



ALEX LIDELL

DRAGONS'
BRIDE

2

HER ROYAL DRAGON PACK

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1. KIT



Exhausted as I am after riding for days through the woodlands at a pace that even the dragon princes concede is brutal, I'm certain I'm beyond appreciating the scenery. The ocean proves me wrong. When the trees and mountains part to reveal the vast blue abyss, I feel my breath still. The water stretches into forever, kissing the colored horizon while the waves crash against the shoreline as rhythmically as the *lub dub, lub dub* of my own heartbeat. There is a salt and brine smell that hangs in the air that hugs me from all sides and makes me think of Cyril. Most of all though, the ocean holds the promise of a new world, one I've heard about, but am only now seeing for the first time. A world where anything can happen.

My horse dances beneath me, and I realize I'm still stopped while the princes moved ahead. Hauck circles back to me first. I'm riding on my own now, but ever since the incident with his dragon, he's never far from me. Even when we stop to rest, and I try to give the warriors their privacy, he's always there to urge me back to the group. To remind me that I'm pack now.

"First time seeing this little puddle?" Hauck asks.

"Little puddle? How about we not offend a force of nature that can swallow us whole at a whim?"

"I could swallow you whole at a whim," says Hauck. "You don't mind offending me."

"You can't. You'd have to chew."

He waggles his brows. “I was talking about a different part of you.”

A week ago, I would have turned bright red at that. Now my cheeks heat a little, but as much from annoyance as embarrassment. “I walked into that one, didn’t I?”

“Dove into it. Head first.” Hauck reaches down and grabs my reins, which I had managed to drop – fortunately without Quinton having noticed. Quinton doesn’t look kindly on such things *at all*, which is not altogether fair. I think that not dropping myself off the horse is already an accomplishment. Especially when the bloody beasts trots.

“Let the horse pick his way down the slope,” Hauck tells me.

I figure out what he means shortly, as the descent turns so steep that I spend most of it praying that my gelding has no suicidal ideations. Once we make it down to the pier, and I can breathe again, I am grateful to see a pair of servants rush up to take our mounts. Another two bring moist towels for us to wash off the grime of the road.

Hauck doesn’t wait for me to try dismounting and lifts me out of the saddle, holding me against him while my legs regain their function. Behind me, someone is talking differentially to Tavius. I only catch some of the words, but they appear to be assurances that everything has been delivered and that the Phoenix – who appears to be an esteemed lady of some kind – is ready for us.

“Who is the Phoenix?” I ask.

“Her.” Coming up beside Hauck and me, Cyril points toward the ocean. I see no woman there, only a large ship that bobs in the distance. “The best frigate in the royal fleet. Faster than anything you’ve seen, and armed for combat to boot.”

“Wait. Phoenix is a boat?”

“Of course not,” says Cyril. “She is a frigate.”

Well, that clears things up. “The way everyone is speaking about it, I was expecting something, well, alive.”

Cyril shrugs, as if he doesn't see how a wooden boat isn't alive.

"I'd keep any less than flattering comments about the ship to yourself," Hauck whispers in my ear. "Lest you would like to make a sworn enemy of the Massa'ev royal navy."

"You are kidding me, right?" I twist toward him. Hauck's gorgeous face is serious, his thick lashes stark in the sunlight.

"For once, no," he says. "You'd be better off insulting the captain's wife than his ship."

I packed that little bit of insanity away, and follow the princes into a rowboat that's come out to collect us. It's such a small thing, barely large enough for the five of us and the pair of seamen at the oars, but marks the real start of this grand deception we are about to play out. For my part that means willingly going the Equinox Trials in place of the now dead Lady Cordelia and helping the pack win the coveted fertility elixir, all while ensuring that no one catches on to the truth: that the princes and I have no intention of ever having pups together. Once the elixir is secured, the dragons will find a nice prophecy-matching blond human with air-magic and breed with her. And I, I will finally get my freedom. I'll be a slave no more.

All I have to do is cross from the human realm into Lunos and not die.

The seamen push the boat off the shore and pick up the oars, which make a soft *splash splash splash* in the clear water. Although our two escorts look human, I can tell that they are fae just from the aura of immortal competence they have about them. As we near the ship, they drop the glamor that makes their pointed ears look smooth, confirming my suspicion.

"Can all fae do that?" I ask, suddenly wondering whether there are immortals walking about the human realm every day. I don't think so, given that the line between Lunos and the mortal realm around here is in the middle of the ocean, so it's a long journey. But then again, immortals have all the time in the world.

“No, glamor isn’t a universal skill,” says Tavias. At the oars, the seamen flinch slightly at the sound of the prince’s voice. It is a subtle motion, but enough for me to notice. Just as I notice that neither Tavias nor the other princes pay much attention to it. As if they are all used to people trembling in their presence. Tavias waves his hand toward the quickly distancing land. “But given our destination, we ensured Captain Dane brought several seaman who have the ability.”

The row boat pulls up near the Phoenix’s hull, the seamen deftly securing it with a rope. Tavias climbs up the side first, then Hauck and I, followed by Cyril and Quinton. The water seems to stand still for a moment when it is my turn, and when I glance at Cyril, I notice a small glow around him.

I lift a brow.

He shrugs a muscled shoulder, as if he didn’t just tame a bloody ocean with his will.

A hush ripples throughout the ship as Tavias steps onto the deck. Two columns of sailors snap to attention, all the others tugging their forelocks. The handful of males who I presume are officers tip their hats in dignified greeting. Someone even plays a welcoming jig on a pipe. It’s as elaborate as anything I’ve ever seen.

A cool sea breeze kisses my cheeks, the air nippier here than it was on shore. Up above us, seagulls caw insistently, unaware and uncaring of the formalities unfolding on deck.

A tall, broad-shouldered man with golden epaulets and an elongated hat strides forward to Tavias. He has a slightly rolling gait and an aura of command that makes him seem even larger than he is. “Welcome aboard the Phoenix, Your Highnesses. It is an honor to have you back.” He turns to me, and his face grows blank of emotion of any kind. I don’t know if I’ve somehow offended him already. “Lady Cordelia. Welcome. I am Captain Dane of the Royal Phoenix.”

“Um...you have a beautiful boat, Captain,” I say, trying to buy myself a few seconds of time to think by looking around. Clearly, the news of our changed plans hadn’t made it to the

pier, and I'm not sure how – and who – is supposed to break the news.

The captain's lips tighten. "Frigate, Lady Cordelia. The Phoenix isn't a boat, she is a frigate."

"And she isn't Lady Cordelia, but Lady Kitterny," says Hauck, swaggering up to my side. He puts a possessive arm around my waist. "So, I'd say you are even."

I am waiting for one of the princes to elaborate on the change, but no one does. Nor do any of them seem the least bit uncomfortable about the suddenly elevated claim of my birth. It certainly makes me uncomfortable.

Dane tips his hat toward me. "Of course. Forgive the oversight, Lady Kitterny." He blades his body to address the group. "Your quarters have been prepared and we finished loading the cargo this morning. I hope you might do us the honor of joining my officers and me for dinner this evening."

Tavias nods his head graciously, which seems to signal the end of the formalities because the sailors on deck disperse to their duties at once. Seizing advantage of the moment, I take in the ship. The towering masts dwarf me immediately, the tallest of them stretching so far into the sky that I can barely see its tip. Most of the sails are furled, but the Massa'ev's golden dragon flag billows and snaps in the wind.

Captain Dane briefs Tavias on the winds and currents, estimating two to three weeks of travel before we enter Faewave Rift, the stretch of ocean separating the human world from Lunos. On the northern continent, the barrier between the realms is on land, with Mystwood forest separating the two. Few who go into Mystwood come back alive. I don't imagine Faewave Rift is much safer.

According to Dane, the rift is shrouded in mist and constantly shimmering with a pale purple light, as if the very fabric of reality is being stretched and warped. That alone sounds bad enough, but then Dane goes on to warn how treacherous and unpredictable the waters themselves are, with strong currents and sudden gales appearing out of nowhere.

I guess if the rift was anything but horrible and deadly, it wouldn't be much of a barrier. No human ships that have attempted the crossing have ever returned, but Dane's Phoenix obviously made it through, as have a few other fae vessels over the years. Provided we don't die in the crossing – a fact that Dane and the princes are a great deal more confident about than I am – it will be a few more weeks of sailing to get to Massa'eva.

“Lady Kitterny,” an unexpected, musical female voice catches my attention and I turn to find a woman in loose colorful trousers and matching top bowing to me. She has a short pixie haircut, barefeet, and a body that seems made for acrobatics even when she stands still. “My name is Nora. I am your maid. May I take you down to your stateroom? I've fresh water ready to help you wash off from the road and your clothes have already been received and put away.”

My maid? My clothes? I hadn't realized the princes had taken the time to wrangle the order from the seamstress. Even a single clean dress sounds glorious right now, and the water even more so. I'm more than glad to indulge in both, though I certainly won't require a maid to help me about. Nora ushers me toward a ladder to the lower deck, speaking with a quiet, animated voice the entire time.

“You've the most beautiful gowns I've seen in some time. I cannot wait to see how they look on you in the flesh. A girl's imagination will only take her so far.” Nora's voice has the song-like accent that's different from the princes, and she speaks a great deal faster than they do, as if she only has a limited time in which to deliver her words. “I've stashed some rose scented soap for you as well. If you might allow me to wash your hair, I would be happy to weave some of your jeweled barrettes into your braid. I've always found that clean hair can do magic.”

I don't have the heart to tell her that I own no hair barrettes, jeweled or otherwise. Not that I have much of an opportunity to get a word in until we get to the door Nora says is mine. Here, I finally put my palms up, stopping Nora in her tracks.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done, Nora, but you don’t need to help me get washed and changed. I’m sure you’ve better things to do.”

“Have I displeased you, my lady?”

“No. Of course not. I’m just...” Not a lady. “I just don’t want to be trouble.”

“Trouble? Why in the world would taking care of you be trouble?” She sounds genuine.

“I personally can think of many more entertaining activities than washing my hair, and it is my hair.”

Nora laughs and opens the door to the cabin. I take one step inside and stop. It’s larger than I imagined something on a ship would be, and gorgeously decorated with golden inlays all over the walls and furniture. There is even a carved armoire with a mirror large enough to see my whole body. All that, and several chests of clothing plus a temporary brass tub. It’s very small, but it’s steaming with fresh warm water. A cabin suited for a queen, not a servant girl.

“These can’t possibly be my quarters.”

“They are a bit small,” Hauck says from behind us, his entire body blocking the doorway. He is still dressed as he was for travel, but the brown trousers and dark shirt betray the lethal cut of his muscles and only highlight his otherworldly beauty. Truly, no one should be able to make a girl’s knees go soft just by leaning against a doorframe. Hauck waves a hand. “No matter. They’ll do for your day time needs. You won’t be sleeping here, after all.”

“I won’t?” I eye the hanging bunk with a thick mattress and clean sheets.

“Of course not. You will be sharing a bunk with one of us each night. And by bunk, I mean bed. And by sharing I mean—”

“I get what you mean.” Heat rushes to my face. I’m afraid to look at Nora. I don’t know what she is making of all this, but whatever she is imagining is probably right. And that only makes everything worse.

Hauck grins, a mischievous streak appearing in his green eyes. Along his temple, golden scales ripple with a hint of turquoise. “Well turnip, you know, we do have to prepare you for—”

“I got it.” For stars sake. “Please stop talking now. I’m sure there is someone here who is missing the pleasure of your company, but it’s not me.”

Nora lets out a small little gasp.

Hauck braces his shoulder against the door and licks his canines. The sharp teeth glisten for a moment, sending a shot of arousal through me. I remember what those teeth can do, the sensation they can send along my skin. And other parts. Stars. Before I met the dragon princes I’d have laughed at a suggestion that sharp canines could be anything but terrifying. Now I just press my thighs together discreetly and hope that Hauck can’t scent me.

“I brought a present for you,” Hauck purrs, bringing out a box from behind his back. “I can’t leave without giving it to you.”

Oh no. No no no. Before we left the last major town, Hauck had mentioned getting *training aids* to help my body stretch enough to accept the dragons inside me. Our anatomies weren’t incompatible, but it did require preparation – something that Cordelia had, and I needed to get on board with. Hauck had not brought his shopping plans up since, but the threat thereof was alive and well inside my mind, no matter how many miles we covered on horseback.

I really did not want to see what was inside the carved box in his hands. Ever. And certainly not with Nora watching.

“Get out.” I shove Hauck’s chest, only to meet with a wall of solid muscle. “Out.”

He rocks back slightly in clear appeasement, but doesn’t move his feet one inch. His smile grows. The bastard knows exactly what I’m thinking. Holding the box in front of him, but too high for me to reach, he flips open the front latch and pulls up the lid.

2. KIT



I squeak and close my eyes, which is admittedly pathetic as far as defensive measures go. The sound of the box's top opening rattles through my bones.

Nora gasps. Apparently, whatever Hauck has commissioned is outrageous enough to spook even the fae.

"These are beautiful. I've never seen anything like them," says Nora.

My eyes snap open. Still grinning, Hauck holds a velvet-lined box where a necklace, three bracelets, and a pair of hair barrettes sparkle atop the velvet lining. Stars take me, calling the set beautiful is like calling the ocean damp. At first glance, the design looks like a bouquet, with large diamonds and emeralds thoughtfully surrounded by golden leaves. But when I look closer, I realize that the intricate leaves are actually dragon scales. And when I take a step back from the box to take in the set as a whole, the shape of a golden dragon with green eyes emerges in earnest.

I've never seen anything like it, not even on the visiting nobility.

"You look surprised, turnip," says Hauck.

"These are... amazing." I reach out and pull my hand back, afraid to touch the gems.

"Of course, they are amazing. I chose them, after all." Hauck squints and pulls them up out of my reach. "You know, from that look on your face, perhaps you were expecting me to have something else for you?"

Rut.

I swallow, trying to fight back the heat that is burning my cheeks again. “I never know what to expect from you, Hauck.”

He licks his canines and leans forward. “Hmm... Perhaps you are disappointed that I’ve brought things to go around your neck and not between your legs?”

The burn along my cheeks flashes through my entire body. Is it possible to die of humiliation? Worse yet, the prince’s words are making my treacherous body needy. Enough so that I have to shift from foot to foot, desperately trying to ease the ache. I think I’m discrete about it, but my scent must give everything away, because Hauck looks like he is enjoying this game more with every bloody moment.

He leans down to whisper into my ear. “Don’t worry, I have something for between your legs as well. But this seems more appropriate for the captain’s dinner.”

“I’m going to murder you,” I whisper back, though I know Nora hears both sides of the exchange just fine. “As soon as I figure out how.”

“I look forward to it,” he says.

I collect what’s left of my dignity and let him place the box into my hands. It feels strange to take the jewelry. I have never held anything so valuable before in my life, not even at the lord’s house. This whole box is worth more than I am many times over.

“What was that thought?” Hauck asks.

I shake my head. “Just that this... it’s too much Hauck.”

“I’m a prince of Massa’evé,” says Hauck. “Why should my gifts reflect anything else?”

“Because I’m not –”

“But you are,” says Hauck. “Whatever you were going to claim, you are that. And more. Now, go get dressed before I lose my patience and we skip right to the other box I brought aboard.”

That snaps me out of my temporary trance. I shove Hauck out into the corridor and close the door in his face. “Rutting prince.”

When I turn back to Nora, her face is pale and she stares at me with widened eyes. “You mustn’t speak to him like that, my lady. Not to any of the princes. Do you have any idea of what they can do?”

“I’ve a notion or two. But it’s Hauck’s ideas I worry about more than my own.” I rub my face. “If you could possibly pretend that you didn’t hear him mention anything about... you know...”

“I have no notion of what you refer to,” Nora says quickly, her face changing back to its energetic self. “But I think I know the perfect outfit to go along with the jewels for tonight. Should we get you washed up for dinner?”

There she went with the *we* again, as if I can’t do it myself. I open my mouth to protest, but Nora cuts me off.

“I’m getting a sense that you are about to tell me that your arms have not fallen off yet and you are capable of holding soap all by yourself.”

“Something like that.”

She thinks for a moment, then her eyes light up with an idea. “Then how about this? I rather like my job. And if you start acting like you can handle your own soap, I’m never going to be able to convince the royal family that they should keep me around. So, consider this a sign of your ladyship’s benevolence.”

I laugh.

She grabs my hands and tows me over to the brass tub.

An hour later, Nora has me bathed and dressed in a gown of sheer seabreeze fabric intermingled with darker blue silks that move like the ocean when I walk. Then she brushes out, braids, and pins up my hair, working in Hauck’s barrettes to match the necklace and bracelets hugging my wrists. Looking at myself in the mirror, I don’t recognize the sensual woman staring back at me.

“You look divine.” Nora stands back and nods in satisfaction, admiring the same reflection that is taunting me. She catches my eyes and frowns. “Is something amiss, my lady?”

Many things. Starting with the fact that I am not a lady, but a dressed up fake. A pig with lip paint standing in for the real thing. I realize Nora is still watching me and give her an appreciative nod.

“You did a remarkable job,” I tell her. Then I pull my shoulders back and ready myself to live the lie I promised.

Nora leads me to the captain’s dining room, where a pair of uniformed guards open the door for me.

“Lady Kitterny, Your Highnesses,” one of the two announces. “Captain.”

I step forward into the spacious cabin. The males are already there, sitting in high backed chairs around the polished mahogany table that’s set with fine china plates set into little grooves that keep the plates from moving around. Behind Captain Dane’s chair, the flag of Massa’ev hangs proudly on the wall. A striking standard of a fierce dragon with its wings spread wide, matching the larger one flapping from the Phoenix’s mast.

Chairs scrape as the room comes to its feet. Captain Dane stands first, flashing his polished uniform and grounding presence, then the rest of the officers. Then, finally, the four princes. I can tell the delay wasn’t due to royal lineage, but because, for the first time since I met them, the four of them were rooted in place.

Their awkward reaction confirms what I already suspect – that I look ridiculous. A pig with lip paint. A slave girl dressed up as a lady she isn’t, while everyone wears the colors of their true office. Never has the difference been more stark than now, with the dragon princes in their full regalia – one they hadn’t bothered to don when picking up Cordelia and kidnapping me.

But now, here, they have. Because this is their world.

In his billowing purple silk shift that bleeds into burgundy beneath the sun and dark pants, Tavius looks like a living flame which matches the aurora of power that crackles the air around him. Cyril wears blue to match his scales, his formal jacket tailored to his wide shoulders and taught waist, emphasizing the perfection of every line of his body. Quinton's outfit appears simplest, but the black shirt, pants and silver sash make him seem even more lethal. If not for the silver, which is also reflected in his cuffs, buttons, and an embroidered dragon over his left breast, Quinton would blend into the shadows. Last, but not least, Hauck is as gaudy as Quinton is understated, his golden shirt matching his rings and a wide cummerbund around his waist.

They are all different, and yet all regal and powerful and princely. The dragons of Massa've.

Cyril breaks free of his trance first. "You look exquisite, Lady Kitterny."

I try a courtesy and nearly tip over. Hauck winces.

Cyril strides forward and offers me his arm. He guides me to an open chair between Tavius and himself. Just before Cyril could pull it out for me, Hauck steps back and presents me with his own spot.

"Take my seat, turnip. I think you'll find yourself more comfortable here."

Cyril tenses. "We aren't switching seats."

"Of course you'd say that," Hauck shoots back, "what with you and Tavius scheming to have Kit all to yourselves. I think she should have options. Namely, me."

"Stop making a scene, Hauck," says Tavius.

"Pot meet kettle. I'm simply offering Lady Kitterny a chair," says Hauck. "I propose we let the lady decide this for herself. Where would you like to sit, Kit?"

All the attention of the room shifts to me, pressing in on all sides. Captain Dane and his officers. The servants who stand along the walls. The princes themselves. Everyone is waiting for Lady Kitterny to take her place among them, to know what

to do with all those forks on the table, and to carry on a conversation in a way that well bred nobles do.

Except that Lady Kitterny, doesn't actually exist and never has. And no amount of training and lip paint and jewels can ever make me fit into this world. My heart quickens and I feel my throat close with the need for more air.

I take a step back. Then another. "I'm sorry," I mutter. "I'm sorry. I'm not feeling so well."

"The sea can take some getting used to," says Dane, not without sympathy even though there is barely any motion to the ship. He is still standing patiently, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Yes, the sea," I mutter. "Excuse me." The final backward step brings me to the door. I bolt out.

3. KIT



I rush away from the captain's dining room and up to the deck. I need air and space. And I don't know where else to go. I thank the stars that Nora dressed me in flat boots of soft leather that make rushing along the ship possible. Still, pieces of my dress snag on the wooden planking and rip underfoot as I scamper up the ladder and rush by the surprised crew toward the rail.

It would be easier if I were seasick, but no such luck is on my side today as I lean over the rail.

"Turnip."

I flinch at the sound of Hauck's voice, which hits me between the shoulder blades. Then the prince himself is beside me, his familiar scent of earth and woods mixing with the salty air. He leans his forearms against the rail. "What happened?" he asks.

"I couldn't do it." I stare out toward the ocean.

"Choose a chair?"

"Pretend I'm some... some royal who is supposed to be wearing these dresses, and jewelry and everything. I know full well that I should be scurrying about with chamber pots, not sitting at the captain's table and pretending otherwise, it's... it's a charade everyone will see through the moment I take another step."

Hauck turns so that his back is to the ocean and his elbows rest on the rail. For once, he doesn't have any smart remarks though. Probably because he knows I speak the truth.

“I can’t fit into the world where princes pull out my chairs and the captain of a ship stands when I enter the room. It’s like... like being a piece of common glass pretending to be a diamond,” I speak the words toward the ocean, filling the void of silence stretching between Hauck and me. It’s a relief to voice the truth, and the words spill more quickly as I continue. “I can only shimmer for so long before everyone realizes that the glow is nothing more than a trick of the light. That I’m no precious jewel. I’m sorry, Hauck. I’m so so sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for exactly?”

“For making a deal that I cannot possibly keep,” I whisper. “Cordelia was noble born and she still had to train her entire life to be your bride. The arrogance of me thinking I could fit into those shoes is... was a heat of the moment stupidity. A few weeks of preparation won’t shine a piece of glass into a precious stone. And the moment everyone sees –”

“You keep mentioning that,” Hauck says. “The part about what everyone around sees, or will see, or should see. Is it important?”

I turn toward him. “Of course it’s important. It’s what this whole game is about.”

“Hmm.” He makes a sound with the back of his throat, then scoops me toward him until my back presses against his chest.

I gasp. “What are you doing?”

Hauck nuzzles my ear. “See all those sailors scurrying about, they may look like they are going about their duties, but they are watching us. Do you know what they see?”

“A human broodmare the royals picked up. Except I’m faking even that part.”

“They see the most beautiful woman, fae or human, who they’ve ever laid eyes on, standing in a prince’s arms,” says Hauck. “And you know what they are thinking? That I am the luckiest rutting male in Massa’ev for getting to leave my scent on you. For being able to do this.” He rubs his cheek on my neck, right over my pulse, then does the same on the

insides of my wrists. Taking a whiff of his handiwork, Hauck makes a content purring sound that vibrates his chest.

“But –”

“Shush.” Hauck nips the top of my ear, the sudden sting making me gasp before turning into an erotic warmth as he laps the bite. “It’s my turn to talk. Can we agree that I’m a royal prince?”

I snort. “Yes. I’m very well aware of your birth.”

“And so is this crew. Do you agree with that?”

“What’s the point –”

“Just answer me.”

“Yes,” I sigh. “They, the whole crew, know you are a royal prince.”

“And as a royal prince of Massa’ev, I can have any woman I choose, couldn’t I?”

“I... imagine so.”

“You imagine right,” says Hauck. “I can have any woman I choose. Not to keep perhaps, but to have for a time.” There is a pang of pain in his voice that he covers quickly. “And you are, like you said, bought and paid for. Correct?”

I nod.

“Good. That means that everyone here knows that there is no reason for me to do this, except for one – because I desperately want to.” With that, Hauck spins me to face him. With one hand on my back and the other on my head, he dips his head and seals his lips over mine.

The kiss starts gently, but as my body yields to Hauck’s, the strokes of his tongue grow deeper and more savoring. His hands roam. One hand is tangled in my hair, not hard enough to hurt, but just the perfect amount to be felt. His other palm spreads wide over the column of my spine. His purr vibrates through me, the intensity and passion of the kiss so palpable that it pulls me onto my toes.

My body ripples with sensation, more potent than anything I've felt before coming into the pack. Hauck is earth and life, he is magic and mischief, and the kind of intensity that makes my heart race so fast that I can't remember where I am. My hands dig into his arms, holding on as I ride each wave of desire that pulses through me.

I'm vaguely aware of the ship shifting beneath me and Hauck's hold growing tighter. Somewhere on deck, a small commotion starts to brew, then more measured footsteps tap against the wood. The seagulls call to each other. Someone announces Captain Dane's presence. Feet scurry about. Something is happening with the ship, but it all pales in comparison to Hauck's kiss.

"Kit," Hauck murmurs against my mouth as he pulls back to draw breath. The scales at his temples ruffle, as if responding to the growing wind. "You've no notion what you do to me. How badly I want you. How desperate I've been to see you wearing my colors and my scent. I wish I had Tavian's mind-magic to make you know the depth of my truth, but since I don't, I'll resort to the more primal ways of showing it."

Hauck's tongue sweeps through my mouth again, its insistence brushing away all doubts in its path. The beats of Hauck's heart hammer against his chest so hard that I feel them against my own skin. Warmth fills my core and my soul, a slowly growing flame that makes me feel wanted in a way I've never experienced before.

Hauck pushes up my chin and licks my exposed throat with the tip of his tongue.

"The crew does have work to do, you know," Cyril says behind us. "Keep this show going much longer, and Dane will end up flogging someone for dereliction of duty."

Hauck growls in discontent, but stops, his rapid breathing matching mine as he stares down at me.

"Hell," Cyril mutters. "It's a good thing there is no shortage of cold water around."

I turn in Hauck's arms, though the male still holds me against him with a possessiveness that is meant to be seen. And is.

"Why aren't you at dinner?" I ask Cyril.

"The wind changed, and Dane wanted to set sail. It is a sight worth seeing." Cyril steps closer to Hauck and me, until he can put a hand on my shoulder. He points towards the sailors now rushing into the rigging. Dane's commands roll through the ship, echoed in many voices.

"Hands to the capstan, hoist the anchor. Topmen, aloft! Sheet hands, prepare to set the courses and jibs!"

Each order is sharp and followed at once. A precise, deadly dance while the ship sways on the waves and the sailors high on the mastheads challenge gravity. My breath catches as a great sheet of canvas unfurls to the deck, making me forget all else but the now.

"Wait for it," Cyril says softly, his hand tightening on my shoulder while Hauck pulls me closer against him. "Wait for it."

"For what?" I ask.

"For this," says Cyril.

The sails fill with a sudden deafening pop and the massive ship lurches forward. The change is palpable. It's an awakening. Like its namesake, the Phoenix bursts forward with new life as it leans over and cuts through the waves, taking up its mission to conquer the vast and unpredictable sea. The sound of the wind in the sails is a constant hum, like the beating of a great, invisible heart.

"Helm, three points west," Captain Dane orders.

A male spins the spoked wheel under his charge.

"Steady as she goes," says Dane.

With a quick dip of its nose, the Phoenix slips fully into the stream of wind that carries us into a different world. My chest tightens at the ship's power and beauty, and then again as the land where I was born and expected to die disappears into

the ever growing distance. The sound of lapping waves fills the air around us.

“You *are* Lady Kitterny now,” says Hauck against the backdrop of the ocean’s whisper. “And you are our bride.”

4. KIT



“Get up.”

I open my eyes in response to a harsh voice – and a harsher knee – that jabs my shoulder. For a moment, Quinton’s hard face seems a part of a surreal dream. I want to go back to sleep. The ship is rocking gently and the warmth from Tavius’s body cocoons me all around. Granted, I’d not have described Tavius’s company as anything comfortable last night, when he insisted on stretching me before sleep.

All the contenders at the Equinox Trials will be required to copulate with their respective dragon packs, and human anatomy doesn’t allow for that without some preparation. Tavius has taken the lead on preparing my backside, and the session last night left me thoroughly embarrassed and just as thoroughly exhilarated. And sore, too. Both from what he placed inside me, and the stinging spanking he delivered to ensure my cooperation. The heat from that woke me up more than once afterwards, my arousal so thick that even I could scent it.

On the backdrop of all that, the notion of getting out of bed now is positively appalling.

“Bugger off,” I mutter to Quinton’s mirage and burrow into the pillow.

The next second, the blanket is off me and the ship’s cool air is nipping my naked skin. I search and fail to find something else to cover myself with.

“I said, get up,” Quinton repeats. “Let’s see if I can teach you to at least not kill yourself. You have two minutes to put on clothes before I drag you to the deck naked.” He tosses a bundle at my head.

“He isn’t kidding,” Taviyas says from behind me.

I rub my face and come to the same conclusion. Digging into the bundle, I pull out a pair of loose pants and a crop top that leaves my midriff bare. The set reminds me of Nora’s choice of outfit and I like it immediately.

“One minute,” Quinton tells me.

Clearly, he has no intention of giving me privacy to dress. Fine. Given what else I am sharing with the dragon princes, a bit of skin while I change is nothing. I am still blinking sleep from my eyes when Quinton leads me up to the deck, where the sun is just starting to mount the horizon line. An endless carpet of ocean stretches out on all sides of the ship, with no land to be seen. The wind carries a salty breeze to my face and the deck shifts oddly beneath my bare feet.

I shudder.

Quinton looks at me sharply. “We have not yet started. Save the flinching for when I actually hurt you.”

When, not if. Glorious. I’m glad I’m still half asleep and don’t feel the full brunt of the warning. The crew, who’d been talking in quiet voices when we first came on deck, are silent now. Silent and watching Quinton and me as if we are hell’s personal emissaries.

“Don’t worry about them, worry about me,” Quinton snaps, cutting off my view of the crew with his broad body. So he’d marked the change on deck, too.

“Why are they looking at us like that?” I ask.

“They aren’t looking at us, they are looking at me.” Quinton points to the deck. “Fall.”

“What?”

He hooks my ankle with his foot and sends me backwards onto the hard planking. I flail, trying and failing to break my

fall before the wood whacks my back and head painfully. Air leaves my lungs. Not giving Quinton the satisfaction of hearing me whimper, I pull myself up to my knees and glare at him. “Does that have a point, or are you just being an asshole for personal amusement?”

“I’m being an asshole because that is my nature.” He offers me his hand, pulling me to my feet with an ease that reminds me of just how strong he is. “But let’s see if we can’t get you through the morning without cracking your own skull open.”

I bite back the point that any cracked skulls would be more his fault than mine, and watch Quinton demonstrate the proper way of landing on hardwood. It seems no more pleasant than my previous experience.

“Fall,” Quinton orders.

I tip myself backwards, controlling my descent until the ship lurches and I hit the back of my head anyway.

Quinton yanks me onto my feet and throws me, harder than last time. This time, in addition to hitting my head and back, the force of the impact rattles through all my bones. This is ridiculous. And dangerous. And rutting useless.

“I thought you were supposed to teach me to fight,” I demand. “I already know how to land on my ass.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“If you are going to –”

Quinton moves faster than I can follow, a streak of darkness against the sunrise. I barely see his hand move before he hits me. The slap is open-handed, but it still cracks across my unprotected ribs with enough force to knock me off my feet. My balance gives and I crash backwards, the planking coming up to meet me with an echoing thud.

Before I can get up, the prince is on top of me. He straddles my midsection, his weight atop my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs. I try to knee his back, but he has my hips trapped and the more I move the heavier he seems to become. Fear and frustration bubble up inside me. I want him

off. I want to get up. I want to knock that cold gaze off Quinton's stony face.

I curl my hand into a fist and punch the dragon prince in the face.

Quinton catches my wrist before my fist connects and pins it cruelly to the deck. His free hand slaps the side of my head, sending stars dancing in my vision.

“Do I have your attention?” he demands.

I can't talk. Can't breathe. Can't move. The prince who'd once kissed me so thoroughly is nowhere behind the cold eyes that glare down at me. I've seen the guardsmen train in Lord Agam's courtyard and I've never felt a desire to join the brutality. Now, experiencing it first hand, I like this even less.

“Do I have your full attention?” he demands again.

“Yes...” I gasp in the air. “Yes, my prince.”

“Good.” Quinton snorts in disgust and lets me up to my feet. “Now, fall.”

I throw myself to the ground full force, lest he decides to help me down once more.

I don't know how long Quinton keeps me at it, but by the time I am allowed to crawl back to my cabin, the sun is up and we've gathered enough of a crowd that Captain Dane has to bark at his crew to get everyone back to task. As I lower myself down the ladder, I catch sight of Quinton's hard beautiful face watching my descent. His jaw tenses as if he is about to speak.

I pause, waiting, even though everything inside me begs to run. Crawl. Hide.

“Same time tomorrow,” says Quinton and walks away.

* * *

“STARS, ARE YOU STILL ALIVE?” Nora grabs my arm and tows me inside our cabin the moment I crack open the door. She is

dressed in a similar turquoise outfit to yesterday's, but now I notice a silver ring piercing her belly button. "There was a pool going on whether you'd make it through the morning, you know. I am pretty sure you bankrupted half the crew when you did."

I'm not sure my current state counts as making it through. I rub my elbow, surprised to find it still in one piece, and collapse onto the cot. The swaying of the ship, which had turned treacherous on me during the morning, is now back to a soothing lull. Or had it always been thus and just felt worse? "Tell them not to worry," I assure Nora. "I'm certain I'll oblige them tomorrow."

Nora brings over a pitcher of fresh water and runs a wet washcloth over my face. The coolness feels divine on my sweat-covered skin and something between a meow and a moan escapes my lips.

"Was I summoned?" Hauck opens the door without knocking and sticks his head inside.

I jerk up into a sitting position and throw a pillow at him. "Most certainly not."

The prince snorts and retreats from the room.

Nora shuts her eyes. "You are going to get us both killed, my lady."

"My name is Kit." I collapse back onto the cot, and take the washcloth with me. "And I'm pretty sure my death warrant is already signed no matter what I do." After a few seconds of thought, I rise on one elbow and frown at my maid. "That way you keep talking about the princes, makes me think you know something I don't."

Nora winces. "No offense intended, my lady, but I'm getting the notion that everyone on this ship knows something you don't."

"Which is?"

"That they are not to be trifled with, for starters." She sits cross-legged on a chair. "Basically, if you close your eyes and picture a kind, gentle male and then imagine the opposite of

that – well, that’s who you are dealing with. Though if this morning’s exercise with Prince Quinton didn’t drive the point home, I’m not sure that anything I might say would do better.”

“It’s not like that.” I sit up all the way, unsure why I feel the need to defend Quinton’s tactics. “That is just his way of showing that he’d rather me not get killed at the Equinox Trials.”

“By killing you himself?”

“Precisely.” I stretch my shoulders, and Nora takes advantage of my shifting position to start brushing my hair. She seems glad to have something to do with her hands, and I am too drained to argue. “I don’t think he is actually intending on killing me. At least I hope not. Which doesn’t mean the asshole knows his own strength either. Must be nice to be immortal.”

Nora leans forward. “Do they truly not scare you? Not even Prince Quinton?”

My brows pull together and I reach back to braid the hair Nora had just brushed out. Do the princes scare me?

“They did at first,” I admit. “Until a few weeks ago, I’d never met a fae, much less a dragon shifter. And they are... well, you know how they are. Bigger than life and they know it. But there is more to them than just power.” And more ache inside them than anyone but me likely knows. “So yes, I’m still afraid of what they can do. But also, I like how I feel when I’m with them. Most of the time at least.”

“And how is that?” Nora asks.

“Like I matter.”

“Of course you matter,” says Nora with all the conviction in the world. “Not just to them, but to all of us. Without you to secure the bloodline and throne, Massa’ev will likely plummet into civil war. But, um, no pressure, alright?”

A bell sounds from the deck above and Nora swears, jumping off the chair. “We need to get you dressed for breakfast. This whole ship – hell, the whole rutting royal navy – worships the timetable above the stars.”

“The breakfast part is correct,” says Tavius, inviting himself inside. Clearly, my cabin door is no more a barrier to the males than it is to air. “As is the description of timetables. Clothes, however, will not be necessary this morning.”

“Your pardon, sir?” Nora has schooled her bubbly personality to utter professionalism in an eyeblink’s time.

“The royal family is having a private breakfast this morning,” Tavius answers with a nonchalance to equal Nora’s. “Lady Kitterny is invited to attend naked.”

My eyes widen.

Tavius looks toward me then, his expression turning absolutely predatory. “Don’t be late, wildcat. Or there might be more of what haunted your dreams so deliciously last night.”

5. QUINTON



The door to the dining cabin opened and Tavieras herded Kit forward, her citrus and cinnamon scent taunting Quinton like it had done the entire time they were training together. He wasn't sure which of them enjoyed the session less. Too close to call. Either way, Quinton was smart enough to know that the pack's plan for the rest of the morning would go over better if he wasn't around.

Tavieras hadn't given him a choice, though. Or a shirt.

Hauck and Cyril, similarly bare to the waist, sit around the breakfast table. Tavieras had a tunic on, but that was a temporary measure to keep from stirring up more chaos amidst Dane's crew than they had already. Once the door closed behind him and Kit, the purple silk came off in a smooth motion to reveal the pack leader's wide chest. Though Tavieras was the largest of the dragons, Quinton could reliably best him in single combat. Tavieras was a trained general. Quinton was a trained killer.

As their father, Ettienne, had forged Quinton to be. There was nothing else left. He shook himself, trying to push the darkness from his mind. Sulking over the past wasn't on the morning's agenda. The human was.

Hauck thought Kit still doubted her place in the pack, and the rest of the morning was to be dedicated to getting the truth through her head. For however long they'd be together, the human was theirs. And they were hers. For better or worse.

Kit took a few steps into the cabin and stopped, her fingers clutching her robe. She looked more vulnerable than she had

in training that morning, which was so backwards that Quinton almost snorted. Stepping behind Kit, Tavius slid the robe off her shoulders, the silk falling to pool at her feet. Her bare skin caught the rays of sunlight streaming in through the round widow and the green specks in her hazel eyes sparkled as she took in the males before quickly averting her gaze. She really did look delicious when she was naked, the curls between her thighs tight with all manner of promises.

Quinton scented her anxiety, but there was an edge of arousal there, too. A mix of trust and fear that filled the cabin to the point of intoxication and made the predators inside them perk up and take notice. Cyril was already clutching the edge of the table with a white knuckled grip, and the laces at the front of Hauck's trousers strained to the breaking point. His brothers' primal need to claim Kitterny and rut with her was thick enough to choke on, and Quinton would be lying to himself if he didn't admit that he was not far behind. Even Tavius was all but trembling to keep himself under control.

The only one who seemed unaware of the room's raging pheromones was Kit. She was too busy trying to cover her breasts with her hands. Hauck was right, she was confused. The human should have been preening at the attention. Instead, she looked so nervous and uncertain that everything inside Quinton ached to pounce and shake the human free of her own thoughts.

As if he was one to talk.

Still standing behind her, Tavius poured rose scented oil onto his palms and stroked his hands along Kit's neck and sides, her breasts perking up at his touch. Kit took a shuddering breath and closed her eyes. The oil was making her already glowing skin glisten provocatively.

Stars take him, Quinton knew exactly how Kit's body felt. How it moved. How easily it hurt. His cock wanted nothing more than to examine the brown curls that covered her sex and he longed to lick the beads of moisture and arousal that clung to them like dew. The rest of him couldn't look past the large purple bruise that hugged Kit's right elbow from when she'd

lost her balance on the shifting deck, and the left wrist that had come a great deal closer to getting broken than Kit knew.

Tavias reached around to smooth oil along Kit's ribs, and Quinton growled in displeasure. A bruise had not yet formed there, but would soon. All because she'd failed to follow his instructions earlier. More than once.

The anger that had filled Quinton earlier this morning now washed over him again. He'd made her pay for the errors savagely, throwing her all about the deck and forcing her through sprints and jumps until her lungs burned so badly that she could do nothing but stand on all fours and heave. Kit thought he was just being an asshole – she didn't understand how rutting much she'd scared him every time she failed to tuck her head, or tried to break her fall with her hands, or ignored another detail that was there to keep her neck from breaking. Whether she understood the why of it or not, Quinton made sure she got the message about consequences each time it was needed. He knew from personal experience how effective a memory aid with consequences was.

Quinton's gut twisted in self-loathing and jealousy as he watched Tavias rub oil along Kit's body and aching muscles, waking her to his touch. Watched her lean into his caress as subconsciously as she'd flinched away from Quinton's holds. Tavias saw the bruises as well as Quinton did, but he could gentle his hands and stroke around them. Quinton couldn't stop remembering how each and every one of them came about.

Tavias's touch was healing. His was... the opposite.

Tavias brushed his thumbs over Kit's nipples and the already bunched flesh tightened further into thick suckable buds that were made for suckling. Hauck seemed to be of a similar mind, and was now stalking up to the human. Cupping Kit's breasts, Hauck waited for her to open her eyes before he slipped one orb into his mouth and sucked deeply.

Kit let out the most delicious moan Quinton had ever heard. So different from the sounds of pain he'd made her sing earlier.

Then Cyril was there too, crouching to run his palms along the inside of Kit's thighs. The slick arousal dripped from her perfuming the air, and made Cyril's fingers glisten.

"You are beautiful," Cyril told her in that voice that could make an entire army bend a knee and listen.

"You are delicious," said Hauck, pulling away from her breasts, his eyes closed as he savored the girl.

"You drive me from all common sense." Tavius brushed his cheek over her neck, where her pulse beat so vividly that it made her delicate skin vibrate.

Quinton crossed his arms over his chest. It was his turn to say something and the expectation was choking. "You need to tuck your chin to your chest when you fall," he said. "Unless you enjoy cracking your skull."

Kit blinked.

Hauck turned his head toward his brother. "Right, Quinton. That was good for what you were doing earlier. Can you try again given the current ongoing festivities?"

Quinton ran his hand over his face, his heart starting to hammer against his ribs. What in the rutting hell did Hauck want from him? Quinton was only teaching Kit the way he was because Hauck called in his rutting boon. He wouldn't have made the training so personal otherwise.

Which would have been better for everyone involved. As was currently being proven right there in the cabin.

Quinton slid back in his chair. "There will be no festivities of any kind with a broken wrist. If you want this whole charade to end before it starts, then by all means, encourage the human to keep ignoring my orders. And, Hauck, watch the ribs. Better yet, play somewhere else."

"The human's name is Kit, and she doesn't have breasts anywhere else, only here." Hauck's voice was annoyingly patient. "Whereas, I like suckling her breasts. They taste sweet."

“She has a *right* breast,” Quinton snapped. “Suck that. Leave the left side alone before you hurt her.”

Kit frowned, her glazed eyes regaining their focus as she looked at Quinton. As much as his cock ached for her, the darkness and emptiness inside him ached more.

Quinton lifted his chin, waiting for Kit to tell him off. Maybe even punch him. He’d let her if she tried.

“I’m alright, Quinton,” she said softly instead. “Hauck isn’t hurting me. I promise.”

A growl rose from Quinton’s chest. That was the wrong answer. “Give him another two seconds and he will. Unless he moves to the right side, which you’ve by some miracle not destroyed yet. But I’m sure you’ll crack that tomorrow.”

Hauck cleared his throat, licked his way up between Kit’s breasts and took her mouth for a brief but thorough kiss before standing and turning toward Quinton. He stood with his legs apart, his hands on his hips, and his cock bulging against his fly. “Quinton... Would you like to join us?”

“No.”

“Then make yourself useful and clear off the front part of the table. I think we’ll have something more edible than breakfast meats to feast on there.”

Fine. Quinton shoved the fruits, nuts, and meats they were going to have for breakfast to the far side of the table. There were a few sweet rolls as well, which Cyril thought Kit would enjoy. When Quinton turned back, Cyril had Kit hoisted up on his hips, his hands supporting her full backside. Walking her to the recently cleared table, he lay Kit down on the edge and put her thighs on his shoulders. A delicious blush spread over her cheeks and skin. Tavius and Hauck captured her hands on either side before she could cover herself again.

Kit gasped sharply, pulling against the restraint – but Quinton could see she was aroused by it as well. A new wave of envy rushed through him. How did they know, how did they feel where that perfect balance of harshness and gentleness lay? They played her anxiety and sensitivity like a fine violin,

stroking each taut note to the peak of arousal yet never pushing past the edge. A hint of danger, a whisper of torment. But never panic. Never pain. They were everything he was not. If he held Kit down, he was certain there would be marks on her wrists and darkness in her eyes.

Cyril gripped the inside of Kit's thighs and licked between her folds, his eyes closed in pleasure. Quinton could imagine what Kit must taste like. Citrus and cinnamon and wildness. A determination coated in a shy shell. His cock jerked, the pressure nearly making him roar. He tore the laces of his fly open before the pressure made him gag, giving his cock more room.

Cyril quickened his lapping and Kit writhed atop the table. His hands, which were keeping her thighs parted, glistened with her arousal. Kit's whines rose and she arched, pressing herself into him. Stars, she was responsive.

Cyril sucked and Kit's body spasmed in the pleasure of release, which Hauck was right there to swallow. He pressed his mouth over hers, drinking in her sounds, the scales on his temples as erect as the rest of him. Hauck purred and sucked Kit's bottom lip, staying with her while her shudders built and slowed. Meanwhile, Tavius's oiled palms rubbed her all over with a blanket of reassurance and protection.

Tavius ran his canines over her skin lightly.

Kit whined and squirmed.

Quinton gripped the back of a chair, his hand trembling.

Cyril lifted his head and licked his canines clean. Quinton already knew what Cyril intended before he looked to Tavius for permission.

"She is ready," Tavius said.

Cyril opened his fly and let his cock spring out with a wet blob. He lined his cock up at her entrance, the thin lines of scales on either side of his shaft laying flat for now. That would change when Cyril got inside her. Those scales were one of the reasons females sought dragons out so fiercely.

“Wait.” Kit tried to jerk up, only now fully understanding Cyril’s intentions. “I don’t know –”

“You are ready for this,” Hauck told Kit, teasing her ear with his teeth. “We are all here. It will be a ride of a lifetime, pet. Hang on tight.”

“Very tight.” Tavius lowered his mouth over Kit’s breast, and held her hand.

“You’re dripping,” Cyril whispered. “You want to be filled.”

The chair Quinton was gripping creaked.

“Kit’s right breast is open,” Hauck murmured to him. “See what you can do with it, Quinton.”

He took a step forward, then stopped, catching a shadow of another bruise. One he hadn’t expected. One of many that would no doubt be coming to the surface in the next hours.

Quinton wasn’t sorry for any of them. But he didn’t belong in this pleasure den either. He was on the wrong side of it all, and his touch would do nothing but remind the human of how much torment he brought to the world. To her. That was how the world worked. For every noble king sitting on a throne there had to be an assassin in the shadows. For Kit to survive to enjoy her pleasure, someone had to dole out the pain. Etienne might have chosen Quinton for the role, but he was damn good at it.

“No,” Quinton told the others. “I want no part of this rut.”

Tavius growled.

Hauck shook his head.

Kit’s eyes slid over to Quinton, the betrayal in them shooting all the way to his core.

Ignoring everyone, Cyril pushed himself into Kit. He moved slowly, the great size of him much more than what humans were used to. Even most fae found dragon shifters uncomfortably large. At least at first. Then the scales took sensations to a new level, making it all worth it in the end.

Kit wasn't there yet though, and the three princes around her purred in soothing harmony as Cyril advanced, inch by inch. Hauck kissed her mouth encouragingly and Tavius massaged her nub, teasing it in ways Quinton was sure Tavius had uncovered over the past few days of training. With each heartbeat, each small measure of Cyril's shaft sliding inside her, Kit gasped and bucked. A mix of shock and pleasure, anxiety and arousal, all alternated along her beautifully expressive face.

The pressure in Quinton's own cock built impossibly. As Cyril finally slid in to the hilt, filling the human deeply, Quinton bit back a savage roar.

6. KIT



“Stars!” My back arches, my eyes popping open, as a tsunami of sensation shoots from my channel through my whole body. It isn’t just the stretch and the fullness and the feeling of something impossibly large and yet perfect filling me. It is something else entirely. Dozens of tiny prickles, each teasing out a bouquet of erotic arousal, are all brushing the most sensitive spots inside me.

The scales. Oh, stars. The scales on Cyril’s cock are shifting about like tiny little tongues. I try to bite my lip to keep from howling at the intensity, but it’s a lost cause. I scream Cyril’s name and he starts to move inside me. His control is infinite, though he too roars. And shakes. Sweat stands out on both our brows.

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke.

Cyril’s heavy sack slaps wetly against my backside in a growing rhythm. As if that isn’t enough, Hauck’s tongue ruts my mouth, sucking and stroking in a way that’s as erotic as the intrusion inside me. Tavius directs it all, one hand massaging my breasts and the other between my folds, rubbing my engorged bud. The pack leader’s eyes are half-lidded, his desire for me pulsating in rhythm to my own heart. To that of Cyril’s strokes inside me.

The pressure builds up until I know that one more brush of Tavius’s finger will shatter me into a million pieces. I’m panting with anticipation. With unbearable desperation. Just one more touch, that’s all it will take. One touch. I tremble.

Tavias stops.

I scream.

“Please. Oh, stars. Please. Please.” I don’t know whether the words are coming out of my mouth or my mind, but the predatory flash in Tavias’s eyes says he’s heard my pleas perfectly. And that he liked it.

No. Tavias’s mind voice murmurs inside me. *Not yet, pet.*

I whimper, undulating. Needing.

Cyril pumps harder, his scales shifting about to find new spots inside me. Rousing the secrets I didn’t know I have.

Please. I beg, trying to grind myself on the hand Tavias holds just out of reach.

Wait for my command, wildcat.

“Almost there,” Hauck promises. I wonder if he hears the mind exchange between Tavias and me, or is just guessing. The too pleased smile on his face drives me mad.

I want to cry and scream and jump out of my skin.

Cyril licks his canines.

I bite back a howl.

Alright. Now. Tavias’s order echoes through my whole body and Cyril gives the hardest thrust yet while Tavias brushes my nub. All my pleasure points ignite at once. Hot seed spills inside me, and I shatter around Cyril’s shaft, my channel squeezing him, my muscles spasming in overwhelmed ecstasy.

I scream as I spiral. Still inside me, Cyril holds my thighs, his grip tight and secure. Tavias and Hauck’s reassuring hands rub my shoulders and belly. Between my thighs, Cyril’s powerful chest heaves with rapid breaths, but he doesn’t pull out until I settle. Only then does he allow himself to disengage, stumbling back in a drunk-like stupor.

Before I can miss the male’s warm presence, Hauck takes Cyril’s place. He’s gotten himself naked all the way and now

leans over me, rubbing me down with his scent and warm rose oil, inside and out.

“You are gorgeous in release,” Hauck murmurs, digging his thumbs into the fullest part of my backside. It feels divine in a whole different way. “If I could drink your every sound and scent, I would never need wine again.”

“Mmm.”

Hauck chuckles, then deftly flips me over on the table until I stand on all fours. His fingers slide into my channel, pumping in and out.

“She hardly needs more oil,” says Tavius.

Hauck lets out a sound that is a mix of a purr and a growl. “But I enjoy rubbing it on her anyway.”

It takes a moment for my muddled mind to process what they’re doing. And saying. “You don’t mean to –”

“Oh, but we do.” Hauck brushes the tip of his cock against my entrance, just enough to shock my body’s arousal.

“I can’t,” I gasp, the possibility of more sensation is as overwhelming as jumping off a cliff. “I –” I try to scramble off.

A stinging spank lands on my ass, and I know without looking that it’s from Tavius. Instead of truly hurting however, the heat melts into molten pleasure that is yanked even tighter with his command. “You’ll stay right where you are. You will take each one of us today.” Calloused hands massage out the remnants of the sting, and I feel that strange mix of anxiety and safety that Tavius can reliably tease out in me every time.

Be grateful we are only playing one at a time. He adds in my mind. *For today. We will use both entrances soon enough.*

I shudder, which was no doubt Tavius’s intention. But then I process his words. One at a time. Something about that makes me count the princes. One. Two. Three. My muddled mind finally processes that something isn’t quite balanced. It is an effort of will to focus on anything but the pressure and pleasure, as the males prepare me to be taken again.

“Quinton?” My gaze narrows on the fourth dragon prince. Quinton stands two paces away. Like Tavius and Cyril, he is stripped to the waist, with scars and tattoos running over hardened muscle that I now see bare for the first time. The perfect squares of his abdomen divide themselves into a grid. A thin sheen of sweat makes his skin glisten, bringing out each groove. My gaze slips lower, to his open fly. His shaft taunts me, the silver scales along it rising and twisting like little tongues. Quinton is beautiful, from his needy cock, to his lithe body, to his tight face and haunted eyes. I hold my hand out to him.

He meets my gaze, his own closing off.

Then he stuffs himself back into his trousers, and lets the cabin door bang close behind him. The sound echoes through me, the rejection stinging my heart. Tavius looks at the closed door, his jaw clenching in displeasure.

“Come back to us, little nymph,” Cyril murmurs in my ear. His lips brush over mine in a gentle kiss that tastes of the sea and wind. “Just because Quinton wants to torture himself, doesn’t mean the rest of us are cancelling breakfast.”

“And by breakfast, we mean you,” Hauck puts in helpfully, right before twisting the head of his cock in my juices and putting it to work.

* * *

“SO, TELL ME EVERYTHING.” Nora sits cross-legged on the cot and leans forward. What I thought was going to be an erotic few hours has turned into an erotic few *days*, with notable pauses for exhausted sleep and periods of torment at Quinton’s hands.

Actually, with the exception of early morning hours when he is tossing or slapping me around the deck, Quinton avoids me altogether now. He doesn’t even show up to the group rutting sessions anymore, no matter what threats Tavius levies at him. Despite my concerns, Cyril’s advice is to let Quinton

be, and Nora too, is more interested in my rutting escapades than my physical training ones.

“Details, my lady!” Nora insists, her eyes sparkling mischievously. “I’ll never have a dragon prince in my bed, so I need to live vicariously through you. I heard their scales –”

“Yeah.” I wince as heat touches my cheeks. Am I ever going to be able to be intimate without embarrassment?

Nora makes a tsking sound. “If you can do it, you can talk about it. And given the amount of *doing* you are getting yourself into, I’d say sharing details should be the least of your concerns. Plus, dragons. Scales. Royalty. Talk.” She pulls out a brush. “And do you mind if I do your hair while you do? I’ve a few ideas I want to try out and you’ve been too busy for me to bother.”

I turn obligingly.

“So, scales.” She tugs on a lock of hair.

“Scales.” I let out a long breath and settle in. Nora is right. Given the end game, the sooner I become more comfortable with the whole thing, the better. “It’s as if their cocks have these little tiny fingers, all trying to stimulate you at the same time. Which seems impossible at first because of how big they are, but it works. And it drags every shred of sanity from you.” It is easier to talk with my back turned to her, and I wonder if Nora hasn’t coaxed me into the position on purpose. “Fortunately, they go all flat and slick when they first go in, but once everything is seated... stars.”

I shift around, my body reminding me of how deliciously sore I am.

“Explains you sleeping for half the day afterwards. Have you done two at the same time yet?”

“Bloody hell, you have no filter at all, do you?”

“Of course I do,” Nora says primly. “I just find this a completely appropriate topic of conversation, for a lady going to the Equinox Trials. Unless you’ve forgotten that part.”

As if I could forget. “No, not yet. I’ve not taken anyone in, um, the other way.” I can’t help the rush of heat that grips my cheeks. Tavius is very aware of this delinquency and has warned me that he will be attending to the issue with greater frequency in the near future. I am not looking forward to it.

“So, which one is the best?” Nora asks. “I think I might die of fear if Prince Tavius came at me. Or Prince Quinton.”

Quinton. The once prince I don’t seem to have to worry about on that front. I try to push past the thought and focus on Nora’s question. I’ve never had someone like her to talk to before. Back home, the slaves and servants always found something negative to say about coupling, as if its only value in conversation was as a tool to shame the participants for... well, for anything and everything. If a girl enjoyed herself, or screamed in pleasure, or preferred a position, she was a whore who opened her legs for the world. If she didn’t indulge, she was a cold fish. It was as if the only acceptable way to copulate was to tolerate the intrusion without, stars forbid, enjoying it.

Nora is different. Like the princes, she finds nothing about sharing bodies and pleasure to be shameful or wrong. Quite the opposite. Which leads to conversations that I never in a million years imagined having.

“So?” Nora tugs my braid. “Don’t hold out on me now.”

“I don’t know about best – they are different.” I try to put my experience to words and hope they make sense. “Tavius is all power and domination. He takes charge of everything, which is ironically good because I don’t think I’d be able to bring myself to do half the things he does otherwise. And he always makes sure there is a reward at the end. He also, um, he is prone to a spank or two if he doesn’t get his way quickly enough. I know that doesn’t sound arousing –”

“Oh, it does,” Nora assures me. “And Prince Hauck?”

“Creative.” I wince. “He likes toys and keeps coming up with new ways of tormenting me.” The latest endeavor involved the use of a scarf and a couple of sphere shaped things from his cursed box. “And before you ask, Cyril is the

most protective. Controlling, but in a different way than Tavius. He's also always fussing to make certain I'm not hurting, and drinking enough water, and don't forget to eat. Basically, he is the anti-Quinton."

Shit. I hadn't meant to bring Quinton up, and the way I did sounded wrong.

Nora stops too. "Quinton hurts you?"

"No." My eyes close. "I mean, he does, but not that way. He... he doesn't want to touch me at all, actually. Or see me. Or even be in the same space with me unless we are doing combat training – and that he's doing because of a promise to Hauck. The only time he speaks to me is to holler about poor striking form or to make me run sprints across the deck. I don't understand it. Him. I don't understand him."

For once, Nora stays silent. Which isn't at all like her. I twist around to face her.

She becomes suddenly engrossed with a fraying thread at the hem of her trousers. Bright pink today.

"You know what I did to upset him, don't you?" I say.

"What?" Her head pops up. "No. It's more that I don't think you did anything."

"Then why are you acting like you know something hurtful and just don't want to say it?"

She winces. "You know Prince Quinton is the royal assassin, right?"

I frown. Did I know that? I knew he was a lone warrior of some kind, but assassin? That hadn't exactly come up in conversation.

"He is darkness and shadows," Nora continues. "There isn't anyone he actually talks to. Captain Dane had to bring extra guards on this trip just to keep the sailors from absconding once Quinton was on board."

I certainly hadn't known that. But I've noticed the seamen making signs to ward off bad luck whenever Quinton and I train. I thought they just didn't want to be in my shoes, but

apparently there is more to it. And now that I think about it, Captain Dane is always around to keep order whenever Quinton goes on deck.

Nora blows out a long breath. “What I’m trying to say is that instead of vexing about it, maybe you should just be glad Prince Quinton is keeping his distance. I don’t care how dexterous his scales might be, the less contact you have with him, the better.”

I sort through Nora’s words, then stand to look out the round window. The ocean stretches in all directions as far as I can see, its waves lapping the ship rhythmically.

Kill her.

The first mind words I’d ever heard from Tavius echo through my memory. Petra, another slave at the Agam estate, and I were cleaning the small entry hall in preparation for the dragon princes’ arrival. The princes weren’t supposed to be anywhere near the back and Petra’s tongue was more free than it should have been. Mine wasn’t much better, but it was Petra who Tavius had heard.

Kill her. Tavius had given the order, but it was Quinton who took the girl’s head off without hesitation. Blood spilt on the floor and smelled of copper. Even then, having just seen the prince, I’d known that Petra wasn’t the first to die by his sword.

Nora is right, Quinton is a killer. But is that all he is?

“They are all killers,” I say without turning away from the window. “All the dragon princes have blood on their hands.”

“They are all predators,” Nora corrects me. “And yes, Tavius and Cyril lead whole armies. More have died at their orders than at Quinton’s sword, though most of those were horrid creatures from Mors. But it’s still different. Prince Quinton has blood-magic. Most fae touched with the gift become healers. Quinton uses it to slice his enemies from the inside.”

“That’s just his occupation.”

“Chicken, egg. Who knows.” Nora says.

Maybe someone should know. Maybe I should know.

“No matter how you look at it, he treats you poorly. So why are you defending him?” Nora asks. “Also, stop thinking that his behavior is somehow your fault. You may not have the power to change the prince’s actions, but don’t let him make you *feel* like you are at fault for his darkness. That power, you do have.”

Nora isn’t wrong. And yet... I’m not ready to give up on Quinton yet.

“He acted differently on the road,” I tell her.

“I’ll take your word for it. But from all accounts, what you see him like now is what you can expect in Massa’evé. Whatever role he played in the human world, he is returning home now. To his... occupation. Where are you going, my lady?”

“To separate eggs and chickens, apparently.” Spreading my shoulders I stride out of the cabin. The ship is only so large and Nora is right, I have more power than I give myself credit for. Quinton and I need to have a chat.

7. QUINTON



Quinton stood on the highest lookout platform atop the main mast, swaying a hundred feet above the ship's deck. It was as alone as one could get on the ship. He longed to take to the sky, but shifting into dragon form and flying about wreaked havoc with the sails. Plus, Captain Dane preferred to keep a low profile rather than announce to the world that the Phoenix carried valuable passengers. The captain could fight the ship well enough, but avoiding battle altogether was safer. Right now, safe was good all around.

The Phoenix was still a few days out from Faewave Rift, but the air was already becoming charged with a magical energy that made Quinton's scales shift. Looking out towards the horizon, he could see the rift's faint outline in the distance, a swath of sea shrouded in a misty purplish veil that shimmered with an unnatural glow. Even the salty breeze now carried a scent of corrupt magic that mixed with the familiar salt and brine. Every so often, a spray of water would erupt from the ocean's surface, as if an unseen creature from the rift had escaped its hold and was now trying to breach the waves. It all made the crew uneasy – and they were already on edge from Quinton's presence aboard.

Dane did his best to keep the seamen too busy to overthink things, but whenever Quinton was on deck, the intensity of the fear rippling from man to man was palpable. They knew who he was. What he did for the throne. And they made signs to ward off evil or beg the stars' protection whenever they thought Quinton wasn't looking.

Kit likely thought they had the deck to themselves for morning training thanks to the sailors' courtesy. Quinton knew they cleared away to avoid him. He wished that the human would do the same.

Instead, the girl was downright stalking him for the past two weeks. Trying to corner him into a conversation he made clear he didn't wish to have. Given what he did to her every morning, pursuing him was the height of insanity – but when it came to Kit, common reasoning didn't apply.

She wanted something from him, and she was going to dog him the entire voyage. So, yes, Quinton was up here on the platform a hundred feet above the deck because the crew didn't want him around. But also because the human was scared of heights.

Fortunately, Quinton's brothers kept Kit busy – and naked – a good deal of the time. When they weren't gainfully occupied with practicing mating skills, Hauck taught her to throw knives and cheat at cards, and Cyril taught her to read books, to write, and about weather.

Quinton taught her to survive and then left her alone.

After that first day, the rest of the pack left Quinton alone as well. They said nothing about the new bruises they had to work around each day, the sore muscles they kneaded while they explored every inch of Kit's flesh to tease out new sensations. When Quinton closed his eyes, he could see Kit locking gazes with Tavius, saw the trust behind the fevered desire. She'd no idea what he had planned for her next, but she trusted that the experience would be pleasurable, if not necessarily painless. Tavius was a master at playing pain against pleasure.

The way Kit looked at Quinton was the opposite of anything his brothers enjoyed from her. Each morning, the human visibly braced herself for whatever torment his next orders would bring. For the pain his next throw would cause. There was no pleasure in it for her. And certainly no trust.

Quinton wasn't sorry for any of it. He'd fulfilled all her fears this morning, and planned to do the same tomorrow. And

the day after that, and everyday until the bloody trials. He'd not driven her to tears yet, but it was coming. She'd crack under the accumulation of stress. And when she did, Quinton would leave her curled up in a sobbing ball on the deck, forcing the human to pull herself together and get up. And fight.

Quinton knew he was brutal. He also knew he was good. Hauck made him promise to train Kit for real, and Quinton kept his promises.

None of which meant that he wasn't jealous of his brothers.

A familiar pang rushed through Quinton as the image of the pack with Kit took hold in his mind. He longed to be the one inside her. Touching her. He wanted to taste her on his lips and feel her hot channel squeeze around him. He wanted to hold her as Hauck did, and see her look at him with trust and pleasure, opening her mouth generously. Her whole body. All the things that Quinton had once taken from Hauck, when he'd killed Lola.

Hauck's calling in his boon hadn't been just about protecting Kit, it was about punishing Quinton for what he'd taken away from his brother – though it had taken him until now to fully understand that.

The ship rocked with the changing wind, the scent of citrus and cinnamon suddenly filling his lungs. The human's scent. For a moment, Quinton thought the scent a mirage, an echo of a too vivid memory, but no. It was the human in the flesh. Climbing heights she had no business playing in.

Quinton leaned down through the cutout in the bottom of the observation platform and grasped Kit's wrist, pulling her the rest of the way up. He'd have shoved her down instead if he could, but they were a hundred bloody feet in the air. Hardheaded as Kit was, she'd not survive the fall. "Who in the hell permitted you to come up here?" he demanded.

"You are here aren't you?" Kit tucked herself against the platform's low guard rail and sat down. She was wearing the training outfit from this morning and had left her feet bare as

well. Seeing her still dressed that way irritated Quinton immensely – he liked it too much. It was his claim over her, a mark of the time of day when she was his alone.

He scowled. “I’m unlikely to break my neck if I fall.”

“I’ll try not to fall.” Careful to avoid looking down, Kit pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. Her citrus and cinnamon scent filled the platform despite the breeze. It was hard to look at Kit without remembering how his brothers had her splayed out on the breakfast table that first morning. She’d screamed in pleasure for them, their joined bodies undulating with primal desire. Quinton still remembered seeing a little drop of sweat on her temple and wanting so badly to lick it off. Just that little bit.

There was no arousal or pleasure – or even sweat – wafting off Kit now. There was determination though, woven together with an edge of fear.

“What are you doing here?” Quinton asked.

“Trying to corner you like a rat. You’ve been avoiding me for nearly two weeks.”

“I see you every morning.”

“At which point you promptly ensure I’ve not enough air in my lungs to form a full sentence.”

“So get better.” He crossed his arms and glared down at her. “What do you want, Kitterny? Are my brothers failing to satisfy your needs?”

She blushed. Quinton didn’t know how she managed to still blush so easily, but she did. It was one of the things that made her irresistible. “The princes are more than adequate, thank you. I didn’t know that the scales on your cocks did... well, did that.”

“Now you do.” Quinton returned his attention to the ocean. The vast blue plain stretched out in all directions, reminding him of the night sky. Beautiful and deadly at the same time. Especially the purple magic of the approaching rift.

“Why did you leave that first day?” Kit asked. “Why are you avoiding everyone all the time?”

“Clearly you and I didn’t dance hard enough this morning if you are still so eager to seek my company. I’ll try to correct that tomorrow.”

Kit sighed, then said nothing for a while, just sitting there while the silence tore everything inside Quinton to shreds. She had no idea what she did to him. Never would. Being so close to her while knowing he could never breach the chasm separating them was a special kind of torture.

“I’m sore,” she said finally.

“So?”

“My sex and my ribs the most. I think everything from the top of my head to my toes hurts in one way or another.”

“Was there something that made you imagine I care?” Quinton shrugged and returned his attention to the ocean. “If you’ve come to whine about training being too hard, save your breath. If you do what I tell you, there is a chance you’ll walk off deck with fewer bruises tomorrow. I doubt it, but it’s possible.”

“You are being an ass, Quinton. And you are doing it on purpose. Why? Did I do something?”

You’ve no idea what you do to me. “I’m not being an ass – I am an ass. Have you not worked that out yet?”

Instead of giving up, like any sane person, she stretched her legs out in front of her. “You know, I think this is the longest conversation we’ve actually ever had.”

“Good time for it to end then.” He pointed to the entrance through which Kit had climbed up. “Go back to the deck.”

She ignored the order. “I was hoping you could heal me. There is a bruise across my ribs that aches whenever I take too deep a breath.”

Quinton felt his back go rigid, his scales tucking tight along his spine. Heal her. Touch her. Feel his magic flowing through her body, the echoes of intimacy tormenting his soul.

He couldn't do it. Not even if he wanted to. Cordelia's death had reminded him of his limits – and of the dangers that playing with magic could bring, especially in a human's fragile anatomy. The more he went over everything he'd tried with Cordelia, the more he feared he'd made things worse. He'd healed the superficial wound, but had he spurred the infection to spread through her blood while he was at it? Had closing off the skin trapped poison that might have escaped? Had his magic simply put too much strain on Cordelia's body, leaving her with no strength to fight off the fever?

It hadn't mattered at the end, but Quinton knew the truth. He'd gotten brazen. Had forgotten that blood-magic carried no less danger than a surgeon's knife. "I can't heal you."

"You did before," said Kit. "That first day after riding when you helped with the saddle sores."

He remembered. She'd been terrified of him, but her essence had washed over Quinton like a tsunami, tearing open the hard-earned calluses inside his soul. The primal urge that gripped him next had been so unexpected, that Quinton nearly tried to take the girl right there in the clearing. Fortunately, Cyril had put a stop to that before it started.

"I shouldn't have tried it then, either," said Quinton. "I kill. Healing is a different occupation."

"You've done it before," Kit insisted stubbornly. Whatever agenda she had went deeper than healing a bruise. "If you tried, maybe it would –"

"I don't *want* to heal you, human," Quinton snapped, a growl following his words. He rose to his full height, spreading his shoulders and scales. He braced his hands on the rail, one on either side of her slim shoulders. Taking over her space. Suffocating her despite the blowing winds that were picking up their pace. "You hurt? Good. You should hurt. Maybe it will help you remember how fragile your body is. My job is to keep you alive, not make you comfortable. Have I made myself clear?"

She flinched, hurt flashing in her gaze. "Yes."

“Yes, what?” Quinton pressed.

“Yes, my prince,” Kit whispered.

Quinton took a step away, giving her room to breathe again. But instead of tucking her tail and slinking away from the observation platform like any smart person would do, she shook herself and rose to face him. Determination lined her face, the rushing wind streaming her hair back.

“Why do you bend over backward to ensure I hate you?” she called over the rising noise. “You’d kissed me in that field with Hauck. So what changed? Or has it nothing to do with me at all? Do you shove everyone away in whatever hurtful way you can find? What are you trying to do, Prince of Massa’ev?”

“I am what I am,” Quinton growled. He needed to get away from Kit and her all too sharp observations. Why couldn’t the human just be petrified like everyone else and stay out of his way? “Get out of here. I don’t want to lay eyes on you until training tomorrow. Understand?”

“Yes, my prince.” She managed to make the title sound like a curse. The human had no self-preservation instinct at all, which was annoying as all hell. But at least she was in motion now, making her way to the hole at the bottom of the platform and eyeing the long climb down. From as high as they were, the deck did look elusively small.

She really should never have come up there.

“Go,” Quinton said roughly, trying to jar the human into motion before fear froze her altogether. Knowing Kit, she’d start climbing just to show Quinton up.

The human let go of the rail and started toward the ladder.

Quinton raised his chin.

The ocean however, had other ideas. A wave birthed from its depth caught the Phoenix’s bow, jerking the ship like a cat shook its kill. The Phoenix lurched. The platform lurched even more. Kit lost her footing and fell with a scream.

8. QUINTON



Quinton moved on instinct, snatching Kit from the air. Her legs were already through the opening in the platform, her bare feet kicking wildly. Quinton barely had time to wrap his arms around her midsection before that too could slip away. She writhed in his grip, terror – and not just the human’s – spiking the air all around them as he hauled her back up to solid footing. Kit shook so hard that Quinton didn’t waste his breath yelling. There was no point. She’d unlikely hear him anyway.

Not trusting Kit to hold up her own weight, he left one arm around her waist while bracing the other on the rail, keeping them both steady as the ship rolled and righted itself. The culprit wave passed as quickly as it had come, but the wind was rougher than before and the sea fussed in response. Kit trembled and clung on to him like a tree-bear.

An officer from the deck called up to see whether all was well. Only the male’s intense caution around Quinton was stopping him from ordering the pair of them to get the rutting hell down from his mast this instant, but Quinton heard the unsaid demand. And he didn’t disagree.

“Time to go,” he told Kit.

She shook her head vehemently, her eyes firmly shut and fingers digging into his shoulder hard enough to bruise.

“It’s not going to get any smoother.”

“I’m not climbing in this. I can’t.” The words came with quickening breaths. Peeling herself off Quinton, Kit wedged

herself into a corner of the platform. “I’ll wait until... it calms.”

Quinton squinted at the horizon. Wisps of purple mist were separating from the dense fog and reaching toward the Phoenix, and there was a predatory feel settling over the ocean. Quinton wasn’t sure the previous wave was caused by the wind at all, and not something that was living beneath the sea. Something not of this realm, but from the darkness of Mors. The types of creatures that filled the blight.

“It won’t be calming any further,” Quinton said. “Let’s move.”

“You go.”

Oh, bloody hell. He weighed the human with his gaze. There was no safe way to lug her down without some cooperation, and the other option – shifting and taking to the skies – would be too dangerous for the Phoenix. That meant negotiation. Which wasn’t his forte. Tightening his jaw, Quinton gentled his voice.

“The waters won’t get calmer this close to the rift. Come with me.” He held out his hand. “I will spot you.”

Instead of taking his hand, Kit dug her fingers into the planking, as if that would do any good.

Down below, Captain Dane, who had none of his officer’s hesitation, raised his voice to a bellow and demanded they return to deck.

Rut. Quinton crouched beside Kit and gripped her chin, forcing her to look at him. “Human. Kitterny. Come with me. I will not let you fall. I promise.” His heart hammered as he realized he was wasting his breath. He had gotten what he’d wanted – Kit didn’t trust him. And now, instead of taking his promise, she’d gone glassy eyed instead.

“No,” she said, panic shaking her body as she glanced down again and what color still remained in her cheeks leached away. “No. No.”

“Kit!” He shook her shoulders desperately, searching for words that he didn’t know. He was the last person to talk

anyone down from a panic attack. He was much better at inspiring it. “Stars, damn it. Kit, slow your breathing before you pass out.”

She didn’t. Hell, she breathed *faster*. Her heart raced. The scent of her terror rose and spiraled, feeding his own. The wind rose, howling through the rigging and carrying more purple wisps of mist. The rushing air sounded like a haunting moan as it beat their faces. The ship was swaying savagely now, the passage down the rigging becoming more perilous by the moment.

“Get your ass down, Quinton,” Dane hollered into a speaking trumpet. There was no pretense at courtesy in the captain’s order, not anymore. “Now.”

A fine drizzle joined the cold gale beating on them, the droplets like tiny needles that struck skin and scales. The human didn’t react. Not even to flinch away or protect her face from the sting. Her breaths came too fast for her body to make use of the air, which only made her gasp faster still. She was too far gone into panic and as distrusting of Quinton as she was of the rocking ship.

“Kit, please,” Quinton heard himself beg as he leaned over her shaking body. She couldn’t hold a rope now if it was placed in her hands and he didn’t dare try to haul her into the rigging by force. He didn’t remember the last time he was scared, but he was now. “Please, just slow your breaths.”

Nothing.

Out of ideas, Quinton wrapped his arms around Kit, slipping his hands under her crop top to splay his palms over bare skin. She flinched. He was probably on a bruise. Stars. This was all his fault. She’d come here because he was here. Because Quinton ignored her everywhere else. She was scared of heights to begin with, but had conquered that fear for the sake of talking to him. And now they were here, with Kit hurt and terrified and in danger. Because of him.

He had to do something. Even if that something made his stomach churn.

Leaning his forehead against Kit's, Quinton surged his magic into her body. It pierced into her easily, mixing with Kit's lifeblood and sending tendrils of heat through her. His heart pounded. She was so open to him, so unprotected. The way Quinton held her, he could kill her in a hundred different ways. Swiftly or slowly, with no pain or with a great deal. That was his magic. His gift and curse. Fear wrecked everything inside him. He'd never used his magic the way he intended to now, and it could go wrong in so so many different ways. But Quinton was out of ideas and out of time.

Seeking out Kit's lungs, Quinton wrapped his magic around them, taking her breath and life into his control.

"I'm going to breathe for you," he whispered, squeezing gently for a count of four, before allowing a deep breath of air to fill her again. Every fiber inside him was alert, concentrating on nothing but just how much to tighten. How much to release. His arms tightened around Kit, holding her through a fresh spike of panic, a soothing purr vibrating his chest. "You'll be alright." He forced air into her lungs again and again, counting the breaths for them both as air finally mixed with her blood, the way it was meant to. Until her heart finally, reluctantly, slowed. Strengthened.

Lub dub.

Lub dub.

Lub dub.

Quinton thanked the stars as awareness returned to Kit's eyes. "I'm going to give your breath back to you, alright?" he said.

She nodded.

Reeling his magic in slowly, Quinton braced himself to be shoved away.

But Kit didn't shove him. Instead, as he released control back to her, the human clung tightly to him and buried her face into the soft part of his neck. Right over Quinton's pulse.

"Don't let go," she pleaded.

“Never.” He pressed his head atop hers. The biting rain had soaked her hair and clothes, and wisps of hair clung to her temples and cheeks. “We go down together. One step at a time. Keep your eyes on the handholds and nowhere else.”

Quinton shielded Kit with his body as they made their way down the mast. He was tall enough to always grip the holds above and below her, and from the sudden steadiness of the ship when they’d gotten about half way down he knew Cyril must have come on deck to lend his own magic to the cause.

The moment both their feet were on deck, Dane was there. Quinton held onto Kit as he bowed his head and took the captain’s tongue lashing without protest. Most everyone else would have been glad to see Quinton thrown to sea, or else been too frightened to speak up. Not Dane though.

It felt strangely good to be taken to task.

Quinton said nothing when Dane was done, waiting for his dismissal. Once the captain gave it though, Kit gripped Quinton’s wrist.

“We need to talk,” she said.

His pulse, which had quieted, started up again.

He bladed his body, letting her lead the way. “As you wish.”

9. KIT



“*H*alt!” Tavius accousts Quinton and me the moment we descend to the cabin level. He looks as friendly as Captain Dane did, but with less restraint. Sparks play over his scales like tiny bits of lightning, which reflect in his eyes. “What the hell do you two think you’re playing at?” he demands. “It’s the first time Dane has had cause to raise his voice to the royal family. I intend to ensure it will be the last.”

My stomach clenches into a ball and I take an involuntary step back. No matter how much time I spend with the prince, how many different ways he makes my body sing with his own, the commander inside him never becomes less terrifying. And neither does the threat of punishment. I can’t help glancing down at his belt and feel my stomach churn all over again. Tavius looks furious enough to take it to me again, and the thought of Quinton taking a whipping right alongside does nothing to soothe my nerves.

Whatever I have left of the frayed things.

Quinton steps in front of me, shielding me with his broad back. His wet shirt clings to his shoulders, showing off the cut of his body. I still remember how that body felt around mine, guiding me step by step down the terrifyingly high mast.

“I wanted to play with the humans a bit,” Quinton tells Tavius and raises his chin defiantly. That kind of brashness is usually Hauck’s problem, but Quinton pulls it off with quiet dignity. A cold answer to Tavius’s hot challenge.

Something shifts beneath both their shirts, and I swear it looks as if both princes are fighting to keep their wings in check. I really hope they do, because if either shifts here below deck, they'll blow the whole ship to smithereens.

Rutting dragons.

"You wished to play with the humans?" Tavias enunciates each word.

"I did." Quinton gives me a small push toward my cabin and I am smart enough not to wait for a second invitation to get the hell out of Tavias's field of wrath.

Racing into my space, I shut the door quickly and lean back against it, my eyes shut. Breathe, I order myself the way Quinton did. The phantom connection still tingles inside me. Deep breaths fill my lungs as I try to regain control.

"Well, you look... well, like you just escaped death."

I jump then realize it is just Nora. I rub my face. "I *did*. Hell, I think I escaped it twice in the last ten minutes alone." Once at nature's hands, the other at Tavias's. "Actually, Quinton saved me on both occasions."

"Quinton?" Nora grabs my arms and drags me over to the cot, which is swaying with the ship's motions. At least the arc is smaller here than atop the masthead. I shudder. Nora's face sparkles as she brings me back to the now. "Prince Quinton? The same Quinton who is usually trying to make your life as painful as possible? Tell me everything."

I lean forward, my forearms braced over my thighs.

"Spill," Nora urges. "Or I'm hiding all your dry clothes and not handing this over." She opens the top of a little lidded kettle and the scent of hot chocolate fills the room. My eyes widen.

Nora pulls the little kettle out of my reach. "I don't make idle threats."

I feel the corners of my mouth lift, and shake my head despite myself. Talking about men with a friend seems so very normal, except that I've never had such a friend before. That,

and the minor detail of the men in question actually being dragon princes. Yeah. So much for normal. I purse my lips.

“Um, you are having a chat inside your own head again,” Nora says. “That in no way helps.”

“Sorry.” I start stripping out of my wet clothes. “You know how Quinton has been avoiding me for like two weeks now? I decided to catch him where he couldn’t leave easily.”

“You decided to corner an upset dragon one hundred feet above the deck?” She holds out a dry shift for me to slip into. “Should I even bother noting how insane of a decision that was? You really should consider making better life choices.”

“Oh, it gets worse,” I assure her, finishing with my clothing and accepting a freshly poured mug of chocolate goodness. I’d never gotten to try the divine stuff before meeting the dragons – chocolate was not something a slave could ever afford – and I feel like I’m sipping paradise.

Nora’s eyes grow wider as I continue the debrief, and she stops dead in the middle of the cabin when I get to the part about nearly getting us both killed. It is hard to describe the sensation of Quinton breathing for me without reliving the panic that had come before it. Once I say everything aloud though, I have to agree with Nora’s assessment of my decision chain.

“And then Prince Quinton covered up for you?” she clarified. “First with Captain Dane and then with Prince Tavius?”

I run my hands over my wet braid and pull out the ribbon. “Does it make me a bad person for letting him do it?”

“He is the royal freakin’ assassin. Half the ship’s crew would throw themselves overboard if he looked at them too long. I think he can handle an argument with his brother without you offering yourself as a human shield.”

“When you put it that way – ”

“Of course he could just be doing it so he could murder you himself.”

“Not helpful, Nora.”

“Hear me out though. Why is Prince Quinton – broody, dark, blood-magic assassin Quinton – who’s been taking pleasure in making your life miserable every morning, suddenly trying to protect you?”

I have no idea. I pick up a hairbrush as I mull over Nora’s question but she snatches it out of my hand and starts to tame my hair herself.

“Well?” she prods.

“Maybe he does want to be the only one to make me miserable. Dragons hoard everything, so maybe he’s, um –”

“Hoarding the pleasure of tormenting you for himself?”

“I mean I wouldn’t put it past him.” I wince as she pulls on a tangle. “I’ll ask.”

“You’ll what?” Nora sputters. “I’m sorry, but did you just escape becoming one dragon’s dinner only to go back and sit on another dragon’s plate? No offense meant, my lady, but at this point you are asking to be eaten alive.”

“So what would you have me do?” I turn toward her. “Stay away from Quinton altogether?”

She nods vehemently. “I want you to be safe. And Prince Quinton, he’s the opposite of safe. You know those monsters parents scare children about? The ones who come find you if you disobey? They are all probably thinking about that silver dragon when they come up with the stories.”

“I believe you. I... I just don’t think he’s actually a monster.” Before I can lose my nerve, I stand and cock my head to the side, listening to the quiet in the corridor. Either Tavius and Quinton killed each other, or they’ve separated. Given that the ship is still in one piece, I am willing to wager on the latter. “I’m going to go have that talk. And if I’m wrong, well, enjoy crispy fried human for dinner, alright?”

10. KIT



Coming up to Quinton's door, I knock twice then let myself in without waiting for permission. Clearly, he has no Nora, because Quinton's cabin is bone bare. Wood panels with intricate carvings line the walls, and the small round window is taking the brunt of the waves that batter the Phoenix's hull. Besides the sleeping cot which is attached to the wall with ropes and brackets, there are a couple of packs in the corner, more weapons than anyone should need, and – finally – Quinton himself. As with most everywhere on the ship, the air is thick with the scent of salt and damp wood.

“Have you considered unpacking?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I didn't.”

“Right. I mean why bother.” I look for a place to sit, but there isn't any except for the cot. Quinton is leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest as he looks at me with that usual quiet malice of his. Except I don't find it hostile anymore. “Thank you for taking the brunt of everyone's ire.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Neither Dane nor Tavius can do much to me. You are in more danger. Or at least your ass is.”

Heat rushes to my face. Of course, he'd bring that up. Instead of retreating however, I raise my chin. “Why do you do that? Say something to shove me away the moment I try to have a conversation.”

“Because I *am* trying to shove you away,” says Quinton. “To my credit, the effect is usually more reliable.”

“That’s why you try to kill me every morning as well?”

“No.” Quinton shifts his weight, his expression no friendlier. “That’s so someone else doesn’t actually succeed in doing so. And sooner or later, someone will try. If not before the Equinox Trials, then certainly during them.”

I bite my lip. Quinton looks lethal. Powerful. And yet, somehow, my body aches with need for him even as I want to take his brooding head off his shoulders. “So what then, want a monopoly on Kitterny torment?”

Quinton narrows his gaze. “Maybe.”

“Except that we both know that when it truly mattered, you protected me with everything you had. Your hands. Your magic. Your reputation. If you’d wanted to hurt me, you could have done it a thousand times over.” I hold my hand out, halting his rebuttal, though my bold move is somewhat soured with nearly losing my balance on the shifting deck. “If the next words out of your mouth are some kind of threat about what you’ll do to me tomorrow, consider me appropriately frightened and move on.”

“Humans are so impatient. What if I want to savor your fear?”

“Except you don’t. Savor it, I mean. You don’t savor me fearing you.” I take a step toward him, holding his silver gaze. Quinton has so many sides to him, but he only dares to show the darkness. “Oh, I know you want me to fear you. But you don’t like it.”

He looks at me warily and a small purple tinge ripples through his scales. “What do you want?”

“I – ” I change what I was going to say in mid-sentence. Quinton and I never do well with talking and my body and soul long for so much more. A connection. I want his magic inside me again. I want his hands on my body. I want proof that I’d not imagined everything that happened on the platform. “I want to touch you.”

“We touch every morning.”

“We toss each other around like sacks of grain every morning.” I take another step toward him. From the tension in Quinton’s body, I know the wall behind him is the only thing keeping the male from dancing back. In my head, Nora’s voice warns me to make a good life choice and get the hell out of Quinton’s space. But I’ve no more mind to heed it than I do to let Quinton go. “Take off your shirt.”

He startles, his scales flushing a deeper purple hue. I can’t read the colors yet, but the pulsing bulge in the front of his pants speaks for itself. “Human... Kit...” Quinton presses himself into the wall, his broad chest expanding with quickened breaths. “I can’t.”

“Can’t take off your shirt?”

He growls, his chest vibrating.

I laugh without humor. “From what I gather, neither of us is going to have a choice in the matter very soon.”

“And we’ll deal with it then.” Quinton snarls and steps free from the wall. His nostrils flare at me. “I don’t want to touch you until I have to. Is that clear enough for you?”

His words hit me like a slap, and my whole world spins.

I thought getting thrown about in training hurt, but it’s nothing compared to the sting I feel now. I step back toward the door, fighting to keep myself in check. I was so sure, so stupidly certain that there was a bond between us. Except I was wrong.

“I’m sorry, my prince.” I turn to the door.

Quinton curses. “Wait.”

I don’t.

He catches me around the waist, spins me around, and holds me up against the wall, our eyes level, and my feet dangling above the floor. “I don’t want to touch you because... I have trouble combining pain and pleasure.”

“I didn’t know that was a requirement.”

He growls again, but this time it's in frustration with himself, not me. "I can't touch you kindly now when I must be rough with you in training." He seems to be fighting with himself for each word. "I do not believe I am capable of being both, and I will not dare compromise skills that may keep you alive."

I blink like an owl. "Are you telling me that you've been staying away from me all this time just because... you worry it might make you too nice during training?"

"Yes."

I open my mouth to tell him how stupid I find his logic, but the vulnerability in his face halts my tongue. He is serious. At least his fear is. "You are more than any one thing, Quinton."

"I am what I was forged to be."

"Alright." My thoughts spin. He is still holding me up against the wall, and the thin tether inside my soul that connects us together aches with desire. Ignoring the pull gets harder with every breath. "Then, new plan. You don't touch me – I touch you. I promise I'll have no more trouble kicking your arse across the deck no matter what happens tonight, so fear not on that end."

Quinton stares at me, then barks a laugh. It is the most wonderful sound that I have ever heard from him, and it sends a flush of sensual pleasure all the way through me.

"You have to put me back down on the floor first," I whisper, not recognising my own sultry voice. I'm not sure who this girl inside me is, the one who is ready to order a dragon about, but she is clearly insane. But so long as she gets me what I need with increasing urgency, I don't care. "And then... then grab that beam overhead and don't let go."

11. KIT



I'm not sure which of us is more surprised when Quinton settles me to the floor and obeys, spreading his feet squarely beneath his shoulders and gripping an overhead beam with his hands. His grip is white-knuckled, as if he is bracing himself for a lashing instead of pleasure. Then again, he is probably more used to the former. As for me... it is all I can do to keep myself in check. My mouth salivates and longs to have the male in my mouth.

Lowering my hands to the hem of his shirt, I pull it free of Quinton's trousers. He'd not changed since coming in from the rain and the wet fabric clings to his skin. I pull the shirt up over his head and my breath hitches at the ripple of his muscles as he regrips the beam. Beads of water shine over his skin and scales, putting the scars into stark relief. Unable to help myself, I run the tip of my tongue along the column of scales that runs along the center of his chest to disappear into his britches. The silver medallions are warm and smooth, and rise like hackles under my tongue.

Quinton makes a choking sound that I ignore. I've never gotten to taste any of the males before and I intend to savor every delicious moment of this. I follow the scales all the way down to his fly, then tug the little laces to free him. Quinton's cock is already so hard that it escapes with a violent jerk that makes the male hiss. With his britches off, Quinton stretches in front of me, a proud silver dragon in all his glory.

Powerful, and slick, and very very naked. If I thought him daunting in his clothing, when cloth covered his muscles and

shaft, that was nothing compared to now. Quinton's shoulders are thrown back and his chest is out, the muscles of his upraised arms as captivating as any work of art. And down below... Stars. His engorged cock is intimidating and tempting and long enough that it veers slightly to the side, the scales along it are slicked back like a pine cone. I know exactly what they do to me inside and just looking at Quinton makes my thighs slicken.

But I want more.

I run my hands along his length. He hisses again as his erection becomes firmer still, and the scales along the shaft ripple. My channel clenches, my mouth watering.

Getting on my knees, I blow a thin stream of air all along his shaft before flicking my tongue over the tip to lap up the bead of moisture hanging there. Delicious. And not enough. Not nearly enough. Of all the males, I cannot believe that it's Quinton who is letting me do this to him first.

I look up, catching the prince's eyes.

There is silver intensity there and heat so smoldering that it is a wonder the whole cabin is not burning down with it. But also... vulnerability. He knows exactly what I intend to do. How unprotected it will leave him. I put a hand on his thigh, silently asking the warrior's permission.

He closes his eyes for a moment, then nods and spreads his feet wider apart, his hands readjusting his grip on the ceiling beam.

That is all the invitation I need. Taking Quinton's shaft, I slide my tongue along the full velvety length of him, savoring the feel of the scales beneath my tongue.

Quinton gasps, his powerful thighs contracting as his whole body goes taught.

The scales squeeze tight against the shaft then rise again, vibrating slightly.

I lick him again, the power of having a dragon inside my mouth roaring through me. After a few strokes down his shaft, I lick up instead, heading against the direction of his scales. He

jerks violently, rising up on his toes, his breaths coming in ragged puffs. Stars. Those little glorious scales are sensitive indeed. Taking all of him into my mouth at once, I start suckling. My mouth is gentle at first, but my control slips quickly, my mouth hungry and merciless along him. Quinton tastes of wind and steel, his essence makes my head swim with magic.

His shaft throbs inside my mouth and I hold onto his trembling thighs, unwilling to waste a single moment of pleasure. Quinton tastes better than hot chocolate, and I wonder if I might not find release just from having him in my mouth.

I work him harder, sucking and licking and savoring. Feeling him at the back of my throat. When I look up and find his eyes again, they are glassy and fevered. The warrior looks as if he is on the verge of begging. For me to stop? To finish? To release him?

I intend to do neither. Instead, I slide my teeth lightly along the scales.

Quinton throws his head back and roars so loudly that the sound makes the cabin shake. He drops one hand from the overhead beam and tangles it in my hair. "Human." There is a world of primal desperation in that word. As if I am the only being in the entire universe who matters.

Pleasure fills my chest and my wet thighs clench with need. I pull harder, determined to get every drop of him. His release is near. I can feel it in his pulse. In his magic. In the way that the connection between us vibrates with energy.

Quinton roars as he comes, his hand tightening in my hair and his face a mix of raw ecstasy and anguish. I swallow the thick warmth and feel the magic seep into me with it, like a handshake between the dragon's soul and my own.

Once Quinton regains his balance, he takes my shoulders and pulls me to my feet. Then his mouth is on mine, his kiss is deep and fierce and vengeful. He pillages me until I have no breath left and we both lean against each other, panting and holding on for sanity.

Neither of us says a word when we eventually pull apart. Beyond the round window, the seas are continuing to argue, the sun settling toward the horizon. It's not night time yet, but between nearly dying and then taking Quinton, I'm exhausted. I know the smart thing now would be to leave and get some rest, but today doesn't seem to be the day for smart choices. So, instead of showing myself out, I walk over to Quinton's cot and climb up, my face set in challenge.

"You are insane," he says quietly.

I can't argue that.

Yet, instead of throwing me out, Quinton settles beside and pulls me against his rock hard and still naked body. I curl into his warmth, savoring the ironic safety of his hold and the quiet satisfaction that now fills the cabin. When I can finally move again, I turn and rise up on my elbow to run my hand along his chest. Warm, damp skin, interrupted by scales and scars, meets the pads of my fingers.

Quinton puts his hands under his head, tensing when I brush the sensitive spots, but making no move to defend himself either. If anyone had told me that Quinton would ever let me – or anyone – touch him freely, I'd have laughed. And yet here he is. Here we are.

"What's this one from?" I trace a nasty scar that crosses the line of Quinton's scales at his collarbone.

He doesn't need to look. "One of my instructors. I was a colt still, roaring at the restraints of training. By the time the fight was over, I had a few marks to remind me of my duties. That one was from his talons."

I wince and kiss the mark. As a slave, I thought I'd drawn the harshest lot in the deck, but I don't think so any longer. My hand slides off, this time to trace a long mark crossing Quinton's abdomen. "And this one?"

He stretches. "A sclice. It's one of the blight's creatures. It had a shadow ore blade and got a lucky shot."

I frown, remembering what Nora told me about Quinton's occupation. "I didn't think you fought the blight."

“Not usually. But Cyril got word that a group of sclices had gotten their hands on shadow ore, which drains our magic, and needed help.”

“Oh.” I file away the bit of knowledge about shadow ore and continue to map Quinton’s body, now touching a tiny mark along his jawline. It’s so small that I only see it because of how close we are, yet the prince stiffens when I brushed the tip of my finger against it. “What – ”

“It was a scratch,” he says tightly, pulling away. Tension crackles along his skin. “From someone whose life I took.”

“They had some serious nails on them.”

“She did.”

Even knowing as little as I do about dragon anatomy, I can’t imagine a set of nails leaving a permanent scar. I wonder if it was perhaps Quinton’s own body that kept the scar from fading. I run my hand along his shoulder, hoping the steady pressure might ease whatever demons that mark carries. “Was she... was she someone you knew?”

“Yes.”

“Someone you cared for?”

He swallows, his voice tight. “Someone my brother cared for.”

I touch the mark again. A physical manifestation of something that had sliced open Quinton’s soul. The urge to dig deeper pulses through me, a need to wash and sooth the wound I’d just found. I can feel Quinton’s pain. And I don’t like it one bit. I open my mouth to ask the next question but the prince cuts me off before I do.

“Her name was Lola,” he says curtly, everything about him changing suddenly. “She was alive and now she is not.” His voice reclaims its cold distance, as if trying to annul the intimacy we’d stumbled into.

“Was Lola – ”

“The question and answer game is over, human.” He slips off the cot and grabs one of his traveling cloaks, which he lays

on the floor.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Going to sleep.”

“On the floor?” I already miss the feel of his body terribly.
“Quinton – ”

“We are done.” He turns his back to me, but his nakedness now feels like a shield instead of an invitation. That connection between us feels blank and empty. A black void with no sound. I want to say that I’m sorry, to apologize for prying, but I can’t find the words. Don’t know if they’d even do any good.

“Go to sleep, human,” Quinton orders. “After the way you humiliated yourself today, we’ve more work to do than I thought. We start at dawn.”

There is a subtle cruel undertone to Quinton’s words, the kind I’ve never heard before. A chill races along my spine.

12. KIT



“Up.”

Quinton yanks the blanket off me, the few sad rays of sunlight peeking through the window betraying the early hour. He is in the process of dumping me from the mattress altogether when I scramble to my feet, catching myself just in time to keep from falling on the floor. He shoves the clothes I’d chucked off before going to sleep last night into my chest. “Dress. You have three minutes.”

I stumble around through the fog in my brain to do as I’m told. I’ve barely cleared the ladder and step onto the still damp deck, when Quinton’s shouting starts for real. I see nothing of the male who’d let me taste him last night and even less of the one who held me afterwards. I don’t even see the one who’d turned his back, his pain too deep to share. Instead, the Quinton who glares at me this morning is foreign and savage.

He wants me to haul bags of sand across the deck, crouch and jump, climb the ropes. Fast. Faster. Higher. Harder. I barely keep up with the commands, my mind wheeling from the sudden brutality. This isn’t Quinton’s usual cold intensity, but a hot torment calculated to grind me into nothing. It’s personal.

My lungs burn, my muscles shaking from the strain. “What am I being punished for?” I ask as Quinton tosses a sandbag into my chest so hard the corner of it snaps up to slap me in the face.

Quinton doesn't bother to even acknowledge the question, much less answer it. He orders me to stand with the bag over my head until my arms give out and then sends me up a rope ladder. Despite the chill, sweat drips into my eyes and slickens my palms. I try to wipe my forehead with my sleeve and slip, the rope burning the skin from my palms as I slide from the rigging to the ground. My ankle buckles as I step off, and rolls painfully.

Quinton is there at once and for a moment I think he wants to make sure I've not truly injured myself. But he just leans over me instead, his lips pulled up to reveal sharp canines. "Did I say it was break time? Which part of 'up the rigging' is too confusing for your human brain to follow? Go again."

"I..." I stand up and look at my bloody hands. The thought of gripping the ropes with them makes my head spin.

Quinton's jaw tightens and he knocks my feet out from under me, sending me backwards onto the deck.

I slap the ground as I land, the impact vibrating through my body. My blood stains the planks. Everything hurts and I'm dizzy from the strain. And so very thirsty.

"I said, again," Quinton orders coldly. He doesn't extend his hand to help me up. "From the beginning."

"He's going to kill the human." I don't know which crewman the voice at the sidelines belongs to, but I'm not inclined to disagree. Today feels dark. Vengeful. As if he wants me to fail. To hurt. To hate. The bond between us is silent, but Quinton's brutality vibrates through every shout he sends at me, every bruise he doles out, every mistake that he notices and punishes.

When I flinch at the order to climb the mast, he orders me to go higher. When I drop a sandbag onto my bare feet, he makes me carry iron cannon shot balls instead. When I'm too slow peeling myself off the deck, Quinton drops his knee into my stomach and cinches down the pressure until I can't draw my next breath.

“Five gold she’s about to bawl,” a voice murmurs somewhere to my right.

“No chance. She’ll pass out before she gets enough breath for a good cry.”

Bets on my training prowess aren’t new, but with how Quinton is going, I’m ready to bet against myself.

“What’s going on here?” Dane’s voice fills the deck. I can’t see the captain as I try to dislodge Quinton’s hold, but the atmosphere on the deck shifts immediately. At least for the crew. Nothing changes between Quinton and me.

“The prince is training the human,” one of the sailors offers.

“Training her to be dead.”

“If none of you have duties to attend to, I will find you gainful employment,” Dane announces. Footsteps sound as the seamen jog away, but I know they’re still staring. Watching. Waiting like vultures. Not for me to die – I’m merely a bit of human entertainment – but for Quinton to peel back what’s left of his civility and show off the real darkness of his soul.

“Pitiful.” Quinton releases me. I roll to all fours, gasping for breath. I’m not sure whether the deck beneath me is rolling for real or just in my head.

“Is your training over for the morning, my prince?” Captain Dane asks. His voice is utterly professional, but it is the first time he has ever interfered in Quinton’s handling of me.

Quinton looks down at me, then surveys all the men watching. More than one of them make a sign against evil.

Quinton nudges me with his toe. “It’s useless to keep going today. Tomorrow we do this again. Understand?”

Rage gathers inside me as I sit back on my heels to meet Quinton’s gaze. My hands curl into fists, my nostrils flaring. I want to hit Quinton so badly that red pulses at the sides of my vision. Except my limbs won’t obey.

The prince pulls his mouth into a snarl. “What’s wrong, Kitterny? Did you imagine you tamed a dragon last night?”

For a moment, I can do nothing but glare at him as the anger spilling into my blood turns to a raging boil. “Is that what you are so afraid of?” I spit the words. “Being thought tamed? If I knew you were so bloody fragile, I’d never have tangled with you.”

Gathering what pitiful dregs of strength I have left, I peel myself off the deck and climb up to my knees. In the corner of my vision I see Hauck has come on deck and is now fast approaching the human puddle Quinton has turned me into to appease his own worries.

Despite Dane’s edict, another seaman makes a sign to ward off evil spirits. I throw the seaman an annoyed look. “Stop doing that. You are just feeding him the darkness he wants.”

Quinton rocks back on his heels and I get childish satisfaction from seeing him startled at the turn of phrase. Apparently, he expected me to sob and slink off quietly to my maid, where I would then mourn my fate and the terrible dragon princes it brings with it. Or something like that.

Not that I don’t want to curl up into a ball and lick my wounds, but I’m too furious with him to let things drop. Too furious to make smart choices like keeping my mouth shut. I swing my face back toward Quinton and bare my own teeth, though admittedly it lacks the effect the dragon’s snarls have. “You wanted a separation between personal feelings and training, my prince. But let’s be clear... you are the rutting bastard who turned one against the other.”

Quinton snorts and crosses his arms. His silver scales are up like hackles. “Fighting words for a human who can’t even stand.”

“What the bloody hell happened here?” Hauck says as he reaches us. His gaze is serious for once, taking in everything on the deck. Hooking his arm around my waist, Hauck lifts my feet with preternatural ease. A moment later we both discover that unless he keeps holding me, I fall back down to the deck.

Quinton shakes his head in disgust.

Hauck makes a sound with the back of his throat then turns my wrist over to reveal rope-flayed palms. His jaw tightens. “You were supposed to train her, not kill her.”

“She is alive,” says Quinton. “Is she not?”

Hauck rolls his shoulders back, his natural good humor nowhere to be found. “I will take Kit. You, go do whatever the bloody hell you do to cool off. And you do not go near her again until you’ve pulled your head out of your ass. Understand?”

Quinton laughs without humor. “You were the one who wanted this.”

“Not. This.” Hauck’s lips pull back to reveal his canines. “And you know it.”

“Oh, I know many things,” Quinton snarls right back. “It’s you who’s forgotten what reality is like.”

Suddenly Hauck is no longer holding me – because he is busy swinging his fist at Quinton’s jaw.

13. HAUCK



*H*auck's fist connected with Quinton's face, the force of the impact jarring his elbow. He knew he'd aimed the blow well, but Quinton hadn't even bothered to block the attack which only poured fuel on Hauck's anger. His scales rose, the magic inside him singing. The ship was made of wood. Dead wood, but with enough lingering life force that Hauck could make a few vines sprout and wrap themselves around his asshole brother's legs for the next day. Thorny vines. Let the asshole deal with that.

"Hauck?" The only voice that had the power to draw Hauck's attention just now sounded from behind him. Taking a breath he turned toward Kit.

"Whatever you are about to do, could you please not break the ship? I don't know how to swim."

Hauck forced his breath out slowly, seeing Kit's point. As satisfying as it would be to leave Quinton stuck in vine-made irons for a day or two, warping the ship's planking would unlikely bode well for the frigate and her passengers. More to the point, it would do nothing for the one being who mattered more to Hauck than he himself did – Kit.

Throwing Quinton one final glare, Hauck scooped Kit into his arms and headed for the hatch leading toward the cabins.

"When I am the responsible one in a group, that's a sure sign of things going amiss," he added over his shoulder. Quinton ignored him.

Issuing orders to have the table moved and a tub delivered to the princes' dining cabin, which was the largest of the private spaces they had access to, Hauck carried Kit there. The human was little more than dead weight in his arms, her skin too pale. And her palms... Hauck had no idea what had snapped inside Quinton to cause him to torment the girl, but he'd get to the bottom of it eventually. And then he'd beat Quinton into a rutting pulp.

Cyril and Tavius rose to their feet when Hauck brought Kit into the cabin, the seaman with the tub following moments later. There was a brigade of more sailors right behind them, all lined up and passing buckets of seawater from above to fill the tub. The seaman in the front apologizing that the water wasn't fresh.

Cyril waited until they were gone before speaking. "What happened?"

"Quinton decided to ensure I do not like him," said Kit.

Hauck hooked a chair with his foot and sat in it, cradling Kit against his chest. She had a glazed look about her and smelled of pain and exhaustion, whatever fight she'd had in her to tell Quinton off now drained away.

"You liked each other well enough last night." Tavius brought over a ladle of water and Hauck held it to Kit's mouth to help her drink. She attacked the water greedily, nearly choking on the cool liquid. Quinton must have kept that from her this morning as well.

She flushed slightly at Tavius's comment, though she couldn't have still been unaware of the fae's hearing and sense of smell. There was not one soul on the ship who didn't know what happened in Quinton's cabin last night.

Kit cleared her throat. "I guess I got too close. And Quinton, well, I think he wanted to let me know I'm not welcome in his soul. Or maybe he just woke up with gas and was cranky. Who the hell knows." She closed her eyes. "Or cares."

Hauck brushed Kit's hair from her forehead and wondered whether she had any idea how strong she was. How much he valued holding her like this.

Tavias pursed his lips, the scales on his temples rising. Going up to the tub, he quickly summoned a wave of magic, heating the water to a gentle steam before striding out of the cabin.

"Nice trick," Kit whispered, eyeing the steam.

"Tavias has his occasional uses," said Hauck.

Cyril shook his head and fetched the soap and washcloths the seamen had delivered along with the tub. The pair of them gently peeled off Kit's clothes, mindful of the bouquet of new bruises now covering her sides, back, and arms. Hauck longed to keep the girl cradled against his chest, but she needed more than his body could give her just now, which bothered him irrationally, but was the truth.

He carried Kit to the warm tub, slowly lowering her inside. That glazed look on her was only getting worse, and she jerked with a surprised yelp when the salt water touched her raw hand.

"So you are alive under all the hurt after all," Hauck said, stroking her back and shoulders. He wished he could take her pain away, but had to settle for offering what comfort his touch could bring. On the other side of the tub, Cyril had soaped up a washcloth and started scrubbing Kit's shoulders gently. When he made the water rise to rinse off the suds, Kit yelped again.

"That's a good trick, too," she said.

Cyril raised a brow. "That is not how I typically think of my magic."

Kit flinched.

Cyril cursed under his breath and ran a thumb over her cheek. "Easy, nymph. It was a joke." He glanced up to Hauck. "What the rutting hell did he do to her?"

"I only saw the last part, but I imagine you can fill in the blanks."

Cyril ran his washcloth over Kit's body in a thinly veiled attempt to probe her joints and ribs.

"I'm not injured," Kit insisted, as if the males couldn't see the hands she wouldn't lower into the water. Hauck wished she didn't feel she had to put up a brave front in front of them, but that kind of trust would be a long time coming.

Cyril finished his inspection, his scales rising to match the tight set of his mouth, and pulled out her foot to wash.

Kit tried to pull it back. "Also, I can wash myself," Kit argued, making a pathetic grab for the washcloth. With the state her hands were in, Hauck didn't think she'd have been happy if she'd managed to capture the object.

"You can," Cyril agreed. "But I'd like to do it. Lean your head forward."

Once Kit complied, Hauck let out her braid and Cyril brought up more water to douse her hair, giving Hauck free rein to work the soap into the thick strands. Kit let out a soft moan as his hands massaged her scalp, her pleasure rippling through Hauck and warming the thing inside him that had gone cold at Lola's death. He pressed his fingers into the base of her neck, seeing what other sounds he could tease out.

They just finished rinsing Kit's hair when the door to the cabin opened again. Though Hauck had his back to the entry, he easily recognized the sound of Tavius's sure steps and Quinton's near silent ones. Then they came into Hauck's line of sight and he barely held in a snort. Judging by the torn clothes and bloodied faces, Tavius had continued the brawl Hauck had started. How Quinton chose to train Kit wasn't a matter for pack discipline, but as far as a disagreement between brothers', fists and talons were fair game.

Cyril surveyed both brothers. "That was short."

Tavius wiped his bloody nose on his sleeve. "We are approaching the rift and Dane politely kicked us off deck." He threw Quinton a dark look.

Quinton crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall, ignoring the rest of the pack. Everything about his

body said he'd rather be elsewhere. Judging by Kit's scowl, she wouldn't mind Quinton's disappearance either.

Cyril's mouth pressed into a thin line. He jerked his chin toward Quinton. "Heal her palms."

"No."

"Not necessary."

Kit and Quinton spoke at the same time.

"That wasn't a request." Cyril didn't raise his voice, but the steel of command wove through every word and the cabin filled with the scent of his dominance. Hauck felt a small jerk inside his chest, where the pack's bond was rooted. Unlike Tavius, Cyril rarely pulled rank even when he was Ettienne's heir apparent, but when he did, even Hauck listened.

Jaw tight, Quinton pushed away from the wall and stalked toward Kit, his displeasure saturating every step. He grabbed Kit's wrist and laid his palm flat against hers. Hauck could see Kit's struggle to keep from jerking her hand away – though perhaps the struggle was to do just that, and Quinton was simply preventing the escape. Stars. Whatever happened between them last night went a great deal beyond the sounds Hauck had enjoyed hearing.

Bloody hell. Why could nothing ever be simple when it came to Kit? He'd truly thought the turnip had succeeded where all others had failed, had pierced through Quinton's darkness to the male he once was. Stars knew she had a habit of turning everything upside down. Clearly, things had not gone as planned and now the pair's sharp animosity was spiking through the room.

Quinton's silver magic rippled over his arms. A great deal more than necessary to heal a bit of skin.

Hauck truly liked it better when *he* was the juvenile one of the group.

Kit went rigid, her eyes glistening. No sound escaped her clamped lips though.

Hauck pulled her closer against his chest, offering the comfort of his body, and he could see Cyril rubbing soothing circles over her knee.

Quinton released Kit's fully healed hand a heartbeat later, which was a great deal faster than he usually took to mend small wounds. Probably because he'd channeled enough magic into the task to make a small horse glow in the dark. Dropping Kit's wrist unceremoniously, he repeated the procedure on her other side, then stepped away as if retreating from a venomous snake. "It's done. Is everyone bloody satisfied?"

"Did you make it hurt so much on purpose?" Kit demanded.

"I did."

Her upper lip twitched in anger. "And why did you do that?"

"Because I wanted to."

"Coward."

Oh, this was going well.

"Enough," said Cyril and pointed toward the back wall of the cabin. Quinton stalked over there and settled in with his usual pose of crossed arms and hard eyes. Cyril glanced over at Tavius, who was still rubbing his knuckles and looking disgruntled over having his brawl cut short. Temper was never Tavius's strong suit. Tavius's nostril flared. Cyril swung his attention back to Quinton. "You and Kitterny are done training together as of now," he said with a cold finality not even Tavius questioned.

Quinton said nothing, but everyone in the cabin knew the order was heard and would be heeded.

Returning his attention to Kit, Cyril ran his thumbs over her healed palms. "Alright?" he asked a great deal more gently than he'd addressed Quinton.

She nodded.

Hauck kissed the top of her head. Then, unable to help himself, he leaned down to her mouth and took a careful kiss. The softness of her lips, the willingness with which she parted them for him, sent tendrils of heat through his core. His cock twitched. Closing his eyes, Hauck scraped his teeth along Kit's bottom lip eliciting a moan that was altogether indecent. He –

A knock sounded at the door.

“Go away,” Hauck growled, not lifting his head from Kit's lips.

“What is it?” Cyril called.

“It's Nora, my princes,” Kit's maid sounded apologetic, but insistent. “Captain Dane would appreciate it if you could join him on deck. We are about to enter the Faewave Rift and the ship will beat to quarters momentarily.”

14. KIT



Nora gets me dressed and ushers me into a small cabin on a lower deck where she and I are supposed to stay if the ship is in danger. It's halfway below the waterline and, thanks to a pair of different height viewports, we can see what's happening both on the water surface and beneath. Just as Nora shuts the door behind us, the ship explodes with sounds of beating drums and running feet. The Phoenix is indeed beating to quarters. Thanks to the daily drills Captain Dane runs, I'm used to the deafening noise and commotion, but knowing that this time the preparations are for real makes me forget both my exhaustion and the two thousand sensations that had rushed through me in the past hour.

Since the Phoenix is used to carrying dignitaries, care has been taken to make this small cabin comfortable. In addition to the pair of viewports, there are a pair of lanterns and a bench to sit on. There is even a small tin with hard ship's biscuits. None of which is making me feel any better at the moment. I know little about the Faewave Rift, except that it marks a border between Lunos and the mortal realm and does not like anyone crossing it. I don't know of any human ships that have ever made it through and returned.

"It will be alright," Nora assures me, though I can hear the tension behind her voice. She sits beside me on the bench, which is swaying in rhythm to the ship's motions. I've been fortunate thus far with not getting sick, but I have a feeling that might change in the coming hours. Nora squeezes my knee. "Captain Dane has crossed the rift dozens of times. There is no safer ship to be on."

“What was it like on the way here?” I ask.

“Mostly like sailing through a really bad storm. The seas and the winds got violent, and I saw a few nightmares through the port window there, but none of the creatures came close. The Phoenix has all sorts of runes in her hull to protect her from the Mors creatures who live in the rift. And if something was to come after us, the Phoenix has guns to shoot it down before it can hurt the ship.” She winks at me. “Plus, this time we have dragon princes aboard to help, too.”

“They didn’t come with you on the journey outward?”

“No,” Nora shakes her head. “They flew most of the way actually, and crossed the rift in the skies. I think they wanted to wear out their dragons as much as possible before entering the mortal realm to... umm...”

“To keep from snacking on the mortals?” I suggest.

She shrugs apologetically. “Dragons are predators and that’s a long time to go without hunting. And with all the smells and fear spicing the air, controlling their primal instincts would be hard. But it looks like those instincts are well controlled now or, at least, tuned toward eating you in other ways.”

“That is so inappropriate.” My cheeks flame despite the truth of Nora’s words.

She laughs. “Oh, very much so.”

“I wonder what the skies were like when they crossed there.”

“Well, the princes didn’t exactly give me a debrief, but when we picked them up on one of the smaller islands they looked like they’d been in battle. But it was fine. Fae heal a great deal faster than mortals do though, and the blight is nothing new to the princes.”

She cuts off as the Phoenix rolls violently, sending the tin of biscuits to the floor. I pick it up and secure it with a bit of rope, like Cyril had taught me.

“Looks like we’ve met our first rift storm,” I say, hoping I sound as brave as I intend to. I don’t feel brave at all though. Especially since Nora’s face is draining of color.

“Um, no. I don’t think that was the wind.”

She points to the lower of the windows, the one fully submerged beneath the water. It takes me a moment to work through the shadows that I’m seeing. A shudder runs through me. “Are those... worms?” I ask, though calling the horse-sized tubular creatures with maws full of sharp teeth *worms* seems a disservice to both.

“Piranhas,” Nora says with a mirroring shudder. “They come up from the gloom here.”

“Disgusting.” That was an understatement. There are at least a dozen of them, all swarming around and making waves.

“They are dumb and perpetually hungry,” Nora says. “And their movements create currents. But they don’t go after ships. We are big and not edible. Now, if you were to end up in the water, especially if you were bleeding, well –”

“I got the idea. No need for details.” I want to look away from the worms, but I can’t. Especially given how active they are. As if aware that they are being watched, the piranhas suddenly turn to face us, their mouths open with rows of needle-sharp teeth. I can see the pink inside of their maws, which is disturbing in a whole new way.

I flinch as the whole school of them suddenly starts swimming toward us at full speed. “I thought you said they don’t go after ships?” I ask as the piranhas show no sign of slowing their approach. I swear they can see me. That their whole school is here just to munch on my flesh bit by bit.

“They don’t,” Nora says, but she doesn’t sound nearly as certain as before. “At least they never –”

One of the worms shoots ahead of the others and rams right into the window I’m standing at. The ship shudders and I get a full glimpse of the maw up close. Not just one ring of teeth but three. My stomach churns, and I step away from the

glass. Another piranha joins the first, slamming their heads into the window. A third.

“Bloody hell,” I whisper. “That’s not supposed to happen, is it?”

“No.”

The hull and glass that’s between us and the carnivorous worms no longer feels safe. I stumble back, gripping the bulkheads as the ship recoils from the impact.

“Nora!” I point to a small leak between the planking, water now trickling to the floor. The piranhas have managed to crack the wood. Not good. Really, very not good.

Another worm hits the hull. The window. Again. Again. The water from the leak continues to pour onto the floor.

I grab Nora’s arm. “We need to go.”

“We c-can’t,” she stutters. “This cabin is made to be the safest part of the ship.”

“Do you feel safe?” I demand incredulously. “Because I feel like I’m about to be canned warm food. And we need to tell someone there is a leak in the bloody hull.”

“It’s not that big of a –” Nora cuts off as the trickle of water turns into a steady pour, the puddle of water on the floor now creeping to cover the whole cabin. I don’t want to know what will happen to the Phoenix if it takes on much more water.

“We need to tell someone,” Nora agrees.

I yank open the door and run to the deck, with Nora at my heels, bemoaning that the deck is the last place the captain wants us when the ship is at quarters. I know that too, but none of the drills we’ve done accounted for a pile of giant underwater worms breaking the planking below the waterline, or the ship coming apart at the seams.

The Phoenix is rocking violently as Nora and I climb through the final hatch. A part of me is distantly impressed with my body for being able to negotiate the ladder without falling, which I couldn’t do on even a stable ship when I’d first

came aboard. Maybe Quinton's brutality did accomplish something – though it will be a cold day in hell before I acknowledge as much to the asshole aloud.

As I climb onto the deck, the salt-laden spray stings my cheeks and eyes, the briny scent of the ocean heavy in the purplish air. The piranhas might be battering the ship, but so is the unnatural wind that howls its fury together with the sea's answering roar.

Sailors and officers are rushing about, boots and bare feet thudding against the damp wooden planks in a synchronized dance. Tavius, Quinton, and Hauck are among the men, hauling and helping as they can. On the quarter deck, Cyril stands beside Captain Dane. The dragon prince's shoulders are spread wide, his hands raised and glowing with magic. He looks like a god made flesh, fighting to calm the seas. Despite the chaos, I can't help but pause and stare at Cyril's power and beauty. And at the fact that, despite his concentration on the sea, he seems to be watching the whole ship with no less understanding than the captain standing beside him.

Then I hear a *crack* as a rope breaks, and my heart returns to a gallop. I have no idea what just broke, but nothing breaking in a storm can be good.

“Lose the fore-royal!” Cyril calls, his voice somehow penetrating through the tempest. The sailors in the rigging scurry to obey, their hands quick and deft as they rig the sail to catch the wind. The ship feels steadier the moment it fills and Dane tips his hat to Cyril. Interesting.

With the ship no longer in imminent danger of capsizing, Nora and I are finally noticed. Tavius and Captain Dane see us at the same time, both demanding we go back down this instant. Tavius's shout is a great deal more heated and colorful than the captain's chilly order.

Holding on to a rope with one hand, I raise the other in a placating gesture. “There is a leak. The safe cabin is filling up with water,” I shout, trying to be heard over the howls. “It's the piranhas. They are ramming into the hull. Or were.”

I can't feel the impact now. I hope that's a good thing, but something inside me warns that they didn't just give up out of the goodness of their slimy hearts.

Captain Dane takes my report with a calm nod of the head, as if I'd just said the galley ran out of milk.

"Prince Hauck," Dane calls to where Hauck is helping a group of seamen wrangle a sail. "Might I impose on your skills with wood?" As he explains the situation to Hauck, Dane moves my hand to a different rope for support. A moment later, someone shouts an order and my original handhold moves to a different location. Dane's calm competence is infectious and reminds me of Cyril.

"Deck there!" A seaman calls from the lookout platform. "Danger off starboard!"

I turn alongside the others and suddenly understand what made the piranha's back away. Lapping in and out of the water is a creature that turns my insides to liquid. Nearly as large as the Phoenix itself, the thing has a long, scaled black body lined with slithering tentacles, red billowing gills, and crimson eyes. Its elongated snout resembles a crocodile's, if crocodiles had cruel looking spikes running along the head and spine. When it leaps up out of the waves, I see massive batlike wings tucked against its body and four limbs with vicious claws.

Several sailors make signs against evil, the sudden dread on the deck so palpable that even I can taste its bitter scent.

"What is that?" I whisper.

"Shadow serpent," Dane says, his face tight.

Nora tugs on my sleeve. "We should go below."

I shake my head, ordering her to go without me. I don't know what good I can do staying on deck, but I know that I can do none if I'm not here to try.

Dane turns to Tavius, his voice low. "I will try to fight the serpent off, but Your Highnesses should be prepared to take to the skies if I am not successful."

Tavias frowns. “I was under the impression that one dragon shifting on deck in calm seas was a grave hazard to the ship. How do you propose the four of us do so safely in the middle of an assault?”

Dane’s barely audible voice is as hard as steel. “If the serpent gets through our defenses, there will be no ship to keep safe, my prince. I do not know why the warding runes on our hull are not working, but clearly they are not. Be ready.” Without waiting for an answer, Dane turns away and raises his voice. “Load the starboard guns. Let us discourage the serpent from coming any closer.”

Three gun crews rush to load the great cannons I’ve only seen fired in practice before. The gun captains’ shout orders, their faces grim with focus.

“Run the cartridge!”

“Shot and wad!”

“Run out the gun!” At that last bellow, the sailors strain against the ropes, heaving the cannon into position.

The shadow serpent is closing with every heartbeat, and my breath stills in my chest as I wait for the order to fire.

“Steady,” Dane calls. “Steady.”

My nerves stretch. The serpent snaps its jaws. They are so big, I imagine it could break the mast in two.

“Fire on the uproll!” Dane orders finally.

Tavias’s arms come around me as the deafening blasts of the great guns go off in unison. The acrid smell of gunpowder and the taste of smoke fills the air, ramming my lungs. The ship bucks beneath me, pressing me against the prince’s strong body.

“Reload,” Dane calls, and my heart sinks as I realize the initial shots hadn’t found their elusive target. The guns aren’t made for things that disappear beneath the ocean and then jump into the air. “Fire at will.”

The seamen rush to obey, pushing the cartridges into place with long ramrods and bringing the guns to bear. This time, the

deafening blasts are staggered, each gun captain doing his best to negotiate the storm-tossed waves and the elusive beast. The ship shudders with the force of each recoil. The crew barely flinches while I jump with each belch.

Just then, a wave crests above us, showing its foamy belly before crashing onto the deck. Cold water drenches me, the salt stinging my eyes and making me temporarily blind. Only Tavius's grip keeps me from losing my footing altogether.

“Brace for impact!”

I don't know who the warning comes from, but the words cut through the cacophony of crashing waves and snapping sails. One arm still around me, Tavius wraps another around one of the masts just as the monstrous sea creature twists and whips its massive tail against the frigate's hull.

The impact reverberates through the ship. The Phoenix spins around like a toy. The male at the helm is thrown aside as the wheel spins. His head cracks and he does not rise again. Two more males and Quinton rush to take up the helmsman's post, the veins in their forearms bulging as they fight to regain control.

Cyril is shaking now, exhaustion straining each line of his face. The ship rolls to the side, more and more and more. A tug of war between the dragon prince's failing magic and the torrential waves trying to capsize us in the blue abyss.

Cyril roars and drops to his knees, as the wave that was going to tip us over flattens at the last moment. I draw a relieved breath – only to scream as the shadow serpent unleashes its tail again.

Timbers groan and the heart chilling *pop* of something breaking shoots through the deck.

“The main mast is coming down!” someone shouts.

With horror, I realize what the *pop* was. The great hundred foot mast has a crack in the middle, the top of it starting a slow motion descent. Several sailors have already fallen to the deck, which is slick with their blood.

Hauck appears out of nowhere, rushing toward the falling contraption. Magic pulses around him and the mast, the wood scarring over with tough fibrous vines before it can topple.

The seamen cheer. Captain Dane does not.

“It’s time, Your Highness,” he tells Tavius. “You must take to the skies.”

“The Phoenix has no chance if we do that,” Tavius shoots back.

“The Phoenix will sleep at sea tonight,” Dane’s voice is steady despite his harrowing words. “Whether it happens in a few minutes or a half hour is of no consequence. My duty is your life. So get off my ship, Prince, and take to the sky.”

“We – “

“With due respect, we are out of options,” Dane snaps, shouting the order at Tavius. “Here on this ship my command outranks yours, sir. And I’m ordering you to – “

I feel a tug of something inside me, at the place where the bond with the pack is anchored. I twist toward it, my breath catching. “Quinton!” I shout, my fingers digging into Tavius’s forearms as I watch Quinton who is sprinting across the deck. He reaches the edge and, without hesitation, dives into the roaring seas. The piranha’s sharp teeth flash in my memory.

“What is he doing?” Dane demands.

“Giving you that option that doesn’t exist,” Tavius says grimly.

15. TAVIAS



Tavias had never felt so useless as he did now, watching Quinton's lithe body fighting the raging waves as he swam away from the Phoenix. With each stroke Quinton took, he seemed smaller, more fragile against the vast ocean. Cyril was at the rail now, his hands holding on with a white-knuckled grip. The blue green glow pulsing from him came in desperate pants as he tried to keep both the Phoenix and Quinton alive. But no amount of Cyril's magic would help against the nightmares in those waters.

And nothing Tavias could do with his fire would help at all.

Kit pressed her head back against Tavias's chest, the touch anchoring him back. He turned to the captain. "Quinton will not shift until he is safely away from the Phoenix. Can you move the ship to help?"

"Aye." Dane nodded at once, calling out orders to the crew. The captain reminded Tavias of Cyril, who was cool reason against Tavias's hot temper. The one who truly deserved to one day sit on the Massa'ave throne, by both birth and skill.

"Where is the shadow serpent?" Kit asked, drawing Tavias back once again. He wondered whether the small human had any idea of the kind of power she had over them. Whether she knew that it was for her that Quinton had thrown himself into the water.

Tavias pointed toward the telltale signs of the wicked spikes cresting the water. After the non-stop assault against the

frigate, the sudden reprieve they were now enjoying was ominous. Too likely, it had something to do with Quinton offering himself as tribute.

“There is a whole school of piranha there, too,” Kit whispered. “I saw them through the window below decks.”

Tavias’s jaw tightened. In the distance, the serpent dove underwater. If it or the piranhas Kit saw reached Quinton before he shifted, there would be no chance of survival.

Shift, Tavias ordered with his mind. *Shift now*.

Quinton twisted his head back, as if gauging the distance to the Phoenix. Dane was trying to get the frigate moving, but there was too much damage to do so quickly.

Ignoring Tavias’s order, Quinton turned and swam farther out. The water around Quinton was swelling now, a wave building up strength. Nothing was natural in Faewave Rift. Not on the sea or in the sky.

Shift, Tavias shouted with his mind again, yanking on the pack’s bond to try to force Quinton into obedience.

At the rail, Cyril cursed, his shoulders sagging as he lost the battle with the swell. The wave gathering around Quinton crashed atop his body, shoving him below.

A choking sound came from Kit as Quinton disappeared from view. As the water where he’d been just moments ago suddenly went deathly still.

“No!” With a shout, Kit pulled out of Tavias’s hold and rushed to the rail, calling Quinton’s name. There was no way he could hear her and yet...

Tavias jerked back as the stilled water erupted in a spray of silver light. Quinton’s dragon burst forth, his majestic wings unfurling against the sky. His scales shimmered like liquid moonlight – which made the creature in the water that much starker in its hideous darkness.

In Quinton’s wake, a sickly black tendril broke the surface, followed by another, and another, twisting and writhing in a nauseating dance. The serpent’s body was a slick, muscular

mass of ebony scales. Venomous spikes glistened from the serpent's spine as it snapped its jaws angrily.

Quinton pulled his tail away just in time to avoid the razor sharp teeth.

Tavias pulled Kit away from the rail as the serpent lashed the water with its powerful tail, propelling itself up. It spread its batlike wings to catch the wind, its great silhouette dwarfing Quinton's dragon.

Quinton banked a hard right, his snarl echoing over the water. He twisted about faster than Tavias thought possible and charged. The powerful gust of wind from Quinton's wings knocked the shadow serpent from its path, a trick of Quinton's that few dragons could even hope to attempt. The male was death incarnate, as he was trained to be.

Taking advantage of the brief opening he'd forged, Quinton lunged forward, clamping his jaws onto one of the serpent's wings.

A guttural sound escaped the beast's throat. It yanked its wing away violently, the leathery membrane ripping against Quinton's teeth. Kit let out a strained cheer, but that was because her mortal eyesight couldn't see the rage that sparked in the serpent's slitted red eyes. If it was merely agitated and hunting before, now it was murderous, all of its fury fixed on Quinton.

Changing course, the serpent dove back into the water, sending a massive wave toward the Phoenix. The ship rocked, but held fast. When the serpent surfaced next, it was behind Quinton. Before the dragon could turn, the serpent reared and raked its claws along Quinton's silver scales.

Deep gashes of red blood streaked along the dragon's body.

A roar of pain and fury tore from Quinton's throat.

Before the dragon could retaliate, the serpent dove toward the safety of the water.

Folding his wings in tight, Quinton followed it down, down, down. They raced, like two arrows against the horizon.

Gaining on the serpent, Quinton twisted mid-dive and whipped his tail, striking the serpent's head.

Stunned, the serpent unfurled its wings to steady itself. Quinton shot up toward the sky, then down, slamming into the serpent's spine, sending the beast spiraling. Ready to receive a killing blow.

Tavias held his breath as he waited for Quinton to end the fight, but the silver dragon shuddered in midair instead.

"What's happening?" Kit asked, the dread in her voice matching that coursing through Tavias's blood.

"The spine spikes are venomous," Dane said. "I imagine we are seeing the effects of the toxin."

Tavias's breath halted as Quinton fought to steady himself. The serpent's wings beat the air as it regained its bearing. Found its target. Attacked.

The two beasts met with a clash that echoed over the ocean. The serpent's red eyes flashed, its sinuous body wrapping around Quinton's. Constricting tighter and tighter. Kit trembled, and Tavias was grateful she couldn't see how the serpent's spikes pierced Quinton's scales. How its tail coiled around Quinton's hind leg and broke it.

In the ocean below, the piranha's were already circling, summoned by the dripping blood. Despite the agony Tavias knew had to be wrecking his brother's body, Quinton gripped onto the shadow serpent with talons that would never let go, not even in death.

Wrapped tightly together, the pair fell toward the water, the hungry maws of the giant worms waiting to devour them both. Bits of broken scales and streaks of blood already frosted the waves.

"No!" Kit shouted as the pair hit the water's surface and went under, the helplessness spreading through her cry echoing Tavias's own soul. Fighting against his grip, she tried to pull toward the rail. To claw herself free of Tavias's hands. He let her pound against him, never letting his protective hold on her body slacken.

Dread filled Taviias's heart.

The next roar Taviias heard came through the bond itself, which wasn't possible, but was happening nonetheless. Bright pulsing flashes of silver magic lit up the ocean's depth. Then the stench of vile blood filled Taviias's lungs, choking him. In the ocean, the waves' white tops turned a shade of rust, as if a geyser of spoiled blood had been opened beneath them.

A heartbeat later, Quinton's head broke the surface. The dragon hauled himself painfully into the air, barely able to rise above the rolling waves. In the shadow beneath him, the piranhas swarmed around the shadow serpent's bleeding body, the snake was still alive, but dying quickly.

Blood magic. Stars. The realization of what Quinton had done hit Taviias like a gust of icy wind, bringing both relief and horror.

"What happened?" Kit asked, her body going limp against Taviias's hold.

"I believe Quinton unleashed his blood-magic when the two were intertwined," Taviias told her gently. "It..." It ripped into every organ in the serpent's body, opening each until the creature was weak and bleeding, but alive enough to lure the piranhas. "Quinton ended the fight with blood magic."

Kit pulled from Taviias's hold and this time he let her go. Quinton's dragon was making painful progress away from the carnage. His body, wracked with pain and exhaustion, was barely able to stay in the air. And once he cleared the purple mist of the rift, he couldn't do even that.

The Phoenix was a hundred paces away from Quinton when the dragon collapsed onto the waves, his wings splaying limply like fallen sails.

16. KIT



I stand out of the way, the salty sea breeze tangling my hair as Tavius argues with Corvus, the ship's healer.

"He needs to shift," Corvus insists for the tenth time, pointing to where Quinton's dragon is sprawled limply on the deck. Corvus is smaller than Tavius, but no less fierce, and the leather apron he wears is splattered with blood from the injuries he'd been tending in the past hour.

"Quinton is well aware of that." Tavius crosses his arms. "If he could do so, he would have."

Even I know that Quinton can no more shift than he can fly just now. With the Phoenix safely through the rift and the piranhas busy devouring the shadow serpent, Dane had ordered a boat lowered into the water. The sailors made efficient work of slinging ropes around Quinton's limp form, but it had taken half the crew and an elaborate system of ropes and pulleys to haul Quinton's dragon up onto the deck. I don't know how Quinton had endured the process, but the dragon's patience had clearly run out – as evidenced by the fact that he snaps at anyone who comes too near his wounds.

And there are a lot of wounds. Quinton's once radiant scales are dull, his flesh gouged and bloody. His left hind leg is twisted at an unnatural angle that is dizzying to look at, and the copper scent of his blood and pain hangs thick in the air.

The crew keeps their distance from him the best they can, uneasiness rolling off the seamen in palpable waves. Even after everything Quinton did to save the Phoenix.

“I believe the problem lies in the three spikes still embedded in his neck.” Corvus purses his lips, his attention shifting briefly to the other wounded who are being laid out on the deck. The falling debris had crushed and broken limbs on more than one sailor. It’s clear Corvus wants to tend those patients and not this conversation. Not Quinton. “The venom in the spikes is still active. If you remove them, the shift should be possible and I will tend to the prince at once.”

Tavias’s lip curls to reveal his canines. They’d already tried doing just that, and Quinton had thrashed and snapped his jaws so violently that even Tavias and Cyril backed off.

“Handling the spikes is too risky,” Captain Dane says with a calm no one else is bothering to even pretend to display. “What are our options, Corvus? Can you tend to the prince in dragon form?”

Corvus huffs. “Pray tell me, how do you imagine I set a dragon’s bone? We’d need to rig a bloody rope system just to get enough force.”

“Then rig it,” Tavias growls.

“Stars take me. I was being facetious. Sea-hardened warriors must be held down for much of what needs to be done – the dragon will kill me for attempting half of it. With all due respect, Your Highness, in his current state Prince Quinton is liable to rip half the ship and crew to shreds if he gets upset.”

Tavias’s hand curls into a fist, but Captain Dane cuts in before Tavias can take a swing. “So what do you propose, sir?”

Corvus waves a hand toward Quinton. “We wait until he goes unconscious all the way and is safer to deal with.”

“You mean let him be poisoned?” Tavias demands. “Or just wait until he bleeds –”

I stop listening to the pointless debate, drawn instead to the dragon’s eyes. They are open now, the vertical silver pupils shrouded in suffering.

“Hi there,” I whisper, trying to remember everything the princes have told me about their dragon forms. I try to find the Quinton I know and dislike behind the intelligent silver gaze, but all I see is a beautiful and terrifying beast who saved the ship and now needs help in return. “Are you hanging in there?”

I step toward the dragon.

The silver pupils narrow. The dragon flares his nostrils. It’s probably a warning to stay away, but I’m feeling the contrary. There is a whole ship of people staying away. Someone needs to come forward instead.

I take another step toward him, my heart pounding wildly in my chest. The logical part of me screams that this is a terrible idea, and starts listing all the things that can go wrong. The rest of me cannot care less. As I draw nearer, the dragon’s eyes – now twin orbs of molten silver – lock onto mine in earnest. There is pain in his gaze, with vulnerability and aggression hidden beneath the layers of his agony. But also, the faintest flicker of recognition.

Yes. You know me. I confirm with my soul. I want to help. So... don't eat me, alright? I repeat the last plea silently as I come within range of his powerful jaws. *Please don't eat me. Please don't eat me.*

Taking it as an encouraging sign when I am within arms reach and still alive, I stretch my hand out tentatively toward the dragon’s muzzle. My breath halts as light glistens off his sharp teeth, my fingers shaking as I brush his scales. Instead of being warm, like Hauck’s dragon had been, Quinton’s scales are cool and clammy. A shiver runs down my spine. I’m not sure what that means exactly, but it can’t be good.

I brush my hand down his muzzle, in what I hope is a soothing caress.

“Holy bloody stars, Kitterny. Have you lost your mind?” Cyril’s deceptively low voice catches me in the back as what I’m doing finally registers with the others on deck.

A wave of tension rolls through the air and I feel everyone's attention burning into me. I'm certain that the only reason I'm not being tackled to the deck right now is because everyone is afraid of upsetting the dragon, who is puffing out small growls.

Cyril draws an audible breath. "You are beside a very large, very powerful, and very injured animal." He announces each word as if speaking to someone soft of mind. "You need to back away at once. But go slow. Do you understand?"

The dragon's eyes flutter closed as he leans into my touch, a low rumble resonating deep in his chest. The fae Quinton might be an utter asshole, but his dragon has already stolen my soul.

"I'm not going anywhere," I assure the dragon.

"Oh, yes you are," says Cyril. Though he keeps his voice in check, I hear the iron command behind it. "That's an order, Kitterny. Move back. *Now.*"

Ignoring Cyril utterly, I reach out and stroke the dragon's neck. I'm pretty sure there will be consequences for all this, but I don't care. I can no more back out and leave the dragon alone in pain than I could cut my arm off.

"I'm here to help," I say, hoping the dragon understands me just now. "I don't know how much you've heard, but the shadow serpent left three spikes in your neck. And they need to come out." I slide my hand toward where the spikes are.

The dragon lets out a low warning growl of displeasure.

"Kitterny," Cyril hisses through his teeth. "Back off. *Now.*"

I would, but Tavius is actually entertaining Corvus's new notion of trying to muzzle the dragon and anchor him to the deck. That very notion makes my stomach roil. I brush the dragon's nose. "Can you let me pull the spikes out?" I murmur. "I'll be careful, but it will hurt. And you can't bite me while I do it. Or, um, thrash around and destroy the ship. You can't do that either."

The dragon huffs. I have no idea if that's a yes or a no.

My chest tightens. “Please. They’ll tie you down otherwise.” I stroke him again. “Blink twice if you promise not to kill me for pulling the spikes out.”

Silver eyes stare into mine, then blink. Once. Twice. Three times.

“Very funny,” I tell him, but move toward the first spike anyway.

From the corner of my vision, I catch Tavius start toward me with murderous intent. Lightning dances over his skin and scales.

The dragon notices Tavius as well. His head swings toward the prince briefly and then his tail flicks once – sending Tavius flying back from us and into a mast. Someone curses.

“I don’t think he wants any of you coming near just now,” I call helpfully.

The dragon gives another huff, then goes rigid as I close my hand around the first of the curved spikes. The hard onyx shell is ice cold and sends waves of vileness roaring through me at once. Nausea claws my throat. “Stars,” I whisper and take a deep breath, bracing myself for what comes next. “Here we go.”

I pull the spike.

The dragon’s muscles tense, a bone shaking roar of agony escaping his maw. Yet I feel no fear. Not from him.

I also can’t get the damn thing out. Gathering my strength, I pull again. I can feel the vibration of the raw power coiled within the dragon, the destruction held at bay by his will alone.

Yet the venomous spike stays where it is.

“Let me through,” a voice I distantly recognize as the healer’s orders. There is a shuffle of feet and then Corvus appears at the edge of the gathering crowd. For a moment I fear he is going to come too close, but fortunately he crouches at a distance instead. “The spike is curved and serrated. You are strong enough to pull it out, but you must pull with the curve. And you cannot let up on the pressure.”

The confidence in the male's voice helps me pull my fraying nerves together. The whole crew seems to hold a collective breath as I once again wrap my hands around the spike. I meet the dragon's pain filled eyes. He blinks. Once. Twice.

Regripping the foul spike, I try again, bracing my knee against the dragon's neck to get the leverage I need. The dragon's breaths come in ragged gasps, his jaw clenched tightly as the spike finally surrenders. With one final tug, the spike comes free, blood welling up from the wound.

The dragon shudders, a low growl rumbling in his throat. Yet, he doesn't lash out. Instead, his eyes hold mine, the silver in them shimmering with unshed tears. I realize my own cheeks are wet. "You are the bravest dragon in all of Lunos," I tell him, running my hand over his scales before moving on to the other spikes, my hands now steady with determination.

The rest of the ship fades into irrelevance as I work, Captain Dane's quiet orders to man the sails and steer the ship are drowned out by my pounding heart and the dragon's labored breaths. My focus is entirely on him, just as Quinton's had been on me when he brought me down from the mast. Before everything changed between us. I swear I can feel his pulse echo inside my body, his trust as tangible as anything I've ever held onto.

The last spike comes free with a wet plop, and I let out a shaky breath. "It's over," I promise. "That was the last one."

The dragon's head lowers to the deck, his breathing evening out as the tension in his body eases. I press my forehead against his neck, relief flooding my blood. Though the puncture wounds still bleed, his scales already feel warmer. Healthier.

It's minutes before I can collect myself enough to step back from the dragon, who is already starting to shimmer. Once I'm clear, the air around him vibrates with energy, a blinding light flashing around him like a cocoon. I shield my eyes against the brightness. When I lower my forearm a moment later, Quinton's dragon form has dissolved, the scaled

body now replaced with the familiar fae male laying on the deck.

Quinton is in the same clothes he'd had on when he lept into the sea, the material torn to show bloody wounds beneath. His left leg is clearly broken and his blond hair falls in wet locks over his pale face. I don't know how he is able to move, but he does, pulling himself up onto his forearms and flipping over into a sitting position before Corvus rushes over to put a stop to the moving about.

As Covus inspects Quinton's broken leg, the prince presses his hand into the planking and surveys the deck. His eyes touch mine and keep going without so much as a pause, the warmth and trust we'd shared moments earlier evaporating to cold distance.

A bitter slap of hurt hits my soul.

Quinton's attention stops on Taviias. "Are we clear of the rift?" he asks. His voice is hoarse and the words come in pants. I long to go to him, but Hauck comes up behind me, pulling me against him.

"We are," Taviias confirms.

"The ship?" Quinton asks.

"Damaged but seaworthy. You –"

"I remember," Quinton says, cutting Taviias off. "Most of it, anyway." He draws in a deep breath, clearly fighting off pain. Fighting to stay conscious as Corvus examines him.

"Are you alright?" I ask.

Quinton's jaw tightens, his attention swinging back to me with obvious reluctance. "Thank you for your assistance," he says flatly, his icy words cutting through me deeper than I thought possible. "However, I no longer require a human's help. Or your misplaced concern."

17. KIT



I definitely liked Quinton more in dragon form.

As if to further dig his barb into me, Quinton allows Corvus to pat his shoulder. The healer isn't even pack.

"Let's get the prince to his cabin," Corvus says. "I will see to him there."

I hope whatever the healer does hurts. A lot. The mix of hurt and anger swirls in my chest like a growing gale. Quinton had gone out of his way to wound me after shifting to his fae form, just as he'd gone out of his way to torment me after the night we spent together. It was becoming a theme. Stars, maybe that is the most infuriating part – that I've dropped my guard low enough to let the jabs take me by surprise and hurt me.

I'm a slave and Quinton is a prince. He is hardly the first to take pleasure in such things.

Still brimming with my righteous indignation, I turn my attention to the rest of the pack. Tavius and Cyril are helping Quinton toward the hatch, but Cyril spares me a look. "We will discuss what happened later," he says in clipped tones that feel like being splashed with ice.

I'd honestly expected celebration and gratitude for helping the dragon. But the tension rolling off the males is anything but.

"Those were some... bold decisions there, turnip," Hauck says behind me. "Even I'm seldom that reckless – and I heal a great deal faster than you do."

“W-What are you talking about?” I ask.

Hauck snorts, though his attention is already being pulled away toward a repair crew asking for help. “Publically disregarding Cyril’s orders to do something that could have ended in disaster? It isn’t something I’d do lightly. Just saying. Excuse me.”

Suddenly alone, I look around the deck to see if anyone might voice a different opinion. Instead, I mark a shift in the crew. It’s the first time I’m without the princes hovering over me, and the sailors make little effort to keep their dislike in check. It is bad luck to have humans on a ship, they inform each other. I had to be the reason the runes on the Phoenix’s hull failed to protect her in the rift. They look forward to watching me get what’s coming.

A few even wager how many lashes I might get for my defiance. Whether I’ll pass out or scream louder than someone named Grevi once had. Whether the princes might strip me naked first.

Chest tight, I move out of the sailors’ way. The rift is behind us now, the purplish mist hanging above it like a deceptively pretty cloud. The rising wind whips the hair free of my braid and I gasp slightly at the potency of the new scents filling my lungs. Now that we’ve crossed into Lunos, everything around me seems sharper and more potent. The briney scent of the ocean, the creaking of the ship’s wet timber, the brilliance of the blue sky. I scratch my brand again, which now feels like it has ants crawling beneath its surface.

Once I’m certain I won’t run into Quinton on my way, I climb down into the cabin to find Nora waiting for me. Her face lacks its usual bouncy optimism as she hurries to help get my wet dress off me.

“The Phoenix barely came out of the rift intact,” she tells me, pulling out a dressing gown. “There will be little sleep for anyone until the ship is set back to rights. Perhaps it’s best if you kept to the cabin for a bit?”

I frown, the tightness in my chest dropping to my stomach. “Did... Did you hear something?” I ask. “About me, I mean.”

Nora grabs a hair brush, looking at my braid with predatory intent. Or maybe she just wants to get behind me, where I won't see her face. "Sailors are a superstitious lot. You can't take anything they say to heart. I once saw a whole storm blamed on one seaman's poor choice of socks."

So, she had heard. I wonder how long the grumblings had been going on, the princes' company at my side keeping them from my ears. I bite my lip, wondering if just this once, the sailors might not be right. I'm not supposed to be here, with the dragon princes. I don't fit the prophecy. What if whatever fates had created the prophecy to begin with are taking the deception personally?

Nora clears her throat. "Did you really ignore Prince Cryil's orders to pull spikes from a dragon?" she asks quietly.

"I did." I open my mouth to explain the pull that I felt, but I decide against saying it aloud.

"Oh," says Nora.

"That's ominous."

"It's just that such things are not usually done," she says carefully. "That's all. But you and the princes have a special kind of relationship. I'm sure they will let it pass."

She doesn't sound sure, and the crew on deck was rather certain about how things were bound to turn out. I feel a shiver run through me. As kind as the dragon princes may seem on occasion, can be on occasion, they are dominating and brutal as hell by nature. The last time I'd crossed them, Tavius had dragged me across his knee and set my backside on fire in front of the whole pack. My howls of pain told the whole forest what was happening. And on a ship? I don't think I'd survive the humiliation.

The slave brand on the inside of my wrist itches in response to my thoughts and I rub the raised flesh that reminds me what I am.

As Nora suggests, I stay in my quarters for the rest of the day while she goes to help healer Corvus with the wounded. When none of the males come to bring me to their bed for the

night – the first such time aboard the Phoenix – I curl up in my cot and grapple for sleep that doesn't come. But at least I manage to keep the tears that sting my eyes from spilling.

The following day, I awake determined to make myself useful. The ship is brimming with repairs, many of the seaman up on deck have to completely relace the cracked mainmast – under *Cyril's* supervision. Immaculate and put together, the prince makes directing the crew and teaching younger sailors look like a simple matter. After what Cyril did in the rift and the command he has now, every seaman on the Phoenix watches him like a god. The one glance Cyril spares me before curtly suggesting that the deck is not an appropriate place to be loitering just now, tells me that there is a reckoning to come.

The coiled tension inside my chest compresses a little more.

The next person I seek out is Hauck, but he is neck deep in magic as he tries to find and repair the leaks in the hull. Tavius is holed up with Captain Dane discussing plans I'm not privy to. Lacking both skills and muscle, I join Nora in helping Corvus in the sickberth – only to be sent away at once.

“The sailors are naturally superstitious, my lady,” Corvus tells me as he shows me the door. “Your presence would cause stress that may be detrimental to their recovery.” From the tight set of Corvus's face, I get the sense that he doesn't altogether disagree with his patients' sentiment.

On the third evening after crossing over the rift, I'm on deck keeping out of everyone's way and practicing a knot every sailor here uses, when a familiar energy flickers through the crew. The chatter dies, the men move with greater purpose, and the younger officers straighten their uniforms. I've seen this before and know what it means. Cyril is about to come on up.

I look for an escape route, but there isn't one to be had, not before the prince clears the hatch. I've not talked to him – to any of them – in three days. Not felt their touch in three nights. And without the protection of their presence, I've learned exactly where I stand in the fae world.

Which is somewhere akin to holy vermin, which no one wants around, but cannot harm for fear of being smited.

“Wind’s holding steady sir,” the officer of the watch informs Cyril at once, touching his hat. “Course steady at twelve knots, due south by southeast.”

“Very good.” Cyril acknowledges, his attention brushing over the rigging as he surveys the ship. Despite working nonstop for the past days, he looks as calm and perfect as ever, the buttons of his high collared vest polished to a golden shine. But one thing is different tonight. Tonight, he strides forward toward me with sure, measured steps.

I tense. Although part of me is relieved that the confrontation that’s hovered over me like a dark cloud is finally going to happen, another part just wants to run the bloody hell away. But what good would it do?

Stopping a few paces away, Cyril leans back against the rail and looks down at me from his greater height.

I shift my feet. I’ve almost forgotten how intense being the sole subject of a dragon’s focus could be. Stars, I hate this. Just as I hate myself for being a coward. For being, well, me.

Cyril motions toward the piece of rope in my hands. “If that’s a bowline you are torturing, the free end needs to come through the loop first.” His voice is smooth like the sea, thick lashes hovering above brilliant blue eyes.

“That explains why it’s not working.” Suddenly I don’t know what to do with the rope. Or with my hands. I don’t even know what to do with my voice, because the truth is that while I know I’m *supposed* to be sorry for defying Cyril’s orders and helping the dragon, I’m really not.

I did it then and I’d do it a thousand times over. Which is very much not what Cyril and everyone else on the ship is expecting me to say.

I swallow and put my knot work down on the deck, the ship choosing that very moment to rock out from under my feet.

Cyril's hand shoots out to steady me before I can lose my balance, the brush of his fingers along my elbow sending a jolt of awareness through me. After three days of being held at arms' length I'm embarrassingly starved for his touch. Perhaps enough so that a part of me welcomes whatever punishment he intends to dole out just so I can feel his arms around me again. Even if the embraces are fake, a game we play to prepare for the trials. The more reasonable – and experienced – part of me, knows better than to welcome a dragon's wrath.

“Why does everyone keep watching the sea as if the rift might come alive at any moment and chase us down?” I blurt out. I'm not stalling. Really. It's a legitimate question.

Cyril blinks, plainly caught off guard by the sudden question. “The rift? I imagine that's the least of anyone's concerns right now. It may be treacherous, but it does stay put.”

“And what doesn't?”

“Priveteers, ships from the other courts, the ocean itself. Did you imagine the Phoenix's guns are just there to miss shots at shadow serpents?” He drapes his hands behind his back, the way I've seen him do when instructing sailors. “Serpari and Ebonreach – the serpent and bone courts – are closest to us. We've avoided an all out war thus far, but the seas here have always been a battle ground.”

“Oh.” I file away that bit of knowledge while I study the prince's harsh profile and wonder how I'd ever let myself be so weak as to start believing the very same web of lies I'm helping to spin. I'm not the princes' lover or bride. They bed me because my body needs the preparation lest my human anatomy rips during the trials. I'm not their friend or equal. I'm temporary pack only because my cooperation makes it easier to achieve our – very different – goals. They are trying to protect their throne and their people. I'm just a tool to that end.

It was an agreement I went into with my eyes wide open, and the sharp reminder of my place that is coming – hell, it will do me ironic good. I'd let the princes too far into my soul,

but I think I can still recover. If I can get my head on straight and keep it there.

Digging down into the void I'd learned back at the Agam estate, when Cordelia liked to order me whipped for no reason at all, I pull the nothingness around myself like a shroud. *Cyril does not matter*, I tell myself firmly. *Nothing he does matters. You feel nothing*. When I speak next, I'm pleased to find that my voice has steadied.

"I take it you've spent a lot more time at sea than anyone on the Phoenix suspected before we went through the rift?" I say.

"Not anyone," Cyril corrects. Despite his deceptively calm tone, the blue in his eyes has a hard edge. A chill that would make anyone want to slink away. Except me. Because his anger or lack thereof cannot reach me anymore. "My brothers have always been well aware. And Captain Dane."

"Captain Dane knew?"

"Of course. I was the one who gave him his commission." Cyril turns slightly, the muscles shifting beneath his midnight blue tunic. "It was a long time ago. The crew wouldn't have met me." His attention returns to me, piercing through the settling dusk. "Is it greatly surprising that someone with water-magic might be attracted to the sea?"

"Not at all." I scratch the slave brand on my forearm. "I was simply curious as to why you initially concealed your expertise."

"I didn't. I simply didn't advertise them. A ship should have only one lord and master, and on the Phoenix that's Captain Dane." He adjusts his weight easily with the rocking deck. "After all, when an order is given, especially in the middle of action, there can be no hesitation on the part of the crew. No confusion about who is in charge and who is not."

He cocks his brow slightly.

Despite my racing pulse, my breath is steady as I lift my chin and meet Cyril's gaze. Clearly the time has come for the next installment of our dance. The dragon prince is yearning to

remind me of his dominance and the crew is thirsty for blood. I cannot stop it, and I will not try.

But I will not let any of it pierce my shields either. Not again.

“I imagine you didn’t come here to critique my bowline knot, my prince?” I say coolly.

“That would be accurate,” says Cyril.

18. CYRIL



Cyril silently cursed the Faewave Rift, Quinton, and the bloody stars themselves. It had been three days of the universe doing everything possible to keep him from Kit, and now they had a reprimand to get past before things could settle back to normal. He sincerely wished they could skip to the normal part, but there was no responsible way to avoid the matter – and he was already getting a bad feeling about how things were going to go.

And what did you expect? That Kit would take being jerked up short in stride or that Quinton would pull his head out of his ass and explain things like a responsible male?

He flared his nostrils, taking in Kit's scent. It was slightly different now that they'd crossed into Lunos, making her harder to read. In fact, at the moment, he read nearly nothing from the girl. Not even a healthy dose of anxiety that should be filling her by right.

Hands still draped behind his back, Cyril spoke with a cool chill of command. "Quinton was unconscious for two days, but is awake now. He'll be at full strength by the time we dock in Massa'eva." He watched Kit's face closely as he spoke, marking the not unexpected flicker of surprise. She had no idea how quickly an immortal healed – which was one of the points he intended to make. What Kit didn't know about dragons and Massa'eva was enough to fill the ocean. "Your pulling the spikes from his dragon form when you did, sped his recovery. But he would have survived in either case. You may not have."

For a heartbeat, a spark of defiance sparked behind her eyes. Cyril knew he should not be finding it nearly as captivating as he did.

“In my defense, it worked,” said Kit.

“It did,” Cyril acknowledged, stepping toward her and spreading his shoulders so he loomed over the small mortal. “But we are heading to the Equinox Trials. Ignoring an order there might mean the difference between your survival and lack thereof. It would be disappointing for all involved if you died. I realize you wish to trust your instincts, but you simply do not have enough experience in Lunos to have developed safe ones.” He wielded each word like a weapon now, bringing them down in harsh strokes. One hard truth at a time.

In the beat of silence that followed, Cyril flared the scales along his temples, increasing his already large silhouette as he let his dragon’s dominance rise to the surface. His power dwarfed Kit. And not just her. Cyril could feel the others on deck tense and back away, many instinctively bearing their necks to him.

Kit lowered her head, her heart hammering so hard against her ribs that he could hear the echoing beats. It was the first sign of real emotion he’d gotten from her since they got to matter at hand. Now they were getting somewhere. Pulling his shoulders back, he stepped closer to the girl. Invading her space. Taking away whatever illusion of safety she was holding on to.

“Kitterny?” Cyril prompted.

“I’m...” Kit’s throat bobbed as she swallowed – and then slammed an invisible wall down between them. Her heart pounded still, but there was something different about her scent. She did feel fear, but there was an abstract quality to it that set warning bells off in Cyril’s head. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you, my prince. I should have heeded your words.”

Cyril rocked back on his heels. In any normal situation, that response would be both expected and welcome. But nothing about Kit was normal. She wasn’t sorry. She was telling Cyril to go to hell in a way that he could do little about.

He knew the technique well enough, having used it often in the five years the Serpari queen held him.

His hands tightened their grip on each other. “You are apologizing?”

“Of course, my prince. Is that... Is that not what you wish?”

Cyril’s jaw ground so hard he heard his teeth scrape. What he wanted was to impart the gravity of the situation to Kitterny. He bloody wanted her to make fewer poor life choices going forward. “I recommend you become more skilled at lying before attempting it against me again,” he said in a clipped tone.

“I’m not lying.”

She was absolutely lying. Hell, Cyril had little doubt that if a dragon with a toothache suddenly landed before Kit, the girl would climb into his open maw to help out. For the present though, all her efforts were aimed at one goal: making Cyril go away.

Rutting hell.

Kit’s spine straightened, her hands draping behind her back in imitation of his own. “I’m ready to accept whatever punishment is warranted.”

“Oh, for ruts sake, Kit,” Cyril snapped, his anger flaring. “Say that a bit louder and it’s exactly how this conversation will end.”

She let out a humorless laugh as if to say *what other way can it end?*

The sound pushed Cyril back on his heels, his mind wheeling. What other way could it end? It was supposed to end with a contrite Kit in his arms, her soft body pressed against him as he assured her that all was forgiven.

Clearly, Kit had other expectations. Other plans, possibly. Ones that included neither contrition nor forgiveness.

Cyril’s pulse picked up speed, his mind racing to take in the field of battle he’d not prepared for. He was acutely aware

that the crew was watching. Knew how they thought an encounter between a commanding officer and a mouthy subordinate should end on a ship of war. That is, with a rope on bared skin.

Shoving all else aside, Cyril focused on Kit. Not the Kit he'd expected, but the one who truly stood before him. Back straight, eyes hard, emotions locked away. She wore a lightweight, sapphire blue dress that draped off her hips, accentuating the curves. The long sleeves hugged her arms before extending into slightly flared cuffs that fluttered with the ocean breeze. Beautiful, except for the spot of blood spreading over her left forearm.

Cyril's mouth tightened at that, but he didn't let himself stop his assessment to check the cause. With the wall she'd slammed between them, it was hard to read Kit's eyes and body. But her scent and the bond between them still carried scraps of feelings she could not quite lock away.

Kit wasn't the least bit sorry. But she was hurt. Alone. Vulnerable as hell and fighting with every fiber of her being to keep it hidden. She looked pale, too. Had she not been eating these past days?

Cyril had been busy, and – since it was his orders Kit had ignored when she put herself and the ship in danger – he'd wanted to be the one to clear the air. So she'd been left alone, a human new to the immortal realm, wondering when she'd be whipped for trying to save Quinton's life.

And now she'd stopped wondering and remembered that she'd been beaten before and survived. Not just by the assholes who enslaved her in the human realm, but by the pack - in an incident that also happened to be over a refusal to follow orders to stay put.

She wasn't running now, though. She was surviving - by not letting anything, the dragons included, to get too close. Kit had been a slave. She'd learned the cost of trusting the wrong person. And she had no intention of trusting the dragon princes again.

Cyril closed the distance between them in a single step, his hand capturing her chin. The contact of their skin sent a jolt of energy through him, one that he prayed to the stars she felt too.

“I don’t want to see you hurt,” he said softly. “The order I’d given was to protect you, Kit. Going up to an injured dragon is more perilous than you know. I *am* sorry it took so long to speak to you. But I need to know that you understand. In truth, not just words. Show me you understand, for real, and it’s behind us. We both walk off this deck and that’s that.”

“I understand.” Unlike Cyril had, Kit spoke loudly enough for the crew to hear her both her words and the insolence of her tone. “Thank you for correcting me, my prince. May I go?”

Rut his life. “You may not.”

A ghost of a humorless smile brushed her lips. “Of course not.”

“You think I’m playing with you?” Cyril demanded. He knew she knew what she was cornering them both into.

“No, Your Highness. I know full well that I am Lady Kitterny, your true bride, and that every word you utter is the truth.” She bent to pick up the rope’s end she’d discarded earlier, her scent now filled with steel. “I understand naval custom prefers rope for discipline?”

An invisible band tightened around Cyril’s chest, and it was only his years of military training that let him keep his voice even, free of the dread and anger now raging through him.

“You understand correctly.” Taking the rope from her, Cyril undid her creative weaving and knotted the rope in even intervals with a precision that he knew she’d notice.”

This was going to hurt them both. And for what? Her pride? To erect a wall between them? Hell, most likely she was doing it to remind herself to hate Cyril.

“The knots are added for impact,” he said, aware of the crew watching his every move. “They hurt a great deal more

than you'd expect looking at them." It was not until he finished the last one, that he moved closer, his voice barely audible above the wind. "This is not how I intended for our conversation to end," he said tightly. "Whether you chose to believe that or not is up to you, but this is not how things should be between us."

"It is the only way they can be." The void between them stretched with every heartbeat. "Plus, doesn't the crew deserve a boon for their hard work?"

"The crew?" Cyril felt his brows rise. What had the crew to do with any of this?

"Haven't you heard? I'm the reason the Phoenix's runes failed. There are good odds being offered that I'll be begging before you are through, by the way."

Cyril froze, his fury pulsing through his blood. He hadn't heard. Probably because the sailors knew he'd flog them within an inch of their lives if they uttered such a thing within his earshot.

Kit stepped away and turned her back to him. Her dress had an open back, with satin ribbons criss crossing the bodice, the skin beneath them was pale and smooth. Reaching back, Kit pulled the knot holding the ribbons in place, letting the satin drop away. She braced her hands on the rail, the muscles of her back bunching to brace for the pain.

"Six lashes," Cyril announced, which was as low as he could reasonably go. "Not at the rail though. I don't need you toppling overboard. Go to the capstone." He pointed to the large post that controlled the anchor chain and the crew parted to let them through.

Kit placed her palms and forehead against the wood. She was already braver than many sailors would be. Cyril hated that she'd learned how to be that.

The wind blew Kit's hair out of the way.

Without allowing either of them more time to make things worse than they already were, Cyril delivered the first blow.

19. CYRIL



*K*it made no sound as the first blow landed across her shoulders, but Cyril felt the lash as if it had hit him instead. No. It would have hurt infinitely less if it were him taking the blows. Letting the rope hang loose for a moment, he laid a second welt beside the first. A third stripe followed. Kit rocked with each one, her breath catching as furious red marks crossed her shoulders. The rope's knots broke the skin on the fourth lashing. Considering he could open an immortal's back with one blow, it had been a stretch to have taken as long as it did on a human.

That didn't make Cyril feel any better as he saw red beads on Kit's pale skin.

"Two more to go," Cyril told her. "It's almost over."

She didn't react.

Some of the crew shifted on their feet. At least a few didn't like this anymore than Cyril did. But there were more that all but smiled. Cyril wanted to rip out their throats.

He ensured Kit inhaled fully before he went on, but that was all the aid he could offer. She'd still not cried out at the sixth lash, though Cyril had no idea how she managed to shove the pain so deep away from herself.

It... It wasn't a good sign.

"That's six," Cyril announced, loudly enough to be heard through the deck, which had gone decidedly silent. Kit sagged slightly, but before she could move he put a hand around the nape of her neck, his voice dropping. "Now, we talk."

Kit stiffened.

“Did you imagine it would end here?” Cyril hissed. Without waiting for an answer that he knew wouldn’t come, he guided Kit down to his cabin and locked the door. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, but she still refused to cry. Refused to let him into her pain.

Well, he was immortal. He could wait. But stars take him, if she made him lash her, he was going to unravel the mess going on inside Kit’s head even if it took the rest of the voyage to Massa’ eve.

Cyril crossed his arms over his chest. “Why is your arm bleeding?” he asked. “What happened?”

“M-My arm?” Kit struggled to keep her composure. She held the top of her dress with one hand, lest it slip further from her shoulders, confusion dancing in the haze surrounding her. At the moment, Cyril wasn’t sure she remembered that she *had* an arm, much less that it had bled through her sleeve.

“Yes, your arm.” Cyril hooked a stool with his foot and slid it over to her. “I’m well aware of what happened to your back.”

“There is nothing of note with my arm,” Kit said. She did sit at least. Probably because she was in too much pain to keep standing. For now, Cyril would take it.

“After what happened on deck, I’m in a mood to make up my own mind.” Cradling her elbow in his hand, Cyril inched up the sleeve spotted with blood. When he saw the wound there, his body went preternaturally still. “What is that?” he demanded.

“Nothing. An itch.”

She’d clawed her slave brand raw, as if trying to take the puckered skin off with her nails. Cyril closed his eyes.

“I’m fine,” said Kit.

“I’m not,” Cyril snapped, his hand tightening on her elbow as he gave up all pretense of control. “I’m not fine with this, and I’m not fine with having whipped you just now. I’m not

fine watching you flinch in fear and even less fine with the numbness you are fighting your way into. I'm fine with none of it, Kit."

"Well you should be."

"Why is that?"

"Because you are a royal dragon prince of Massa'eva and I'm a slave in lip-paint. We are a business deal and nothing more."

A chill went through him. "You think you are a business deal to me?"

"It's the truth."

"You want another truth?" Cyril growled softly. "Here it is." Gripping Kit's sides, he lifted her into the air until their faces were in line with each other, and pressed his mouth over hers. Cyril's tongue swept in between Kit's parted lips, taking her with a possessiveness that erupted from his very soul.

Kit tasted of sweetness and fire, of determination and vulnerability that made Cyril ache. With her in his arms, the world seemed to blur at the edges and Cyril was no match for the storm of emotions the touch of her lips released. He shifted her in his hold, one arm dropping just below her backside while the other cupped the soft curve of her cheek.

Her skin was velvety soft beneath his touch, a delicate contrast to the rough calluses of his own hand. His thumb traced the curve of her jaw, feeling the steady rhythm of her pulse beneath his fingertips.

Cyril's own pulse raced, his chest tightening with desire and something deeper that he couldn't – wouldn't – conceal from her.

Kit's hands rose to grip Cyril's arms, her fingers digging into his flesh. Cyril shuddered. An emotion. He'd have been happy with anything, even an attempt to knee him between the legs. Anything but the cold veil of nothing she'd wrapped around herself on deck. But this... her touch, her hold, her allowing him to be her anchor if only for a few heartbeats – it was everything.

He threaded his fingers through Kit's hair wanting every sensation, every detail of their connection seared into his memory – her sweet taste, the hard press of her fingers, the way her mouth softened against his. And in return, he bared the primal need burning inside his heart to her.

They both trembled when Cyril finally pulled away. Rearranging Kit in his arms, he cradled her in his lap as he settled them both on the cot, his forehead pressed into her hair. She didn't relax against him but she didn't push away either.

“I have you,” Cyril promised. “I'm here with you. I'm not going to let go.”

She shuddered, lifting her face to fight the threatening tears.

He stroked her hair. “You can cry. I know it hurts very badly.”

A sob finally escaped her. The first one.

“There you go,” Cyril said.

“I don't want to cry.” Her voice hitched.

“You can trust me with your pain,” he said, rocking them both as Kit's shoulders finally started to shake. “I have you, nymph. You aren't a business deal. You are the beating heart of the pack, the one that lets us keep fighting. You are everything.” He brushed his fingers gently over her abused back, then rubbed the base of her neck with his thumb. He didn't realize his dragon was purring to her too, not until he felt the vibrations in his own chest.

When Kit's shaking shoulders settled a bit, Cyril dared to unwrap one hand from her long enough to pull a med satchel toward him and take out a tin of salve. It took a moment to get the tin open without loosening his hold on Kit, and another few heartbeats to softly let her know what was coming. That it may sting a bit before it helped, but that it *would* help. Just as he would help. The scent of arnica mixed with other herbs drifted into the air.

Kit flinched at first contact, her body going taught before her head pressed harder into his shoulder. “Sorry,” she

whispered.

“Never be sorry for letting me see the truth,” said Cyril. “Would it help if I started on a less tender part?”

No answer came for a moment, then Kit nodded reluctantly, as if admitting to a weakness. Cyril kissed the top of her head. He understood too well, knew that this went a great deal deeper than a bit of salve.

“Tavias and I are twins,” he said against the sound of another quiet sob that Kit let escape from her, the tentative trust between them like a weave of a spider’s web. “But I was born first. I was the heir apparent.”

Kit shifted, evident surprise rippling through her.

“When I came of age, my father, Ettienne, sent me to sea. Learning to command a ship and crew isn’t the same as ruling a kingdom, but it was a start.” He adjusted her in his lap, returning his attention to her back. It was easier to speak without looking into her face. “The water called to me, and I fell in love with the waves and winds. With commanding a ship and using my magic to make us a force to fear. Eventually though, Ettienne decided that I was becoming too reliant on my personal magic and needed a new lesson. He ordered that I return to court. Leaving the ocean was the last thing I wanted. So... so I didn’t.”

“You refused the king?”

“I did. It... It didn’t go well. Ettienne gave me enough rope to hang myself. He knew I’d want to prove myself at sea, and so he waited for me to get reckless. Eventually, I did. I brought a fleet into action against a larger force from the serpent court. We lost, and the Serpari queen, Nagaia, took the survivors prisoner. As is customary at sea, she offered to return me and the other officers back to Massa’eve – an exchange for some of her people that we’d captured. The terms were fair. Except, Ettienne said no.”

Done with Kit’s back, Cyril gently cleaned off the blood on her forearm, hating the sight of the slave brand there.

“Nagaia was upset at the snub. She’d expected Ettienne would gladly give her anything to get me back, and convinced herself that I must be a spy trying to penetrate her court. There was no more courtesy after that. Nagaia is known for... she is known for her dungeons.” Cyril felt his heart pound against his ribs, the unwelcome memories hammering against his senses.

Kit half turned, her hand splaying on Cyril’s chest until the warmth of her touch grounded him again. “How long were you held?”

“Five years. First, she forced me to watch while she tortured and killed my crew. Then she started on me. Sometimes, after a while, the beatings were the only thing that reminded me that I was still alive. So long as I feared them, I figured I was still capable of reason. On worse days though, I welcomed physical pain. It was the only way to shield myself from the darkness in my mind.” Cyril had never spoken of his time with Nagaia aloud, not even to his brothers, but it felt right to tell Kit. “She left brands on me, too. The many years since then and my immortal blood have erased many of the marks from my skin, but I remember them.”

He wrapped a linen bandage tightly around her forearm then peeled the dress off and nudged her to lie down on the bed, careful of her back as he wrapped his body protectively around her. “I’d likely still be there except Tavier pulled a team together to get me out.”

“And that is why he is the heir apparent now?” Kit asked. She lay on her belly, her head pillowed on Cyril’s shoulder, the softness of her cheek pressing against his skin.

“No,” said Cyril. That was a different conversation altogether. He brushed his hand over her hair, savoring the feel of the strands. “But I did learn then how little royal blood matters.” He pressed his forehead against Kit’s. “Please never make me do that again,” he whispered, his voice hitching. “Even if you can bear the pain, I do not believe I can. I would rather hand myself over to Nagaia than have to hurt you again.”

20. KIT



I wake to the sounds of multiple quiet voices talking over me and Cyril's hand drawing small circles along my neck. Blazing fire covers every inch of my upper back. I don't remember it hurting so much last night. Maybe the adrenaline had kept the pain at bay. This morning however, all my nerve endings are awake and screaming. Cyril's gentle stroking is the only thing keeping me from bawling right now, and I don't dare move or open my eyes while I get myself under control.

Through the haze, I start making out the ongoing conversation.

"Who?" Taviias demands.

"No one person." For once, there is no humor in Hauck's voice. "From what I gather, the sailors got it into their heads that having a human aboard was bad luck, and it became a theme."

"The wounds look worse than last night." Cyril's voice is tight, tension filling each word. "And her heart is beating too quickly."

"It's just pain and swelling," says Taviias.

A soft growl. "*Just* pain and swelling?"

"I meant there is no infection." For once, Taviias sounds like the calm one. "It will get better. She needs something for the pain, and more salve for the welts. Here I'll – " he cuts off as a primal sort of growl echoes through Cyril's chest. It isn't a sound I've ever heard from him and it fills the cabin with the

promise of bloodshed. The hand that's been stroking my neck now pulls me protectively against Cyril's hard body.

"Stop," Hauck says quickly.

I open my eyes to find Hauck's arm blocking Tavius's path, both the princes' scales standing up like hackles. On the other side of me, Cyril's body continues to vibrate with a low growl, his pupils dilated and nearly filling his eyes. Wisps of magic seem to be rising behind him, like shadows of phantom wings.

"Tavius, back away. Slowly," Hauck orders, his eyes locked on Cyril, who he addresses next. "It's alright, Cy. He won't touch her. No one will. Just you."

What the hell?

I swallow my surprise as Tavius does what he is told. By Hauck. Which isn't something I'd ever thought I'd see. But whatever is happening, Hauck seems to get it.

As the violence in Cyril's growl settles slightly, Hauck holds a placating hand out to him. "No one will touch Kit without your permission. But if we give you the salve, could you put it on her welts? She's awake, and she might be getting scared."

Despite acknowledging that I'm awake, Hauck doesn't look at me at all, and Tavius seems to be fighting the urge to let his gaze slide toward me as well.

"Cy?" Hauck says gently.

The menacing growl finally stops and I feel Cyril sigh behind me. "Sorry," he says. "I don't know what came over me."

"I do," replies Hauck. "Would it be alright if we said good morning to Kit?"

"Of course –" Cyril cuts off as another growl escapes him, his body and words clearly not in agreement on the plan.

"We'll hold off," Hauck says.

I struggle to sit up, a gasp of pain escaping me as I do. Cyril's growl strengthens, but his hands are there to steady me, his fingers never losing contact with my skin. Whatever is happening to him, I know he means me no harm. "What's going on?" I ask.

"Cyril is feeling a bit possessive this morning," Hauck says. "It's a primal reaction that... well, that sometimes happens."

"It's never happened to me," says Cyril. I'm not sure, but I think I hear embarrassment mix with contrition in his tone. Clearing his throat, he turns toward me. "How are you feeling?" he asks, brushing a stray strand of hair from my face. His pupils are shirking to normal now, the shadowed outlines of wings nearly invisible.

"Sore." My hands tighten around the edge of my blanket. It has slipped down to my waist and, despite the many various ways of nakedness all the princes have seen me in, I feel strangely self-conscious. I pull the blanket up to cover my breasts, wincing at the motion.

Cyril helps settle the blanket into place. "Can you bear for me to put more salve on your back? It will help."

I feel my face blanch at the thought. "Can you give me a bit?"

Cyril's mouth tightens in objection, but he nods. "A bit. But not too long."

I shudder despite myself and Cyril presses a kiss to my forehead. "I will be very gentle with it, I promise," he whispers.

"Who blamed you for the attack in the rift, Kit?" Tavius demands, changing the course of the conversation as he paces the confines of the cabin. "I want names."

I glance at Cyril to see if he's likely to bite Tavius's head off if I look at him, but Cyril seems to be getting control of himself. Still, I'm careful not to look at Tavius too long.

Cyril notices and gives me a look that is a mix of gratitude and apology.

“I don’t know.” I’m only half lying, but it’s for a good cause. Tavius looks homicidal. Or prone to setting something on fire. I’d rather not be an accomplice to either of those deeds. “There are lots of things people say when their superiors aren’t –” I cut off as commotion sounds outside the cabin.

“You need to get back to your cot,” Corvus is still insisting as Quinton shoves the door open without bothering to knock. His face is as pale as Corvus’s is red. “Prince! Prince Quinton, please.”

Ignoring Corvus’s sputtering, Quinton stumbles inside. He moves with painful slowness, his hands gripping walls and overhead beams to keep himself upright. Wisely, Tavius and Hauck just move aside, making no move to aid their brother – though Quinton’s jaw tightens in pain each time he puts weight on his left leg.

Still, he is awake. And walking. Both of which seem impossible given his state just days ago. Yet he is here, and as delightful as ever.

With no explanation or greeting, Quinton stumbles through the now silent cabin to where I sit on Cyril’s cot. If he’d done as much five minutes ago, I’m pretty sure we’d have had a deathmatch on our hands, but at least Cyril seems to have himself in check now. Which is good, since magic is crackling along Quinton’s scales.

“You can’t do this, my prince,” Corvus insists, redoubling his effort to rush after Quinton. A pair of confused looking sailors who’d come with them stay at the door. Corvus huffs. “You shouldn’t be walking yet. You certainly cannot be using your magic. This is preposterous.”

Quinton’s gaze meets mine. It isn’t friendly. In fact, the silver dragon seems intent on murder, and is just looking for the right victim.

“You know, I’m with Healer Corvus on the whole you going away part,” I tell Quinton. “So why don’t you limp off to wherever you belong. Hell for example.”

The magic crackling over Quinton's scales intensifies. Why couldn't Cyril's menacing growling have taken root now instead?

"For stars' sake, Princes! Someone stop him before he hurts himself further," Corvus demands, his voice filling the cabin. "Can't you see he intends to *heal* the human."

Wait, what?

"Well, she is in pain," Hauck points out.

"And what of it?" Corvus throws up his hands. "Using magic will set back Prince Quinton's recovery." He spins toward Quinton and conjures a reasonable tone as he speaks into the prince's back. "Your Highness, please. I assure you that the human's wounds will in no way affect her ability to bear healthy offspring. Surely you can see that it's her back not her womb that bleeds? In fact, much research *encourages* judiciously lashing humans lest they –"

Quinton turns faster than I thought possible given his state.

Hauck, who's already pulled a knife from his boot, holds it hilt first toward Quinton.

Without so much as slowing his arc, Quinton takes the offered weapon and slashes the blade over Corvus's throat.

The healer's eyes go wide before his body crumples to the floor.

I choke on air.

With unnerving calm, Hauck retrieves his knife and cleans it on Corvus's coat before tucking it back into his boot.

Tavias turns to the waiting sailors. "Clean this mess up," he orders. "And inform Captain Dane that he will need to appoint a new healer."

Cyril nods his agreement. "Also, spread the word amidst the crew. Anyone treating or even speaking of Lady Kitterny with anything but utter respect will find himself at the grating, with me at the whip. And there will be not one, but nine knotted strands, when I use it to uncover the color of their backbone."

Bloody stars.

The sailors pale and touch their foreheads before dragging Corvus's corpse from the cabin. With no further ceremony – or asking permission – Quinton lays his hand on my abused back. “I really dislike you,” he tells me, before his hand heats and pain explodes through my quickly healing flesh.

By the time Quinton is done, I no longer hurt and he... he is no longer conscious.

* * *

TWO WEEKS after we leave the Faewave Rift behind us, the lookout's shout of “Land Ahoy!” brings everyone out on deck. The crew races to the rail to examine the shore now cutting the horizon line, their voices ringing with so much enthusiasm that I wonder if they aren't surprised to have found it. Maybe they are. Though no one has dared to mention anything about my being a bad omen since Cyril had issued his threat, I don't doubt the seamen's worry is still with them. Quinton, who's been back to his usual caustic self for days now, ignores the excitement with the same derision he ignores me.

I still have no idea why he healed my back that day. My best guess is that he wanted to balance the scales, ensuring he didn't have to feel indebted to me for helping him in his dragon form. Not that I think of it that way. As far as I'm concerned, Quinton and his dragon are entirely different creatures.

After the initial excitement over the land sighting, the ship descends into a swarm of activity. Decks are scrubbed, clothes are laundered, the sails are furled and unfurled and furled again until they meet Captain Dane's exacting standard. Now that we are close to land, a flag with Tavius's purple colors is hoisted up the mast to signal that the incoming ship carries the heir apparent aboard. Dragon princes and their new bride apparently making landfall in Massa've is an affair of state.

Nora outdoes her usual efficiency in packing up my belongings before I even have a chance to try and help, and

then pulls out a dress I've not seen before.

"I've been saving it for this moment," she confesses, her eyes glittering with excitement. "And you are not going to believe the jewels the princes bought to go with it."

"Nora? Were you deprived of dolls as a child?" I ask.

She raises her chin. "Are you implying I treat you as a doll?"

"Never."

"Good. Because I'll have you know that I never put makeup on dolls. It ruins them. You on the other hand, it only makes more interesting. So we'll be doing make up. A lot of makeup."

"Glad we clarified that." Suppressing a smile, I switch my attention to the gown Nora holds up for my inspection. It is a deep purple satin that hugs my breasts and cascades down over my hips. The cloth is smooth under my fingers and the hem brushes perfectly against the tops of high heeled shoes that fasten with a ribbon lacing around my calf. "Stars. This is..."

"No less than you deserve," says Nora. "Now, sit. Me and your hair have plans."

Nora spends two hours brushing, curling, and braiding my hair, her hands tugging slightly in a rhythmic way that lets my mind wander along the waves. In just a few hours, I'll be stepping off the familiar deck of the Phoenix and onto the battle ground that is Massa'ev. A fake stand-in for Lady Cordelia, a fake bride apparent for the dragon prices, a secret bait and switch for the fertility elixir. None of that is new, but it is newly real.

My stomach churns. Discreetly gripping the edge of my chair, I close my eyes and coax my lungs to take long calming breaths – only to jump out of my skin when the cabin door swings open.

"I brought –" Tavius stops with his mouth slightly ajar, his gaze clinging to me as if he'd expected someone else in my place.

A shiver runs through me. “Is something wrong?”

“No. Yes.” He growls, the scales along his temples ruffle and shift to a deeper purple tint. A very deep purple tint. Just like my dress. Tavius clears his throat. “Pretty,” he says gruffly.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

He steps in and clears his throat again. “Dragons hoard pretty things, not parade them about,” he says curtly and turns to leave, before stopping and turning back. I’m fairly sure that, for a moment there, he’d forgotten why he’d come. Now, he drops a carved box onto one of the chests. “For you. I’ll see you on deck. Don’t – don’t be late.”

I stare at the closed door. “What was that?” I ask. “And what could I even be late to?”

Nora covers her mouth, her delicate hand holding back a giggle. “I believe that was Massa’ev’s general and heir to the throne feeling smitten.” She clears her throat, much as Tavius had. “It’s sometimes hard to remember that under all the arrogance and power, they are flesh and blood immortals.”

“Oh, right. Just run of the mill immortals.”

The irony is lost on Nora. Skipping over to the box Tavius left, she opens it at once, her face lighting up in excited delight. “These are perfect, Lady Kitterny!”

She tips the box toward me. Perfect doesn’t begin to describe the two dragon-shaped combs that lie within, each covered with diamonds and jewels. When I examine them closer, I can see that each of the princes’s dragon colors are skillfully worked into the design. I’ve never touched anything as expensive. Hell, each little comb could feed a family for years where I come from. Probably in Massa’ev, too. “I can’t possibly wear these,” I whisper.

“Well, you cannot *not* wear them either,” Nora points out. “Given that Prince Tavius himself delivered them and all.”

I run my finger along the gems. Each is cut perfectly and catches the light in a way that makes the dragons seem to glow with magic. “What if I lose them?”

“How?”

“Like drop them and not notice. I’m very good at dropping things.”

“Like if you accidentally get into a brawl along the docks, completely destroy your hair and dress, drop the combs, and manage to not notice? And neither do the four hoarding, overprotective dragons surrounding you?”

Well, when she puts it that way... I sit myself back on the stool.

By the time Nora is done and I look at myself in the mirror, I can hardly recognize the lady who looks back at me. Then I touch the still itching slave brand on the inside of my forearm and the illusion disappears.

“Stars,” Nora exclaims, rushing back to one of the chests. “I completely forgot the gloves.”

She holds supple, elbow-high gloves for me to slide my hands into, and the last evidence of truth disappears from view.

The four dragon princes are already dressed by the time I come up on deck. Tavier, Cyril, and Hauck all wear exquisitely tailored military uniforms, though Tavier’s jacket is decorated with so much golden embroidery that it is difficult to see the black material in places. Hauck’s epaulets on the other hand hold only a pair of lonely gold bars for rank. The dragon stitched on their breasts matches the beasts on the combs I wear, while the wide sashes emphasize the princes’ taut waists and broad shoulders. They are a study of masculine perfection. Stars made flesh.

Beside them, dressed in a loose black shirt and pants, the preternaturally still Quinton manages to be simultaneously invisible and mouthwateringly gorgeous. If one is attracted to sociopathic dragons. The only color on him is in the form of a silver dragon embroidered on his collar. A matching dragon pendant that I’ve seen glimpses of before hangs from his neck. Of the four princes, Quinton is the only one openly armed, the sword strapped along his spine not looking very ornamental.

Tavias, Cyril, and Hauck all incline their heads to me when I approach. I curtsy back, the way Nora taught me.

“You look lovely, Lady Kitterny,” says Tavias.

“The dragon combs suit you well,” Cyril agrees, as formal as his commander.

“You look delicious, turnip.” Hauck runs his tongue over the tips of his long canines.

Cyril rolls his eyes.

Quinton turns on his heels and starts toward the other side of the ship.

I make a vulgar gesture toward his back.

Tavias catches Quinton’s shoulder and yanks the prince back, twisting him so Quinton and I face each other.

“Enough.” Tavias’s words come through clenched teeth and are barely audible. “I don’t care how you two actually feel about one another, but the moment we step off this ship, you are nothing but devoted. Quinton wants nothing more than to protect Kit with his life, and Kit dreams of bearing Quinton’s pups. Thirty-five of them. Am I making myself clear?”

I catch the flash in Tavias’s eyes and nod quickly. “Very clear.”

Quinton turns away. “We’re not off the ship yet.”

Cyril curses.

21. KIT



“Your carriage is ready, my prince,” a liveried manservant bows to Tavius the moment we step onto the docks, which teem with activity. Sailors secure ropes and dock workers unload crates, the clamor of voices merging with the cries of gulls and the rhythmic creaking of ships swaying with the tide. The salty sea air I’ve become accustomed to on the Phoenix now mingles with the fragrant aroma of exotic spices and flowers that drift from nearby market stalls.

Before we can take two steps, a contingent of royal guards steps forward, their uniforms adorned with golden thread. Their disciplined formation contrasts sharply with the chaos of the docks as they touch their hands to their hearts in salute before forming a diamond around us. A moment later, and yet another liveried man appears with refreshments and news of court.

Everything is happening so quickly and smoothly that I wonder if they hadn’t rehearsed all the motions before our arrival.

“Why wouldn’t they have?” Cyril says matter of factly, and I realize that I’d spoken my last thought aloud.

As we make our way toward the carriage, I try to take in the princes’ home without appearing to gape. In truth though, I’ve never been to a large city and this... this is beyond anything I could have imagined. Towering spires and intricately carved balconies dominate the skyline in a bow to Massa’evé dragon heritage. The layout of the city, as much as I can see it from the docks, appears to central around the

looming palace, boulevards lined with lush trees and flowering plants extending from it like the spokes of a wheel.

“This is beautiful,” I whisper.

“And yet, you outshine it all,” Hauck says with a smirk. “I’m not being poetic, by the way. In case you’ve failed to notice, it’s you who everyone is watching.”

With a start, I realize that Hauck is right, and promptly trip over my own feet.

Hauck catches my elbow.

Cyril falls in on my other side. “Are you alright?” he asks quietly.

“Fine.” Except for the part that everywhere I turn, I now find someone staring. In curiosity. In disdain. In hope. In every emotion in between. I wonder if any of them are also secretly wondering if a human isn’t a bad omen, like the sailors did.

Once we reach the carriage, Quinton helps me inside. For a heartbeat, I think he is being genuinely helpful, but the moment the door closes behind us, Quinton pulls away as if burned.

“Does being near me pain you so much that you can’t even feign civility for a few hours?” I hiss.

“Does walking distress you so much that you can’t work out where your feet go?”

I shake my head in disgust.

He snarls.

“Enough, you two,” Tavius snaps. “If Ettienne suspects you aren’t fully committed to the Equinox Trials –”

“He’ll what? Decide to give up on the whole thing?” says Quinton. “Let Geoffrey compete uncontested?”

Tavius growls. A reminder of who is in charge. When that fails to make an impression on Quinton, Tavius shakes his head. “You know better than to underestimate, Ettienne. You, of all people.”

Darkness flickers over Quinton's silver scales.

I rub my arms. "Can I just say that your father sounds horrid?"

"He isn't," Cyril says, shaking his head.

"He –" I cut myself off, unsure if Cyril would be alright with me bringing up his captivity.

"He puts Massa'ev and the dragons first though," Cyril finishes for me. "Ahead of whatever his own desires might be."

Tavias nods. "It's not just the fate of the dragons at stake. In the southern ocean, Massa'ev is the force standing between the likes of Nagaia and Azulon. Both their courts fought against warding the humans away. They are still bitter over being unjustly denied their mortal slave labor. If Salazar takes Massa'ev's throne, he's not going to hold Ettienne's line about the humans."

"So you are saying we have to get this right?" I ask.

"Yes. We have to get this right," Tavias says, not echoing my hint at lightness at all.

I wince. A fake bride. A fake unity of our pack. A fake set of Equinox vows to be taken in two days. With a winning setup like this, what can possibly go wrong?

* * *

CYRIL TALKS MOST of the ride to the palace. I spend it wondering how in the world I'm going to pull off what's expected. What's needed. With what Tavias had explained about the other courts' wish to enslave the mortal realm, it seems that the survival of both dragons and humans is riding on ensuring the princes keep the throne.

"Have you been listening to me, Kit?" Cyril asks as the carriage bumps to a stop. "Kit?"

"Um... no." I wince in apology. "Sorry. I really am."

“I was listening,” says Hauck. “Don’t worry, turnip, you didn’t miss anything useful.”

“Get out, all of you,” Taviias says, motioning his brother out of the carriage. When I start to follow after the princes, Taviias cuts in front of me, his hands gripping my shoulders as he pushes me back down to the padded bench. His attention on my face, he slowly traces his thumbs over my cheekbones.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Your eyes,” he whispers. “The way the light reflects from them, it makes them shine as brightly as the jewels in the combs.”

“Oh.” I swallow, fighting the urge to run my finger over the sensitive scales running down Taviias’s temple. My breasts feel too full all of a sudden, my nipples rising indecently against the exquisite purple fabric of my gown. Purple. “I’m wearing your colors, aren’t I?”

His throat bobs. “You are. And you have no idea what the sight of you in that dress is doing to me, Kitterny. I should be thinking about a million things right now, but all I’ve been able to concentrate on the entire damn trip is how much I like seeing you in that dress, with those dragon combs in your hair. It’s been... distracting.” The last words come out hoarsely and Taviias shifts his legs.

Unable to stop myself, I brush his scales briefly, sending a shudder all along Taviias’s body.

“Stars, Kit. Don’t do that. Not now.”

My fingertips stop at Taviias’s neck, where his pulse is beating hard enough to make the stutter. “Your heart is racing.”

“It is.”

“Does it have anything to do with my being neither blond, noble, or gifted with air magic?” I try to say the words lightly, but I don’t manage to convince myself, much less him, that it’s a joke. I lean my cheek into his touch, drawing on the endless strength that he offers with no hesitation. “I’m scared, Taviias.”

“You are the diamond, Kitterny. Anyone who doesn’t see you outshine the world is either blind or stupid.”

I swallow. “The world must have a lot of stupid people then.”

“You have no idea.” He grips my face in his hands and tilts it up toward him. “And the reason my heart is beating so fast? It’s because I’m afraid that once we walk into that palace, I won’t have a moment alone with you to do this.” Leaning toward me, Tavius brushes his lips over mine with uncharacteristic gentleness.

My mouth parts with a soft gasp of desire.

Tavius’s canines brush my lower lips, sending zings of sensation along my skin to match the warmth already spreading through me. For a moment, Tavius’s hand on my jaw and his tongue sweeping through me in slow savoring strokes, I feel the coiled fear ebb away. I breathe him in, letting his scent and power make the world fade away.

If you only knew how long I’ve wanted to do this, Tavius’s mind voice is a caress inside my head. To have you alone, tasting you, and letting the world be damned while it waits.

His hands slide down to my waist, pulling me closer, the kiss deepens until I’m not sure where I end and Tavius begins. He’d kissed me before, of course, many times. Done a great deal more as he trained my body for the trials. But it had never been like this. Soul deep and sensual and so viscerally real.

My hands reach up to thread through his hair, anchoring me to him. He offers himself freely, his body a lifeline promising to keep me safe in this new land. Our breaths mingle, our hearts race in tandem as someone – probably Hauck – pounds on the carriage door.

Tavius pulls away slowly, letting our lips linger against each other for a moment longer before parting.

“I don’t want to open the carriage door,” he confesses. “When we go inside, with Ettienne, I might be different. More... more the way the heir apparent is expected to behave.”

Whatever happens, promise me that you'll remember this moment. Know that it's real. Alright?"

My chest tightens. "I'm not sure what that means," I whisper.

His thumb traces my cheek again. "Nothing. I just mean..." He hesitates, strangely unsure with his words, which is so unlike him. "Just that we may be different. A disciplined pack that moves with a single united purpose."

"So you've been saying."

A corner of Tavius's mouth lifts, making a rare dimple touch his face. "And you've not been listening."

"Neither was Hauck. Or Quinton. I think you and Cyril were the only ones listening, actually."

Tavius chuckles softly and kisses the top of my head, just as someone bangs on the door again.

"Time to go," he says.

"Wait." I grab his arm, his bicep rock hard beneath his formal tunic. "Can I ask you something before we go in?"

"Of course."

"Has a meeting between the whole pack and your father ever gone well? Or at least as you've intended? You know, in the past few hundred years?"

Tavius lips press together. "There is a first time for everything."

22. TAVIAS



Marideth, the chamberlain who'd been running the palace since before any of the princes were born, met Taviias and the others in the grand foyer.

"My princes!" She clapped her hands together, the neat graying bun on top of her head bobbing about as her round face lit up with a warm smile. "Massa'eve has not been the same without you."

"You've been out and about much, have you?" Taviias asked, raising a brow. The chamberlain knew and loved every inch of the palace – but she also seldom left it. Not even to go to festivals. The familiar grounds were a comfort to her and in return, she made the grand structure into a home for the royals.

"Never you mind that, Prince Taviias," Marideth said primly. "The palace speaks to me as always."

He snorted. "Your staff speaks to you, Marideth."

"We expected you over a week earlier, my prince," she continued as if Taviias had not spoken. The small round female was a force as strong as any of the ocean waves that Cyril tamed. "With the Equinox pledge ball tomorrow night, I feared you might not make it. It will be a masquerade as always. I do hope the masks I've prepared are to your liking. And your fit. Have you lost weight in the human lands, Prince Taviias? Was there little food to be had?"

"Taviias – would you stop gabbing and let the rest of us through?" Pushing Taviias out of the way, Hauck enveloped the

chamberlain in a warm hug, gently lifting her off the floor. “Hello, Marideth.”

“Put me down this instance, Prince Hauck,” she swatted at him. “This is undignified.”

Hauck chuckled, but obeyed, letting Cyril get by to greet Marideth with a kiss on both cheeks.

Quinton being Quinton, remained in the back. And Marideth being herself did not let that stop her from marching right up to him and patting his face with her weathered palm. “Welcome home, Prince Quinton.”

He gave her a bow. “Marideth.”

Blading his body to nudge Kit toward the chamberlain, Tavius held out his hand in a sweeping introduction. “Marideth, allow me to present Lady Kitterny to you. Our bride apparent.”

Kit curtsied. Passably.

Marideth returned the gesture with a good deal more experience and grace. Her lips pressed together into a thin tight smile. “Welcome to Massa’ eve, my lady,” she said with none of her usual warmth.

It wasn’t the greeting Tavius expected, but Marideth always had her own mind – and was protective of the four princes to a fault.

“Is Ettienne waiting for us in his study?” Tavius knew he would be. Ettienne always wished for his sons to come to him, not the other way around. He also wanted such things done without delay. Even the short greetings exchanged with Marideth were likely stretching the limits of Ettienne’s patience.

“No, my prince,” said Marideth. “But he asked that you join him at dinner in an hour in the family dining room.”

Well that was different. Tavius glanced at Cyril, who shook his head. He didn’t understand it either.

“Marideth,” Tavius said, “why –”

“Lady Kitterny, allow me to show you to your room to freshen up before dinner,” Marideth said smoothly. She had perfected the art of not hearing anything she didn’t wish to. “And perhaps I might have the hairdresser stop by to help take those pretty combs from your hair? We wouldn’t want such precious things misplaced.”

Tavias’s spine stiffened, the scales running along it rising beneath his shirt. Marideth knew exactly what those combs were, and her suggestion to remove them was no accident. Something was going on, but Tavias would have an easier time getting an enemy general to talk than the chamberlain.

Hauck seemed to be feeling more optimistic on that front, because he turned to Marideth with the same hopeful expression he’d used as a pup after getting caught stealing pastries from the kitchen.

Ignoring Hauck as efficiently as she’d ignored Tavias, Marideth swooped behind Kit and herded her away. “Dinner is in an hour, Your Highnesses,” she called over her shoulder in that same voice they’d heard since childhood. Only difference now being her restraint from reminding them to wash their hands and scales before sitting at the table.

Quinton turned on his heels and walked off without a word.

“What a pleasure to be home,” said Hauck. “How I’ve missed Ettienne and his rutting games.”

* * *

CYRIL, Hauck, and Tavias all met outside Kitterny’s room right before dinner. She was slightly pale with nerves, but holding up, though the absence of the dragon combs made her look naked somehow. Vulnerable. Following the direction of Tavias’s gaze, Kit smoothed her hair, which was now braided and pinned.

“They were just jewels,” she said. “Honestly, it feels lighter without them.”

They weren't just jewels, they were marks of favor.

"Stop making things complicated," Hauck pushed past them into Kit's room. "The combs are still here, aren't they? Sticking them back in can't be all that difficult."

Tavias swallowed a groan, but fortunately Cyril had the patience Tavias lacked.

"You know as well as we do that Ettienne is behind this," Cyril said with a calm Tavias felt none of. "Given that we have other hurdles to clear today, perhaps we can find a more practical hill to die on than the combs?"

Hauck's face darkened. "Yes, we wouldn't want to do anything to upset my liege." Only Hauck could make the honorific sound like an insult, but he was talented that way. At least he wasn't contradicting Cyril. At the moment, Tavias would take it. Offering his arm to Kit, he led the way to the pack's next battle ground.

The family dining room table was set for six when they arrived, Quinton already inside and leaning menacingly against a wall. Unlike the formal hall, the room was small and welcoming, with a lit hearth at one end and vases of fresh flowers along the walls. The candelabra hanging from the ceiling cast warm light on the brown table cloth, without any of the harsh shadows that made the palace look severe.

At least until Ettienne arrived a few minutes later and all the warmth left the room.

Tavias's father, the man he feared and loved in equal measure, was tall, with broad shoulders, dark eyes, and a sharp widow's peak to match his sharp mind. Ettienne was an onyx dragon, just like his brother and Geoffrey. Small crows' feet at the corner of Ettienne's eyes were the only signs of the centuries Ettienne had on them. The crows' feet and the power that forever pulsed from inside him.

Tavias put his hand to his heart and lowered to one knee, the others following suit behind him. "My Liege."

"Tavias." Ettienne stepped forward, clasping Tavias's forearms and pulling him upright. Ettienne's face warmed with

a smile. “It is good to have you back. The armies have missed their general, and I have missed my son.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“I am pleased to see you’ve kept the pack from killing each other.” Ettienne clapped Tavier’s shoulder and motioned for the others to rise. “Marideth has worried herself sick over how you four were getting along, and I must admit I shared some of her nerves.”

“I’m sure you stayed up long nights fretting.” Hauck strode to the table and sprawled into a chair, somehow managing to make a pristine uniform and toned body look unkempt.

Tavier’s jaw clenched. If he didn’t kill Hauck before the evening was over, it would be a close call.

“I’m sorry, am I making you look bad, Brother?” Hauck asked.

Ignoring both Hauck and Quinton – who was now so still and silent that he seemed to melt into the shadows, Tavier held his hand out to Kit. “Father, allow me to present our new bride apparent, the human, Lady Kitterny.”

Ettienne’s dark gaze weighed her with careful calculation. “A pleasure, Lady Kitterny.”

“Thank you, my liege.” Kit managed to curtsy, a dose of anxiety and fear spiking her scent as Ettienne’s attention tightened around her.

Ettienne obviously smelled the same thing Tavier did – and licked his canines the way a dragon might when staring down an especially juicy deer.

“Would you like to sit down, Kitterny?” Cyril asked, tactfully pulling out a chair between his own seat and Hauck’s. She gave him a grateful look, slinking away from the line of Ettienne’s fire while Tavier took a seat at his father’s right hand. Quinton was the last to join, taking a chair beside Tavier, and dedicating the whole of his attention on the window. As if nothing in the room was relevant to his existence.

While the servants brought in wine and food, Tavius listened to Ettiienne discuss the current state of Massa'eve affairs. The blight had been active the past month, with Mors creatures coming up from the gloom and attacking Maasa'eve soldiers with increasing sophistication. There was speculation as to whether Nagaia or the bone court king might be dabbling with forces from the dark realm. Lady Autumn, the sister of Slait – the earth court – ruler, in the far north was expected to arrive for the Equinox Trails.

It was all important news, but Tavius found himself struggling to concentrate on Ettiienne's words while Hauck and Cyril entertained Kit just across the table from him. Was there a sheen along Hauck's eyes from his wine? No. Impossible. He'd not had that much – Cyril would have stopped him if he'd tried.

A roast was brought in and set in front of Ettiienne, the venison so fresh that it seemed still warm from the kill. Hauck growled appreciatively. Drawing a razor sharp dagger, Ettiienne carved into the meat. Cutting off a thick slice, he held it up appreciatively. Drops of blood and juice ran down the blade.

Kit flinched, her gaze darting away.

“Dragons don't burn their meals the way humans do,” said Ettiienne, serving the slice to her. More blood leaked from it onto the white porcelain. “I look forward to hearing your thoughts on our food.”

“I imagine it's very... flavorful.” Picking up her knife, Kit cut a piece off and brought the bloody morsel toward her parted mouth. Her citrus and cinnamon scent was mixing with the fresh aroma of the meat, and the dragon inside Tavius bucked against his restraints. Stars, he wanted her. Now. On the table. He wanted to shove everything to the floor and feast on Kit instead.

Kit's fork stopped halfway to her mouth, the piece of near raw meat suspended in the air. She looked nauseated.

Ettiienne raised a brow.

“I... I find myself not hungry, my liege,” she said and returned the fork to her plate. “Please pass on my apologies to the chef.”

Tavias tensed. A dragon’s bride was not supposed to have opinions on their dining choices. More to the point, she’d face ordeals far more taxing than eating a bit of too-fresh venison she didn’t much care for.

Hauck plucked Kit’s meat with his fingers and popped it into his mouth. “Why is it that everything tastes better when it belongs to someone else?” he asked as he chewed, then licked his lips clean of blood.

Ettienne gave Tavias a sharp look, a silent reminder that, as pack leader, he was responsible for his brother.

Stop it, Tavias ordered Hauck with his mind, adding a small bite to the command.

“I wasn’t the one who started it.” Hauck pulled Kit’s whole plate toward him and then – as an afterthought – pulled Kit herself onto his lap. “Is anyone else planning on eating, or did the rest of you just gather here to torment the human?”

“Is this the behavior we can expect from your pack at the Equinox Trials, Tavias?” Ettienne asked.

“That’s right,” Hauck gulped down another goblet of wine and put it down with a clank, nearly toppling the cup over. He *was* drunk, though Tavias had no notion how Hauck could manage it on the wine. “It’s all Tavias’s fault. If Cyril was still in charge, I’d no doubt be an obedient fluffy puppy.”

“I find myself hungry after all,” Kit offered quickly. “I’d be grateful, Prince Hauck, if you might assist me with another helping?”

“You are bad at cards,” Hauck said. “Bad liar.”

Quinton rocked his chair back on its hind legs and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Your combs are missing.” Hauck buried his nose in Kit’s hair.

She pulled away gently. “Not missing, my prince. Just put away for safekeeping.”

“Mmmm. No,” said Hauck. “They. Are. Missing. From you.”

Cyril took Hauck’s goblet and helped himself to a sip. “This isn’t wine.”

Tavias’s gut sank.

“Of course it isn’t,” said Hauck. “You know how much wine I’d need to get drunk? I had the kitchen bring me something different.” He took the goblet back and refilled it with a pitcher that stood by his elbow, visually identical to the others at the table. “You didn’t expect me to sit through this dinner sober, did you?”

“In fact, I did,” said Ettienne.

“So you aren’t as smart as you think, are you?” Hauck slurred slightly. “Combs. Where are my bride’s combs?”

Ice touched Ettienne’s eyes. “The combs will be in the hair of the pack’s bride apparent.”

Hauck put down his cup again and ruffled through Kit’s hair like a monkey looking for bugs. “No... No, they aren’t. I just checked again.”

“That is because Lady Kitterny will not be that bride.”

23. KIT



Silence shoots through the dining room, even Quinton growing stiller than usual. My hand tightens around Hauck's forearm.

Hauck belches. At first, I'd thought he was acting more drunk than he was for the sake of irritating Tavius and Ettienne, but no. He really is as out of it as he sounds. The royal family of Massa'vee is as dysfunctional as any human one.

"Lady Kitterny is our bride because she is a magic-touched human," Hauck announces into the silence. He flicks the top of my rounded ear. "See. Very human."

"And where did you get this human exactly?" Ettienne asks, his posture changing from moments earlier when he was discussing the blight with Tavius. The king is no longer a father speaking with sons, but a commander dressing down subordinates.

Cyril lowers his head in acceptance of the coming reprimand. Tavius raises his chin, bracing for battle. Quinton's piercing gaze cuts away from the window and rests with emotionless calm on Ettienne, as if awaiting orders. Hauck...

"We got her in... umm... The human realm." Hauck frowns with effort then grins, proud of himself at finding the right words. If I could slip off his lap and toss a pitcher of ice water into his face to snap him back to reason, I would, but we are plainly beyond that. He raises a finger. "That umm... place where humans live. At an estate."

My heart stutters then starts into a gallop that echoes in my head. Hauck's drunken sputtering aside, this is no longer a hazing game Ettienne plays with me and bloody meat. It's something else entirely. Something that has an ominous feel to it.

"Kitterny is from the Agam estate, sir," Cyril says smoothly. Unlike Hauck, he is all calm and patience and professionalism. On the other side of the table, Tavius is still battling his temper and – I think – the sting of Ettienne's disappointment.

I wonder if Ettienne knows how desperately Tavius wants his approval. To me, that much is obvious.

Cyril bows in my direction. "Kitterny may not be the woman we expected to bring back, but she is magic touched. Mind speech, like Tavius and you. Unfortunately, Lady Cordelia was unable to complete the journey and so –"

"And so, you grabbed the first human who fit the basic requirements of being magic touched and female and dragged her in instead?" Ettienne turns from Cyril to Tavius, his voice hardening further. "I expected better from you."

Tavius's mouth presses into a tight line. "I admit to my failure in protecting Cordelia, sir. But the suggestion that Kitterny is anything but equally worthy –"

"Did you imagine I would not find out?" Ettienne asks. His voice is deceptively calm. "Is that why you sent no word that you four failed to keep one human alive for a few weeks?"

"No deception was intended, sir," says Tavius. "I judged that such a message might be intercepted to our adversaries' advantage."

"So, you chose to keep your commander in the dark? To take a plan that was decades in the making and turn it on its head on your own?"

"I think our perfect Tavius is in trouble," Hauck whispers into my ear.

I give him my best *stop talking* glare and dig my fingernails into his shoulder for emphasis.

“I chose to keep the throne’s secrets from our enemies’ ears.” Tavius braces his forearms against the edge of the table and leans toward his father. His voice is rising, a contrast to Ettienne’s even notes. “Geoffrey is likely behind Cordelia’s death. I believe he and Salazar are making a play for the throne.”

“Do you?” says Ettienne.

“I do,” says Tavius.

“Well, praise the stars that the Massa’ve heir apparent can see basic strategy.” Ettienne lifts his arms in dramatized appeal, then leans in toward Tavius, invading his space. The king’s voice drops. “Of course they are vying for the throne. What else did you imagine, Tavius? Fair play?”

A beat of silence passes, then Tavius shakes his head. “No, sir.”

Hauck belches again.

I stuff a goblet of water into his hand.

“If I may,” Cyril injects himself between Tavius and Ettienne. “The Equinox pledge ball is tomorrow. That means, in just over twenty-four hours, our pack will join others in presenting ourselves to the trials’ master priest. Might I suggest that we table dissections of the past months’ communications in favor of focusing on the pressing mission? And for that, for the Equinox Trials themselves, our pack is ready.”

Ettienne sweeps his hand around the table. I am still perched on Hauck’s lap, the male beneath me now engrossed in watching the water swirling about his cup. Tavius is so tense that sparks of flame are playing along the tips of his scales. Quinton is back to staring out the window. “Cyril. Your pack isn’t ready to so much as sit through a dinner party.”

A twitch of Cyril’s brow says he doesn’t exactly disagree.

Tavius lifts his chin, the sparks along his scales intensifying. “Kitterny is a thousand fold braver than Cordelia ever was.”

“Kitterny doesn’t fit the prophecy.”

“She is smart, and strong, and caring,” Tavius launches each word with iron conviction. “And my pack is better for having her in it. Give her half a chance, Ettienne.”

“Yes, let’s give her a chance.” Ettienne’s attention swings toward me, his scales rising like spears. The weight of his scrutiny squeezes my chest. “Who are you, Lady Kitterny?”

I hear the shadow of magic whisper in my mind, then the stab of an invisible knife. Sharp pain shoots through me as Ettienne’s magic forces itself into my memories. My thoughts. I whimper, then scream, grabbing my head.

It does no good. Trying to shove Ettienne from my mind is like pushing a knife’s blade with bare hands.

“Stop it,” someone roars. “Now!”

Through the haze of pain I see Tavius spring to his feet and throw the whole table to its side. Food and dishes clatter onto the floor, Hauck pulling us both away from the mess just in time.

“Stop!” Tavius roars.

Ettienne’s gaze narrows. More pain slices through my head with every heartbeat.

Hauck growls, his arms wrapping tightly around me, but for the first time ever, it does no good. Through my blurred vision, I see Tavius advancing on his father. The sparks along Tavius’s purple scales now crackle like lightning bolts. Ready to burn the world to the ground.

“Tavius, don’t,” I try to say, but the words come out garbled. I try to lower my hands from my head, to look like I am alright, lest Tavius sets fire to the whole palace.

Ettienne’s eyes and magic bore into me. Unstoppably. Unrelenting.

A trickle of blood escapes my right ear and slithers down my neck.

“Father.” Up on his feet, Cyril holds his hands up toward his father while trying to get himself in Tavius’s way. I don’t think he wants to see the palace burned down either. “Father, you taught us that mind-magic wasn’t to be forced. Tavius is following your rules.”

Tavius swipes his massive arm, shoving Cyril aside. His hand is curled into a fist, flame and lightning like a glove around his hand as he faces Ettienne. “Stop or I will kill you.”

Ettienne flicks his hand and the pain stops.

I collapse against Hauck, who is now purring soothingly while I tremble.

Cyril’s worried gaze brushes over every inch of my body.

Tavius lowers his hands, his chest heaving with panting breaths.

With no more table to sit at, Quinton has returned to propping up the wall and looking bored.

Ettienne swings his attention back to Tavius. “Better?” Picking up a napkin, Ettienne wipes a spot off his pants where a bit of the spilled food had landed. “For stars’ sake Tavius, it’s a human.”

“Kitterny is my pack.”

“Kitterny is a mortal slave, little different from the dog you once had.”

Tavius’s fingers curl into a flaming fist again. Stars. I think he really will take a swing at the king of Massa’ev, no matter what it costs him. I’ve never had anyone stand up for me the way Tavius does. The way all of them do.

Except Quinton. I’ve had plenty of people ignore me like that.

“Just to clarify, Tavius,” Hauck drawls, his words wavering a bit. “When you ordered me to behave today, is this what you meant? Because if we are brawling, I think I can be of help.”

I am no strategist, but even I know that wasn’t the right thing to say. And I do have a well developed survival instinct.

“Your Highnesses, my liege.” Pulling myself out of Hauck’s hold, I step toward Tavieras and Ettienne, trying to avoid the spilled food. “I beg your indulgence for a moment.”

They turn to me slowly.

“Given the importance of the prophecy for Massa’ev’s people against the lack of time before the start of the Equinox Trials, perhaps we might consider an alternative?” I say, thinking quickly. “For instance, might we alter my appearance and name to match Lady Cordelia? Provided that you both still intend for the pack to compete.”

“Of course the pack will compete,” Ettienne states.

Tavieras lets out a slow breath, then bares his throat to Ettienne. The flame around Tavieras sizzles out.

I thank the stars.

“Thank you, sir,” Tavieras says, his voice once again controlled as he rights an overturned chair. “We will not disappoint you.”

“Lady Kitterny’s observations were wise.” Cyril nods in my direction. “If we alter the color of her hair now, the few people at the pier will believe themselves mistaken. The nature of her magic need not be disclosed outside the trials. And –”

“*Lady Kitterny* is a slave,” Ettienne says, cutting Cyril off. “That is no pedigree to continue a royal line no matter the nature of her hair and magic. Even if it weren’t so, Massa’ev deserves its princes to do better than drag an overdressed throw away to the most important event in two decades.”

“I don’t understand,” says Tavieras. “You just said the pack will compete.”

“And so you will.” Ettienne claps his hands three times and one of the side doors to the dining room is pulled open. “You will compete properly. With a proper bride apparent.”

A chill runs over my skin as three human women in white dresses walk inside, their long, blond hair waving behind them. They are beautiful. Graceful. Demure. Even more importantly, each holds an object suspended in the air above

her palm. Air touched, just like the prophecy that promises to heal Massa'ev's land.

Nothing at all like me.

Ignoring the mess that Tavius has made of dinner, they line up before the dragon princes, eyes down cast.

“From distant lands, a mortal strays, with locks of white and air that plays,” Ettienne announces.

“Thus rises one that's strong and true, who'll conjure life her soul imbued.

Her spirit fierce, her power vast, her fate entwined with dragons' past.

Their numbers scarce, their hopes forlorn, for generations hatchlings mourn.

Until the dragons forge a bond, a unity that grows beyond.

With only her shall dragons find, a future thriving and entwined.”

Finishing reciting the prophecy, Ettienne points to the floor. “Kneel,” he orders.

The women kneel gracefully.

“Spares and decoys.” Ettienne waves his hand at them. “When a wise king has something as vital as the Equinox Trials to contend with, he doesn't rest his whole strategy on the hope that one particular human will survive to breeding age.” He strides down the line, lifting one girl's face for examination then releasing it with a shrug.

“The viziers I sent to the human land initially identified six suitable women,” Ettienne continues. “One perished along the way, and another was maimed by the pox a few years back. Of the four remaining, you were directed to bring the best choice over yourselves. At the same time, three other teams were sent to quietly retrieve the spares.”

My breath halts as I realize the full extent of my irrelevance. None of the dragon princes speak. Not even Cyril.

“Why did you not tell us this before we left?” Tavius asks finally.

“You had no need to know,” Ettienne replies. “Had you succeeded in your mission, you wouldn’t have known about these girls even now. It is safer that way. Plus, what would you have done differently if you had known? Shown up empty handed, your failure on display for the whole kingdom? You are too smart for that Tavius. And if you’d not thought of it yourself, Cyril surely would have.”

I can’t bear to bring myself to look at the dragon princes. Everything they need, everything they’d wanted me to fake, was now theirs in triplicate. Kneeling and waiting for orders.

“You four have two hours to select your new bride from the three choices here,” Ettienne says with a finality that rings through the room. “If you cannot, I will make the selection on your behalf. Kitterny, come with me if you please. I wish to speak with you.”

Hauck spins toward us, his teeth bared.

“I will not harm your pet,” Ettienne tells him. “Unless you give me a reason to, of course. Do we understand each other?”

Haucks’s scales tuck in. “We do.”

“Excellent.” The king opens the door, and I have no choice but to walk through it.

24. KIT



I feel disconnected from myself as I follow Ettienne. The sound of the door closing behind us, the lock clicking shut, rings over and over in my mind. The memory is as loud as the pounding of my heart against my ribs. For a moment, I expect one of the dragon princes to come after me, to at least pound on the door, but there is only silence.

“Where are you taking me, sir?” I ask. If Ettienne is not going to be swayed by his sons’ endeavors, I doubt my questions will alter his intentions either. So I might as well ask.

“To get you some more comfortable attire,” says Ettienne, as if it is obvious. “But first, to talk.”

He stops in front of a heavy wooden door and opens it, letting me proceed him inside. I hesitate, my feet suddenly feeling rooted to the floor. The paragon of bravery, I am not.

“I do not keep my recipes for preparing human stew in here,” Ettienne says. “You are safe to come in.”

I doubt that, but I also know there is little choice in the matter.

Fortunately, the space beyond proves to be an office not a dungeon. Ettienne motions me to an oversized chair. At least oversized for a human. All the fae, especially the dragons, are larger by an order of magnitude. The king settles himself behind his large mahogany desk. He looks like a more severe version of Cyril, with darker eyes and long hair. Unlike the kings in the human world, the immortal Ettienne looks no

older than his sons. Except for his gaze. That looks old and cunning.

“You made a deal with the princes to exchange your willing participation in the trials for your freedom?” It is phrased as a question, but clearly Ettienne knows the answer. That much he has cut out of my mind.

I flinch involuntarily at the memory of that pain. Of the intrusion. My fingers touch my ear, just to reassure myself that it is not bleeding anymore.

“I have no more desire to go back into your head than you wish me there,” Ettienne says dismissively. “But do answer my question.”

“Yes, my liege,” I whisper, unable to keep from glancing at the door. “That was the deal.”

“If you are wondering whether one of my sons will come after you, I assure you they will not.” Ettienne cocks his head. “Do you know why I am so very certain?”

“I imagine because you are their king and father, sir.”

Ettienne snorts softly. “I’d love to live in a world where that was all it took. However, no. There are other safeguards in place. Did any of them tell you about Lola?”

I shake my head.

“She was a female who Hauck imagined himself in love with. Eventually, she became a distraction from his duties and needed to be removed. When Hauck fought me on her relocation, I was forced to resolve the issue permanently.”

My throat constricts. “You killed her.”

“I had Quinton do it, but yes.”

Oh stars. I think I might be sick right here on Ettienne’s fancy floors.

He waves a hand, jewels sparkling on his finger. “Which is to say that, if my sons care for you, they will know better than to chase you to the same fate that Lola met. If they do not,

then they have no reason to distract themselves from choosing a new female for the trials.”

Such a neat little package, with both routes leading to my likely demise. Which does mean I’ve little to lose by arguing my case. “My liege... If I may? Ultimately, winning the fertility elixir is what will make the greatest impact on Massa’evé. Would you not rather your sons won with me than lost with a human who better fits the prophecy description?”

Ettienne’s lips press together as if he is trying to keep from laughing. At least he finds me entertaining. “Fighting words, *Lady Kitterny*. But is it not presumptuous of a slave to suggest she might win?”

“I only speak of probabilities, my liege. The women you’ve brought are no doubt excellent, but the princes know none of them. I, on the other hand, have spent many weeks with the pack. All other women were trained by humans. I was trained by the royal princes of Massa’evé themselves. Does a pack that’s trained together not stand the better chance of victory?”

“My sons trained you?” That chuckle Ettienne is trying to suppress is now dancing in his eyes. “Yes, I imagine various types of *education* would have been necessary for this plan you five concocted. But do tell me what you learned of the dragons in return?”

I pause for a heartbeat, considering my answer. Of all things the king could have asked, this one is most unexpected. My shoulders clench. Is this a test of some sort? Or is he toying with me like he had at dinner? “The dragon princes are a credit to Massa’evé, my liege.”

“That isn’t an answer.” He leans back in his chair, his fingers tenting. “You’ve just given a pretty speech on the importance of knowing one’s pack. So tell me of my sons, *Kitterny*. Impress me.”

I swallow, not wanting to share anything with the male sitting behind the desk. But Ettienne is right, I did walk myself into this one. I also know better than to say no to the king of Massa’evé, especially one who can invade my mind. “Tavias

is always in front,” I say finally. “Always bearing all the weight of the world on his shoulders. He has a temper, but his heart is just as fierce. And he wants nothing more than to do right by his people. By you.” Questionable as that might be.

Ettienne raises a brow at that, but motions for me to continue.

“Cyril is the quiet, responsible one. Always watching, always ready to help. He is the foundation that keeps the whole pack standing. He sees the whole battlefield and is forever thinking and analyzing and aiding in every way he can. He is the rock that Tavius can lean on. But there is a sadness inside him, one that he doesn’t deserve to carry.”

“You have opinions on what Cyril deserves, do you?” Ettienne makes a shoofly motion. “No, don’t answer that. Please continue. What shall you tell me about my son Hauck?”

“He is a rogue. Or at least he plays one. He’s hurt, but he is clawing to keep from drowning. To not bring the world down into the darkness with him. But when things matter, Hauck is the one who will extend a hand. Who will see and protect. He is so much more than everyone gives him credit for. And he cares deeply. Sometimes too deeply for his own soul. If Tavius is the pack’s power, and Cyril is its mind, then Hauck is the heart.”

“And let me guess, Quinton is its muscle? The sword to defend it all?”

“No, he’s just an asshole.”

Ettienne stares at me for a moment then throws his head back and laughs. “I do like you, Kitterny,” he says once the mirth runs its course. “If only you were born as something else.” Standing, he dusts invisible specks off his thighs. “In return for your delightful insights, allow me to share some news that is certain to please you. I have decided to honor my sons’ original agreement.”

My mouth opens. Closes. I hadn’t thought my argument would work, not really. And yet... “I will compete in the Equinox Trials?” I say breathlessly.

“Stars, no. But you may claim the prize of victory nonetheless.”

“I don’t understand, my liege.”

“Freedom, Kit. The reason you started down the path with my sons to begin with. I’m giving it to you with no trials required.” Ettienne walks me back to the door, but now turns us in a different direction down the corridor.

“There is a carriage waiting for you outside the stables,” he explains as we walk. “Inside, you will find a pack with suitable attire and food. The driver will take you to a village about two weeks’ ride from here and provide you with funds to start a new life. You may remain there for as long as you wish, or secure passage back to the human lands. Few ships make the trip through the rift, but it does happen. You may even undertake the long voyage to the northern continents, where I hear Queen Lera has a soft spot for mortals, having once been one herself. The only requirements are that you make no attempt to return to the capital, speak of what happened these past weeks, or make contact with any of my sons. Should you violate those rules, you will be put to death.”

I stare at the king in incomprehension, the words penetrating slowly through me. “I’m free?”

He sighs in exasperation. “I’d have thought with the humans’ limited lifespan you lot wouldn’t be quite so repetitive.” Ettienne motions toward the two guards who now approach. “Yirel and Jared will take you from here. I wish you a long and prosperous life, Kitterny. Should we ever meet again however, you will find a very different reception.”

25. TAVIAS



Tavias grabbed Hauck before the male could yank open the door that closed behind Ettienne and Kit moments ago. It was just in time too, because one of the guards already had a knife at a girl's throat.

“Is this one not to your liking then, my princes?” the guard said with steel subservience, the blade he held never wavering. The pale-faced blond human shook like a rabbit, silent tears already flowing rivers down her face. The guard inclined his head to Tavias. “Shall I cull her and be done with it?”

Stand down, Tavias ordered into Hauck's mind. Ettienne will kill her if you don't.

Hauck, who was fortunately less drunk than he appeared, growled, but backed away. The guard released the girl and slunk back into the shadows, as far from Hauck as the room allowed. He knew Hauck was a breath away from ripping his throat out and didn't fully trust Tavias from keeping it from happening. But Tavias would. He had enough wits about him to keep from murdering innocents. Just barely, but enough.

Fury roared inside Tavias as he surveyed his brothers. Hauck now had a white-knuckled grip on a wooden chair, which was quickly sprouting roots into the floor. Cyril had quietly maneuvered himself between Hauck and the door, a precaution against further outbursts. He was calm. Always so rutting calm. Quinton lounged against the wall, shadows seeming to dance around him. A lone assassin whose missions always ended in death anyway.

“We will discuss this with Ettienne when he returns,” Tavius said, his voice betraying nothing of the thunder inside him.

“And if Kit is dead by then?” Hauck demanded.

“Then we’ll have one less problem on our hands,” Quinton said coolly.

“Quiet,” Tavius barked. Kit had been out of the room only a few minutes and they were already falling apart. Turning on each other. The threat of violence vibrated the air for a heartbeat and Tavius wasn’t sure he’d be able to contain the rage in the room, to keep his brothers from destroying each other. “He won’t kill her. Not yet. He wants our cooperation.”

No one had a reply to that. They were still standing there in silence when Ettienne returned a quarter hour later and swept his eyes over the pack. He shook his head at Tavius, disappointment dripping from his features.

“I’m aware of the bargain you’d made with the human,” Ettienne said.

“Freedom in exchange for her participation in the Equinox Trials. Am I correct in this?”

“You are,” said Tavius. “Where is Kit?”

Ettienne’s lips thinned. “It disgusts me to know my own sons schemed to sabotage our people’s sacred right.”

“Where is she?” Tavius demanded. Despite everything he’d shamed Hauck for, magic was already building up inside him. His wings threatened to erupt. If Ettienne hurt her... There would be no palace left by the time he finished that sentence. No palace, no pack, and very likely, no heir apparent. A growl he couldn’t contain rose in his chest and he didn’t need Cyril’s warning glare to know that lightning danced along his skin. His control snapped. His voice rose. “Where is she?”

“Kitteny is alive and well,” Ettienne said, unphased. Confident. “The shame you brought is not her fault. She has no history here. No loyalty. No bloodline.” Each of Ettienne’s words landed with a sting. “I would not punish her for your

misdeeds. In fact, I did quite the opposite. I granted the girl that which you four dangled before her. Freedom.”

Tavias’s breath caught.

Ettienne continued into the room, inspecting the three kneeling maidens as he spoke. “Yirel and Jared are taking Kitterny to safe lodging. When I left the girl, she was contemplating returning to the human lands. What happened here?”

The last question was directed to the droplets of drying blood on the first maiden’s throat. The young woman still bawled silently, though she made no move against Ettienne’s manhandling. He released her without waiting for an answer and moved to the next.

“She accepted my offer gladly, if that matters to you,” Ettienne continued. “Strangely enough, being free of four dragon fae who intended to put her through pain, torment, and near certain death was an easy sacrifice to accept. And I will now tell you the same thing I told her. There is one rule. One offense that will cause her life to be forfeit – contact with any of the four of you ever again.”

Silence fell like a wet blanket over the dining room. Over the fire and lightning inside Tavias.

Finishing his inspection, Ettienne gripped the third maiden’s hair and pulled the girl to her feet. “I personally like this one the best, but I’m not the one who needs to bed her. My advice, don’t rush into the decision. Ride all three first. See who feels right.”

Ettienne’s smile did not touch his eyes as he let the girl drop and walked out of the room, leaving the princes, girls, and guards once more in each other’s company.

“Is he telling the truth?” Hauck asked into the lingering silence.

It was Cyril who answered. “Yes,” he said simply. “Yes, he is.”

26. KIT



Yirel and Jared fall in step beside me, herding me toward the stable. With their long strides I have to jog to avoid being trampled. I have a nagging sense that that is the point. Each step down the hall and away from the dragon princes feels like a new nail in the coffin of everything I envisioned for myself. A weighted sadness settles around me, squeezing my chest.

Which is absolutely ridiculous.

Freedom was the end game from the very beginning. Our temporary alliance, our pack, had always been a partnership of convenience. They needed the elixir. I wanted my freedom. That was all it ever was. All the lessons and rutting and touch – those were all just a part of the game. That was clear from the start. Stars, I was the one who'd come up with the rules. The only thing to have changed in the last hour, was how unfairly quick I got to collect my prize.

I have no right to be anything but grateful.

No matter how empty and irrelevant I suddenly feel.

As we close upon the stable, Yirel grabs the back of my neck and pulls me inside the rest of the way, the shove's momentum carrying me into an empty stall. I catch myself on the wooden wall to keep from falling, the horse on the other side of the partition whining his dissatisfaction at my arrival.

The stable is dimly lit, the lanterns casting dappled patterns of light and shadow on the hay-strewn floor. Drawing a breath of the thick, hay and horse filled air, I try to calm my

shaking nerves. Plainly, whatever courtesy the guards were feigning earlier is no longer relevant. But that doesn't negate what Ettienne promised. Or the fact that no one is coming for me.

"Watch that dress, human," Yirel barks at me. "It's worth more than you are." Grabbing a bundle of clothing from the floor, he throws it at my chest. "Change. And don't rip the fabric or I'll take it from your hide."

Ah, well, this is familiar. I wait for the stall door to close, but it doesn't. Right. Modesty is one of those courtesies the guards no longer need to pretend to grant me.

Balancing on the straw covered floor, I carefully pull off the delicious silk and satin gown and pull on the rough spun, gray dress the guard has given me. It is too large and the material is scratchy. When I wriggle my head through the opening, the motion sends a shot of pain through my skull. An echo of the agony Ettienne put me through when he forced himself into my mind.

Didn't Cyril tell me that was impossible?

Because a dragon prince would never lie to a human slave, right?

I stay still until the pain dissipates, then put on the new shoes. At least they are more comfortable than the heels I had with the gown. Small bits of light. Yirel barks at me to move faster, grabbing my upper arm hard enough to bruise when I fail to comply with his standards. On the other side of the stable, the double doors are already open and a windowless carriage awaits.

It's all happening so very fast.

As he herds me toward the carriage, Jared picks up a pack and shoves it into my arms. "Your things. I'd ration your food if I were you. Or not. Don't expect to be joining us for dinner when we get to the inn." He laughs as if he knows something I do not. "We don't like dining with shadows."

"I'm a shadow?" I ask.

Jared and Yirel look at each other and snort. “No. You are most definitely not a shadow. You’ll know one when you see it.”

I’m not sure what that means, but the fact that the guards do in fact plan on taking me to an inn and have a pack with things prepared is a good sign.

Stopping just short of the carriage, Jared digs into his pocket and brings out a jingling purse. The horses’ heads turn curiously toward the sound. “Your allowance,” Jared says.

I hold out my hand. I’m not stupid enough to reject gold.

He opens the little sack and pours half of the contents into his palm before giving the rest to me. “Payment for our services.”

“Don’t fret,” Yirel adds. “I doubt you’ll live long enough to miss it.”

“Why is that?”

“No reason.” He opens the carriage door for me, adding a mock bow to the proceedings. As I climb inside, Yirel leans over to whisper into my ear. “But if I were you and ever saw a shadowed male wearing a silver dragon pendant, I’d start praying to the undertaker.”

The door shuts, leaving me in the gloomy darkness. I don’t know whether Yirel’s threats have merit or if he’s just enjoying toying with me. It could go either way. If we were dealing with anyone but Ettienne, I’d say there was no point in getting me out of the city just to kill me, but I know better than to try and predict the king’s intentions. Still, for now I have no option but to take Ettienne at his word and try to rest while I can.

Despite the darkness and constant motion, the sleep I seek still takes hours to find me. Yes, maybe that’s because a part of me was still waiting to hear dragons’ roars and guards’ screams as a pack of dragons swooped in from the sky to stop the carriage and take me back.

Take you back to what, exactly? The reasonable part of my mind demands. Back to the trials that are likely to kill you? Or

back to being an exotic pet in their hoard? Whatever their feelings, this was never going to end with you staying together.

I rub my eyes and try to make myself comfortable on the hard bench. Despite the reality of our deal, I refuse to believe that nothing the princes and I shared was real. Unfortunately, that brings little light to the situation. Maybe the princes are letting me go because they no longer need me. And perhaps they are doing it to keep Ettienne from ending my life, he had Lola's. The end result is the same either way.

My final thought as I drift off to sleep against the rattle of the wheels along the cobblestone, is that it's good that I wasn't followed. For my sake and theirs.

The opening door of the carriage jerks me awake sometime late into the night. In the lantern light, I make out a two-story building that is constructed of weathered timber and fieldstone. A faded wooden sign hanging above the entrance depicts a prancing horse and a tankard of ale, and despite the late hour, the common room appears active.

Yirel negotiates with the stout inn keeper for a set of rooms and, despite the guards' threats to the contrary, has a bowl of soup and bread sent up to my chamber. I expect to be locked inside for the night, but the pair laugh at the question.

"This ride is for your benefit, not ours." Jared scratches his beard, which is in need of a good trim. "If you want to run off, we just go home sooner."

Yirel, who is already strutting toward the downstairs common room, nods in agreement. "You know why jewels are locked up and rocks aren't?" he says over his shoulder. "Because no one needs the rutting rocks."

I close the door against their ongoing remarks and quickly eat my late supper. I'm not so far gone from my slave days to miss the chance to eat. Then I stare at the closed door, the slave brand on my arm starting to itch fiercely again. I bite my lips to keep from clawing at it. There won't be anyone to wrap it for me anymore, to give me salve to stave off infection. With nothing more to do, I go to bed. But not to sleep.

The downside of having rested in the carriage, is that I can't settle myself at all now. The town bell chimes two past midnight when I decide that a trip to the latrine is in order. The inn's facilities are outside and, as I make my way through the darkness, I wonder if I shouldn't take my things and leave my fearless escorts behind. Except where would I go? My foot catches a stray rock on the dark path and I nearly twist my ankle before I regain my balance. No, the only sane place for me to go in the middle of the night, is back to my room. Tomorrow, I can contemplate other options.

I've a feeling that convincing Yirel and Jared to entertain themselves a few days on the king's coin instead of driving all the way to whatever village Ettienne has planned will not be an issue. Hell, getting them to do their job might be the harder part. But that is a decision to be made when I can see more than a foot in front of me.

After the night's darkness, the lanterns lighting up the inn's corridor and common rooms seem unusually bright. I rub my eyes, only to repeat the process in reverse when I walk into my own dark room. For a disoriented moment, I wonder why in the world I turned off the lantern before leaving my chamber and then I remember – I hadn't. But the oil in the lamp had been running low.

Despite the logical explanation, the darkness tightens around me, my heart speeding up as I peer into the shadows. They are still. As they always are. There is no sound beyond the general commotion of the first floor. Except, I don't feel like I'm alone anymore.

“Hello?” I call. “Is anyone here?”

There is no answer, but as the branch outside my window shifts in the wind, a sliver of moonlight trickles into the room. That's when I see it. A flash of silver, in the corner.

My stomach clenches. I want to scream – I try to scream – but my throat is suddenly too tight to make a sound. Too tight to breathe. As if someone is cutting off half my air. I grip the wall, panic rolling through me. Yet the next time I take a breath, it fills my lungs without protest.

Stars. It is all in my imagination. Walking back to the door, I feel for the handle and back into the hallway to grab one of the lanterns hanging on the wall. Imagination or not, I feel better having a light. Bringing it inside, I let the light fill the room, the clicking of the door behind me making me jump regardless.

And that's when my gaze finally falls on the shape I thought I'd imagined earlier. A cloaked male figure sitting in the shadowed corner of the room. His clothes are as black as the night, blending into the darkness – all except for a small silver dragon hanging from a thong around his neck.

This time I know it is his doing when my scream stops in my throat.

“Quinton,” I whisper finally when he lets me breathe again.

The figure pulls back its hood. “Yes.”

I swallow, my heart pounding so hard that each beat echoes painfully through my skull and I wonder if my ear might start bleeding once more.

Looking Quinton over again, I mark every detail of what I see. The shadows. The hooded cloak. The silver dragon pendant.

If I were you and ever saw a shadowed male wearing a silver dragon pendant, I'd start praying to the undertaker.

“Are you... are you what they call a shadow?” I ask.

“Yes.”

My chest tightens. “Are you here to kill me, Quinton?” I whisper.

“Yes.”

27 KIT



I step back, only to find myself against the wall. When I imagined the dragon princes following after me, it was in a different context.

Quinton rises, extending to his full height. He moves slowly, as if he has all the time in the world. In fairness, he does. “I’ll ensure it doesn’t hurt. I promise you that.”

“That isn’t as great a comfort as you imagine.” I shake my head, trying to lodge my thoughts back into order. It doesn’t make sense. None of it makes sense. Or maybe it does. I don’t know. Logic isn’t doing me much good. “Why are you doing this?”

“The same reason I do all my work,” says Quinton, his voice free of all emotion. “Ettienne’s orders.”

Ettienne. Phantom knives stab into my mind just at the memory. Or maybe it is real. Something Quinton is doing. It is hard to tell just now. “Ettienne was the one to organize this exile to freedom to begin with.” My words come in quiet pants, my arms darting around the room though I know there is no way I can escape the dragon. “He said I could go.”

“He doesn’t trust that you will stay away,” Quinton says. “Or that the others won’t decide they still covet you regardless. You are a distraction he wants eliminated.” He is a pace away from me now, the lantern’s light and shadow sculpting him into preternatural perfection. Confident. Powerful. Immortal.

And ready to end my life.

“He could have killed me before I ever left the palace. Why the charade with guards and a carriage and everything?”

“Sugar over a bitter pill.” Quinton shrugs in indifference. “My brothers need their wits about them for the trials. News of your death could be upsetting. Hauck especially can get irrational with emotions. It is cleaner if everyone believes you chose to embrace the offer of freedom and left for the paradise you’ve always wanted. A closed chapter.”

I snort, that backbone that seems to grow when I face certain death showing its face again. “*Hauck* can get irrational?” I raise my brows, clearly recalling Quinton holding on to the overhead beams while yielding his pleasure to me – and his utter change the following morning. “Confuse pot and kettle much?”

Bravery and common sense really aren’t working well together for me.

Quinton says nothing to that. Either he is blind to the irony or else he isn’t and is too great an asshole to admit it. Either way, the chill coming from the dragon seems to settle through the room, filling every crevice with ice cold apathy.

Moving away from the door – and from Quinton’s looming form – I perch on the edge of my bed. I’m still wearing the night-dress I’d pulled on when going out to see to my needs. “You’ll probably wish to do a bit of clean up in the room, then,” I say, waving my hand around to the various items I’ve strewn about. The dress I’d worn in the carriage. The few sacks of food I’d pulled out of my pack, along with extra sets of stockings whoever packed it for me put in there. The hair brush. “Make it look like I’ve decided to run off.”

“Correct.”

“Right.” I tip my head up and meet his gaze. It has the same kind of steel in it as when he’d turn our training sessions into exercises in cruelty, though his pupils are tight now and the silver irises stretch toward subtle vertical slits. I cross my legs. “My answer is *no*.”

“I was unaware I asked a question.”

“You did. You asked it the moment you decided to let me see you in this room.”

Quinton cocks a brow. “And what question is that exactly? You think I’m looking for your permission?”

“Permission? Oh, no, no. You don’t want permission.” I laugh without humor. I might not be an immortal warrior, but I’ve learned a great deal more about the silver dragon than he likes to acknowledge. “But you would like me to make it easy for you. And I’m saying, no.”

“I don’t require my victim’s assistance.”

“And yet, here we are. Still talking.” I shrug.

“Alright. I’ll play. For a time.” Quinton crosses his arms over his chest and braces his shoulder blades against the wall. His usual stance. “What power do you imagine you have to make killing you easy or difficult for me? Do you think I want your absolution? Forgiveness? That I care whether you stay silent or plead for your life?”

I rise and stride up to him, gripping Quinton’s gaze with my own. My pulse beats a rhythmic pattern. It’s that bravery again, the one that comes out when I’m cornered like a rat. The same one that had me standing up to Tavius in a different inn. “No, you want none of those things. What you want, Quinton, is for me to get mad at you. And if you can’t have anger, terror will do for a consolation prize.”

His upper lip rises in a snarl. “You think I’m hunting?”

“No. You are scavenging for any scraps you can use to fuel your own self-hatred. You forgot that I know you, my prince. That I’ve seen behind the veil you like to wear for the world. And you know what I’ve figured out?” I’m right by his face now, my neck straining back to meet his silver eyes.

Quinton is so still he could be chiseled from stone, but it’s a tense stillness. A muscle ticks at the corner of his chiseled jaw.

“I’m going to tell you. Because it’s not really a secret.” I smile. “You. Are. A. Coward.”

“I can make this painless, Kitterny,” says Quinton. “But I don’t have to.”

“You are so afraid of feeling something, you go out of your way to ensure the world hates you. And then you use the world’s hate to build a shield around yourself. You yearn for self-flagellation and darkness. You get yourself drunk on it. Too bad for you, I’m not going to play.” I tilt my chin to the side, exposing my neck. My heart races with a mix of disgust and fury, my hands opening and closing at my sides. As if I have more energy in me than my body knows what to do with. A snarl enters my voice. “Go ahead, Prince. Draw your blade across my neck. But the only thing you’re getting from me is pity.”

Quinton’s hot angry breath whispers along my skin. I hear a knife slither from its sheath. Feel the whoosh of Quinton’s blood racing through his veins, the endless lub-dub of his heart, the hissing rustle of his lungs as they fill and empty with each breath. Over and over. Unending. Deafening.

Wait, what?

I try to shake the sudden tsunami of sensation. It doesn’t work. Quinton’s blood is moving too loudly, his heart beating like a never ending drum that hurts my ears. There is too much light in my eyes. Too much weight on my bones.

Quinton is saying something, but his words are distant, drowned out by how rutting loud everything else about him is becoming. His blood. His heart. His lungs.

A stabbing pain hits my head, as if someone is driving a hot metal rod through my ear into my skull.

My vision blurs. I fall to my knees with a muffled scream.

Lub dub. Rush. Rush. Hiss. Lub dub. Rush. Rush. Hiss.

“Kitterny.”

I clamp my hands over my ears. Blood is trickling from the right one, the same way it had when Ettienne’s magic invaded my mind. It hurts, the pain echoing through my body. Has Quinton already made the killing blow? Is that what the pain is? Why am I not yet dead? My breath races. Dead. I need to

be dead. All the courage drains from me, leaving only agony and terror.

“Finish it,” I beg. “For stars’ sake. Just finish it.”

“I can’t.” Quinton’s face is in front of me, filling my vision. My whole world.

Lub dub. Rush. Rush. Hiss.

“Why?” I whimper. “Please.”

“I can’t finish because I didn’t start anything.”

His words hit me like a betrayal. I fall to my side. He is lying. He has to be. He could finish it. He could end this. “Please!”

Strong hands grip my face, forcing me to meet silver eyes. Quinton is crouched beside me, his silver scales bone white shifting about as his eyes bore into me. Everything about the dragon prince vibrates with power. Power that saturates the air and then shoots into me.

“Words, human,” Quinton orders. “Use them. Now.”

“It’s too loud,” I whisper.

“What is?”

“Your heart. Your blood.” I somehow know that’s what it is. “Everything.”

Quinton’s scales freeze.

“My heart and blood. You hear them inside you? As if my body is hijacking your senses?”

“Yes, damn it.” I taste something copper and realize I’ve bitten my own tongue.

Quinton’s hand tighten on my face. “What you are describing, human, is blood magic. You have blood magic?”

I don’t care what it is. I want it gone. “It’s your rutting magic. Take it back.”

“Doesn’t work that way,” says Quinton. He is so calm that I want to wring his neck.

“Then how does it bloody work?” I yell.

“You need to focus on something that’s yours. Pick one thing. Your own heartbeat, your breath, your – ”

A whimper escapes me, along with tears of pain that stream down my face. He is asking the impossible, demanding that I hear a mouse beside a dragon’s roar.

Quinton curses but gives up issuing orders. “Alright,” he says, scooping me up off the floor. “Then let’s give you something more potent to focus on.”

Faster than I can follow, my back is pinned against the wall, Quinton’s strong fingers tangled in my hair. His mouth presses over mine. Insistent and invading and rousing. I gasp against him, heat searing through me.

Quinton’s tongue pillages my mouth, his free hand sliding up my skirts.

I tense.

Pressing his knee between mine, he parts my thighs firmly, trapping my legs with his own to keep me from closing again. “Focus on *your* sensations,” Quinton whispers against my mouth. “The rush of *your* blood, not mine. Your blood, your heart, your lungs. Understand?”

I struggle to obey, forcing my senses inward to my own body. I feel my need throbbing through me, a counter resonance to the overwhelming pounding inside my skull. The scent of my arousal fills my lungs. Zings of sensation crackle over my skin... But I still feel Quinton’s body too. The rush of *his* blood, and the pounding of *his* heart. The pain in his cock, that is so engorged I don’t understand how it hasn’t burst from the pressure.

“Focus on yourself,” Quinton orders, his voice hardening. “Or I’ll bend you over the bed and take your ass with my cock.”

The threat doesn’t sound nearly as menacing as it should though none of the dragons had fully taken me that way yet.

Quinton makes a sound in the back of his throat. Pushing away my undercloth, he runs his fingers between my folds, flicking my nub ruthlessly.

That gets my attention. Arousal, sharp as nails, shoots through my nerves. My thighs tighten, my back arching against Quinton's hold. My rising need crashes against the phantom feel of his.

Quinton slides through my slick folds again and again, tracing the rim of my quickly engorging nub, only to pull away a second before I can catch my release. The arousal building inside grows so intense that it hurts. I whimper, embarrassed at the pitiful mewling sounds coming from me.

“Not yet, little human.” Quinton doubles down on his torment, now slipping his fingers into my wetness. I grip him hungrily, with my hands and my channel, as if I can keep him there.

I can't.

Quinton pumps in and out and I buck against him in search of more contact. His hold on me is unrelenting, his legs holding me open, his free hand gripping my hair. He has me anchored to the wall, and is feeding my arousal like a fire, spurring the flame with each touch.

The urgency for release builds inside me, its pressure so intense that I fear I'll burst apart. My breasts ache. My sex screams. My calves tighten into stones.

I moan.

“Quiet,” the prince orders. “You have to stay silent.”

He might as well demand that I turn into a dragon and fly away. My apex throbs in rhythm to my heart. In rhythm to *his* heart. I feel the rush of the coming release. The sensation drives me higher and higher with each flick and pump of Quinton's fingers, an abyss opening beneath me. I shudder with the need to come.

Quinton's teeth scrape against the pulse on my neck.

Pleasure mixes with pain, overwhelming everything.

“Qui – ” I start to holler, but the dragon prince’s hand grips my throat, cutting off the sound and making my sex scream its pleasure instead.

28. QUINTON



Quinton gripped Kit's throat, the spike of pleasure in her scent hitting him so hard that he nearly staggered. Kit's climax convulsed through her body, dilating her pupils. Quinton's heart pounded and the claiming growl building up inside his chest nearly gave them both away. If he'd ever doubted whether his soul's deep need for this human was the universe's penance for everything he'd done, he now knew it for a fact.

Giving up his life for hers would be easy. But giving up claiming her? That went against every primal instinct his dragon roared with.

Kit's hands dug into Quinton's wrist as he loosened his grip on her throat, but continued to stroke her swollen apex. She'd come once already, but there was more to tease out. Giving no reprieve, he pumped her channel with his fingers. She tried to writhe away from the stimulation, but it did her no good. Quinton's restraints on her legs and neck gave no quarter, which drove her deliciously crazy. And he was about to make her even more so.

Quinton constricted the hand gripping Kit's throat again and watched her eyes widen.

Her body fed on the edge of danger. She was so small. So responsive. So full of spirit and vulnerability that Quinton shook with need for her.

His cock screamed as she neared her next release, his scales laid so tightly against his erect shaft that they imprinted

the skin. The aching pressure was too much to bear. Quinton panted. It was an effort of will to keep from ripping through the human's clothes and sheathing himself inside. But he didn't. He let her have it all.

Kit's pleasure reached its pinnacle just as Quinton bit back a scream of his own need. Her body arched as she climaxed. She was gorgeous as she came, with blushing skin that seemed to glow brighter each time she shattered. The scent of her pleasure saturated the air and coated his tongue. Stars. It was intoxicating. She was intoxicating.

The self-control he'd held in a death grip all these weeks slipped further away with each twitch of her pulse. He could see it, pounding against her neck. So close. Calling to him. Echoing the pulsing ache in his cock. But he wouldn't take her. Her carnal urge was driving her now, but in truth she hated him.

Taking her now, when she was in no true state to refuse, was akin to force. That was a line Quinton would not cross. What Ettienne did, forcing himself into Kit's mind, disgusted him still. Once the final spasm of climax rolled through Kit's body, Quinton peeled his hand away from her neck and lowered her to the floor.

She looked up at him, her eyes glassy, but sated, her body free of whatever had made her mimic Quinton's blood magic.

Yes. The human was alright now.

But he wasn't. He was on the verge of losing control and taking her, uncrossable lines or not. Bracing his hands on the wall, Quinton pushed himself away from Kit and snarled.

She blinked up at him. "So... you aren't killing me, then?"

"Undecided." Stars. It *hurt* to keep this distance. If things continued this way, there was a good chance she was going to do him in instead.

Moving faster than she should be able to in her state, Kitterny grabbed his shirt and pulled him back toward her.

Quinton snagged her wrists. "What are you doing?"

“Talking. In the only way you seem to be able to communicate – fighting and rutting.”

“What makes you think I want to talk to you?” It was a stupid thing to say given that his cock was straining the seams of his trousers and one flick of Kit’s eyes toward the bulge said she knew as much.

“I don’t care,” she yanked her wrists out of his hold. “I want to talk to you.”

Did she now? The self-control Quinton had been gripping snapped. In a single pounce, he was atop the girl, dropping her to the floor again and ripping that damn dress off. The fabric gave way easily, revealing full milky breasts that fell open for him. Her nipples bunched from the sudden rush of air and he captured one with his mouth.

Kit gasped, then found her voice, her nails raking his shoulders. “Explain why you turned into an asshole.” The end of the asshole sounded like a moan that rose in volume. She didn’t understand the danger of someone finding them here. She never did. It was one of the things that drove Quinton insane about her.

“I’ve always been an asshole.” He clapped his hand over her mouth. “Your imagining otherwise for a time was your problem.”

She bit him. With her teeth. She broke his skin and tasted his blood.

Quinton snarled. The hot sting made red dance along the sides of his vision, drowning out everything else. His world pulsed. His thoughts scattered. His cock screamed. And the dragon inside him? It took over.

Quinton bit her right back, sinking his canine’s into her breast. His canines pierced the human’s skin with ease, and he gulped a mouthful of her blood. Magic flashed inside him. The taste of her made his head swim. It was sweet but edged with arousal and just the right amount of fear.

Yes. Take. Mine.

She called Quinton's name. Or maybe she didn't. He could no longer hear. Gripping Kitterny's hips, he rubbed his face on her chest, rubbing his own scent all over her before sliding down. Scraping his teeth along her belly until the curls of her sex brushed against his lips. His body vibrated, down to the edges of his scales.

Kit gripped his hair.

He broke her hold, then pulled off his shirt and freed himself with a hard jerk of his laces. Quinton mounted her hard and rode her hips. She pushed up to meet him and his cock slid inside with a wet slither. Stars, she was everything he imagined. Hot. Tight. Perfect. *His*.

"I hate you." Kit's nail raked down his arms, and the pain only drove his frenzy.

Quinton pulled back and pounded into her. It wasn't gentle. It was primal, each stroke pushing the madness higher. Heralding the next.

Kit wrapped her legs around him, adding her own force to his. The rhythmic *thump thump thump* of their flesh echoed throughout their bodies. Their souls. The whole bloody world. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

The intensity of the coming climax blacked out Quinton's vision. He gripped Kit's hips. Her legs tightened around him. Her channel clamped around his engorged shaft.

"Kit." Quinton's body spasmed with pleasure so powerful it tipped into agony. The scales along his cock extended against her tightness, making her writhe.

Kit screamed without sound and came hard, her channel squeezing around his cock like a blazing vice, extracting every drop of seed until they both collapsed from the effort. Quinton barely caught himself on outstretched arms before he could crush the human's small body.

It was then, as he held himself above Kit and panted, that he saw what he'd done.

A deep mating bite bled on Kit's right breast, binding them together.

Quinton froze. Unable to move or think as deafening silence filled his mind. Stars. He didn't even remember doing it. Yet the evidence was right there before his eyes. And in the taste of her blood on his tongue.

Kit purred through her haze and brushed the tips of her soft fingers over the gashes her nails left along his arms. "I'd say sorry, but it would be a lie."

The scratches? She was thinking about scratches right now? Stars take him. She had no understanding at all of what had happened. What he'd done. Quinton threw himself off her, scrambling across the floor to get some distance. Not that distance was going to do anything now.

"Right." She sounded exhausted. "Here we go again. Fire and ice. Let me guess. You are suddenly regretting rutting with me."

She wasn't wrong.

Kit pulled herself up into a sitting position. "So, have you decided?"

"Decided what?" He couldn't look away from her bleeding breast. A few pearly beads of red were beading on the wound. He ached to lap them up. To lick the whole bite closed and then lap other parts of her. He was salivating. Quinton's nails scraped against the floor in an effort to keep himself still.

"Whether you are going to kill me. That's why you showed up here, remember?"

Why *had* he come? Right. Ettienne's orders.

"Quinton?"

"I've decided not to bother. You'll probably get yourself killed all on your own anyway."

"Probably," she agreed. She brushed her hands through her hair.

He wished she'd stop moving. He got a new urge to pounce on her everytime she did. One more quick motion, and stars help him, he didn't trust himself to resist.

“Don’t you need me dead on a schedule, though?”

He blinked at her. Did she feel nothing of what just happened? Maybe bonds didn’t work the same way with a human. If she didn’t feel the connection between them, maybe it could still be broken. She could still be free from him. Though whatever Ettienne did when he forced himself into her mind put them into new territory. Newer territory.

“Is the pain gone?” Quinton asked.

“The one in my ass is still here.” She rubbed her temple, her voice shifting. “But if you are talking about your heartbeat trying to deafen me, then yes, that’s gone. Thank you for... helping.”

“I didn’t do you any favors, trust me.”

“Do you know what that was?” she asked.

He really wished she stopped talking. And moving. And everything. The mating bond inside Quinton was so raw, it reacted to every whisper. He forced himself to remember the human’s question. “By the sound of it, your body mimicked my blood magic.”

Kit frowned. “How is that possible?”

“That’s a conversation for a magic scholar.” Quinton pinched the bridge of his nose, taking stock of how much of a mess he’d just made. After weeks of doing everything in his power to build an impenetrable wall between the human and himself, of getting within a hair’s reach of severing the dangerous ties binding her to them, he undid it all with a single bite. And he didn’t know how to tell her that.

Kit drew her ripped dress toward her, examining the ruined fabric as if she intended to dive into repairs right here and now. “Can we skip talking in circles? You let me see you on purpose. If you didn’t come here to kill me, why did you come?”

“To scare you.” Quinton rose, readjusting his clothes with more force than necessary. “I *was* sent to kill you, just as I knew I would be. Spend long enough with Ettienne and you recognize when the order is coming. I’d hoped to scare you

into returning to the human lands this night, and make it look like I executed the order.”

“And is this no longer the plan?” she asked.

He wished he could see into her mind. To know what she wanted. But she’d shut him out just as he had done to her. The fact that he deserved every moment of it was of little consolation. He raised his head, catching Kit’s gaze. Beads of blood were still rising on the bite. “There has been a complication.”

29. KIT



“*T*here has been a complication.”

There is something strange about Quinton’s tone, something I have never heard before. Uncertainty. Fear, even. His pointed ears seem to pull in toward his head, the tips of his silver scales shifting with emerald hues.

Not meeting my eyes, Quinton finds himself a chair and sinks into it. His head bows, every muscle in his body tense beneath sweat slickened skin. He looks like an odd mix of lethal grace and contrite puppy.

I sit on the bed and pull the sheet around my body. “Use your words, immortal.”

He glances up at my jab, which is an improvement over the ringing silence. “I bit you.”

“I noticed.” I rub the bite mark on my breast, hidden beneath the clean white sheet. It is still tender, the skin around it feeling unusually hot. “In your defense, I bit you first.” I touch the bite mark again. Now that it catches my attention, I cannot shift my mind away from the sensation. The puncture pulls all my body’s skin taught. I swallow, a shiver of fear running through me. “Are your bites infectious? A stray cat bit a servant at the Agam estate when I was young. She lost her whole arm.”

Quinton’s face rises, something like indignation flushing over him. “I am a prince of Massa’ev, not a stray cat, Kitterny.”

I throw up my arms. The bite mark flares and pulls. “Well, you are giving me about the same amount of information as a cat. What is important about this bite?”

The tips of his silver scales flash. “It... I... made a bond.”

I’d think this new contrite side of him adorable if I did not have a gripping sensation that he just turned the whole rutting world on its ears. “What kind of bond?”

“Claiming.”

“Claiming what? Me? For what?” My head starts to spin. Quinton needs to get to the point. My bite mark heats and tingles as if it knows we are talking about it. Or maybe it is my mind playing tricks on me.

“For me.” Quinton runs his hands over his face and when he meets my eyes, his again brim with apology. “I claimed you. I bonded us together.”

“Like... siblings?”

The bite mark flares, offended.

“For stars’ sake,” Quinton snaps. “Mates, Kitterny. I claimed you as a mate.”

“A mate.” I parrot dumbly, trying to digest what he’s just said. What my body has somehow already known. “You claimed me as your mate.”

“Yes.”

“You do know that I don’t like you, right?” It’s the only thing that I can think of saying as I try to sort through the stream of emotions washing over me too quickly to feel any one of them individually. I don’t like Quinton. He’s a self-destructing asshole who’s hell-bent on destroying anyone who gets too close to him.

He lowers his head again and I wish he’d shout instead. An enraged murderous Quinton is a more familiar opponent than the vulnerable male sitting across from me. He nods. “Yes. I do.”

I draw a deep breath, which comes out in shuddering bursts. The bite mark has quieted, apparently content now that it has been acknowledged. “I don’t feel anything different,” I say.

The bite bites me.

I yelp.

“I meant, I don’t feel anything different about Quinton,” I clarify, for the bite’s sake. That seems to appease it and the pinching pain eases into a soft kind of warmth. As if it, the bite and the bond and the magic, were a living breathing thing.

“Who are you talking to?” Quinton asks.

“Honestly, I have no idea.” I wave my hand at him. “If you bonded us as mates, shouldn’t I feel something different toward you? Like some pull to at least wanting you around?”

He shrugs one large shoulder. Unconcerned. Or feigning being so. “You are human. Maybe it goes one way, or maybe it will only start later.” He pauses, the muscles of his jaw clenching. “But I feel it.”

“And what does it feel like?”

He thinks for a second, the scales on his temples shifting like fingers of coral. “An awareness, on a visceral level. Like a tether. I’m aware of where you are in relation to me – not that you are sitting in a chair, but that you are west of me and close by. There is also this bone-deep need to protect you. To destroy anyone and anything that threatens you.”

Well, that’s better than a deep-rooted need to kill me. At least probably better. The dragons are damn confusing. I close my eyes and try to see if I too am aware of Quinton’s general location. I’m not. I then visualize punching him in the nose. No ill effects. I glare at him. “So, does this mean we are stuck together for eternity?”

“No,” says Quinton helpfully. “You are mortal, you’ll probably die before eternity.”

Right.

“There might be a way to break the bond.” He tries and fails at nonchalance. Fails at hiding the wince that those words bring him. I hate seeing him like this. Hate that being stuck with me is the cause. He straightens his back, pulling himself together. “We need to find a seer versed in such things. I’ve never had cause to look into it, so there is a great deal I don’t know.”

“And until that point, what happens with the plan for me to return to the human lands?” I ask.

Quinton’s voice regains the confidence I am used to from him. “I’ll do nothing to stop you. Your choices are your own, regardless of my... lapse in control.”

That seems easy.

“But I do not believe I’d physically be able to withstand the separation.”

So much for easy. “So, what, you’d come with me?”

“Yes,” he says simply. Like that is the start and end of the discussion.

“And the Equinox Trials? The future of Massa’ev? The whole protection of the throne and ensuring your line of succession?” I feel my voice rise with each word. If Quinton runs off with me, he’ll be hunted in retribution for all the problems his sudden absence will cause. I don’t need to be a noble mastermind to put that much together. “You can’t just throw all that out into the gutter with a rutting ‘yes.’”

He just looks at me and says nothing, though the silence fills in the void quite clearly. Yes, I can. And will.

“You’ll do no such thing,” I snap. After all the effort of preparing for the Equinox Trials, I feel a strange allegiance to the mission I’ve been dragged into. Enough of an allegiance that it feels utterly wrong to outright sabotage it at least. Plus, there is the rest of the pack to consider. What will happen to Tavius and Cyril and Hauck if Quinton disappears? “There must be a solution that doesn’t involve the utter destruction of everything everyone has worked for. What if we return to the palace and tell the truth? Will Ettienne still kill me?”

“No. That will destroy my usefulness to him for decades,” says Quinton. I hate hearing him speak of himself as a piece of machinery. I hate what he says next even more though. “More likely, he’d hold you hostage to ensure my good behavior. The cage may or may not be gilded, but it will be a cage.”

My stomach knots. “Can you get dressed please?”

Quinton unfurls to his feet. “You want me to leave?”

“No. I just want to think without being distracted by...” I wave my hand in the direction of his perfect, chiseled body.

“By what?”

“Just get dressed please. I need to think.” I wrap the bed sheet around myself and pace the room, letting the fabric drag over the floor. Quinton gets himself fully dressed like I ask, but watching him pull on his shirt isn’t helping me think straight either. I make myself turn away and slow my racing thoughts.

I can’t run off without destroying the pack and their fight for the throne. Without opening Massa’evé to a possible civil war. I can’t return to the capital without becoming a pawn in Ettienne’s game to twist Quinton into a knot. What does that leave?

“What do you want?” Quinton’s words hit me in the back, right between the shoulder blades. His voice fully composed now, its usual quiet self. Masculine and powerful and enough to send a shiver along my spine.

“That’s what I’m trying very hard to figure out,” I say without turning toward him.

“No,” says Quinton. “I mean you, human. What do you want for yourself?”

“I...” I stop halfway through the phrase. It isn’t a question that a slave is asked by a prince. Especially not in earnest. The obvious answer comes to me at once, the same answer that I gave the pack and then Ettienne. Freedom. Yet during the one day when I seemingly attain it, I feel as empty as ever. Freedom is more complicated than I first thought. “I want to make my own choices,” I say.

“None of us have that,” says Quinton quietly. “Not completely.”

No, they don't. Not even the princes of Massa've.

I stop at the window, surveying the inn's pasture and the dirt road beyond it. It's late and the moonlight shows only outlines of evening life. An occasional lantern passing through the night. People coming and going. Building. Doing something. When was the last time I felt that I'm doing something more worthwhile than ensuring a visiting noble has a clean chamber pot on which to set his ass?

Truth is, the first – the only – time I feel myself count for something is when I'm a part of the dragons' pack. When I think myself needed for the trials. When I think I can make a difference. I want that again – this time by my choice.

I twist back toward Quinton, my hands gripping the sheet with a bone-tight grip. “The women who Ettienne brought in for you. The real nobles and air touched. Would they do much better than me in the trials?”

“No,” says Quinton, the lack of hesitation in his voice sending a rush of warmth through me. He slides his hands into his pockets. “They have the advantage of the prophecy behind them – but that's window dressing. It appeases the people, but it does nothing to help win the competition to begin with.”

“And me?” I press. “Do you think I would do well at the trials? Would we stand a chance if we compete together?”

“I wouldn't have trained you if I didn't think so.” Quinton is fully back to himself now, arms crossed over his chest as he leans against the wall and waits. Watches. Lets the silence linger and fill the room without offering anything to fill it or giving an ounce more information than he must. He hasn't bothered to tuck away that silver dragon pendant of his, and I am not sure the oversight is accidental. I think he wants me to remember what he is.

I raise my chin, the wheel of rushing thoughts stopping its spin with the arrow pointing to one. Maybe it's not the best one, and it certainly isn't the smartest one, but there it is. “You

asked me what I want. I want to compete at the Equinox Trials with the pack. And I want to win.”

Quinton stares at me, his perfect face unreadable. My heart pauses. The bite mark on my breast is quiet, giving me no insight into the male’s feelings.

A lot of help you are, I think at it.

“You want to compete at the trials,” Quinton says finally, repeating my words with an utter lack of emotion. “And then what?”

“I don’t know!” I rewrap my sheet with more force than is required. “I don’t have the next three decades planned out. We win the rutting trials, and then we figure the rest out.”

“I see,” Quinton says, watching my gaze. Probably waiting for me to realize the utter idiocy of what I’m proposing and back out on my own. When I stare right back, he curses and shoves away from the wall. “You are serious.”

“Yes.”

He curses under his breath, and I catch something with the words mate and suicidal mixed into the string. Then he sighs. “Ettienne would never allow it.”

Despite his hard voice, I can tell he’s offering the information by way of disclosing an obstacle, not declaring an objection.

I nod. I’d expected as much. Ettienne wouldn’t have bothered sending me away otherwise. “What if we take the choice away from him?” I ask. “Is there a point of no return in the rituals? Some marker after which he is powerless to interfere?” There has to be since Ettienne doesn’t have the power to ensure an outcome.

Quinton thinks for a moment then nods in acknowledgement. “The pledge ball. It’s a masquerade with the packs and their brides apparent revealed in a symbolic ceremony at the end to be marked by the priests administering the trial rights. Once the marks are inked onto the skin, there can be no changes or substitutions.”

“Then that is what we’ll need to do.”

Quinton’s jaw tightens, a muscle ticking along it. “You want me to allow my mate into a trial that most humans never survive?”

“Not my fault you bit the wrong human, now is it?”

He snorts, shaking his head. And though I know he won’t stop me, I can also see the pain now etching his eyes. I soften my voice. “Most humans don’t have the advantage of a dragon prince mate intent on keeping them alive,” I say. “I want to do this.”

Quinton bows. The prince of Massa’evé bows. “You have the protection of my body and soul, Kitterny. But whether that will be enough, I cannot begin to wager.”

“I –” My words die in my throat as, without warning, Quinton lunges for me and throws me to the floor, his hard heavy body covering mine. My knees hit the ground, whining at the impact. Breath leaves my lungs. Quinton jerks, holding me down for another moment before rolling off and shoving me into the corner of the room. I scramble to my feet, staying low as Quinton draws his weapon, his powerful muscles already crouched into a fighting stance.

And then he falls to his knees, red soaking his hand where he grips something at the front of his tunic. The arrowhead, the one that was meant for me, protrudes from his chest.

* * *

THANK you for reading Kit’s adventure. Want more insight into Tavius? [Sign-up for Alex’s newsletter to get a free bonus scene](#) of Kit’s punishment (from book 1) told from Tavius’s point of view!

Kit and the dragon princes’ story continues in [Dragons’ Mate](#), Her Royal Dragon Pack, Book 3.

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Alex Lidell is the Amazon Breakout Novel Awards finalist author of THE CADET OF TILDOR (Penguin) and several Amazon Top 100 Kindle Bestsellers, including the POWER OF FIVE romance series. She is an avid horseback rider who believes in eating dessert first. She writes as both Alex Lidell and A.L. Lidell.

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