh grilled meat. My mouth starts to water and that's when I remember I don't actually have any money on me.

"Hey genius, did you think you were going to pay with your looks?" Lo taunts me and I feel my face heat. Daria chuckles and shakes her head.

"I should not be surprised that you don't know how the real world works," she says with a sigh before pulling some money from her pocket and buying a meat skewer for everyone.

"Thank you." Taking the stick in my hand, I take a bite and my mouth is flooded with a mix of different flavors. It's so good I wish they would serve something like this in the castle instead of some of the fancy things they do.

Before I know it my stick is empty and I'm about to beg for another one when Daria's pet lands on my head. I'm not sure what he is doing but she looks at him and then looks towards the end of the line of stalls where a group of soldiers are now heading our way. My instinct says that this is the fastest way into the castle if we act as if we are just here to visit our dear friend Rye. Which is why when Daria looks like she is about to run I grab her arm and pull her close to me.

"Relax. This will get us where we want to go faster if we are invited," I say and she nods her head understanding my plan.

"Prince Drax and Prince Xander, the King would like to see you and your party," one of the guards says. None of them give off any kind of hostile vibes so I smile brightly and get ready to put on a show. One I'm very familiar with.

"That is so great! We traveled all this way to see Rye and we didn't even have to knock on the door. Thank you. Have you tried this meat stall though? It's the best thing I have ever tasted," I say and the guards smile before turning to lead the way.

"You're good at this," Daria whispers to me.

"I've been playing this role my whole life."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Listening to that jackass guard think rude shit about Rye all the way to the castle had me wanting to throw his ass out of the basket. It was making me feel a lot more like my asshole self but I just had to grit my teeth and not act out and punch the fool. Every time he tried to talk about how Rye needed the basket I about let him have it.

Just because he is the King's prized mutt does not mean that he is anything special. In fact he could easily be replaced. He is so foolish thinking that he is safe. The King will hand his crown to Rye soon enough and then his lavish life is over. There is no way that Rye is going to keep an asshole like that as his head guard.

No fucking way.

I don't get a say in other kingdoms and how they are run but I wouldn't trust that man to watch Rye's back. He would sooner put a knife in it than protect him. He just seethes contempt for the fact that Rye has no wings. As if the Prince had a choice in how his body is now. Such an idiot.

"Raider, calm down," Rye says and I didn't even realize that I was pacing back and forth in Rye's room.

"Sorry," I say, taking a seat in one of the chairs in the corner at the small table.

After we were brought to the castle, we were ushered into Rye's suite and told to wait for the King. As if that man has any control over what I do, is what I thought but when I saw Rye shaking I calmed myself a bit. It's been hours and all we have done is bathe in the luxurious bathroom; which we probably needed after days of travel, and wait.

All this waiting around makes me think the King is just making us wait for his own amusement.

Bast's thought echoes my own as he sits there looking calm on the outside. I'm sure he is doing that to try and help relieve some of Rye's stress. My pacing probably wasn't the least bit helpful, but I feel like a caged animal and so does my dragon. Moving helped us feel a little better.

"I'm sorry this is taking so long," Rye says, but we know this isn't his fault in the slightest. He is just used to apologizing for everything.

My father is toying with all of us like he usually does to just me. It's bold even for him to show this side to the other Princes. I just hope he doesn't abuse me in front of them too. That will make me feel pathetic.

Rye's thought hurt my heart, like a sharp stabbing pain. My parents have always been very neglectful but I never had to fear them raising a hand to me. I can't even imagine living like that day in and day out wondering when the next blow is going to come. God, that makes me so furious.

"It will be okay, why don't we have some tea or something and just try to relax. There are worse things in the world than waiting in this nice room," I say, giving Bast a look, but he is already on it.

"Yeah, like getting attacked by Redspies. That is something that I never want to go through again. Thank god you saved me Rye," Bast says and it comes out a little fake and awkward but I have to give him credit for trying.

"I don't want to think about that again. I may be a healer but I've never been so scared in my life. The thought of you almost dying to protect me, it

makes me sick to my stomach,” Rye says.

“But you did a great job. I was really proud of you,” I tell him, grabbing his arm and pulling him into my lap.

All my life I don't think anyone has ever really been proud of me. Ashamed, yes. My father and even my mother have expressed that, but never proud.

Rye's thoughts make me want to punch every damn person in this castle for not taking care of him. Just because he doesn't have wings they made him feel like he was nothing and I can't help but feel overwhelming frustration and pity for him.

“Well we are proud of you. You are stronger than you think that you are, just remember that,” Bast says.

Just the look on his face since we arrived tells me everything I need to know about this place. I want to get him out of this terrible place as fast as possible. But I'm not sure if that will work since he is the Prince of the kingdom.

Bast's thoughts once again sound like my own. I wonder if since he is mated to Daria and she is with the rest of us too if he would be able to live at the Areola castle most of the time and not have to come here much. From the way things looked this kingdom runs smoothly. Maybe it is something I should suggest later?

“Why don't you tell me about that drawing on your wall over there. Did a kid in the castle give that to you?” I ask pointing to the one that looks very much like a child did it.

“It's strange but I don't remember where it came from, but for some reason I still cherish it and can't seem to bring myself to throw it away. I tried a few times but I always stopped and put it back on the wall. I'm strange right?” he says and I don't see anything wrong with keeping a drawing just because you like it. It's a little weird that he doesn't remember who drew it but they must have been special.

“People keep things for different reasons, doesn't mean they are strange,” I tell him, rubbing his back to try and help him relax.

“I could call Granny to bring us some snacks and drinks if you want,” Rye suggests and this is the first time that I'm hearing about this Granny person.

“Granny?” Bast asks.

“Oh yes she practically raised me, actually she did raise me. My mother

and father were too busy and ashamed of me so Granny always took care of me,” he says and for the first time he smiles about something in this damn place.

“I’d like to meet her,” I say and his smile grows larger before he gets up and opens the window. I’m a little confused as to why Granny would be out there but okay.

He lets out a sound and suddenly a snapdragon appears at the window. Oh right he can talk to the little creatures, but I really hope one of them isn’t Granny. That would be too fucking sad for words.

“Please wait,” he says to the creature and it nods its head. Rye dashes over to the desk and writes a quick note before handing it over to the snapdragon. “Can you give this to Granny for me? She is the one that always gives you guys honey.”

The snap nods again and then takes off.

Thank god that wasn’t Granny.

Bast thinks and I nod my head in agreement.

“I sent her a note so she should come soon. She was feeling sick before we went to Areola so she had to stay behind,” he explains and I feel a little relieved that he has someone at least.

“Don’t the snapdragons usually live in the forest?” Bast asks and I have to say I’m curious about that as well.

“When Granny and I discovered that I could talk to snapdragons she suggested that we lure some into the back garden and spoil them until they decided to stay. We spent a lot of time feeding the three we have honey and sweets but now they are so spoiled they don’t want to leave,” he says smiling out the window.

“That must have been fun,” I say.

“Yes, Granny and I have used them to send notes back and forth for years so even though they can’t communicate, the snaps still listen to her,” he says before closing the window.

“That really is an amazing skill,” I say, but he shakes his head.

“Manipulating shadows and hearing people’s thoughts are amazing skills. I just make friends with little creatures,” he says and I scoff.

“My skill is more like torture, I honestly would love to trade it for anything else,” I tell him and he comes back over to the table and pats me on the shoulder.

“I love my shadows, don’t get me wrong but they also helped me push

everyone away after my parents died. So I'm not sure if that is a good thing or not," Bast says and I never really heard him talk about his parent's death before.

Bast looks so sad I wish I could hug him, but I'm not sure what is exactly going on with the three of us so it's probably best just to keep my hands to myself.

Rye thinks and I may not like Bast in that kind of way but the sad look on his face makes even me want to hug him. I know that his parents were murdered but as far as I know no one has been caught for the crime. It's crazy to me how someone managed to kill two strong dragons when they were out for a stroll.

"Well you have us and Daria now, so you don't have to be alone and I guarantee there is no pushing that woman away no matter how hard you try," I tell him and he chuckles.

We may not know Daria all that well yet but one thing we know for sure is that she is someone not to be trifled with. Her skills on the battlefield at the Games were fierce and I don't want to be on the receiving end of her wrath. Which is why when I get a chance I will be apologizing and explaining things to her. There isn't an excuse for my behavior but I still need her to understand. I'm not the asshole she thinks I am. At least not all the time.

Let's hope this Granny person is actually sincere and not a fake planted by Rye's father to keep an eye on him.

Bast thinks loudly in my direction, while giving me a look. Apparently it's my job to dig through the old woman's thoughts and find out her true motives. I would have done that anyway without being told. The more time we spend here the more I feel terrible for not even trying to connect with Rye over the years. Out of all of us I had the most freedom and I still chose to keep to myself. I'm filled with nothing but regret now.

"I hope that we can all be good friends again someday," Rye says and I'm not sure we will all be good friends especially Drax and Bast but I'm sure that we could all strive to at least be cordial to one another.

"There is a lot going on, so for now we should all just try to get along to help Daria. That means no more taking your frustrations out on the others when you are overloaded," Bast says, giving me a look. As if I don't know that I have been behaving badly.

"I'll do my best but hearing what other people think about you all the time is fucking exhausting," I tell him with a sigh.

“I’m sure they would think better of you if you showed them the you we have seen for the last few days. The person who cares about others and isn’t afraid to let people in,” Bast says and the thought kind of makes me nervous. It felt completely natural letting Rye and Bast in. Well mostly. It was difficult at first but once we traveled together and got to know each other it was easier to open up.

“Just try, that’s all we ask,” Rye says and I give him a nod.

“I promise not to go out of my way to make trouble. We have a lot more important things to deal with like helping our mate find her father,” I say and I’m rewarded with a smile from Rye.

He looks so cute in his official Tranquil clothes. The pale pink and white really match his personality and looks. Bast and I are still wearing the commoner clothes that we had on before because nothing of Rye’s would fit us and we weren’t offered anything else. Luckily they were at least cleaned while we were bathing, so I don’t feel as dirty as before. It’s still odd though not being in my usual red and gold.

A knock at the door has all of us looking over quickly, just to see an elderly woman with white hair and bright blue eyes pushing in a cart with drinks and snacks on it. She looks very composed, her face blank, until she shuts the door behind herself. As soon as she spots Rye she abandons the cart and a huge smile comes over her face as she pulls him in for a tight hug.

My sweet Rye. Thank god he is safe and home. I was so worried when I heard he had gone missing in Areola.

Her thoughts are pure and I know right away that she genuinely cares for Rye. Glancing over at Bast I give him a thumbs up and his shoulders sag in relief. I’m positive that neither one of us wanted to break Rye’s heart if she turned out to be someone bad for him but we would do it if we had to.

“Oh you brought home two handsome friends but I thought I heard that you got yourself a pretty mate. I really wanted to meet her and make sure she is worthy of my little Rye,” she says, giving his cheek a little pinch.

“I do have a mate, Granny, but things are complicated at the moment. Her father was kidnapped and we are all looking for him,” he explains, and I’m a little shocked that he is being so open and honest with her. She must really have all of his trust.

“Oh no. Well tell me what she is like and what she looks like,” Granny says, before walking back over to the cart and pushing it over to the table where Bast and I are still seated.

“She is very nice, but brave and strong too. Daria is unlike anyone I have ever met before, she doesn’t let anyone put her down and she always fights back,” he says and I watch Granny pause for a second when he says her name. I try to listen to her thoughts but she is only thinking about pouring drinks and setting the snacks out right now. It’s almost as if she is purposefully trying not to think about something.

Interesting.

“Wow. She sounds wonderful. Is she pretty? And why are you two helping Rye with his mate not that I don’t appreciate you looking out for my dear Rye,” she says looking between the two of us.

“Oh, well, Daria is the mate of all five Princes, and yes she is beautiful,” I say and again when I say the name there is a slight pause in the old woman’s thoughts.

“I’m an old woman but I don’t think that I have ever heard of a woman having more than one mate in recent years. Is that even possible?” she asks, taking a seat at the table across from Rye.

“Apparently it is if we are all fated mates,” I tell her before pulling down the collar of my shirt to expose part of the dragon tattoo outline. Bast does the same for his pulling up the hem of his shirt. My outline is in red while Bast’s is black, which means that Rye’s is either white or pink to match the dragon when shifted.

“Where is yours Rye?” she asks and he freezes.

Should I tell them the truth? That I lied this whole time and I don’t have one, I just wanted Daria too much to let her go. Granny and the others will be so disappointed in me. I hope they don’t hate me.

He thinks and I look over at him in shock. This is the first time that I heard him think that. There is no way that he lied, is there? Rye is a gentle soul, he wouldn’t do that. Maybe it’s just somewhere that he can’t see it?

“I haven’t found mine yet,” he admits and both Granny and Bast look a little taken back. With the way he reacts to Daria there is no way that he doesn’t have one. It’s not just that she is nice that he’s so attached to her. It’s his dragon driving him, I just know it.

“Don’t worry dear I’m sure it’s there it’s just probably hard to see since I’m sure it’s white and your skin is so light,” she says, reaching across the table and patting his hand.

I’m so glad that he found her, after all these years.

Granny thinks and it feels like there is more behind her thoughts but I just

can't hear it. It's almost as if she knows that I'm listening in and is purposefully avoiding me.

"Granny is right I'm sure the mark is somewhere, it just might be somewhere you can't see. If you want we can check later," Bast says and I almost spit my drink when Granny gives him a shocked look and Rye turns bright red. I'm not sure Bast realizes what he just offered in front of a complete stranger.

Shit. I should just not talk. I didn't even mean it in a sexy way. I just wanted to help him feel better.

Bast thinks and I almost burst out laughing at how embarrassed he feels. At least I am not the only one that puts my foot in my mouth constantly. It's kind of refreshing.

"Yes you should let your friends help you, that way you can stop stressing about it," Granny says with a smile that says she knows there is more to it than that but she is willing to let it go for Rye.

"Okay."

It's rude to read an old ladies mind but I guess I will let it go since you seem to be a good friend to my Rye.

Granny thinks directly at me and this time I do choke on my drink. The liquid drips down my chin and I grab a napkin to clean it up before looking at her again.

"How did you know?" I ask and Rye and Bast give me a funny look.

"I'm an old dragon, I know the secrets that have been passed down. Mind reading has been in the Inferno clan off and on for generations. It's why there is a spell in the King's and Queen's rings that specifically negates that power," she says and I'm shocked.

"Who are you?" Bast asks.

"Good question, young Shadow user. I'm Gliza one of the original dragons, but you can just call me Granny."

Original dragons?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



The castle is huge, but everything is so white it feels more like a tomb than a home. It's cold and unfeeling as we walk through the nondescript halls following the guards. They have been polite since they picked up our ragtag group at the market. My stomach feels a little queasy the closer we get to our destination and I almost regret eating the street food no matter how delicious it was at the time.

"This place is so quiet," Lo says under his breath and I have to agree. Living in the Areola castle for a while I had to get used to the noise of all the people coming and going. So far all we have seen are the guards that were at the main door, other than that not a person in sight.

“They have servant corridors in the walls so that they don’t disturb the King,” Xander explains, but I have no idea what that is.

“Oh we have those but we don’t use them,” Drax says cheerfully.

“I’m guessing you don’t know what they are?” Xander asks and I nod. “So they are kind of like secret passageways in the walls and some require their staff to use them so that they are hidden away. It’s really an archaic way of doing things, but apparently the King here doesn’t want to see the people that work for him.” Xander shrugs and honestly that doesn’t surprise me at all.

“Does anyone else use this kind of thing?” I ask, wondering if any of the other kingdoms are so high and mighty they don’t want to see the people that work for them.

“As far as I know, all the castles have them but whether they use them or not there is no way for me to know. Since before coming to Areola again I only stayed in Hailstone,” Xander says and I guess expecting him to know everything about all the kingdoms and their policies is a lot.

“Aquapura doesn’t use them and neither does Areola so then you only need to ask about Drumfire and Inferno when we see the others,” Drax says and I nod my head in agreement.

“Right. Are we going to see them now or what?” I ask. It feels like we have been walking down the same hallways forever.

“Yes. Prince Rye’s wing is the furthest away but it should only be another ten minutes before we reach it. The King wishes for you all to rest for a while before meeting with him,” one of the guards says. I feel a little nervous about seeing Rye after running out on him but I’ll do anything if it gets me closer to Henry. Even face down a seriously awkward situation.

“Why is he not in the royal wing?” Drax asks having no problem bringing up things that people would probably rather not talk about.

“That is above my station, but I believe it has something to do with the Prince’s condition when he was young,” the guard says, and I highly doubt that has anything to do with it, but we should let it go for now.

Everything about this place gives me the creeps but also feels oddly familiar. Maybe it’s because I got too used to the castle life in Areola so now this kind of place seems normal. I’m not really sure but I think it could use some color. It’s clean I will give them that but almost suffocatingly so. I know we are mates but the only way I’m living here for any period of time is if we make it more homey.

Wait. Did I just think about living here? Nope, now is not the time for any mate nonsense.

“It will be okay,” Abina says quietly from my left. She hasn’t left my side yet but she is still more subdued than when it was just the two of us. I’m sure it’s weird for her to be around my mates knowing that she kissed me. Or maybe it’s just because we are all so young in her eyes?

“Thank you,” I tell her, trying to give her an encouraging smile but I don’t think that it worked since her face continues to stay blank.

“Here we are. Dinner will be in about five hours or so, if you are hungry ask Prince Rye and I’m sure that he can provide you with whatever you need,” the guard says before turning and walking away.

‘Is someone going to open the door or are we all just going to stand here?’ Spin says with a sigh when no one moves to open it.

‘Yes, geez. You have no patience,’ I tell him before opening the door. This room is different from everywhere else in the castle; it actually feels like it has life in it.

Over in the corner of the room I spot Rye, Raider, and Bast sitting at a table with an elderly woman who smiles as soon as she sees me.

“Troublemaker, I hoped that it would be you,” she says before getting up and coming around the table quickly to pull me into a hug. I’m stiff for a second but something about her scent is oddly calming and familiar.

“Hi,” I say awkwardly.

“Oh Child, I’m sure you don’t remember me, it’s been a long time, but I can never forget your fiery red hair and all the trouble you caused around here when you were little,” she says and I have no idea what to say to that.

It’s true that I don’t remember much about my life before I was with Henry, but what she is saying feels strangely right. Did I really come from Tranquil originally? If so, why did my parents dump me in Areola?

“Granny, please let Daria come in and sit down. I’m sure that you have many things to tell all of us and they have traveled a long way,” Rye suggests and I give him a smile before breaking away from the others and pulling him into a hug.

“I was worried about you, I heard that you fainted. Are you feeling okay now?” I ask pulling away so that I can look at his face.

“I’m better now having you here with me,” he says smiling even as he tears up. He’s such a softy, but I love him for it.

“We’re mates, right? Oh by the way, Abina found your white flower on

my back so we really are mates,” I tell him quietly, even though I’m sure the others can hear I hope they don’t butt in.

“Really?” he asks with a huge smile as the tears freely flow down his cheeks. I know that he was nervous but I didn’t know that it was affecting him this much. *Poor guy*. Such a burden to be carrying alone.

“Yep. Turns out I have six flowers, but I’m not sure who the extra one belongs to,” I say with a shrug, using my sleeve to wipe Rye’s tears away before stepping back.

“That is from the member of the missing sixth kingdom,” the old woman says and we all look at her.

“Wait. The one that has been missing for hundreds of years?” Xander asks, clearly his curiosity is piqued by this news.

I’m more confused than anything because I don’t remember touching any other dragons besides the ones that are now permanently attached to me now. It’s possible but I really don’t know what is going on most of the time with this dragon magic shit.

“The line has been missing only in the official capacity as they were the only ones willing to give up their kingdom to bring peace with the humans. But they are far from extinct. They have been still producing heirs for years waiting to fulfill the prophecy of my time,” she says, and now I really have no clue what is going on.

“What?”

“Why don’t we all have a seat and I will tell you about it? Or would you like to be the one?” she asks, looking at Abina.

“I am not sure of what you speak either,” Abina says.

I forgot I was still wearing my pack so before taking a seat I set it off to the side feeling instantly relieved from taking off the extra weight. Lo does the same, setting his next to mine and I also take a second to kick off my boots as well. From the sounds of it this is going to be a long explanation and I would like to be comfortable for it. After traveling for days it feels almost weird to just sit down and relax for a moment.

Henry is still my main objective in coming here but maybe there is something in this old woman’s story that will help me. Either with why this happened or about my past. I’m not sure but when I look at her I know that she knows more about me than I even do.

“I should start with an introduction,” she says, retaking the seat that she was in before. The table is not big enough for all of us to have a seat so I pop

a squat on the floor and some of the others do too.

“I’m Gliza, I’m one of the original dragons,” she says and I swear you could hear a pin drop with how quiet it is in here. “You can all just call me Granny.”

“I’m Daria, though I have a feeling you already know that, then we have Lo, Drax, Xander, and Abina. Oh and that one trying to get the snack because no one is looking is Spin,” I say, and Spin snatches something from the table and flies off.

‘You didn’t have to introduce me like that,’ he says, clearly embarrassed that he got caught.

‘Well you shouldn’t have been stealing other people’s food then. Geez, we may be thieves but at least have some damn manners,’ I tell him and he scoffs.

‘What was I supposed to do, ask them for the food? Oh that’s right the only person I can talk to is you,’ he says. I’m not sure why he’s so cranky but I’m not going to get into it right now.

“It’s nice to meet you all. As I said I’m an original dragon, so you can imagine how old I might be. In my time we had a prophecy about someone who would reunite all the kingdoms one day. A woman who would love all the heirs and bring peace to Estonia once more. I believe that person is Daria,” she says and my mind goes blank.

I’m supposed to do what?

It’s bad enough that I’m mated to all the Princes, now I’m supposed to fulfill some kind of prophecy? I quit. I just want to find my dad and go home. This is too much for a simple thief like me.

“Before you panic just listen to what I have to say, it’s not like you have to go on a crusade or anything. You simply have to mate the heirs which you are already doing,” she says and I feel a little relieved to hear it’s not a quest to save the world.

I’m not cut out for that shit.

“Okay but what about the sixth? And well I’m kind of stuck with this human jackass as well,” I say pointing to Lo.

“It’s fine dear, prophecies are not black or white. There is a general outline but after that you fill in the gray with what suits you best. The idea isn’t to burden you more than you can take. Or no one would ever want to be the hero,” she says but I’m not buying it.

The universe already saddled me with more men than I can handle and

I'm almost afraid to ask what comes next. Am I supposed to pop out a kid for every kingdom? I'm not down with that.

"No one is going to make you *do* anything you don't want to do. We just hope that you will at least give us a chance," Raider says, surprising me and everyone else. Except maybe Bast and Rye who look relaxed at his statement.

I'm not sure what changed his tune about everything but I'm not going to fight with him if he has decided to be nice.

"You already have your sixth with you now," Granny says and everyone looks at her.

"Lo my man are you low key a dragon and didn't say anything?" Drax teases and Lo frowns.

"No, not him, the tall beauty," Granny says pointing to Abina.

"What? I thought female dragons don't have mates?" Xander asks as if everything now is completely blowing his mind. I have to say right now I'm feeling the same way.

"Did you know?" I ask, looking at her.

"I did."

"We traveled all the way here and you lied to me the entire time when you already knew that you were the extra flower?" I ask, feeling a little betrayed.

"Yes. I did lie to you, but I didn't know how to tell you," she says looking hurt and confused. That's what I'm feeling right now. I told her all kinds of things about me and my life but she couldn't even tell me she's my mate. Guess it makes sense why she was following me now, it wasn't for the Princes.

"We will talk about this later. I don't have the emotional capacity to deal with it right now, just know you are now on the shit list with Lo," I say before looking away.

"Welcome, we don't have any snacks and the club meets every day on the corner of guilt and pain," Lo comments and I just roll my eyes while some of the others chuckle.

"Back to your story Granny," I say ignoring the rest of them.

"As I was saying you need the six dragon heirs but it doesn't hurt that you also have a human mate as well. All kingdoms will be fairly represented in your family unit," she says and I nod my head because that makes sense. I'm not sure why I am so calm about this, I should be freaking out, but apparently I had already decided to take on the Princes so what is a couple more mates?

“I see. That makes sense and also makes it easier to unite all the kingdoms under one ruling body,” Xander ponders out loud.

“Before we press on, do any of you have a problem with this?” I ask, and they look at me. I get it I was the one who didn’t like the whole mate thing to begin with but it seems as if I don’t have a choice now. The universe has decided and I can’t change that. Does that mean I’m going to jump in bed with them right now to seal the deal? No, but I’m not going to run away anymore either.

“I’m asking because this was put on us by some unknown forces, and if we have to be in this together then we should all at least agree to try in a peaceful manner. I know some of you have problems with each other but we are going to have to work them out for the good of everyone in the future,” I say, trying really hard not to look at Drax and Bast, the ones that seem to have the most issues with one another.

“I can see why the fates chose you my dear, you will be the head of this group and keep them all on their toes,” Granny says with a chuckle.

“I don’t know if that’s a compliment or not but I’ll take it. We will become a matriarchal society. That’s the correct word right Xander?” I ask and he nods his head smiling as if happy that I paid attention when he was talking in the library.

“I thought you were sleeping?” he says with a smile.

“I was for a good portion of it but I remember some,” I say with a shrug.

“I’m glad,” he says and I hear some sighs from around the room.

“Nerd flirting is weird,” Drax says with a chuckle.

“Yeah, well your idea of flirting looks more like stalking so you have no room to talk,” Xander says and I can’t help but laugh. I’ve never heard him talk to the others that way and what he said is one hundred percent true.

“Is that all the prophecy said Granny? It seems we are getting off topic,” Rye asks and for the first time I notice that he is sitting on Raider’s lap. I’m glad to see that they are getting along now. Not sure how I feel about sharing my Rye but I might be willing to consider it if I think Raider is worthy of him.

His travels seem to have calmed him down a bit, I hope that he and I have a chance to talk things out. In Areola during the Game emotions were running high and though he was an asshole for no reason whatsoever. I’d be willing to look past that for a chance for all of us to move on. But first I require an apology and begging.

Seems I have a short list now of people that will be begging for my forgiveness.

“No, I told you the general idea of the prophecy, now the rest is up to you. I will be here for advice though, you are always welcome to call on me. In fact when you decide where you wish to settle down I might just come live there with you,” she says with a smile.

“We would welcome your wisdom and knowledge with open arms,” Xander says and I’m sure he has a million questions for her right now and he is just holding himself back.

“I will let you all talk amongst yourselves and get cleaned up for dinner. I will see you all later,” she says getting up from her chair she takes the cart and leaves the room.

“You three look like you have already cleaned up, so I hope you don’t mind if the rest of us take turns,” I say and Rye smiles.

“Of course not, please use anything you want,” he says getting up he comes over and offers me a hand up. Taking it he leads me into the bathroom with the others not far behind.

The room is bigger than Henry’s house and there are two water stalls and a tub that’s big enough for a few people. If all of us are going to be living together one day we should probably get something kind of like this in the Areola castle. As much as I want to see the other kingdoms, I can’t imagine myself living anywhere else. It’s home and it would just feel right to settle down there.

Oh shit. I should have asked Granny if there is a time limit on sealing the mating thing. Maybe Xander knows?

“Xander you stay everyone else you can take your turns next,” I say and with no argument but a few sour faces they leave and shut the door.

“I have a question and it’s kind of embarrassing but I figured you would be the best to ask,” I say and he nods for me to go ahead. “Is there like a time limit I have to connect all the bonds in a sexual way? I remember you saying that there were a few parts to it but sex is the final step. If I wait too long will it fade or something?” I ask and he doesn’t laugh or make me feel uncomfortable as he thinks about it for a second. Knowing him the little that I do he is probably thinking how to phrase the answer.

“Let’s start by asking a question. Do you know why all the Princes were looking for mates this year?”

“Actually, no. I didn’t really think about it,” I say with a shrug.

“Okay here is a secret that no one knows. In royal family bloodlines if you don’t mate by your thirtieth birthday you petrify as dragons do when they die. Your body becomes stone and there is no way to reverse it. Rye is safe because he is five years younger than us but the rest of us have less time,” he says and I feel like someone just punched me in the chest.

Why did no one bring this up earlier when I was throwing a fit about mating? I’m not the kind of person that will just tell them to go die. Geez.

“I have six months, Bast has four, Drax has two, and Raider I think has two weeks,” he says and I blink at him in shock.

Abina is probably safe since she is in her fifties, so I’m not worried about her but fucking Raider only has two weeks. Should I just fuck him and get it over with? He can earn his forgiveness when he isn’t about to turn to fucking stone.

“Hey just breathe, he still has time. That’s probably part of the reason that he was rude to you. Because he is scared not only of dying but that you might not love him and only sleep with him out of pity. He’s quite prideful,” Xander says and I never would have thought there was more to it than him just not liking me.

How could I be so wrong?

“Well I can’t say that I don’t pity him, so I guess I need to get to know him sooner than I thought,” I say with a sigh leaning my head on Xander’s surprisingly firm chest.

“Just talk to him about it. I’m sure he wants to apologize, he just hasn’t had the chance with everything going on,” he says, running his warm hands up and down my back. It feels really nice and some of my stress starts to melt away.

“You are always so calm and level-headed,” I tell him and he chuckles.

“I just prefer to save my energy for other things,” he says and his tone is deep and a little seductive.

“Are you actually in the mood after all that?” I ask.

“I’m always in the mood for you Babygirl.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



This isn't the right time or place to be doing this with my mate, but whenever she is near me I can't help but want her. My body trembles with every touch as if I'm a hapless virgin about to touch breasts for the first time. She calls to me with every piece of her and I want to answer more than anything.

"I want to strip you down and have my way with you right now," I whisper in her ear as I pull her body closer to mine. If only there weren't so many clothes in the way I could finally feel her skin against mine.

"Please, I need to just not think for a while," she sighs before pulling my lips to hers. The sensation that I get just from a small kiss gets me hard. My

dragon makes a noise almost like purring in my head but I ignore it.

“Let’s take our clothes off and get in the water stall, you are going to want something to cover your screams,” I tell her before backing away far enough to toss my shirt aside before I start working on the rest of my clothes.

Her lips are red and swollen from our kiss and she looks at me up and down drinking in every inch of me that is exposed. I smirk when she licks her lips, excited that she likes what she sees.

“Are you going to take those off or do you want them to get wet?” I tease and she shakes out of her trance.

“The only thing I want getting wet around here is me,” she teases right back with a wink, before quickly stripping off her clothes, tossing them on the floor with mine.

Seeing the mate marks on her arm gets me excited and when she turns I can see the white flower filled in on her back just like she said. The rest are just outlines, but soon mine will be filled in too and it feels so thrilling leaving my permanent mark on my mate.

“Are you coming? I’m not even sure how to use this thing,” she says with a laugh looking around the water stall. I know from seeing where she grew up that this kind of luxury is foreign to her, but soon enough she will have everything that she deserves and more.

“Coming Babygirl,” I say before moving over behind her and pulling her soft body tightly against me. I wonder if she will be shocked when she finds out what my tastes are in the bedroom? For now I will just keep things light and talk with her about it later, no reason to spoil the mood with a serious discussion.

Holding her still with one arm I reach over and press the stones for the hot and cold water so that it should come out at the perfect temperature. These kinds of spells are expensive but worth it because they won’t ever run out of use. For as long as the castle stands these stones will always serve their purpose. I wish that I had the opportunity to study a witch and their magic but because they are so sought after they remain in hiding for the most part. I don’t blame them but my curious mind can’t help but crave knowledge from them.

“Let’s wash before we get dirty again,” she suggests grabbing a cloth she puts soap in it and rubs it until it foams.

“Yeah the closest I have gotten to a bath in a while was falling into the river once when Drax was scared by a snake and bumped into me. He’s not

built for the outdoors and I'm sorry to say neither am I," I tell her and she laughs as she rubs the cloth across my chest.

Not to be left out I grab another one and do the same as she did. I try my hardest not to get distracted by her pebbling nipples but as soap runs down her body I find it extremely hard to pay attention.

"I honestly am surprised that you guys survived out there," she laughs as she spins me around to wash my back.

"If we hadn't been with Lo neither of us would have made it," I admit and I don't even feel bad about it. My domain is the library, it's where I feel the most comfortable and I'm not ashamed of that.

"You were at least smart enough to know about the little monster in Lima, I had no clue. Spin says it's because I fell asleep during your lesson," she says and I just smile and ignore the fact that she basically admitted she talks to him. I'll wait for her to actually tell me before badgering her with questions.

"Yes, well knowledge does not automatically equal good survival skills. I know many things but actually experiencing them was completely different. I'll also admit; because I'm sure Lo will bring it up eventually, but I tended to get distracted by all the new things. Which wasn't helpful to our mission," I admit and she just chuckles.

"Between you and Drax I'm sure Lo was extremely frustrated and that just brings me joy," she says and I just shake my head, I don't want to get on her bad side ever. She seems a bit evil when she laughs at his pain and I find that amusing and terrifying.

"I'm going to remember this side of you and strive never to make you mad," I tell her and she gives me an evil grin.

"Good. Now I'm pretty sure I'm clean enough, how about we move on to the good part," she suggests pressing her naked wet body against mine. Immediately all my brain power moves to my cock that is hard and ready to go.

"Turn around and put your hands on the wall," I say and she looks at me for a second but ultimately does as I ask without question. I know that she is not the obedient type so I'm not going to push her today.

"Good girl, now don't move," I say before dropping to my knees behind her and shoving my face in her center. I find her clit first and suck on it while flicking my tongue. Her soft moans reach my ears and my length twitches.

As much as I would love to just stand up and pound her until she screams,

this is our first time together and I want her to enjoy it. You only get one first time when you are mating, the thrill of experiencing pleasure with a new partner is something I want her to remember from me. Also I hope that this will help her relax some of the tension in her body, because I'm sure the rest of our time here will be stressful.

"Xander, I'm close," she cries and I add my fingers to the mix, plunging them quickly in and out of her soaked pussy. Her legs are shaking and she clenches down on my digits before letting out a cry and coming. I help her ride out her orgasm before getting back to my feet.

Before she can even catch her breath, I thrust my length into her and grab both her wrist in one hand against the smooth wall. My hips move slowly at first letting her adjust to my size and I keep my grip light so not to bruise her.

"You are such a good girl, you take direction so well. I can't wait to play with you for real sometime," I say nipping at her neck.

"More, please," she begs and I'm done playing games with her today.

Letting go of her wrists, I grip her soft hips and start thrusting with speed and power. Her panting breaths and soft moans spur me on and my own desire starts to creep up my spine.

One of my hands drifts to the front of her body and I start playing with her sensitive little button. I know that she is close because she is getting tighter on my cock but I keep going until she finally cries out. My orgasm reaches its climax when she clamps down so hard I can't move and I feel a burn not only in my spine but also on my abs where my dragon tattoo is.

My legs are almost ready to give out and I'm holding Daria up so I sit on the floor and pull her into my lap. I kiss her gently as we both try to catch our breath. I can't help but admire the purple moonflower on her shoulder. Now that I'm looking at it closely it also has bits of silver and there is a vine that goes to her back and I imagine it connects with Rye's white moonflower. It's strange that it would be that flower. It only blooms at night in nature and yet there it is fully open on her skin.

Very interesting. I wonder if they will all eventually be connected and if that is significant in meaning?

"You know it burns when these things fill in. Now that I'm thinking of it I felt the same thing when I slept with Rye I just didn't realize at the time," she says, giving a small yawn. She is probably even more tired than the rest of us after her travels since she is human.

"If we clean up quickly you might have time for a nap before we are

summoned to dinner,” I tell her and she nods but doesn’t move.

“Just give me a few more minutes,” she says with a sigh, making herself comfortable in my arms.

“I know it’s too late to ask but I didn’t use any protection, I’m sorry,” I tell her, but she just shrugs.

“I have a spell in my arm that prevents pregnancy, so no worries. Having babies right now is not high on my priority list so I have us all covered,” she says patting my chest.

My dragon is a little disappointed that we didn’t give our mate a baby but I’m glad that she is thinking ahead. We aren’t even sure what is going on right now with her father so babies will have to wait and I’m fine with that. One day when or if she is ready she can decide all of that.

“Whatever my Queen wishes,” I say and she snorts.

“I’m not Queen of anything yet, unless you mean Queen of disaster, but I’ve held that title since I was young,” she jokes and I wish that we could stay like this longer but the world outside of this bathroom keeps on moving and we need to rejoin it soon.

“Let’s get clean and then take a nap, my ass is going to sleep on this cold floor,” I tell her and she laughs as I help her to her feet.

“I don’t think I have ever heard you cuss before, it sounds weird coming from you.” She laughs, before grabbing one of the discarded cloths from before and adding more soap.

“I spent a lot of time with Drax and Lo lately, their bad habits probably rubbed off on me,” I say with a sigh, cleaning my own body this time.

“At least that is the only thing that they rubbed on you. I noticed that the other three are a lot closer now and I think some of that is sexual,” she says and I was wondering if she would catch the atmosphere between those three. I wasn’t planning on bringing it up since it’s not my business, but since she did.

“How does that make you feel?” I ask, curious if she will be opposed to them having their own special bonds.

“Honestly? I have so much on my mind I don’t know how to feel. I’m not against it if they really care about each other, but I think we should all have that talk together. There are seven of you and one of me. As much as I like sex I don’t have time to do it everyday, so we will have to work something out,” she says with a shrug and I decide to leave it at that for now. It’s as she said something that we will have to talk about as a group in the future.

“How about that nap?” I ask when we are both clean and I shut off the water.

“Yes please,” she says, wrapping herself up in a fluffy robe she found on the back of the door and heading out into the bedroom. Since our clothes are drying I’m wearing a towel around my waist when I follow her out.

“Rye come snuggle with me I want to take a nap,” she says and he hops out of Bast’s lap this time and hurries over to the giant bed to join her. The two of them smile as she pulls him close, gives him a small kiss, and closes her eyes. It’s hard to look away when I find their interactions cute.

“It seems she is feeling a little better,” Drax comments, giving me a wink. I knew that they would be able to hear everything in there but I just didn’t care. I was not giving up a chance to be with our mate even if I get ridiculed later.

“Yes, we talked about a few things and she is much more relaxed now,” I say, taking the empty seat at the table.

“I think I will nap too after a quick shower,” Drax says, jumping up and heading for the bathroom. Glancing around the room we all look rather tired and I suspect it’s because as princes we aren’t used to traveling like this. Abina is standing near the window looking out, while Lo is in another corner passed out sitting against the wall, and Bast and Raider are still sitting at the table in the chairs they have been in all day.

“Daria noticed something different about you guys and Rye. She isn’t mad, I’d say more curious, so if you are having feelings or something I would talk with her first before you go too far. It’s the right thing to do,” I tell them and Raider sighs while Bast nods.

“I’m really surprised she doesn’t hate me. I’ve messed up so much and haven’t had a chance to even apologize for one thing yet,” Raider says, sounding more vulnerable than I have ever heard him before. It’s a huge change in attitude from when we were in Areola, and I’m wondering if being around Rye and Bast helped him somehow.

“You will get your chance, just maybe not today. I’m sure this dinner is going to be awful so just be prepared for things to go sideways. We all know how Rye’s father can be,” I say and he nods his head.

“I wish that we could find her father for her quickly so that she doesn’t have to worry anymore,” Bast says, and I know that he is probably struggling too. Not because he knows her father but because he knows what it is like to search. Only in his case all he found were their bodies in the end and

someone had already mutilated them.

“While we are occupied with the King we should see if she can get her pet to search the castle,” I suggest, as I look around the room searching for the little snapdragon.

“He is searching the grounds now,” Abina says, not looking away from the window.

“How do you know that?” I ask curiously.

“I traveled with them for a week, I know their habits. As soon as Daria went into the bathroom with you he took off out the window,” she says before glancing at us.

It is a little awkward that she is here but also that she is Daria’s mate and the missing sixth family. I never expected any of that. It’s not even the fact that she’s a woman, but that she is so much older than us. In fact Abina watched us when we were young and ran around Areola castle. She was like an aunt to us and now we are all sharing the same mate. The universe has an odd sense of humor.

“I’m glad that you were able to travel with her and keep her safe,” I say trying to open up communication between us, but the blank look on her face tells me that is still a ways off yet.

“She would have found a way without me, that’s how strong she is,” she says before turning back to the window signaling that our conversation is over.

This will be harder than I thought.

“This will take time for all of us, so be patient,” Bast says before getting up and disappearing into his shadows. Apparently he has also had enough socializing for the day.

“None of us are used to being around each other anymore and for those of us used to being alone this is a lot. But I would do anything to help her find her father, even put up with Drax,” Raider says and his tone is more teasing than anything.

“Yeah, try dragging his ass through the woods for days on end,” Lo says from his spot, apparently awake enough to join in on griping about Drax.

“I don’t even want to imagine that nightmare. You did better than me though, you brought him all the way here and he still lives,” Raider says and Lo chuckles. These two were at each other’s throats before we left Areola and now they are talking and joking.

That has to be a good sign.

“It was touch and go for a while on whether nature or I would get him first. Since I was already on the shit list though I decided bringing him alive would be in my best interest,” Lo says, stretching his arms over his head as he looks at me.

“What?”

“You are looking at me funny?” Lo says.

“Well you were really against Daria being with us and now you seem less hateful,” I say, and he sighs.

“The old lady said this is Daria’s fate or destiny or whatever. That is something I can’t fight with a bow and arrow, so as long as I get to be part of her life then I can be happy with that,” he says and I’m not sure what changed his mind so quickly but I’m glad it seems everyone is on the right track to helping our mate.

Things are finally looking up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“Hey it’s time to wake up you two. Dinner will be served in an hour,” someone says, tapping me on the shoulder. Blinking my eyes open I see a familiar face.

“Granny,” I say as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

“Yes child, I brought you some clean clothes,” she says with a smile.

“I feel the strangest sense of *deja vu*, like we’ve done this before,” I say with a yawn snuggling closer to Rye who is still sleeping soundly.

“Oh child, we will talk about that someday but right now you need to get up,” she says, pulling the blanket back and slapping me on the ass.

“Ow. But he is so cute, just a few more minutes,” I say but she puts her

hands on her hips and starts counting.

“One, two, three—”

“I’m up!” Rye says sitting up quickly. His eyes are still closed but apparently he knows enough not to push Granny.

“You remind me of Henry, he used to toss water on me to wake me up for school,” I say and feel a pain in my heart. Not knowing what’s happening to him is killing me.

“The other’s filled me in while you were sleeping, and I will do my best to find any news on your father I can. He sounds like a great man. Perhaps if he is single you could introduce me,” she says and I’m not sure what else to say so I just laugh. Even though she is one of the original dragons she looks about the same age as Henry so maybe?

It’s not something I want to think about right now.

“What kind of clothes did you bring me? I’m not really a ball gown type of girl,” I say crawling over Rye and getting out of the bed. He is still sitting there blinking and staring off into space while trying to wake up and it’s adorable.

“Hey come on, I know it’s been hard lately but we just have to keep going a while longer,” I tell him before giving him a kiss on the cheek and then following after Granny.

Before I enter the bathroom I see Bast appear out of the shadows and help Rye by picking him up and walking towards the closet. They do seem sweet together, and it doesn’t make me jealous or anything, but is that how this should work?

“Hey Granny let me ask you something,” I say, shutting the door behind us.

“Anything dear.”

“How would you feel about your mates hooking up with each other?” I ask and she looks at me in surprise.

‘I checked the grounds but no sign of Henry anywhere,’ Spin says and I’m a little disappointed he didn’t find anything but we still have the castle to check.

‘Thanks for looking,’ I say and he scoffs.

‘Someone had to do it and you were too busy playing with all your little mates and sleeping,’ he says, giving me attitude.

‘It was only one mate and it has to be done or they will turn to fucking stone. How about this? You check the castle while we are at dinner and I will

make sure that you get a really big dessert as a reward,' I say and he is quiet for a minute before finally giving in.

'It better be something amazing,' he says before going silent.

"What does hooking up mean? I think I get it but I don't want to be mistaken," Granny says.

"Well having sex with each other," I say feeling weirdly comfortable having this conversation with her.

"Back before the witch's curse it wasn't unusual for dragons to have more than one partner or form a unit, but when females became unable to bear children we had to change over to the human idea of mates. Which is why the standard is now one mate. It was even circulated around that if you took up with someone on the side your mate would die, but that is not actually the case," she says and now I get why she was so comfortable with the idea of me having multiple mates and why everyone else was freaking out.

"So then it's not a big deal if they like each other?"

"This is something that you will have to decide on your own but if it doesn't affect your relationship with them or cause problems in the group as a whole then I don't think it's an issue," she says and I think she is right.

Rye is sweet and gentle and also fragile, there are times when I thought I might break him with my roughness. So why should I begrudge him the others also loving and wanting to take care of him? It doesn't take away from what we have and actually it takes pressure off of me because I won't be the only one giving him the emotional support that he needs and deserves.

"I think you're right, I will talk to them about it later, but I think it's fine. I'm not jealous, I kind of want to see it but that seems rude. So for now it's a non-issue," I say and she gives me an approving smile.

"Now don't be upset. I know that you don't like dresses but you have to wear one. It's not poofy or anything and Bast brought your weapons from the castle so you can wear those," she says and when I look and see my daggers laid out next to a fancy pale pink dress I feel so relieved I don't even care about what I have to wear.

"My babies," I say, picking up the daggers and spinning them around in my hands, the familiar weight and texture helps my heart feel at ease.

"You remind me of me at that age, I was obsessed with being a warrior and I loved my weapons more than I loved most people. Yours are particularly beautiful, made from dragon scales, correct?" she says and I can definitely picture Granny being one hell of a warrior in her day.

“Yeah Henry made them for me,” I tell her as she helps me into the dress. It’s soft against my skin and even though the color is not really to my taste it looks okay. I should have guessed that I would have to wear Tranquil colors while I’m here. I wonder if the others also found suitable attire for this stupid farce.

“His skills are impressive for a human,” she says, bunching my hair up into a bun and tying it so that it looks presentable. I’ve never had anyone but the ladies at the brothel show me how to do anything with my hair so this is actually nice. If circumstances were different I’m sure this is what it would feel like to have a mother dote on you.

“Thanks he is the best man in Areola for weapons,” I say.

“There you are done except for putting on your weapons and if you want to do anything with your face,” she says but I don’t think that I want to waste the effort on any make up tonight.

Glancing in the mirror I look better than I thought in this color and the dress fits nicely. It’s not as provocative as the ones I have at home but it still has a slit up the side for easy access to my daggers. The thin straps hardly block any of the mate tattoos and the moonflowers look interesting, some filled in some not. Now that I know Rye’s flower is there it’s much easier to see and even looks like there is a bit of pink in it now.

Well this is as good as it gets.

Turning I leave the bathroom with my daggers in place giving me comfort from their thigh holster. When I enter the room I am almost blinded by all of the white in front of my eyes. All of the guys are wearing white except for Rye who is in pink like me.

“Let’s hope this doesn’t turn into a food fight or those clothes are toast,” I say and a few of them chuckle.

Abina is off to the side still wearing her Areola uniform and it sticks out like a sore thumb with all of us wearing light colors.

“I am here under the guise of being your escort, it would not be proper for me to wear the colors of another kingdom,” she says as if reading my mind.

“That makes sense. You still look as beautiful as always in your uniform,” I say and she gives me a small smile before looking away.

“What about me? Am I beautiful too?” Drax asks, batting his eyelashes at me.

“Yes, yes you guys all look handsome as well. Where did you get all the matching clothes?” I ask. They aren’t all wearing Rye’s things because none

of them except maybe Lo would fit into them without ripping them.

“Oh, Granny sent out for them while we waited and the townsfolk were more than happy to rush the order for us,” Rye says with a smile. It’s clear to me just from his smile that he loves the people of this kingdom and they love him. If only his father wasn’t such an asshole this wouldn’t be a bad place to visit.

“That’s great. Spin is going to search for Henry while we are all at dinner, so all we have to do is be the best distraction that we can be,” I say and they all nod.

“We will do our best,” Drax says and the smirk on his face makes me uncomfortable, like he is going to cause trouble.

“Right. Lo you are in charge of Drax’s leash tonight, if he gets too out of hand you will take the blame,” I say and he looks like he wants to argue as the others laugh at him but instead he moves over next to Drax and grabs his ear.

“If he gets too wild I will shoot him in the ass with an arrow,” Lo says and Drax actually looks a little scared, it makes me wonder if Lo put the fear of the gods into him while they were out in the forest.

“I’ll be good, I swear. Just call off your dog,” Drax whines but I just shake my head. Someone has to watch him, he is too tricky for his own good.

“Lo won’t hurt you unless you go too far. Tonight is important. As much as I would rather not share a meal with the abusive bastard I will do anything if it helps find Henry,” I say and they all nod in understanding.

“We are all here with you, whatever you need,” Raider says, and I blink at him in surprise.

“You and I will have to talk later, this new side of you is freaking me out,” I say and he just smiles.

“Fate brought us together, which means from now on we have to work with each other. There are plenty of people that will want to see us fail but we aren’t going to do that. I’m not good at relationships or sharing my emotions so you will have to be patient with me. I’ve been struggling since the tattoo showed up and announced that we would be stuck with each other for life, but I realized that doesn’t have to be a bad thing. We can be a family for each other. At least that’s what I want us to be,” I say hoping that I don’t sound like a rambling idiot. It’s the first time I have gotten to talk to all of them at once in a while and I want to get my feelings as of right now across to them.

“That sounds nice to me,” Rye says with a big smile.

“We will follow your lead, Calari,” Bast says, bowing his head.

“Good, good. I know that this is a learning curve so fights and disagreements will happen. We just can’t let them break us apart,” I say and they all nod, even Abina who acts coldly towards everyone in the group but me.

She will open up eventually, I hope.

“We should get going,” Rye says. It's the first time that I notice that he is paler than usual and his hands are shaking.

“Come here,” I say, waving my hand at him and he walks over to me without hesitation. “Everyone in this room is on your side, you don’t have to be afraid of him anymore, because you are our Rye.” I give him a quick hug and he looks like he might cry but I loop my arm in his and pull him towards the door.

Let’s feast with the devil.

The walk to the dining hall is at least fifteen minutes and I wonder again just how fucking big the damn place is. Is there even a possibility that Spin can look through the entire building while we share a meal with this smug asshole. I mean for god's sake he had trumpets playing as he entered the room and we weren’t allowed to sit down until after he did. The most annoying part is how nice he is trying to pretend to be in front of the other Princes, even though they all already know his true colors.

“What brings you all to our lovely Tranquil?” he asks and I have to bite my lip from answering. In fact I shouldn’t talk the whole night or I just might cuss the jackass out.

“Well Daria hasn’t visited any of the other kingdoms yet so we thought we would take her on a little tour. Tranquil just happened to be our first stop,” Drax says, putting on quite a performance, I’m actually a little proud of my goofball mate.

I guess this is what it’s like to grow up in proper society?

“But why were you in separate groups for your journey? I believe Rye, Bast, and Raider were found in a cave on the outskirts of Inferno,” the King asks and I just take a sip of my wine and let the guys handle the story part of the evening.

“Oh well there was a mishap in the forest and we got separated from them. We were supposed to meet up at the market here but you had already tracked them down by the time we made it here,” Xander says, his smooth tone would have anyone else eating out of the palm of his hand but the King doesn’t seem to be buying it. Not that he is calling him out just his face gives more away than he thinks.

‘How are you doing Spin?’ I ask, checking in for the first time since he took off.

‘I’m almost too far away to hear you but so far there isn’t a trace of Henry anywhere,’ he says, and my stomach drops.

What if we wasted all our time coming here and the King has nothing to do with it?

‘Keep looking, and anything suspicious will help,’ I say and then hear nothing from him. I’m assuming that means that he is finally too far away.

“I see that you have sealed at least one bond, do you intend to complete the others soon? Time is running short for some of them,” the King says and I really want to throw this butter knife at him.

“I’ve actually completed two Rye’s just on my back so you can’t see it from where you are sitting,” I say while taking another sip of wine. For some reason we haven’t been served any food yet, so we just have to sit around chatting. I’m sure that was part of the King’s plan all along. He is trying to get information out of us while we try to do the same for him. No one is getting anywhere so far.

“Oh how lovely, I’m glad that you find my son to be of some use to you,” he says and I see Rye flinch out of the corner of my eye.

“He is my mate, one that I treasure. I’ll protect him with my life if it comes to that,” I say calmly, giving Rye a wink to hopefully reassure him that I have his back.

“Shall we eat now?” the King says ignoring my words and signaling for the staff to bring the meal.

“Finally,” someone says under their breath and the King frowns but I feel the same way. I hate these kinds of situations. I would rather punch, kick, or stab my way out of problems instead of pussyfooting around and playing mind games.

I smell the food before I see it and my mouth starts to water. Abina did a great job hunting for us in the forest, but this is the first real meal I have had in a while aside from the inn and my body is ready for it. I used to eat a lot

more food when I was at home, so I'm feeling it.

As the staff sets down everyone's plates I'm about ready to dig into mine, but Rye taps me on the leg.

"You have to wait for him to eat first," he whispers, and I glance over at the King who is playing with his wine glass instead of eating.

This bastard.

"Let's eat," he says after playing with his glass for ten minutes while the rest of us watch our steak go cold in front of our eyes. He takes a small nibble and that's all the courtesy I'm giving him. My stomach is growling like a bear and if I don't feed it I'm going to get cranky. That will not be any help to this delicate situation.

He's lucky this tastes so damn good or I would be in an even worse mood.

"Why do the rest of you not have escorts like Daria does?" the King asks, signaling to Abina who is standing by the wall behind my chair. I didn't know until we got here that she wouldn't be able to eat with us or I would have insisted she change to just be part of the group. But she is a stubborn one and probably wouldn't have listened anyway. Maybe I can get Granny to bring her food later. I can't have my woman starving just to save face with this asshole.

It feels a little satisfying thinking of her as my woman after all the back and forth in the woods. I'm still not happy she lied but I can't be mad she is now one of my mates.

"Areola's legendary head guard is more than enough protection for all of us, don't you think? Plus Daria is more than capable of handling herself," Drax says and I'm glad to hear him speak highly of Abina.

"She is a mighty warrior, that is true. I've tried to steal her from Areola many times but alas she has an attachment to that human land," he says with a mournful sigh.

"We all have attachments to our homelands," Bast says, and the King gives him an odd look but then moves the conversation on.

"I hear that you are adopted, Daria. What do your parents think about your mating five dragon Princes?" he asks and I'm not sure what game he is playing but I'm starting to lose my patience with it.

"I have only an adoptive father and he is happy as long as I am happy. He doesn't try to control my life or decisions, instead just offers support when I need it," I tell him, feeling proud of my very adult answer instead of just telling him to piss off like I want.

“Sounds like you have a happy home life, let’s hope it doesn’t get too disturbed by filling the role of Princess,” he says before he takes a bite of food.

After that the inquisition stops and the King continues to eat in silence and the rest of us follow his lead. I try to pace myself to give Spin more time but before I know it dessert is being rolled out and I still haven’t heard back from him.

“It’s been a lovely evening and I do hope that you will be staying in Tranquil for a bit. I have to watch my sugar so I will be skipping dessert and retiring for the evening,” the King says getting up from his seat which of course means we all have to get up too until he leaves the room. Etiquette sucks ass.

‘Spin,’ I say when I sit back down and wait for the cake to be served.

‘*Daria, I have searched all the dungeons and the royal wing along with the guest wing and staff quarters. Henry isn’t here,*’ he says and my heart sinks.

‘*Shit. Just come back, we are having cake,*’ I tell him with a sigh.

‘*I’m sorry, be there soon.*’

“Fuck!” I say under my breath and everyone looks at me, even the staff. “Sorry I bit my tongue.”

This is not the place for me to have a meltdown. I just have to keep it together until we get back to Rye’s room. As hard as that is going to be, I can do it for Henry. I’m still not convinced the King doesn’t know anything, yet. So I can’t let word get back to him that I flipped out at dinner.

“Why don’t we have Granny bring dessert back to the room later, I’m sure that we are all still exhausted from traveling,” Rye says signaling to one of the staff who nods.

Getting up from my seat I head in the direction of Rye’s wing on auto pilot, the only sound is the clatter of feet of the others following after me. My mind is racing a million directions and I don’t know how to settle it. I’m sure they are all giving me weird looks but I don’t want to tell them where there might be ears listening.

‘*Daria!*’ Spin shouts.

‘*What?*’ I ask, stopping in my tracks and looking around. My stomach drops when I don’t spot Rye in the group.

“Where is Rye?”

“He was getting things settled with the dessert, he said he would be right

behind us,” Lo says.

‘Daria! I just saw some guards drag Rye towards the throne room!’

No!

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



E ren and another guard toss me at my father's waiting feet and he doesn't hesitate to kick me in the ribs as hard as he can. Sending shooting pains through my whole body. Before pulling me up by the collar and slapping me across the face with his ringed hand. It stings and I feel blood dripping down my face but I learned long ago there is no use in trying to heal myself it only makes him angrier.

"You little shit!" he yells, this time balling his fist and hitting me in the eye. Tears roll down my cheeks from the pain, but also because deep down I hoped that this would never happen again.

It doesn't matter what I do though he will never be happy with me as his

son. Even getting a mate as amazing as Daria and becoming friends with the Princes isn't enough to improve my standing in his eyes. All because I don't have wings.

"What did I do this time?" I ask, crying out as he smacks me once again. His eyes are full of rage but there is something else behind it too. I'm in too much pain to interpret it but it's a different look from normal.

"Why would you bring her here?" he asks and I don't see why that would make him so angry. So far Spin hasn't found Henry so he is either hiding him well or he isn't actually here. Neither one of those things should make him lash out like this.

"She is my mate, I wanted her to see our home," I say innocently but it doesn't seem to make a difference to him. He doesn't even seem to care that his white robes are now stained with my blood, he just keeps hitting me in his rage.

"You have ruined everything since the day you were born. Now he'll pay for your sins," he says, not making any sense.

Does he mean Henry?

There is something off about how he is reacting this time but I can't put my finger on it. His anger is even more forceful than the other times he would beat me. Most times I always assumed he was bored and I was as good as anything for a distraction. Now it feels more personal. As if I did something to offend him. I'm not sure what any of this has to do with Daria.

Locking myself away in my head is how I have coped with the abuse over the years, so when my father drops me out of nowhere and falls back I'm shocked. There is a familiar dagger sticking out of his hand and he is clutching it while screaming out in pain. Looking over my shoulder with the eye that isn't swollen shut I see everyone standing there at the entrance.

"You touch what's mine again and the next one will be going into that empty space where your heart should be you bastard," Daria says before slowly moving towards me. My body is battered and full of pain but I'm relieved to see them so much that I start to cry.

My father is screaming behind me and I look over to see Eren has come to his aid and is pulling out the blade and using his powers to heal the wound. Spin drops down and picks up the discarded weapon before coming to stand between my father and me. If I wasn't in so much pain I would be smiling at the sight of this snapdragon trying to protect me.

"Oh baby, look at your face. I'm so sorry. I swore I would never let this

happen again. I failed you but I won't fail you again," Daria says lightly, running her fingers down my cheek.

"Thank you for saving me, no one has ever stopped him before" I say, before turning and spitting up blood. My throat burns and it probably means I was screaming while checked out. It's happened before but not often.

"Raider, Bast take Rye to his room and find a healer. Ask Granny if you need help," she says but I shake my head.

"No, let's all just leave together. There is no point in pushing things further. He stopped and you won, that's enough," I say and she growls under her breath.

"But he deserves to get back a thousand times what he did to you," she says but I shake my head.

"That's not how things work in royalty. Even if he deserves it, you will be the one to pay the price. Just let it go," I tell her coughing again and crying out when my ribs protest.

"You are lucky that Rye is being the voice of reason right now or I would offer him your fucking head," she sneers at my father, who glares back at her in defiance.

"You will pay for this," he says and a shiver of fear runs through me but Daria just stands tall and doesn't flinch. If only I could be as strong as she is then we wouldn't be in this situation.

"Let's go before I change my mind," she says as Raider comes over and gently picks me up off the ground. My body protests but I still throw my arms around his neck and cling to him.

"It's okay now, we've got you," he says and I just cry harder as he carries me out of the throne room.

"Relax or you will hurt yourself more," Bast says next to me as I cough up blood on Raider's shirt.

"I'm sorry," I cry. I wish they never had to see me like this, I'm so pathetic. I don't deserve their love or kindness.

"Rye, look at me," Daria says and I didn't even realize we stopped. I glance at her, but she isn't mad instead she is crying too.

"You never have to apologize to any of us. We love you," she says and I don't know what to say so I just nod.

Raider starts walking again and I close my eyes and just try to breathe through the pain. Not only the physical but the mental as well. Sometimes it feels like it would have been better if I had died when I was young, then no

one would have to suffer through dealing with me. A useless dragon with no wings.

“I refuse to let you call yourself useless. You are special to me. I’ll prove it to you for the rest of our lives,” Raider whispers in my ear before kissing my cheek.

“What happened?” I hear Granny ask.

“That abusive bastard got his hands on Rye,” Daria says.

“What are you talking about?” Granny says closer to me now.

“The King, he beats Rye,” Daria says as if Granny should already be aware of that.

“I never told her,” I say, and Daria looks at me. “I never told anyone.”

“Oh child, why would you hide something like that from me all these years?” Granny says and I see tears running down her cheeks.

“I didn’t want to be a burden,” I say.

“Why don’t we take this inside before more people come,” Xander suggests and the group moves into my room and shuts the door.

“Let’s take him into the bathroom and get him in the tub. I’ll heal him while he gets cleaned up,” Granny suggests and Raider heads right for there with Bast and Daria following behind us.

“I’ll hold him up, if you guys can strip his clothes off,” Raider says and I hear the tub filling behind us as Daria and Bast work to get my blood stained clothes off of me.

I wish that I could say that it was painless but it hurt being held up like that. My father must have done more damage than I thought. This is probably the worst beating that I have ever gotten from him. All the other times I was at least able to get back to my room on my own, but this time it was almost as if he really wanted to kill me or do permanent damage.

“Get him in the water it will help soothe him as I heal him,” Granny says, and I’ve never had her heal me before so I’m not sure what to expect. I know that I am hard to heal, that’s why my wings were not able to be saved in the first place.

The water is warm and it stings a bit as Raider lowers me into the tub gently. He flinches every time I hiss in pain and so I try to bite my lip to keep it in. None of them should have to suffer watching this.

“I’m fine, you all should go change,” I say as the three of them stand there watching Granny pour something into the water.

“Nope we are staying,” Daria says and the other two nod in agreement.

“Raider, at least wash off the blood,” I say, his white clothes now completely trashed. It makes me feel worse looking at it.

“If it will make you feel better I’ll take a shower. Granny you don’t mind right?” he says pulling his shirt over his head and tossing it into the pile with mine. Daria looks at his toned body for a moment in appreciation before looking back at me and winking.

“No dear, I have seen my share of naked men over the years, I’m sure you don’t have anything I haven’t already seen,” she says nonchalantly, and it makes me love her more. All my life I wished she really was my grandmother, but I guess even if we aren’t connected by blood we are still family in a way.

“Child, why did you keep something like this from me? I would have put your father in his place a long time ago if I had known,” Granny says, putting her hands in the water and mumbling something. The pain starts to lessen enough that I can breathe comfortably now and I sigh in relief.

“It’s never been this bad before. A slap here or there, but today is the first time he went this far. He seemed angry but also afraid,” I say finally figuring out what the other emotion behind his eyes was.

“He should be afraid, because if he touches you again I’m going to kill him,” Daria says just as I feel a light touch on my side from Granny.

“Not if I get to him first child, this is unacceptable. I won’t stand for it,” Granny says and I feel her warmth fill my abdomen and my ribs start to move. Apparently some of them broke when he kicked me with all his might. Probably why I was coughing up blood as well.

“Please don’t. I don’t want either of you to get into trouble because of me,” I say and then groan in pain because healing can sometimes be uncomfortable while it’s happening. Depending on the injury.

“Shh. Calm down or you will make my job harder,” Granny says moving her hands down to my leg which I hadn’t realized was even injured. “I’m not going to do anything but talk to him, but I promise to give him time to cool down so that things don’t get out of hand.” She smiles and I trust her so I nod.

“Guess I better leave that to you Granny because I think I will still want to stab the bastard in a few days,” Daria says with a shrug. She gives me a smile before sitting next to the tub on a little stool and grabbing my hand. It’s mostly the left side of my body that received the most damage except for my face.

“I love you,” I tell her and she kisses my hand.

“I love you too, and I’m always going to want to kill people that hurt you, so you will have to have patience with me in the future,” she says, and I try to smile but my face protests the movement.

“Alright it’s time to do that pretty face and then you will need to sleep for at least ten hours,” Granny says and I’m not surprised. It’s always much easier for me to heal others than for me to get healed and both require my fragile body to sleep.

“It’s okay we will watch over you,” Bast says, and as Granny runs her hands over my face and I feel the heat my eyes drift shut and fall asleep with their smiles in my mind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



That rotten son of a bitch!

A million different ways to torture his old ass are running through my brain as I sit in a chair next to the bed and watch Rye sleep. I really don't understand why he would do that to Rye. We had a perfectly awkward dinner but nothing really happened. No insults were thrown by either of us. It was the least hostile interaction I have ever had with the man. And then he goes and does something crazy like this? I just don't get it.

"Hey you don't know this yet but my secondary skill is reading minds and your seething rage filled thoughts are starting to give me a headache. Sorry," Raider says when he squats down next to my chair.

“Wait. What?”

“Yeah, it’s something I can’t turn off and it’s not an excuse but it’s probably the reason I lashed out at you the most. In rooms full of people I easily get overloaded and it’s not pleasant,” he explains and I’m shocked. Not only that he can read my thoughts but that he is talking to me so calmly about it.

“Sorry, I just don’t get evil people,” I say with a sigh.

“I don’t think any of us get it. I’m sorry for being so rude to you before, I had no right. I know that I need to earn your forgiveness so I promise that I will do my best to be a good mate and group member from now on, so that one day you can forgive me,” he says and it’s like talking to a completely different Raider.

“Okay, I will let you earn it. Rye trusts you so I know you aren’t a bad guy. We have a lot going on right now so just prove to me that you are dependable and I can trust you,” I tell him and he smiles, and I’m actually shocked by how handsome that makes him look. Like almost blindingly so.

Actually now that I think about it not a single one of my mates is lacking in the looks department. Maybe I’m the one that looks like a duck in a group of swans?

“You are definitely not a duck,” he says with a chuckle and it’s kind of crazy to see his mind reading work right before my eyes.

“This actually might come in handy in a tight spot,” I say thinking about how it would be even better if he could also communicate back. That would make different situations a lot easier.

“I don’t have that skill or if I do I just don’t know how to use it yet. I was thinking about asking Granny if she has any tips since she knew right away what my skill was when we first met,” he says and I think that’s a good idea. She is the most knowledgeable person that we know, we might as well get everything we can from her.

In fact there are a lot of things that I wanted to ask her and never got the chance. The way she talked about me growing up here. Could that really be true? I don’t remember much of anything before Henry took me in so it’s entirely possible that my original home was Tranquil. If that is the case then does that mean that my parents are still here? Henry has always been enough of a parent to me so it’s not like I need them, but a part of me wants to know the truth. To confront them and ask why they threw me away like trash.

“Do you really think you are from here?” Raider asks, reminding me that

he has been reading all my chaotic thoughts.

“I don’t know. Granny seems to think so and she is a trustworthy person,” I say with a shrug. “Plus there are things that seem familiar about this place, even that drawing on the wall over there sparks something in my mind I just can’t connect it fully.”

“Rye told Bast and I that it’s something he has always cherished and never could bring himself to throw away even though he can’t remember where it came from,” he says and I’m not sure what to think right now. There is just so much happening and we still haven’t found Henry.

“Oh I forgot to tell you guys since everything happened so quickly, but Spin didn’t find a single trace of Henry anywhere,” I say and they all look at me with concern. Everyone is spread out throughout the room still on edge after the encounter with the King none of us have been able to sleep yet.

“So what does that mean?” Drax asks.

“Well either he is hidden really well so even Spin can’t sniff him out or he was never here and the uniforms were just a distraction,” I say and I’m not sure which one I hope is true. Either way we aren’t any closer to finding him, which is just fucking frustrating.

“What do we do now then?” Lo asks, and I wish that I had an answer for him but at the moment I just don’t know.

“I think that we should still confront the King,” Raider says and I look over curiously.

“Why?”

“Well even if Henry isn’t here someone here is involved in his disappearance because of the uniforms,” he says and I hadn’t thought of that. Even if the King isn’t directly involved he could have helped. That would mean he at least knows something.

“That’s good thinking,” I say, but I’m not sure how to confront him without things getting out of hand. If he contacts his maybe partner then Henry could end up hurt. It’s a tricky situation.

“I think we should explain the whole situation to Granny and see what she has to say about it. She’s been a part of this kingdom for a long time. She might have really good advice that we need to listen to,” Xander says once again the voice of reason.

“You’re right, we should all try to get some sleep and talk to her tomorrow,” I suggest and everyone nods, looking just as exhausted as I feel and I had a nap earlier. Being the head of the group is going to take some

getting used to.

“Don’t forget that you may be the head, but we can be the shoulders so don’t be afraid to lean on us,” Raider says and it’s corny but I kind of love it.

“Thanks.”

“He went from high on the punch list to a smooth talker in a little over a week, that’s the fastest turn around I have ever seen,” Drax teases, as he walks towards us, but he doesn’t make it far when I see a shadow wrap around his leg and he tumbles to the floor.

“Thanks man,” Raider says, and Drax looks confused as he lays there sprawled across the rug.

“Ow. Bast you asshole,” he says at least smart enough to realize who tripped him. I’m actually surprised that he even interacted with him from the way those two avoid each other completely most of the time. Perhaps on their trip he found a way to connect with Raider? That would actually make me happy, because I honestly didn’t like seeing him all alone.

“I will stand watch,” Abina says standing by the window; which has become her favorite spot in the room. Bast may be connecting but she sure as hell isn’t. She won’t talk to anyone but me unless she has to and she always stays away from the group. Something else to put on the list to deal with later.

“If that’s what you want,” I say, not bothering to argue with her. If this is what she wants to do to contribute to the group then have at it.

‘*Spin,*’ I say and he doesn’t answer so I look over to where the cake is or should say was and find him passed out cold and covered in frosting.

“Should we wash him up?” Drax asks, laughing at my dessert fiend.

“Nah, maybe if he wakes up stuck to the tray he will learn his lesson,” I say before getting up and moving around so I can crawl in next to Rye. “I don’t care where anyone sleeps, this bed has room for a few more but don’t smother me.”

With that I close my eyes and I try to relax enough to fall asleep. Even as the bed moves a few times I don’t open my eyes again.

“Wow it looks like they are going to need a bigger bed,” I hear someone say, and open my eyes to see Granny standing there with a cart full of food and a

smile on her face. Now that I'm awake I'm starting to feel hot and looking at all the bodies around me I'm not surprised. Rye is in front of me with Bast curled up in front of him; I'm not even sure how much mattress he has. Xander is hugging me from behind and beyond him is Raider who is facing away and at the end of the bed is Drax and Lo looking comfortable. So the only person that didn't try to pile in was Abina and that doesn't surprise me at all.

"I'm starting to sweat," I say and Granny chuckles before coming over and pulling the covers off and tossing them on top of Drax and Lo who don't even make a sound.

"I brought breakfast. I figured after last night it would be best if I was the only one coming and going from this room," she says with a smile and I am grateful for her thoughtfulness. We don't know who to trust in this place so other people handling our food makes me nervous. We actually should have been more suspicious at dinner last night but luckily nothing came of it.

"Thank you. Now if I could find a way out of here I would be more than happy to eat your hard work," I tell her, as my body warns me there is something else we have to do first.

"They look so comfortable, it's a shame to have to wake them but it has to be done," she says before clapping her hands loudly. "TIME TO GET UP!"

Her loud shouts send the bed into a flurry of motion as Raider jumps up ready to fight, Bast hits the floor having very little mattress to begin with and Rye sits straight up with his eyes still closed yelling that he's awake. Xander actually doesn't move which is surprising and Drax and Lo look like they are wrestling under the covers.

"I'm blind," Drax says and I can't help but chuckle as I get to my feet and step around them so I can jump off the bed.

"You aren't blind you idiot, stop groping me," Lo says and I have to run to the bathroom before I piss myself from laughing.

By the time I come out from taking care of business the others are awake and moving around slowly. I guess this is what I have to look forward to in the future. I have to say it's not half bad.

"Abina, you didn't sleep all night, why don't you lay down for a while," I suggest, walking over to stand next to her by the window.

"I am fine," she says, but I can see that she looks tired.

"You're not. Get your ass in the bed and take a nap or else," I tell her,

putting my hands on my hips.

“I have to protect you,” she says looking out the window.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed but I can protect myself, and there is a whole group of people to support me. You don’t have to do this on your own. You are my sixth mate. Though I was a little surprised, I’m happy about it, but eventually you are going to have to try to get along with the group,” I say, giving her a pat on the arm before turning and walking away.

I may be the center of this little group but I’m not going to mother or force them to cooperate. We are all adults here. Even though we all have our own baggage we are going to have to learn to carry it together. Honestly before we came here I was probably the biggest problem. I just wanted to live my life and not be tied down with all these burdens. My burdens though are people with feelings of their own and thinking about them like dead weight made me the asshole. Finding out that it’s a fate I can’t change, actually makes me feel better about the whole thing.

I’m sure it will take time for us all to get to the point where we can just be, so for now I’m just going with the flow and letting the mate thing happen naturally. I’ve only confessed to Lo and Rye, and I think that’s okay. Love doesn’t happen overnight for me, and I can still take time to process my feelings while claiming them one at a time. Because even if I don’t love them right now I feel like I will in the future, and that’s good enough for me.

“Eat, eat. I have a feeling after last night the King has something else up his sleeve that none of us are going to like,” Granny says and I have to agree. He said that he would pay me back and I don’t think that he is one to go back on his threats.

“We actually have some questions for you, if you don’t mind,” I say, grabbing a piece of bacon and a cinnamon roll from the tray and taking a seat on Xander’s lap so there will be more chairs for the others. Raider takes a seat and pulls Rye into his lap as well and then it is a race to see who gets the last one. Somehow Drax wins but when he tries to pull Lo into his lap he gets an elbow to the gut for his attempt.

“Ow. Come on baby everyone else is doing it,” he whines and Lo flips him the bird before sitting on the floor.

‘*Daria, I’m in a bad way,*’ I hear Spin say and I look over to see him struggling to get off of the cake tray but the damn thing is basically glued to his scales.

‘*That is what you get for eating the whole damn cake,*’ I say and I hear

him growl in my head.

'No one else was going to eat it, and no one said that I couldn't,' he reasons, but I just shake my head.

'No one else wanted any because you rolled around in it before eating it. It's like the chocolate fountain all over again,' I say.

'Help me, please,' he begs but my chair is just too comfortable to get up from right now.

'Sorry, but somehow we have to break this habit of yours. So you are just going to have to suffer a little longer,' I tell him before shutting down the link.

"So you were just talking with your pet right?" Xander whispers in my ear.

"How did you know?"

"Well you were looking at him and he looks a little pissed right now," he says, and sure enough when I look over Spin is glaring at me with his beady eyes, smoke coming from his nostrils.

"I will help him clean up," Bast says, picking him up from the cart the cake was on, tray and all.

"I was trying to teach him a lesson," I say with a sigh but Bast just walks into the bathroom, Spin giving me a smug look over his shoulder.

"He worked really hard last night checking the castle, he deserved a bit of fun," Drax says, looking at the cart covered in frosting with a smile on his face. Apparently finding Spins sweets habit very amusing.

"Fine but if you all spoil him I don't want you coming to me whining later when he is a pain in the ass," I say grabbing a tasty looking pastry off the table and taking a bite. It's so good, but out of the corner of my eye I see Abina get into the bed and that makes me even more happy.

"Now what did you want to ask me?" Granny says watching all of us with a smile on her face.

"Raider was wondering if you had any insight to how he could use his power more effectively without hurting himself and I wanted to ask if you have any information on me growing up here and my parents," I say and she nods.

"Raider will be easier to work with first, there is a lot going into your background and some of it isn't pleasant," she says and I get it. I mean I don't know anything but for people to dump their kid it has to be pretty bad right.

“That’s fine I don’t want to ruin my appetite anyway,” I say, taking another bite of food.

“So what do you need help with?” Granny asks Raider.

“I can’t turn it off unless I’m sleeping and Daria was curious if there was a way to communicate back,” he says and some of us understand him but others have no clue what he is talking about.

“Maybe it would be a good idea if you all told us your second trait so we know what we have to work with,” I suggest.

“Telekinesis,” Xander says.

“Invisibility,” Drax comments, looking smug.

“Talking to Snapdragons,” Rye says shyly.

“Bast says shadow manipulation, and mine is reading thoughts,” Raider answers and everyone looks at him.

“Yes I can hear that loud and clear Drax and it’s disgusting,” Raider says, leaning his head against Rye’s shoulder as if trying to get whatever Drax said out of his mind.

“Drax, be good,” I say and he shrugs innocently.

“I can see why you would want to turn that off now and then, I can’t imagine having to hear everything all the time,” Xander ponders out loud.

“I’m guessing since you are struggling that your parents didn’t teach you about it. Even if it isn’t their trait there should have still been knowledge from other generations to pass down. You poor thing struggling all this time alone,” Granny says reaching over and patting him on the hand.

“Well they sold most of our library to pay for their travels and luxurious life. I’ve tried to keep the kingdom going and get some back secretly but I’m only one person with no real authority,” he says and I can’t believe these are the types of people that are in charge of entire kingdoms.

“Daria you should pay attention to what I teach him because you will get all their secondary powers as well,” Granny says and I almost choke on my bacon.

“What?”

CHAPTER THIRTY



“I can’t believe none of you knew that once you mate your human gets your secondary traits. The human body can’t handle the elements of the dragon but in sharing your life force through the mate marks they can handle the secondary skills. Though Daria is special because she will get all six instead of just one,” Granny says and I blink at her in shock.

“So that means you already have Rye and Xanders’s traits,” Bast says coming out of the bathroom rubbing a towel over the now clean Spin who looks pretty damn comfortable.

“It’s obvious that she talks to her pet,” Drax says and if even he caught on I was not hiding it very well at all.

“Yes, but I already bonded with Spin before I had sex with Rye,” I say and his face turns a little pink. I forgot he was a virgin when we got together so it’s probably not that easy for him to talk about sexy times.

“Well that is part of your story which we will get to after the lesson on using your abilities,” Granny says and now I’m even more curious.

“For you Raider it is all about building your mental defense up so that you can shut down when you need to or even pick just one person to listen to. Daria might have an easier time because she has been communicating mentally with Spin for years,” Granny says and that makes sense.

“Oh yeah I can shut him out anytime that I want and he does the same to me,” I say, taking a sip from the cup in front of me. I think it’s Xanders but who knows. We are all mates now so I’m not worried about a little spit.

“I’m not sure how to go about that,” Raider admits and Granny looks over at me, like he’s your mate you teach him.

“I think it would be easier to start with just trying to shut out one. So like Drax would be a good one because I’m sure he is annoying you right now. When I first started I used my emotions to shut the door. Now I can do it without that,” I say and I hope that it makes sense.

He nods his head and looks over at Drax, cringing as I’m sure Drax is thinking something stupid to get on Raider’s nerves. It takes a few minutes but eventually he looks relieved. I can’t blame him, I don’t want those thoughts in my head either.

“That did work. Do you think the concept would work in a room full of people?” he asks and I’m pretty sure that it will.

“I think eventually you will be able to block out whoever you want,” I say and he gives me a huge grin, once again blinding me with his good looks.

“Oh good! I would just practice opening and closing the doors for now until you get used to the feeling and then move on to two at a time and so on until you can shut everyone out at once,” Granny says, cheering him on as if she was the one that taught him.

“Does anyone else have problems with their secondary power that they would like help with? We might as well see if Granny knows something,” I say but everyone else seems to have a handle on it.

“Oh I was wondering why can I only use my ability for a short amount of time before I feel drained?” Drax asks and I think we are all a little surprised that he asked a serious question.

“You will be able to use it for longer when you complete your mating.

I'm not sure if either of you noticed yet but completing the mark should have given you a boost in power levels.

"I noticed when I had to heal Bast that I had a lot more power than I used to," Rye says.

"Oh yeah, Bast was on the brink of death after a Redspies hoard attacked us but Rye brought him back no problem and even fixed his clothes. It was amazing like it never happened," Raider says and I smile at him singing Rye's praises.

"I haven't used any of mine yet but I haven't really had time for experiments yet," Xander says with a shrug.

"You almost died?" I ask Bast when my mind catches up to all of the story.

"Do not worry Calari, I had faith Rye would save my life," he says with a smile and I think we are going to have to sit down and swap stories when we have a minute to breathe.

"We could have used a healer when this dumbass slipped in the river, knocked himself out on a rock, and almost drowned," Lo says pointing at Drax, who looks embarrassed.

"I was just trying to get Daria a pretty rock," he grumbles and everyone laughs.

"What the hell is she going to do with a bunch of rocks?" Lo asks, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"You are lucky Lo made him throw most of them back, he had a pocket full of them," Xander says, and Lo rolls his eyes.

"As if you were any better. Stopping every ten feet to look at some new plant you read about in a book somewhere. It was like traveling with toddlers," Lo says, and when I glance over my shoulder at Xander he just looks away.

"Seems like you had the trip you deserved," I say before picking up another pastry and taking a bite.

"You're probably right," he says, giving me a smile. He's cute but not off the hook yet.

Looking around at all the smiles in the room, I can't believe that I almost threw all of this away. Yeah the idea of having mates was a lot to deal with after winning the Games but I should have thought about it more.

At least I'm willing to try now, and it looks like they are too.

'I'm sorry I ate all the cake,' Spin says, and I look over to see him sitting

on Bast's shoulder eyeing the food on the table.

'You are only saying that because you want more food now,' I say.

'It looks so good, I'm sure no one would miss one little pastry with jam,' he says, his beady eyes pleading with me.

'Fine. I don't feel like fighting with you today, but only one. We are going to start balancing your diet more than just sweets,' I tell him.

'Says the woman on her fifth pastry, and jam has fruit in it,' he snarks before jumping off and flying over to grab the pastry I hold up for him to grab.

"Watching you two interact is really amusing, you have the weirdest looks on your face when you are communicating," Drax says and I feel my cheeks heat up. I keep forgetting about that.

"It's frustration," I say before taking a sip from the cup that is now mine. "It's like dealing with a tiny Drax who only wants to eat sweets and bitch," I say and the others laugh.

"Wow, I can see how much you all really appreciate me," Drax says pouting.

"Watching you all is very interesting," Granny says and she was being so quiet I almost forgot she was here.

"Let's not waste anymore of your time. If you wouldn't mind telling me what you know about my past I would be grateful," I say and she gives a nod.

"You did grow up here in Tranquil. Your red hair is kind of rare so there is no way I would forget the young girl that used to run wild with Prince Rye when he was young," she says and I'm at a loss for words and it looks like Rye is too when our eyes meet.

"So what happened?"

"Oh you two were so cute, always playing together while your parents worked here, but you guys got too close. The rule for not touching humans is a lifelong thing until you find your mate. But one day you crossed the line and it was discovered that you were mates," she says and I'm confused as to why that got me kicked out.

"So wait. All this time Daria has been my mate?" Rye asks.

"Yes, it's part of the reason that your body is so weak, because you two have been separated all this time without ever completing the mating," Granny explains and Rye looks like he wants to cry. I don't blame him. Maybe if I wasn't in so much shock then I would be reacting the same way.

"So that's why at the ceremony I didn't get the same feeling as the others,

because we had already had our first touch,” he says, and I’m glad now that he lied back then. It also makes more sense why the King was so adamant that Rye and I are mates. He knew the truth all along.

That rat bastard.

“But why would it have been bad for Rye to find his mate early?” Raider asks handing Rye a napkin so that he can wipe his tears.

“It’s not about the age, but more about the who, right?” I say and Granny nods her head.

“I don’t get it,” Drax says.

“Think about it. I was a maid's daughter, which is pretty low in the King’s eyes. Whereas if he got rid of me and Rye went to find someone at the Games he would have more of a chance to hook him up with someone from an influential human family,” I explain and Granny nods again.

“Well I didn’t really need another reason to hate the King but now I have one,” Drax sighs and I would agree except the story is missing some key details.

A knock at the door has us all turning as Granny gets up and walks over to answer it. My daggers are on the nightstand and it makes me feel antsy having them that far away but I try to hold still.

The guard that helped the King last night enters the room alone and I relax a little because I know that we could take him if we have to.

“The King would like an audience with you. He is most distraught over what happened last night and would like to offer a most sincere apology, if you would meet him in the throne room in one hour it would be most appreciated,” he says and I don’t buy that shit for a minute.

“Why should we?” I ask and the guard looks at me for a moment before speaking again.

“It is but a humble request, but I also believe that the King may have information that you have been looking for,” he says.

“Information about what?” I ask, getting a little tired of playing this game.

“About your father’s disappearance,” he says and the blood in my veins runs cold.

“Fine. One hour. But no more bullshit. I want answers,” I tell him and he bows before turning and leaving the room.

“What should we do?” Lo asks.

“We prepare to face the King one more time, and if he won’t give us

answers, we will have to take them by force.”

Unfortunately Abina only gets a couple hours of sleep by the time we are ready to go meet with the King but it is better than nothing. I make sure to explain things when she wakes up and she agrees without question. She even gives me a small smile and a kiss on the cheek before taking off to the bathroom.

It makes me hope that my words from earlier helped.

“Alright we don’t know what we are walking into but we are altogether so we should be fine,” I tell them as all the guys stand there in their commoner clothes from before ready to head out.

“I’m sorry I can’t join you,” Granny says looking a little pissed about it but there is nothing that we can do. The King knows something about Henry and I aim to find out what it is.

“It’s fine. You have helped us more than enough, eventually we were going to have to stand on our own and I guess now is as good a time as any,” I tell her and she pulls me into a tight hug before leaving.

“Does everyone know the plan?” I ask, and they all look at me funny.

“What plan?” Drax asks, looking confused.

“Actually there is no plan. We are just going to have to face whatever he has planned with our heads held high,” I tell them and they chuckle.

“Oh there is one thing though, we don’t let him get his hands on Rye again,” I say and everyone nods their head in agreement.

“Thank you.” His face is red when he speaks but I think he is also relieved not to have to face his father alone.

“That’s what family does, no thanks needed,” I tell him just as there is a knock on the door.

“Please follow me,” the guard says, it’s not the same one as before; this one is actually smiling as he leads us to the hell chamber. I still have no idea how the King has been able to trick people all these years. But even as we were in town people seemed to have nothing but the highest regard for the royal family here.

The tension is high as we follow the guard, all of us on edge and lost in thought as we traipse through the neverending white hallways. Aside from a

new King this damn place needs a paint job or something. It's clean but fucking depressing.

When we arrive the guard goes in and announces us before opening the door for us to enter. The first thing I see is the King sitting on the throne with the guard from this morning standing next to him. I think Rye said his name is Eren and he is the King's right hand man. From the looks he is giving the King I would say that he is more than that but it doesn't really matter right now.

That bastard looks pretty smug as he looks at us and I have a feeling that things are about to get even worse.

"Thank you for meeting with me. It is unfortunate that things turned out so poorly last evening but I hope that we can all move on and have peaceful relations in the future," the King says and I roll my eyes.

"Is that your idea of an apology?" I ask, and the King chuckles.

"You think I owe you an apology. How quaint. I'm the King. I can do whatever I wish to my son and you have no say in it," he says and I hear someone growl from around me and I'm glad that the others feel the same way that I do.

"Not anymore. He's mine now and I keep and protect what's mine," I tell him and he laughs once again.

"I'm really not sure what he finds funny about this," Lo says under his breath, but of course all the dragons in the room hear him just fine.

"It's funny that this little human thinks that she can protect anyone when she holds no power," the King says before signaling a guard off to the side with his hand.

The side door to the room opens and the guard brings in two chained people with bags on their heads. My stomach drops and I feel frozen in place as I look at the two people forced to kneel on the floor next to the raised platform where the King is sitting. Neither of them look big enough to be Henry so what the hell is he doing?

"You protect what's yours but you can't even protect your own parents," the King says signaling again, and the sacks are taken off their heads. Bright red hair cascades around my mother's face as she looks up at me with pleading eyes, and I'm frozen in place.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



M *y parents?*

I mean they look like me, my mom has the same red hair as me and my father has the same green eyes. But I don't know them. There is no flash of memory or feeling of attachment. In fact I kind of feel numb about seeing them. It's strange all this time I thought when I finally met them I would either be happy or angry but I'm neither of those.

"Father! You have gone too far!" Rye shouts I'm sure feeling outraged on my behalf but it's not needed.

"Come now Rye I'm just uniting a family that lost each other," the King says with a laugh as if he is just having the best time.

“So your idea to torture me is to dangle these two strangers in front of me and hope that I still have some kind of attachment to them after twenty years? I mean good effort but I’m not buying. Tell me what you know about Henry,” I say and the King’s smile dims a bit.

“But darling!” the woman says, but I just ignore her.

I’ve been thinking about this since Granny told us the story about me living here and what I haven’t figured out yet is how I got to Areola. It’s not like my six year old self walked there. Something is still not quite right with this.

“You are putting on quite a show but I’m sure you care for your parents,” the King says, but his haughty expression from before is starting to falter around the edges.

“I mean sure, they had me and I’m grateful for that but they also tossed me out like garbage when I became inconvenient. So I only have one parent and that’s Henry. Tell me where he is,” I say and my so-called parents look a mix of shocked and angry.

Interesting.

“We love you Daria, we never wanted to let you go but we had to,” my mother cries, and I feel a little sorry for her but I have to keep going. Henry is more important.

Raider can you read their thoughts and see if they are being truthful?

I glance at him to make sure he got the message and he nods his head slightly.

“You are lying. I saw you in the Games you helped your competition with compassion, there is no way that you don’t care about your parents at all,” the King says, showing that he is getting angry as well.

“I feel bad for them, they are tied up and look a bit distraught but I don’t think they are all that upset about me,” I say with a shrug.

“You ungrateful brat, we gave up a lot for you and this is how you repay us!” my father shouts, and I know that I’m on the right train of thought.

“Silence!” the King shouts angry that he is clearly losing at his own game.

“Yes, such warm loving sentiments from my adoring parents,” I say, shaking my head.

“Apparently they are afraid they will lose the estate and the money that they got for getting rid of you,” Raider says quietly and that is the last detail I needed to really shut my heart to them.

“This is not going as planned at all,” the King says glaring over at my parents. “I should have killed you myself but they assured me that for the right amount of money they would do it themselves. I should have asked for an ear as proof of death and not just some hair.” He groans and I feel my own anger starting to build up.

“They did do me one favor by not killing me, but why did you want me dead so bad in the first place? I get you didn’t want me to be Rye’s mate but dumping me in another kingdom would have done the trick,” I say.

“You don’t get it. Even at that age if you had died Rye would have as well. No heir means I stay the King,” he says but I feel like there is something more to it.

“I know you are a greedy bastard but I don’t think this is all there is to it,” I say and he glares at me.

“They seem to be worthless, toss them in the dungeon until I decide what to do with them,” the King orders and the bags are put back over my parents heads and they are dragged out of the room kicking and screaming.

“What was the point of this show?” I ask just wanting to go back to the room and process.

“I was hoping that it would give me leverage but it seems you only care about Henry,” he says, his tone changing completely.

‘Hey Daria,’ Spin says.

‘What?’

‘I forgot to mention some things last night,’ he says.

‘Now is not the time,’ I tell him.

“What could you possibly need leverage for? You are the King of Tranquil don’t you have an army at your beck and call. What do you need me for?” I ask and he actually sighs.

“I used to,” he mumbles and I don’t understand what he is getting at.

“What the hell is going on?”

“A year ago someone came into power and they have been pushing the kingdoms to give up their power and merge into one,” he says and I have no idea where he is going with this but the guys around me shift.

“I’ve heard this rumor,” Xander says and we all look at him.

“Alright go on,” I say to the King who signals for Eren to explain in his place.

“Something precious was taken from the King to hold over his head and make him cooperate. Just as your father was taken from you. You are now

drawn into this game not only because of that but because being the mate of all the Princes puts you in a position to control all the lands just as this man wants. We assume that he plans to use you to take over,” Eren says and I’m a little taken back.

“Who is the man with the evil plan?” Drax asks.

“Bane.”

“What? My uncle wouldn’t do that,” Bast says and I honestly don’t know what to believe.

“He was willing to kill his own brother and mate to secure the throne for himself. I think he is perfectly capable of kidnapping and extortion,” the King says and for some reason I believe he is telling the truth. Just for confirmation though I look over at Raider and hope he is reading Eren’s thoughts right now. Our eyes meet and he nods.

“Do any of you have good families?” I say with a sigh.

“I think only Xander and Drax,” Raider says, answering my rhetorical question out loud.

What am I even supposed to do with this information? Does the King expect me and this group to somehow save Estonia from Bane’s plans? That’s fucking nuts. He has an entire kingdom at his beck and call and still somehow his hands are tied. That doesn’t make sense to me.

“Why don’t you fight?” I ask, my brain processing things slowly right now with the information overload.

“We are a kingdom of healers. Yes we have an army but it is small and we aren’t battle hardened,” Eren says and I guess he would know what his men are capable of.

“And as I said he has something of mine that I can’t chance having it hurt while fighting him,” the King says and I’m more curious than ever what that might be.

“You said he also has Henry, but you want me to risk his life all the same to help you right?” I ask and the King actually hangs his head. I actually think I preferred him when he was an asshole instead of looking beat down like this. It’s just weird.

“When you said he would pay you didn’t mean Henry,” Rye says and I turn to look at him.

“No I did not.”

“Then who did you mean? I’m getting really tired of you beating around the bush old man,” I say, losing my patience.

The King looks at Eren and the look they share gives me the creeps. *Are they really a thing?*

“Our son,” Eren says.

Wait. What?

“I wasn’t very good in school but I’m pretty sure that’s not possible,” I say.

“He is my biological son but the King and I have been raising him together. A year ago he was kidnapped by Bane. He’s five now,” Eren says, taking the King's hand in his.

‘*Daria,*’ Spin says.

‘*Yeah?*’

‘*That’s what I was trying to tell you before. I found a little kids room next to the King’s chamber last night,*’ he says and I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh.

‘*That would have been a lot more helpful before now!*’ I say before shutting the door between us.

“How come I didn’t know I had a little brother?” Rye asks clearly in shock.

“Because it is frowned upon to take a lover as a King and you aren’t actually related by blood. I thought you might reject him and side with your mother,” the King says and I’m stunned.

“You don’t beat that kid too do you?” I ask without thinking.

“No.”

“Thought not. You beat Rye because of his mother right?” I say and now it’s the King that looks shocked.

“How did you?”

“Just a lucky guess. But I want to know why?” I say staring him down. Rye needs to hear this too.

“The Queen never loved me. She had already fallen for someone when her family forced her into the games and she won. We did have a child together and I loved him but because she hated everything about me she didn’t want me to love our child and she actually tried to kill him. So the only way to save him from her was to reject him myself,” the King says and I glance at Rye to see how he is taking the news that his father loved him and his mother hated him.

God, rich people give me a headache.

“So you beat your son to save him from your wife?” I ask and the King

nods.

“She is actually spying for Bane and has been all this time. That is why I lost my temper last night because I was afraid Joel would be killed once rumors spread of your arrival. It’s one thing to have Rye be alive and hate me but I don’t want Joel to die since this has nothing to do with him,” the King says and I don’t forgive him for the way he treated Rye. There is no excuse for abusing your child.

“So the person that the Queen was in love with back then was Bane?” Xander asks and my head is so full of other things I didn’t even connect those dots.

This is so fucked up.

“Yes, and we should be safe now. She took off last night for Drumfire,” Eren says, holding on to the King’s hand tightly.

“Putting aside all the family drama for a moment. What do you want? Just be straight with us no more games,” I say feeling more exhausted by the minute.

“We want you to save our son, you are the only one that can,” Eren says, and honestly I would have done it without all this underhanded shit. It seems I have to go there to get Henry anyway a kid won’t be a problem.

“Fine, but when we return you retire, it’s your punishment for being the world’s shittiest father,” I say.

“Done. If you save Joel I will retire and you will never hear from me again,” the King agrees quickly, his face filled with regret when he looks at Rye. Rye looks pale but he is still standing tall in the face of all this and I couldn’t be more proud. Bast also looks pale but we will have to deal with that later.

It looks like we are going to Drumfire.

When I said I wanted to travel I didn’t mean like this.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BANE

“**W**hat are you doing here Aria?” I ask as soon as she struts her way into my room. She thinks she owns the place and me but I’ve just been using her. As if I could ever love such a pathetic woman. Not in this lifetime. However she does make for a good pawn against that idiot of a King in Tranquil.

“I’m done spying, and I’m done watching that man who is supposed to be my husband shack up with his guard,” she gags before taking a seat next to me on the couch in front of the fireplace. I’ve been drinking and thinking about my next move but now my mood has soured considerably. She smell of a sickly sweet perfume and her makeup is overdone, I’m surprised she lasted this long playing Queen when she never deserved the crown.

“Since when do you make decisions on your own Aria?” I ask setting my drink off to the side.

“Well I just thought it was time since that girl is at the castle and she is bound to figure everything out,” she says looking at her hands and fidgeting.

Daria. Now that is a woman fit to be Queen. Too bad she is tied down with all those little brats including my nephew.

“Was your life in danger there?”

“Well no, I just wanted to be with you,” she says running a hand up my thigh. It makes my skin crawl. I’ve slept with her in the past just enough to get her hooked on my. I of course waited until after she was mated so I wouldn’t get stuck with her and always wore protection so she wouldn’t try to claim a child from me. But I’ll never sully myself with her again.

“You should have stayed there and played your part,” I tell her before wrapping my hands around her skinny neck and squeezing with all my

strength. I can't kill her yet but at least now she will know where we stand.
"Now I have no use for you."

I hold her until she passes out and then push her onto the floor, her thin body makes a small thud but it's not even close to satisfying. Getting up I wipe my hands on my trousers and walk to the door. A guard is waiting there.

"Toss her in the dungeon with the others. If you find her agreeable do as you please," I tell him and before leaving the room and heading for my office.

Things are coming fast, but my plan is still working.

One day I will rule all of Estonia and there is no one here to stop me.

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