



WORLD'S
ERGOTEKA

NAGGA'S ESSENCE

CELESTE KING

NAGA'S ESSENCE

NAGA LORDS OF PROTHEKA

CELESTE KING

PROTHEKA PUBLISHING

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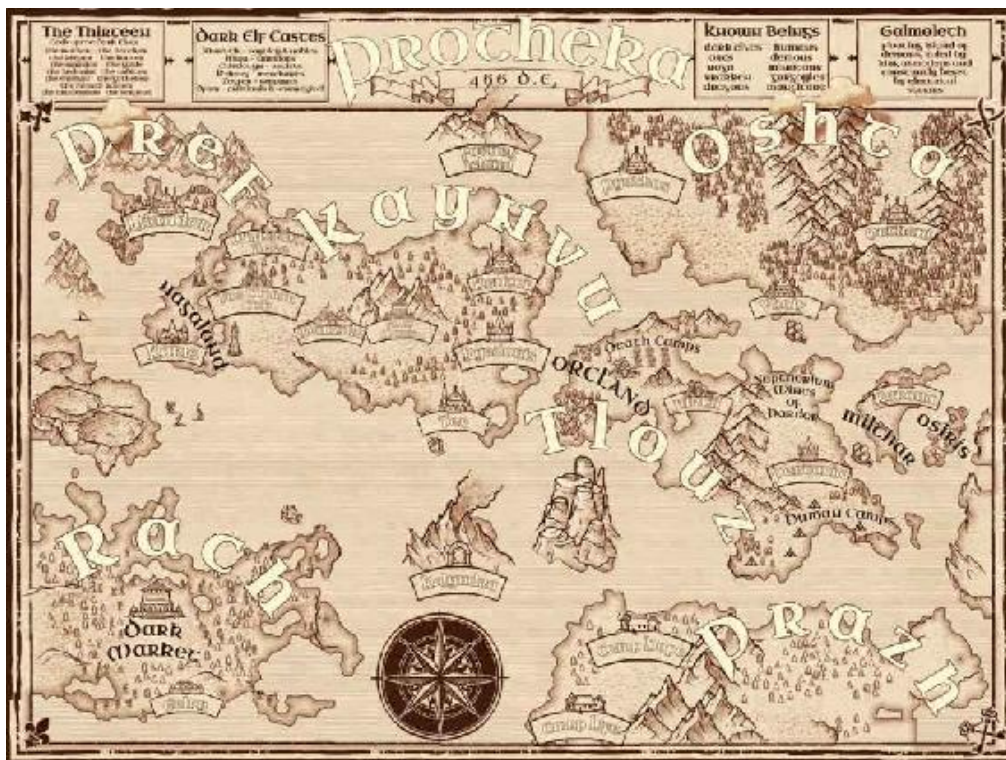
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THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA



LORELAI

“**W**here the fuck am I?”

All I can see are sand dunes.

I watch as the dunes become alive. I watch as they grab and clutch at the horizon. I watch as Yadat’s horizon drowns beneath the sand.

The heat of the sun doesn’t help this little vision I’m having. The sunlight is just as alive as the sand dunes, and right now, the two are at war with one another.

You need to eat something before you tear your clothes off and walk into the city center because that is exactly where these thoughts are heading.

I haven’t eaten for two days. I ran out of my last preserves of boiled and salted dripir meat exactly two days ago.

I’ve been nursing a sprained ankle from my last hunting trip for about a week, and when all you can do is sit around and stare at the walls, eating your last supplies of food sounds like a good idea.

“Not that there were many supplies to start with,” I mutter to myself.

Earlier in the day my ankle felt well enough for me to walk on it, but I wrapped it so tightly that the circulation was cut off before I ventured into the forests to hunt.

Now, I sit at the very top of the most ancient tiphe tree in this forest, and it gives me a view of the entirety of Yadat. This

includes the desert that seems to grow and spill sharply from the edges of the forest.

Not much grows in the desert that rings the outskirts of Yadat except for what the humans on the farms struggle to grow for themselves.

Looking out at the desert, there is not one tiphe tree to be seen. It is as if some old god drew the boundary made out of magic and cursed a part of Yadat so that nothing would ever grow.

I wouldn't put it past the naga gods. They're as cruel as the creatures they created.

Something rustles beneath me. I cannot help but smile as the group of wild dripir that I have been tracking since dawn comes barreling through the forest's undergrowth. They're all overgrown, almost obese from eating all the root vegetables that the forest has to offer. I really only need one of them.

But I'll settle for two. I don't want to be out here again any time soon.

The arrow is already loaded in my bow, and I exhale slowly before I let it loose. I've already loaded another arrow into the bow and let it loose into the skull of another dripir as the first one falls.

They are both dead instantaneously. They fall heavily, surrounded by deafening, frantic shrieks and squeals as the rest of the herd runs for their lives.

I drop from the top of the tree and land with a soft thump in an overgrown bush before I roll off it and stand.

"At least I'm not limping anymore," I grumble as I tie the dripir's feet with twine and then begin to drag them through the forest.

I am not far from home, and I know that it only seems like a long way because the dripir are so fucking heavy.

"But," I huff as I reach my bunker. I start to skin and cut up the animals right away. "At least I won't have to hunt for a few weeks."

I salt and store the meat in the little shed that is mostly below ground. The only part of the shed that can be seen from the forest is the little triangular roof, although I keep it covered with tree branches and large leaves most of the time.

Then I head to my bunker, which is also underground.

It took me months to build this place. Luckily, there was a hollow in the ground already, so I didn't have to dig too much.

"That would have taken forever," I mutter to myself as I strip my clothes. "And at least Mama taught me how to use my magic properly."

I cannot help but go still for a minute when thinking about my mother. I always do.

She is gone now, along with my father, and I am alone. I have been alone for so long. When I think about either of my parents, my body just goes quiet.

Sometimes I get tired of being alone. Sometimes I grow tired of taking care of myself all the time. Sometimes I am tired of how quiet the world is in my little bunker in the forest, with no company but the brutal sunlight and the brittle sand that blows in from the desert when the winds grow too rough.

"But I have survived, and being alone is the only way to be safe now," I say out loud, as if to reassure myself, or possibly the spirit of my mother who I am sure lingers in every breath I take.

The anger that I always feel curdles inside me, sour and bitter and *furious*. Sparks glitter and explode in small, dark flames at my fingertips. I try to calm myself down, but the anger doesn't go away, because it *never* does.

I force myself into action even though there is still a lump in my throat, a lump I have grown used to. I pull on the clean set of clothes that I stole eight months ago when I ventured to the human farms to trade.

The clothes are too big for my small, slim frame, but they will have to do because the only clothes that do fit are covered in dripping blood and guts. I'll need to go to the river to wash them.

“And now, for some burgona,” I say to myself as I grab a knife and a basket. I sling my bow and sheathed arrows over my shoulder for protection.

My mother spent most of my childhood teaching me how to forage and hunt. In between teaching me which berries were poisonous and which weren't, she instilled in me the importance of eating vegetables.

I'll be able to forage for some burgona – root vegetables that keep all the animals in this damn forest alive – close by, and hopefully I'll make it home before sunset.

But as I find burgona leaves hidden in the brush, a dangerous voice sounds before me.

“You shouldn't be here, human girl. You're going to come with me.”

I drop to all fours at the sound of the naga's voice, but he has already seen me. He tramps heavily through the forest in my direction.

I stuff my bag filled with burgona and wild somana underneath a bush and stand up to face him.

At least I brought the carving knife along with me, I think as I pull the now sticky knife that's almost as long as a dagger from the ground.

I smile as the naga comes closer. His eyes are bright and sharp, and he bares his teeth in an attempt to frighten me.

I cock my head to the side. *He really thinks I'm going to submit to him.*

The naga is clearly surprised that I haven't fallen to my knees, so he does something very stupid. He lunges at me.

I leap backward, sprained ankle be damned, and swipe at him with the carving knife.

He howls with pained rage as the blade slices through the scales on his face. I stumble backward as he crawls towards me and drags his tail through the air. His tail catches me behind my knees, and I shriek as I go flying.

I land on my back and jump up, launching myself towards him.

He is ready for me, and I know he has the upper hand because of his strength. So I drop the knife and throw my hands away from my body, where I clench my hands into fists.

The naga doesn't last very long when I force a tree trunk into his path, slamming the thick trunk against him brutally.

“Don't use your magic unless you absolutely have to. We shouldn't have to live like this, hiding ourselves and what we can do. But this is what we have to do for now. My daughter, I don't want you ever to get hurt, so only use your magic unless you absolutely have to.”

My mother's words resound through my head as I kneel beside the broken body of the naga.

He died on impact with the tree trunk. His face has caved in, and most of his scales have been violently sloughed off, leaving only bloody flesh behind.

I'll leave the body for the worgs, but I'm certainly not going to leave the clothes or anything else he's carrying.

I search his pockets first, and I find money and jewelry. I place those to the side before I continue searching the inner pocket of his jacket.

That is when I find the letter.

I know how to read, mostly because Mama insisted on it. I haven't read anything in a while, but the words make sense to me quickly enough.

A smile stretches across my face.

The King of Yadat writes to express his displeasure at the new Crown Princess of Lodra. If this matter is not rectified instantly, there will be the gravest of consequences for Lodra. Yadat is not above going to war for what is right.

“This is perfect.”

I sit back on my haunches as I consider the possibilities.

It is clear that the naga of Lodra and Yadat are headed for a bout of political unrest. And that means they won't be focused on a young human woman who might or might not have magic.

This is my chance, finally, to bring the kingdoms of Nagaland crumbling down.

SLYTH

I chew my food slowly as Zalith and Aurora stare at me from the other side of the long table.

They're certainly not happy to see me here.

I'd chuckle if it were any other situation, but the situation we're all in right now is dire.

Of course, Zalith doesn't believe we're in any danger at all, ever. I'm not sure how much Aurora knows.

My mind keeps drifting back to the letter, and chewing the roasted dripir becomes more and more difficult as I remember its contents.

What in the name of Mynir are we going to do?

I decide to tell them. Zalith and Aurora are the future King and Queen of Lodra, and they, rightfully, should know what is going on in their future kingdom.

They should also know that the potential exists for Lodra to go to war.

I swallow the piece of roasted dripir that I have been chewing for possibly an hour and clear my throat.

Both Zalith and Aurora look at me with narrowed eyes. I know they wanted some quiet time to themselves. They didn't appreciate me barging in on their meal, but as the royal advisor to the future King, I need to spend at least some time with the future leaders of Lodra. Outside of drinking games, that is.

“Zalith, Aurora.” I hesitate, but Aurora clears her throat and taps the table impatiently. Sparks of green magic flutter from her fingers, and she balls her hands into fists.

“There is something you must know. I found a letter from Kriseri. It arrived some months ago. They are not.... happy about your mating with a human. They made all kinds of threats in the letter. I think these threats are credible, and we should take them seriously.”

Aurora remains quiet, but Zalith scoffs and rolls his eyes.

And this is why I didn't want to tell him. He always thinks I am overreacting about everything.

“We don't need to worry about Kriseri!” Zalith slams a fist down on the table. Aurora rolls her eyes as the cutlery and crockery on the table clatter with the force of Zalith's blow. “We have the force of an entire kingdom behind us! Let them bring their warriors! We'll crush them easily, as though they were an army of so many pillas!”

Aurora meets my eyes across the table, and she gives me a sympathetic smile. When she speaks, her eyes slide back to her mate, her voice quiet, gentle, and measured – but firm.

“Zalith, we cannot deal with this by waiting and hoping that our forces will be strong enough to take them on. I agree with Slyth. This is an important matter that should be dealt with diplomatically.”

Zalith softens, losing his attitude right away as he defers to his mate.

I still find this transformation wonderful to see. Several months ago, Zalith would never have bowed to anyone other than his parents. He would have made a quick meal of any human who tried to give him guidance or advice.

But now with Rory, he has become almost malleable, open to different opinions and schools of thought.

She has really changed him for the better.

“How do you propose we deal with this, then?” Zalith asks Aurora.

Suddenly, the dining hall is lit up with sunlight as the afternoon grows brighter and sharper.

We have been experiencing beautiful weather recently. The kind of weather that warms scales and skin. The kind of weather that is good for crops and livestock. The kind of weather that signals prosperity.

I'm grateful because right now, Lodra needs to look strong and prosperous, especially in front of its enemies.

"Well." Aurora's soft voice drags me from my reverie, and I focus on her words. "We all know that the human population will get hurt the most if there is bloodshed. So we will need to accomplish as much as we can without violence."

"How are we supposed to do this with so little information?" Zalith asks, and I am reminded that he has had a royal education, the same education I have had.

He might value strength of the body above strength of the mind, but he is as intelligent as I am. I just wish he'd use his brain more.

"I don't suppose the letter gave you any more information?" Zalith directs this question at me. His tone is sharp and curious.

I shrug and then I start to cut into my vegetables.

"There were a lot of vague threats, but nothing specific. The anticipated sentiments about disrespecting tradition, wrongs being righted, et cetera," I murmur.

Then I voice something that I know they probably won't agree with. "That's why I was thinking that I could go into the territory and find out what is happening. It's not like we can send in an army, or even a spy, because if they're caught, well, then war will certainly break out."

"No." Zalith and Aurora speak in unison, and I wince as Zalith brings his fist down on the table again.

"That is far too dangerous for you! You are not trained like our soldiers or spies are! It would be asking for death to walk into Kriseri!"

“It’s the only way,” I say calmly as I place my knife and fork neatly on the table and plead my case. “I don’t see any other way to get information, do you? I’ll go in quietly. I’ll visit the southern villages where I am sure I can gain some information. There is always someone willing to talk around there.”

Zalith sighs and leans back in his chair. I am struck by a wave of pride. He is finally starting to look like the world-weary King that he will be someday.

Aurora takes a sip of the fine mead we imported from Milthar and then dabs her mouth delicately with a napkin before she speaks.

“Are you sure about this, Slyth?” she asks me directly.

I nod firmly and take a sip of my own wine.

“I am sure. This is the only way. I won’t be gone long, a few months at most. I want Lasta to run things in my absence because he is the only naga I trust with the job. He’ll keep the place running while I’m gone, and when I return, it will be like I never left.”

Zalith grimaces and snorts before he finishes his zhisk, which we imported from Vhoig.

“It sounds like you have it all figured out. You were never going to listen to us asking you to stay, were you?” Zalith says, an accusatory tone in his voice.

I shrug smoothly and stand up from my place at the table.

Now that I’ve told them, it is time to get the ball rolling.

“You are both very important to me, but this is one thing I need to do – for me, for our territory. For both of my closest friends. This whole matter needs to be handled delicately, and I knew you’d want to send an army in right away. I am your royal advisor, Zalith. You appointed me in the role because you knew no one else could do the job better.”

Before I leave, I walk around the table to them and bow to Aurora before I kiss her forehead. I bow to Zalith, who rolls his eyes before he pulls me into a massive, rough hug.

A thousand memories flash across my mind, and I am sure that the same memories are flashing across Zalith's mind, too. Memories of us. Of life up to now. Memories of our childhoods. Memories of our teenage years.

I know that our memories are probably different. Zalith will remember us being friends.

I remember learning to be his faithful servant in between moments of our adolescence. Everything I do now is to continue the legacy that I was born for.

The memories do not fade when Zalith lets go and I walk away from the dining hall.

I meet Lasta outside his chambers, where he leans against the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Lasta." We shake hands, and he looks me up and down before he snorts derisively.

"You don't look like you're ready to infiltrate the Kriseri," he mutters before he turns and walks into his study.

"You'd say that even if I looked ready, Lasta." My tone is mild.

Lasta tends to be... abrasive. I have learned not to take offense at this point because I know he doesn't mean anything by it.

"Well." Lasta's tone of voice is short. He sighs and sits down at his desk, which is a haphazard mess of books and papers. "I got you the maps you wanted. Not that they'll do you any good. I doubt you'll make it very far before they realize that you're a spy."

I sit down in the chair opposite Lasta and take the maps he hands me.

"It's always good to have your ringing endorsement, Lasta," I say absentmindedly.

"You know I like being honest," he says with a sharp grin. "Just don't die while you're there. I don't want to be stuck with this lot. None of them know their ass from their elbow, and I don't want to be left cleaning up after Zalith."

“Your request is noted,” I say with a smile as I stand up. “Now, I am already packed. I just need to stop by the armory and pick up my weapons.”

“How much did you pack?” Lasta asks me, and his tone is almost curious, which is a shock to anyone who knows him.

“Not a lot.” I pause in the doorway. *Does he actually want to have a conversation?* “Enough to get me by for a few months. I don’t dare pack more, because I don’t want to be weighed down.”

Lasta grunts and looks away from me. He focuses on the paperwork in front of him.

“Well. It was nice knowing you.”

LORELAI

“**T**his has to work,” I mutter quietly under my breath. “Because if it doesn’t, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

My skin is cold. I would light a fire using my magic, but considering that I am creeping through one of the human farms and about to steal a shit ton of their belongings, I don’t think that would be very wise.

My mother has been haunting me more and more lately. It’s like she’s come to life. Like she has risen and is with me at every turn, with every move I make.

She is there in the whisper of the trees and in the air that shifts around me when I inhale and exhale. She is there in the click and sputter of my magic, and she is there in my dreams.

Always in my dreams.

I have never been afraid of meeting my mother in my sleep. Why should I be? She loved me desperately. She loved me enough to sacrifice herself for me to live.

But lately, I am afraid.

I don’t want to see her in my dreams, and I don’t want to see her in the shapes carved into the tree trunks. Because I have finally come up with a plan to get my revenge, and I know she’d disapprove.

My mother, while she was alive, raised me to be brave and strong. But she also raised me to keep my head down.

She would not have gone along with this plan.

Even though this plan is the only thing I have to hold onto right now. Even though this plan is the only thing keeping me going.

I stumble in the darkness and let out a choking gasp of air as something in my chest twists painfully.

It is true. This plan to overthrow the naga, to burn them all to the ground, is the only thing keeping me going.

Without it, I don't know what I'd do.

I find the clothesline before I know it, and I strip it bare, bundling the clothes under my arm before I run back into the forest.

I hate this. I shouldn't be stealing from other humans. But they'll thank me when we're finally all free.

At sunrise, I go bathe in the nearby river. I have a small block of soap and a piece of hessian cloth, and I scrub my skin until my body is raw and rough to the touch.

I dry off quickly, using a larger hessian cloth before I sort through the bundle of clothing that I stole off the clothesline.

Most of it is useless, but I find a pair of trousers and a shirt that should fit.

"This is what comes from doing things in the dark," I mutter as I look over my collection of knives and my bow and arrow.

I can keep most of my knives underneath my clothes, close to my body, but my bow and arrow are too large to hide.

"Unless..."

I look over at the bow and then at the shirt, which fits although it is slightly too large.

I grab one of my carving knives and get to work on the bow.

The day grows old and weary around me as I carve away at the spine of the bow and rip apart the seams of the shirt before I sew it back together.

I'm missing a lot of good hunting doing this. I only hope that this will work out. It has to work out. Because if it doesn't, I don't know what I'll do.

As I adjust the stolen clothes and my bow so that my weapons can fit underneath the shirt, I go over the plan in my head.

In a few days, there will be some kind of special royal anniversary, and the streets will be filled with naga and the human slaves that they take with them everywhere.

In a few days, I'll leave at dawn and make it into town, where I'll blend in with the other slaves.

I cringe as a vision of my mother's face materializes in my head. *She would not be happy with me right now. She'd consider this a death wish.*

"Maybe it is," I murmur furiously to myself as I test the spine of the bow, which now has a hinge in the middle that allows it to bend. "But I don't have a choice. It has to be done."

She didn't raise me to sit around and do nothing. I cannot believe that my destiny is to remain in this forest and hunt for the rest of my life.

Once I blend in with the rest of the slaves, I'll infiltrate the villages that are close to the center of the town, where I'll figure out what the King's movements are.

If he plans to leave the castle, I can follow him on the road. When the carriage pulls over, killing him will be as easy as killing a dripir.

"He's no better than a dripir, either," I say darkly to myself as I finish up the shirt. The shirt has an extra flap at the back so that when I hang the bow over my shoulder, it will look completely inconspicuous.

I have also adjusted the bow, which can now fold in half, so it is even smaller than it originally was.



THE SUN IS SO bright that it is painful to look at the horizon, where the brilliant light streams out as if someone has tipped over a jar of sunlight and is flooding Yadat with it.

It is a little bit after dawn, and I have just spent about an hour bathing in the river with a piece of soap that has completely dissolved in the water.

My skin is bright red as I pull my stolen clothes on. I hop down into the bunker and grab some of the rubber clips I fashioned to keep my hair at bay. Then I grab the small, broken piece of looking glass off the shelf.

I very rarely look at myself, but I have never been particularly good at braiding my hair, and I need the looking glass to guide my hands. When I have finished braiding my hair back, I stare at myself in the looking glass for just a second before it becomes too painful.

All I see, when I look in the glass, are my parents looking back at me. All I see are my mother's deep-set eyes and straight dark brows. All I see are my father's curly baby hairs that refuse to be tamed no matter how much water or taura fat I use to slick it down.

I look around the bunker that I may never return to. I grab my small bag and bow and arrows and secure it underneath the oversized shirt and the jacket that is the only thing I have left of my father.

And then I leave.

I arrive on the outskirts of the village early enough to blend in with a group of farm workers.

We are directed by three naga to carry sacks of grain to the center of the village, where the village's baker will use it to make baked goods.

Luckily, everything I am carrying beneath my clothes is light enough not to burden me too much, and I lift a bag easily enough onto my shoulders and follow the line into the village.

“What’s all the fuss about?” I ask the woman next to me. She must be close to my age, and she is slightly thinner than me. Her face is gaunt, and her skin is stretched tightly over her face.

She shrugs, struggling underneath the weight of her bag before I reach over to help her.

She looks at me with narrow eyes, but then she must decide to trust me.

“Not sure. We were just told to be ready for extra work today. As if we didn’t have enough to do already.”

I ask more questions of the people around me as we walk, but no one seems to know anything about the King or his movements.

Maybe this wasn’t the best place to get information. You need to get closer to the castle.

I am about to slip away from the group as we near the center of the village when I hear shrill shrieks and screaming coming from the village square.

The naga around us lift their spears and swords, and we all come to a stop. *There’s no fighting your way out of this*, I think to myself as I look around doubtfully. I examine the naga and keep my hand on my waist, where I have several knives holstered.

The naga around us mutter excitedly to one another before they start to yell. They shout orders at us, and we all put down the bags of grain we are holding before we walk in a straight line to the center of the village.

“What’s going on?” I hiss at the woman behind me. The woman I helped earlier with her bag of grain. I twist around to see her answer. She shrugs and sighs.

“It could be anything. These bastards are always going on about something. But don’t let them hear you say anything. They killed Jenny in the town square just the other day.”

I am inflamed with rage at the news of Jenny’s death, who I will never know, but who was just another victim of the

naga.

*I'm sorry, Mama. I know you'd disapprove of this plan.
But I have to do it. For you. And for Daddy. And for Jenny.*

SLYTH

The whole village smells like filth.

Frankly, the whole state of Yadat seems ugly to me. I've been here for a week, and I'm already tired of it. Everywhere you go, there are humans trying to avoid being hunted down and soldiers trying to hunt them. No one trusts anyone here, and they are all afraid of the very land, because it may be hiding the humans they live off enslaving.

As for the humans that have been caught and put to work, they are constantly chained and humiliated. Having the most of these broken creatures is considered to be glorious, and so every petty rich man competes to be surrounded by dirty, sad people whose eyes are constantly on the ground.

This is not the kind of nobility I care for. There is none of Zalith's even-mindedness or fiery spirit. This country turns men into mean-spirited, small-hearted tyrants, and the sooner I get out of it, the better I'll feel.

I walk down the streets of the town, making my way towards the center, where I assume there will be a marketplace. I do my best to offer smiles to the naga who go past me and to avoid the eyes of the humans.

I reach the village square and stand, looking around for somewhere to set up a booth. It isn't too long before one of the other merchants walks over to greet me.

"You look like you've just arrived. Looking to buy or sell?" He's a short man with green scales and a big, fanged grin that's probably fake.

“Sell, at least at first.” I notice that there are two humans setting up the booth he was by. One of them is a man with a heavy chain around his neck. The other is a woman with a scarred back. “Can I just set up a booth anywhere?”

“Well, that depends on what you’re selling,” he replies, peeking at the packs on my back. “I’m guessing medicine, based on your bags.”

“That’s right,” I say, not unimpressed. “Healing potions from Lodra. From the look of things, it looks like I’ll be making good sales.”

His eyes narrow. “What does that mean?”

I point at the woman. “Well, that slave isn’t the first I’ve seen with some rather unsightly scars on her. One rub with one of the lotions I’ve got in here and all of that will be as clear as fresh snow.”

The merchant laughs. “Well, you’re not going to sell anything with that pitch! A human without scars is like unground nabella. If those creatures learned you could just get rid of their scars, they wouldn’t learn a thing from them.”

I don’t like this man. I don’t like the way he laughs about ugly, violent things. I also don’t like how he slips in little boasts like mentioning nabella, which I’m sure he absolutely drowns his food in just to show he can afford it. Still, I nod and do my best to fake a smile. “Of course. Silly of me not to have thought of it.”

“I take it that means you come from somewhere outside of Yadat? May I ask your business? I doubt you came all the way here just to sell a few healing potions.”

“I go anywhere there’s money to be made. There’s not much more to say about my business unless you want to be a part of it.”

“And Yadat just happened to be where you thought you could make the most money?”

I wonder if I’ve slipped up somehow. If so, I don’t know where it was. Certainly, I might have missed some bit of

merchant culture somewhere. Then again, maybe this man just doesn't like me.

That's okay. I'd rather people like this didn't like me.

"Yadat happened to be where I hadn't tried making money yet. Whether I end up coming back or not isn't certain."

His fanged grin rises again. "Well, then I certainly hope that your health potions sell well. I'd recommend you set up somewhere in that row. That's where all the medical wholesalers are."

I nod. "Thanks for the tip."

With that, I walk over to the row of booths that he's pointed out. Unfortunately, I haven't learned anything about Kriseri, and anything I ask him will just make me look suspicious. Hopefully, I'll do better once I start actually selling some potions.

I spot an empty booth and walk quickly over to it. Next to me is a booth selling various freshly gathered herbs and another selling potions. There are chained and beaten humans at both.

I walk to the herbs booth.

"I'm looking to sell some health potions," I say. "Would this be a good place to set up?"

The woman who's running the booth looks confused. "For health potions? No, this is for non-magical remedies. You'd want to be over there."

She points to another row of booths halfway across the square. Not a bad trap on the part of that merchant. Not many people who'd come to a non-magical remedies section looking for health potions.

"Thank you. I must have gotten lost." I start to walk away, then pause, as if I've just thought of something. "Are you native to this area?"

"That's right," she says. "I've been gathering and selling herbs here for years."

“I’ve been thinking about expanding my business into this area,” I explain, worrying slightly that if the other man got suspicious of me, she might too. “But before I do any of that, I want to know if things are safe around here. I don’t want to try and expand somewhere and then have a war break out.”

“You’re asking if I think there’s going to be war?” she asks. I can tell from her voice that it was definitely too direct a way to approach it.

“Just if you’ve heard anything. Troops building. Traders getting stopped. Anything like that.”

She thinks for a moment. “I don’t talk to competition.”

Before I can even say anything, she turns to one of her two humans. “What are you standing around doing nothing for? Go find me some customers!”

I walk away before the human can pitch me on buying herbs. Yadat is apparently not a trusting place. Frankly, I’m not sure if people are hiding things from me because they think I’m a spy or because they think I’m a fellow merchant.

I keep noticing the humans and their dull, miserable stares everywhere I go in this market. Before getting to know Rory, it used to be easy for me to just look away from humans most of the time.

I still found it a little disconcerting when someone was cruel to a human, in the way it’s disconcerting when a child plucks the legs off an insect. Now, it’s become something more. Now, when I see these humans, I imagine Rory in their place. I imagine someone showing all this cruelty to one of my friends.

There’s nothing that makes me angrier than that.

Unfortunately, I’m here as a spy. I can’t make a scene, because people who make scenes get noticed.

It’s then, as I’m walking to the next row, that, almost as if the town is trying to test me, I hear the screams of humans and the angry hissing of naga chasing them.

I turn around. There are several humans running, all women. They're coming from a few different directions, and there are naga soldiers close behind them and surrounding them. It takes me a second to realize what I'm looking at. It's a round-up. The soldiers have picked out a few unattended humans who were probably sheltering in some building nearby and are gathering them together to dispose of.

For a moment, my hand wants to draw my weapon. But I resist. I'm a spy, and as much as I hate having to stand by during brutality like this, that's exactly what I have to do. For Prince Zalith.

The soldiers are moving the humans towards a stage. The humans look terrified more than anything else. They're looking for any opportunity to escape, but the net of naga soldiers keeps closing tighter and tighter around them.

The crowd is closing in, too. They're watching all this with a gaze that's almost hungry. I hate having to blend in with them.

That's when I notice her.

She's one of the humans being corralled into the village square. A laborer, by the looks of it. She's surrounded by other weary-looking slaves, naga soldiers at their backs who look hungrily at the women being forced up onto the stage.

She's pretty, for a human at least. It's a little hard to tell given how dirty and unkempt she is, but every once and a while, her face or body will hit a pose and I'll see it. She has short black hair, cut unevenly, probably with a dagger. Her body is muscular, and there are several scars on it, but they're the kind that happen from accidents rather than torture. Most of all, her sharp eyes give her a look of startling confidence.

That's what really makes her stand out. She's not scared right now, not like all of the other humans around her. She's furious.

This whole country seems almost entirely dedicated to robbing humans of any sense of dignity. This woman has managed to hold on to it, despite everything. That interests me.

It especially interests me now, because it makes me wonder if she's going to do something about the women screaming for their lives on the stage.

She's one woman, unarmed against several naga soldiers with swords. Yet she doesn't look like she's lost hope.

She's shoved onto the stage as the soldiers have now formed a near-solid ring around it. There are several other humans on the stage with her, but my eyes stay locked on her. The other humans are terrified. I'm sure she's planning something.

Whatever she's planning, it's interesting to me. I push past the gathering naga, deciding that I'd better get a closer glimpse of this. If something is about to happen, there's no way that I'm not going to be right in the thick of it.

LORELAI

I was trapped in it before I had a chance to get out of it. I was walking down the streets of the village, doing my best to keep my head down and not get the attention of anyone, when suddenly, a young woman carrying a baby stumbled into me. She had come from one of the houses, and it took me a second to realize what was going on.

That was when I saw the naga soldier, sword drawn, standing in the doorway of the house she'd just been pushed out of. Immediately, I became aware that there were other soldiers and other humans everywhere around me. And worse, people were gathering to watch.

“Let’s go, let’s go,” the soldier said, stepping forward. “We’ve got a show to put on.”

The woman stepped back, and I put myself in between her and the soldier, then followed her into the market square. More soldiers and more humans were being forced in from other streets, all towards the great stage at the center.

I caught the eyes of the woman. She was looking at me for reassurance, but there wasn’t much that I could offer her. We were caught in a round-up. The only way out was going to be through.

There are no formal rules for a round-up. That isn’t really the point. The point is that soldiers can do it, and they want to remind humans that they can. Even a human who was owned by someone else can get swept up into a round-up. If they get killed, sometimes the owner will demand financial

compensation, but usually, the fear it creates among the rest of the humans is payment enough.

All I know for certain is that the soldiers are going to force all of the humans onto the stage, and then they won't let them go until we have entertained them. Usually, that means a fight to the death. The soldiers will let one human leave once there is only one human left.

Usually, at least. If they don't think it will be more fun to kill them, too.

I glance around the various humans being corralled into climbing onto the stage. There are about twenty of them. None are armed with any real weapons. Only a few of them move like fighters – a man over by the opposite corner of the stage, a teen boy who is already on the stage, and a woman who is about three or four people away from me.

Of course, there is the possibility that any of them can use magic. Then again, they'd have to be very subtle about it if they did try using magic in the battle. Letting a crowd of angry nagas know that you are a human magic user is just asking to be killed.

There is no way for me to use fire or elemental magic in this battle. Even if I escape, which isn't guaranteed, the news will make its way up the military chain. I'd lose any chance to approach the King with the element of surprise.

So what am I supposed to do? How am I going to make it out?

I climb up onto the stage as a basic plan starts to form in my head. Yes, I decide. I'll fight my way through this and win. But I'll do it without letting them see that I'm fighting. I'll be the last one standing, but as far as anyone will be able to tell, that will only be by pure chance.

That will mean they'll be pretty likely to let me go once it's all over. If it looks like I won by skill, they'll want to humiliate me more and knock me down a peg. If it looks like chance, they'll laugh it off. Even a weak little woman like me can kill a bunch of humans.

“Well, then,” the leader of the soldiers announces, stepping forward. His armor has a golden sheen to it, which indicates someone who bought their way up the ranks. “You all know what to do. Show me which of you wants to live!”

There’s a moment of silence as the humans on the stage look at each other, wondering whether they’re actually going to attack each other or not.

And then, chaos breaks out. It turns out, it only takes one to start it all off.

The first thing I do is wrap my arm around the throat of the woman who had the baby. With a single jerk, I’m able to pull her off my feet and to the ground. If my arm had been just a little lower, I would have been able to snap her neck like that. I think if anyone is watching, they’ll think that’s what happens. But I’m also counting on the idea that no one will be. There’s too much movement for anyone to focus on me and what I’m doing.

“Stay down on the ground and play dead,” I whisper to her, then pull my arm off and back away, trying to get to a place where no one will attack me. She remains there, quiet. As long as she doesn’t make any noise, she should be safe.

I might not have the chance to save anyone else, but at least I hope she’ll be okay.

The mass of people charging into each other is terrifying and overwhelming. There’s so much blood and violence, and it’s all so senseless. None of these people are fighters. They’re all just desperate and scared. Watching it, I can feel myself shutting my emotions away, pushing them down until I can survive this.

A large man sees me standing alone and charges at me. He’s already got blood on his fists, and I don’t want to think about how he got it there.

I do my best to look terrified and frozen until the very moment he reaches me, at which I duck down, sidestep, and push him past me into another person. Immediately, the two of them start to fight. Hopefully, to anyone watching, that looked

like me trying to jump away at the last minute rather than a practiced move.

I try to move through the crowd as much as I can, making sure there's always something more exciting to watch near me while doing my best to avoid getting dragged into the action myself.

There are knives and rocks in play now. The soldiers must have thrown them in to make the whole thing more fun. There's blood everywhere, and I'm nearly deafened by the screams of people fighting and dying.

I see an older man standing over by the edge of the stage. For some reason, my eyes linger on him. And then suddenly, the tip of a knife bursts through his chest, then pulls back. He falls sideways, revealing the teen boy holding the knife and glaring straight at me.

As he runs at me, I duck behind a woman, and he attacks her instead. Someone else tries to hit me in the head with something heavy, and I only just barely manage to jump out of the way. I add a little stumble at the end which I hope looks convincing.

Someone dressed in a dull red shirt leaps at me, and I end up grappling with them. I spin around, hurling them backward into another woman who seems to have found another knife.

There are fewer and fewer people now, and more and more blood. It's harder and harder to be ignored. I'm doing my best to stay in the background now, as far away from anyone as I can.

Someone else swings something at me. I dodge it. They follow me, but I lead them into someone else, who kills them with a single blow.

And then, finally, it's just me and the teen boy. He's pointing his knife at me and moving slowly closer. The knife is much too far from his body. No form or caution at all.

He's just a kid, I think. Just a scared, angry kid.

But everybody's watching now. There's no chance of pulling off a fake kill again. The best I can do is leave him too

wounded to keep fighting. Maybe someone will help him. Maybe.

“We don’t have to do this,” I say, trying to sound as desperate as I can. “If you just put down the weapon...”

But it’s too late. He charges at me.

I turn around as if I’m trying to run. With one hand, I cover my eyes, making the gesture as big and quick as I possibly can to draw people’s eyes toward it.

With the other, I grab his wrist and push his knife into his own chest.

That’s when I see him, standing in the audience.

He’s a tall naga, with orange scales covering his body and a deep pink tone to the hood around his head that reminds me of a sunset. His limbs are long and graceful, and his scales reach a deeper orange near his hands and feet. His eyes are bright yellow and sharp, and they’re fixed directly on me.

He saw everything I did, I realize without question. The others might be fooled, but not him.

“Well, well, well,” says the captain in gold. “Looks like we have a winner.”

I don’t even pay attention to him. I take off as quickly as I can, trying to lose myself in the crowd.

It’s not the soldiers I’m running from. It’s that beautiful naga with the sunshine eyes.

Why am I calling a naga beautiful? There’s nothing beautiful about them. Only there was something beautiful about him. Not just physically, although he was certainly attractive for one of them. There was an intelligence to him, a wisdom.

I glance quickly over my shoulder.

He’s following me.

What really surprises me is that some piece of me is relieved to see him pursuing me. Even though he’s a naga,

there's something in me that wants to know more about him
and what he wants with me.

LORELAI

WHY IS HE FOLLOWING ME?

I can't think of any immediate reason. Obviously, he's seen what I can do. He knows that I'm more than a simple human. I can tell that much just from the sharpness of his gaze. But that's a better reason not to follow me, at least, on its own. If I could defeat all of those humans without even needing any weapons, what would I do to a naga who follows me somewhere I'm free to use them?

Time to lose him, I tell myself, starting to move towards the right side of the street. I do it as carefully and gradually as I can, drifting just slightly and making sure to always dodge people to the right and never to the left. Hopefully, I'll already be in position by the time he even notices what I'm doing.

I can't help noticing that he's good at following. He doesn't follow me with his gaze, which would make it too obvious, but he keeps track. His pace is brisk. Not fast enough that it stands out on the street and makes him look suspicious, but quick enough to keep up with me.

But what really gives him away is how aware he is of other people and his surroundings. Most people just sort of stroll blindly forward, noticing a few things that interest them but letting almost all of the details go past. They'll walk straight into someone if that person doesn't say something first. But he doesn't do that. He weaves elegantly through the crowd, planning the way he walks so he never has to make awkward, quick jumps to avoid any of them.

There's no mistaking that kind of awareness. That's not someone who's strolling around casually. That's a determined fighter, making sure that no one has a chance to surprise them. He was able to recognize me fighting in the round-up because he's a fighter, too. And I wouldn't be surprised if he were a deadly one at that.

Only, what is it that he fights for?

Could he be working for the King? Could he know something?

No, that doesn't make sense. I haven't made any moves yet. Whoever he is, he wants me for completely different reasons. Reasons I don't know anything about.

I turn around quickly and fix my eye on him. I want him to know I see him following me now. I want to give him a warning that if he doesn't let me go, I'll make him sorry for it.

The next moment, I make my move. Now all the way at the edge of the street, I duck into the alley between two houses, stepping nearly sideways so that he has as little time to respond to me doing it as possible.

As soon as I'm in the alley, I take off running at full speed. The question is whether I can make it to the end of the alley before he makes it to the mouth. I think there's a chance. After all, there is something of a crowd, he is towards the middle of the street, and maybe I am overestimating his skill.

Or maybe I'm not. As I near the end of the alley, I hear him run into it at full speed. That indicates impressive agility and some ability to improvise. I turn left at the end and keep running. Let's see if he can keep up.

He runs into this alley just a few seconds before I reach its exit. He's fast, but I've got an advantage. This next alley is shorter, and it leads into another crowded street. By the time he makes it to where I'm standing, I'll be lost in the crowd.

A good chase. But not quite good enough. I make it down the alley and immediately slip into a large group of what appear to be farmers.

As I continue down the street, I keep my eyes peeled. The gate of the village and the treeline of the forest beyond it are in view now. Once I make it into the forest, then I'll feel safe. This village is hostile to all humans, and especially to me. The forest is friendly. I know it like the back of my hand.

I could run into another alley or even enter a house. There'd be no way for him to track me down if I did that. But frankly, I want out of this village. And if he's a good enough tracker to follow me to the treeline, then maybe I want him to. That's certainly something interesting, and in this kingdom, I could use that.

I step through the gates and risk a glance behind me. There he is! I'm impressed. He must have used a track I left on the ground or some similar trick.

Either way, he won't stop me now. Even a second or so of lead, which I'm guaranteed to have, will be enough in the woods. He may know how to track people in a forest, but I know how to not leave traces, and in a forest, the person hiding has the advantage. I push myself, running towards the trees as fast as I can. Maybe I also want to show off a little for him.

I have just enough time after I pass the tree line to set up an attack.

He runs into the forest. Then his body responds before he even knows what it's responding to. I throw two daggers straight at him. They shine bright and spin straight towards him with deadly accuracy. One less naga.

But then, he leaps out of their way, just barely. I'm astonished by the sheer agility of it. I've never seen a naga move that way.

But it won't be enough to help him. The daggers have got him off balance. That means, no matter how good he is at jumping, he won't have enough time to get out of the way of my next attack. I pull the string of the bow back, aim it at his heart, and let the arrow slip.

He sees the arrow flying at him. He knows there won't be time to jump out of the way, but he doesn't despair. Instead, he grabs onto the nearest branch and uses his arms to pull himself out of the path of the arrow. It whizzes past him and lands in the trunk of that very same tree.

Now I'm really impressed. That's the kind of trick I would have felt proud of thinking up myself. And he pulled it off well.

I've got another arrow out of my quiver and pointed at him, but I don't hurry to shoot this one. I want to see what he does next. This male knows how dangerous I am now. He knows that I'm armed and that if he makes a wrong move, I'm more than willing to kill him. So what's he going to do?

"Are you going to shoot me?" he asks as he drops back to the ground, his sunset-colored scales gleaming in the sunlight filtering through the forest's trees.

"Depends," I answer, keeping the string tightened. "Are you going to make me?"

"I don't want to hurt you," he says.

"You'll forgive me if I need a little more than your word to believe that."

"Unfortunately, I don't have much more than that to give you. I'm a merchant. I've come here to sell health potions –"

"Oh, don't give me that!" I snap. "You're not some merchant anymore than I'm just some slave. What are you really here for? And what do you want from me?"

Something flashes in the naga's sunshine eyes, something dangerous. His masculine features harden further, if possible, and an unwelcome wave of heat flows down my spine at the sight. It's clear that he's unhappy that I've seen through his facade. That makes two of us – I like having been discovered just as little as this mystery male.

The naga lunges at me almost faster than I can track, and I loose my arrow a second too late, the arrowhead burying harmlessly into the tree behind him as he tackles me. I scream

furiously as he takes me to the ground, his weight crushing me against the forest floor.

Panic sinks in. He's going to kill me, or worse, and there's nothing I can do about it. He's too big, too strong, too fast –

Just like that, the weight above me lessens, the naga pushing up onto his forearms and caging me in against the ground. My heart hammers like it's trying to find a way out of my chest as I stare up at him, momentarily shocked by the duality between his attack and the concern I see on his features.

The moment he realizes I'm fine, however, his full lips twist up into an infuriating smirk.

“Had to level the playing field, didn't I?”

I buck my hips, rage sweeping through me and replacing the animalistic fear I'd been feeling seconds ago. The sharp shift throws the naga off-balance, and I slip out from under his arms, swiping another knife sheathed at my hip and brandishing it at him.

Surprise widens his eyes before he recovers, that same cool, predictable smirk on his face once more.

“A fighter. I like that. So why are you all the way out here, little killer? Are you hiding from something?”

I growl, the nickname grating against raw wounds I'd rather keep hidden from this naga. He pushes to his feet slowly, showing me his hands like he's trying to placate a wild animal. I take a step back as he takes a step forward, maintaining the distance between us.

He cocks his head curiously at me, as though trying to read the thoughts flitting across my face. For the first time in my life, I don't think I can outsmart this naga, not without my magic.

My flames tingle in the palms of my hand, eager to take care of the threat before me, but for some reason, I stifle them.

Instead, I turn on my heel and dash deeper into the woods, praying that I'm faster than he is for the second time today.

SLYTH

To me, it looks less like she turns and runs into the forest and more like she simply disappears. One moment she's standing there, a snarl on her lips and her knife gleaming in the diffused light, and the next, she's seemingly leaping into nothingness. It's as though the forest bent around her, swallowing her whole and leaving not a trace for me to follow.

It wouldn't be any good to try, either. I can already tell that, even as I approach the place she was just standing to look for a trail. She saw exactly how good I am at tracking, and I saw how good she is at moving through the forest. Maybe with a few days and an army at my command, I could track her down, but not on my own.

Whoever she is, she's clearly an ally of the forest. She knows it, and it knows her.

I stand in the place where she disappeared and examine the forest around me carefully. It isn't so much that I hope to find a track with which to hunt her down. Rather, I'm hoping that she'll decide to show back up on her own.

It doesn't seem totally impossible, honestly. She was interested in me, at least a little bit. I could almost swear I saw that in her eyes. Especially after I dodged her daggers and her arrow. Maybe she wasn't as interested in me as I was in her, but she was curious. She wanted to know who I was.

Although not as badly as she wanted to get rid of me, it would seem.

Perhaps it was forward to ask if she was hiding something. I should've known that would scare her off, but I couldn't help myself. After all, what other reason would a human have for behaving the way she has? If she was truly just trying to stay hidden from the atrocities of this territory, she never would have slipped into the village. It's more than clear that she knows how to fend for herself out here.

All of this just leads me to believe that there's something she's after. While that should concern me, all it does is pique my interest. I'm here for something, too, after all. I have my Prince and she has... well, that I don't know. But I will someday.

"Aren't you curious, little killer?" I murmur into the woodline, scanning for any signs of movement. I wouldn't put it past the feral little thing to still be watching me, weighing me. Perhaps even waiting for another opportunity to strike.

"I could answer so many questions bouncing around in that pretty little head..."

My ears strain against the usual sounds of the forest. The sound of something large and wild echoes over the countless smaller signs of life. Probably a batlaz or a worg, but I'd need to hear it again to be sure.

I can't resist waiting for just a few more seconds. Of course, nothing happens. My little killer doesn't make a sudden appearance, and despite the fact that I knew she wouldn't, I can't help but feel... disappointed.

"I'll come find you again," I say finally and then start back towards the market.

Is there any chance of her being relevant to my mission? None that I can think of, much as I would like to. She certainly isn't working for the King. Even if the King were willing to set aside his own disgust for humans long enough to recognize her talent, she would never stoop to following him. Could she be resisting him? That's possible, but I don't see much evidence that she's involved with any broader organization.

The work of one talented warrior like her is certainly enough to interest me, but my Prince sent me to discover information on a much broader scale. So far, I have none of it.

As I go back through the gates and towards the market, I catch a few stray eyes lingering on me in a way they didn't before. People saw me running here. Only a few people, to be fair. No one in the market itself. Still, it was a mistake, and if word spreads too far, there's a small chance I'll pay a price for it.

It was wrong of me to let my personal interest in a woman overcome my dedication to the mission. I won't let it happen again.

I make my way back to the market and choose a booth to set up near the other enchanted medical supplies. I see a few other stalls also selling health potions. That's just as well. I'm not here to sell potions. I'm here to gather information.

For a while, I don't get a chance. Customers come by too often, and none of them are interested in talking. They just want to buy a few potions and then head off without talking much about it. Even when I raise the price to draw out my stock, people keep coming.

They don't want to talk about it, but the people of this village are scared. They're expecting something very big and very dangerous to happen, and for some reason, none of them want to name what it is.

It's nearly evening by the time someone finally comes by who's willing to strike up a conversation with me. She's a short naga with blue-green scales and purple eyes. Based on her clothing, my guess is that she's a small-scale landowner or perhaps another merchant. Not a noble, but not someone who has to break their back just to make a living, either.

People like that are usually a good source of information. Not rich enough to not worry about danger or poor enough to keep their heads down. They're the kind who will talk if you just listen.

“Healing potions, eh?” she muses, looking at my wares. “Sounds like someone’s heard about the rumors.”

So she’s even willing to start the conversation without me prompting her? Finally, a spot of luck.

“Are there rumors?” I ask. “I only arrived today.”

“Oh, you hadn’t heard?” She looks embarrassed. “Well, maybe I shouldn’t tell you. It’s all just gossip and hearsay. And nasty gossip at that.”

“I have noticed that I’ve been doing better business here than anywhere else,” I say, trying to let her know that I’m curious without actively saying so. “It’s almost as if everyone here was afraid that something was about to happen.”

“Well, it’s better to be safe than sorry.” She picks up one of the bottles. “I’ll take just this one, I think. Just to be sure.”

“You said the gossip was nasty,” I say, getting a bag for her to place the bottle in. “May I ask who it’s nasty to?”

“Oh, I don’t think I should tell you that,” she says, accepting the bag and the bottle. “It wouldn’t be decent.”

I can tell by the way she says ‘decent’ that she means safe. I don’t know how much longer I’ll have to wait to meet someone who’s as open to talking as she is. It’s time to make a bit of a gamble. There’s one person who it would certainly make sense for people to be anxious to gossip about. Nothing to do but hope I’m right.

“Is it possible that the subject of this gossip wears a certain special hat? Say, a crown?”

She hesitates and a slight smile spreads across her lips. “Well, now that you mention it, it’s certainly a possibility.”

“If it helps, I have no loyalty or connection to the King of this country,” I tell her, leaning forward slightly. “As a merchant, kings are an inconvenience we have to work around.”

She nods, and a look of relief spreads over her face. She clearly wants to share this story, but the King does keep plenty

of informants to watch his people. Still, it's a pretty safe bet that none of them would say what I just said.

"It's said that the King is planning a military action soon and that he'll be marching his army south," she whispers, laying her elbows on the counter.

"A military action that would pass straight through this village," I add.

"Exactly. And that's bad enough on its own. Only, there are also rumors about the military action itself and what they're fighting."

"I always keep an ear out for rumors."

She nods. "They say the action is a response to revolutionary activity and civil unrest in this very area. And... well, you've probably heard the sorts of things the King has done on punitive campaigns in the past."

I certainly have. No wonder healing potions are selling well. I'd buy some if I heard that.

"Those are certainly unnerving rumors," I say finally.

"I agree," the woman says. "Make sure you keep some of your stock for yourself. You wouldn't want to be without it."

"No, I wouldn't," I murmur.

She smiles and starts to walk away from me. That's when I stop her.

"Oh, there was one other thing I wondered. Did you see that round-up that happened in this square earlier today?"

"On the stage?" the woman answers. "Yes, I did see that. Your first?"

"My first," I confirm. "What did you think of it?"

"Not a very good one, really. I like it better when there's some real fighting rather than just stumbling about."

"So you didn't think much of the winner?"

She smirks. "Not even sure I'd call her a winner, except by technicality. The boy screwed up and stabbed himself. She just

stood there and watched it happen.”

I nod. Of course, I hadn't really thought that she would know anything about the mysterious woman. Still, it couldn't hurt to at least ask. After I'd gathered the information I was really here for, of course.

“Maybe there'll be a better one tomorrow,” she says. “They're really exciting when there are a few humans in there who actually know how to fight.”

And with that, she waves goodbye and walks away into the market.

So my mysterious woman appears in a village that is known for civil unrest and revolutionary activity. Enough of it that the King himself is planning to crush them for it. That has to be more than a coincidence, doesn't it? Either the King is coming here to try and kill her...

But of course, she isn't my mission. The King is engaged in quieting civil unrest. That's what matters.

So why do I keep thinking about her? Why does she feel so important when I know she shouldn't be?

LORELAI

It's good to be in the forest alone.

The forest is simple. It doesn't care for you, but it also doesn't expect anything from you. As long as you're wrapped up in its branches and leaves, you don't have to be anything different from what you are. The forest will offer its fruits and herbs and other gifts, either way.

The first thing I notice once I'm alone again is the pain in my foot. From the moment the soldiers surrounded me until the moment I ran back into the woods, I've been ignoring the sprain. No time to deal with a bad ankle when you're being chased through a village by a mysterious naga who can dodge an arrow.

But of course, you can only ignore an injury for so long. It's definitely hurting worse than it did before.

"I'll have to gather some herbs to make a salve for it," I tell myself. "But for now, I just need to sit in the branches and rest for once."

I lean my head back against the trunk of the large tree I've chosen to hide in for now, letting my eyes flutter shut. The moment I do, I see that naga again.

I can picture almost every detail of him. His simple cloak. His bright scales, his powerful, tall frame, and the muscles that give him such remarkable and deadly agility.

"Will that be the last I see of him?" I ask myself. It's certainly possible. I can think of any number of people who

have tried chasing me into the forest and who I've then never encountered again. Of course, with those people, I didn't think about them again, either. They were little nuisances on my path and not anything more.

I have a feeling that I haven't seen the last of that mysterious naga or his piercing yellow eyes. He's in this village for a reason just like I am, and it would be strange indeed if whatever it is he's come here to do has absolutely no effect on what I'm planning.

As I lie against the tree, other faces come up before my eyes. The face of the teenage boy at the moment I plunged the knife into him. The face of the man I pushed as he fell into the grip of someone else. The faces of the people I couldn't get close enough to rescue at all.

The sounds of screaming and the smell of sweat and blood.

That face of surprise was the same that my father had when he was sold into slavery. My mother had it, too, when she realized that the two of us had been betrayed. And she did scream at the very end. I didn't see what happened because I was running away, but I did hear her cry, and I knew that I wouldn't ever get to see her again.

The guards had taken her from me. The king they served under had taken her.

It would be easy to kill the King just for my parents. They would certainly deserve his blood, even if he had never harmed another soul in all his life. But I don't have that luxury. I don't get to have just one or two people dead. No human who lives under him does.

When I kill him, it will be for all of them. He'll die for my parents, but also, everyone else who fought in that round-up, or any of the too many people I haven't been able to save in all these years. I wish I could make him see all the pain he's caused. I wish he could feel everything that he's done.

But he's just one man. He can only hold one man's suffering and one man's death. That will have to be worth it.

I pull out my bow and one of my arrows and begin to cut notches in it. I began this when I was young, with one notch for my mother. Ever since, I've added a notch every time I've had to watch someone die because of this quest. It's painful to have to add nineteen all at once, by my count. I've never had to do so many in one day.

“One day, this bow will launch the arrow that will kill the King. And it will do so with the strength of everyone I've ever had to mourn because of him.” Saying it out loud makes me feel stronger. I forget about the pain in my ankle momentarily. My conviction fills me with no room for anything else.

Then my mind shifts to think again about the mysterious naga, pulling himself out of the path of my arrow. I certainly will have to see him again. But when? And do I have to adjust my plan in order to deal with his presence?

There's no particular reason to think he'll be a danger. He certainly won't be loyal to the King of this country.

“If he were, he would have tried to kill me for one thing, which he didn't,” I muse. More than that, I simply don't want to believe such a thing about him. I don't believe someone could be as talented and clever at battle as he's shown himself to be and attach himself to a vile wretch like the King.

No, he won't fight me to stop him. But if my purpose crosses his, then he will certainly stand his ground. It might be wise to find out who exactly he is and what brings him here.

Or am I just looking for an excuse to pursue him rather than my purpose? The question cuts deeply. I'm close to getting my vengeance, closer than I've ever been in my life. Now is no time to get distracted.

“No. He certainly deserves caution,” I resolve. “But he's also no reason to slow down my plan. There's no telling how long before I get another chance as good as this.”

The plan is simple. The King is well protected while he's in his fortress. The stone walls are strong, and he's surrounded by men who have no choice but to be unfailingly loyal to him.

He has no taste for hunting or any other activity that might give me a chance to kill him while he's staying in its bounds.

That means I have to draw him outside. One of the only circumstances he leaves the castle for is to lead military expeditions. He loves few things as much as he loves the blood of battle. But even when he leaves under normal conditions, he will be surrounded by his army. A loyal army is every bit as difficult to penetrate as stone walls.

The exception, of course, is if his expedition is against civil unrest. Then the army has to split up to cover the same ground that a resistance can. The key, then, is to cause as much disruption as possible. The more orderly and planned everything is, the safer he will be. But every disruption to his army's structure puts him closer and closer to danger. Soon enough, he will have to take a risk that's too dangerous to make up time or to deal with a miscommunication.

That will be the moment I strike. I only need one moment like that, and I know he'll give it to me.

The first step is to draw him out earlier than he plans. One big action, a sudden attack here ought to do it. To him, it will make sense to move quickly. He'll think the fact that he had already planned to make an expedition here in a few days will protect him. He won't realize how many compromises pushing it forward as little as half a week will cause.

He won't realize until I take advantage of them.

"That means we'll have to start a rebellion here. That won't be as hard as it sounds. The people here are already angry and scared. They know that the King is going to come against them soon, and they know how brutal he will be when he comes. All they'll need is an opportunity and a little pushing, and they'll seize the opportunity. If the King is coming to destroy us anyway, we might as well take what we can before he arrives."

Will the rebellion I aim to provoke here succeed? I don't know. Certainly, all the people who fight in it won't make it. I have no idea what the army will do once the King is dead. Will someone be able to step into his place and continue his work?

It's possible, but I doubt it. The King is a fearful man, and he's kept anyone who's too ambitious or too competent as far as he can from power. It's kept his throne safe enough, but once he falls, it means there will be no one ready to take his place.

Again, my mind returns to the naga who I know nothing of. It won't be too long before I'm done with this quest for revenge. Another quest may well be found. In fact, I'm sure it will be.

But first, I think I want to find you, I decide. Maybe by the time I'm done with my mission, you'll be done with your mission, too. You can tell me what it was, and I'll tell you about mine. And then... well, I don't know what will happen next.

I drop down from the tree down to the forest floor. It's time to gather some herbs for my foot. It still hurts, but it's calmed down enough that I don't fear going through the forest with it anymore.

I have a strange idea that this mystery naga will understand me in a way that few others have. I can see in him the same strain of duty and carefully controlled anger that drives me. That's what I really hope. I hope that he won't be afraid of or horrified by me when he meets me, as so many have been. I hope he will see the power and importance of what I'm doing.

I hope that he'll like me. It's a ridiculous thing to care about when I'm planning to begin a revolution and murder a King. But it's still true. I hope he likes me. I hope I like him too.

SLYTH

Slowly, I tease out more information about the unrest against the King in this territory and the rumors of a planned military action in the near future. Like all rumors, it's all murky and full of contradictions. One second, I'm reassured that any rebels who ever operated here have moved on, and the next I'm told there's a permanent base somewhere in the forest which is the heart of a country-wide movement for revolution.

The truth is, my focus isn't on any of that. It's on her.

Every once in a while, I come across the tale of a rumor that just might be about her. Two soldiers went missing in the forest and were found with burn marks all over them. A lone rebel picking off soldiers and guards. A human with dark powers that allows them to fight with nagas, one on one.

"There's no reason to be sure they're talking about her. They could be combining the achievements of many rebels into one legendary warrior," I ponder to myself when no one is around to hear me. Or maybe it's more like a boogeyman. The merchants and slave dealers tell stories about a human who wants revenge to deal with their fears and soothe their consciences.

But I want it to be her. Any time someone talks to me, I ask them about the army and resistance first, and then about her. She matters to me. Sometimes, I even think she matters to me more than the mission.

Unfortunately, no one is able to tell me anything that brings me any closer. Even if I tell myself they might have heard of her, none of them have understood anything about her.

“Oh, there’s definitely something out in those woods,” one of my customers says after mulling over the potions for nearly five minutes. “But I don’t think it’s just one person.”

“A whole revolutionary army?” I prod.

“More like a few fanatics,” he answers. “If humans could put together an army on their own, then we’d be in real trouble.”

He laughs, and I do my best to laugh with him.

If you only saw the way she fought, I think to myself. Then you’d really be scared.

Finally, I can’t stand it anymore. I’ve had enough of collecting vague rumors and petty anxieties from slaveholders.

I’m going into the forest. I want to find her.

“In a way, it’s not abandoning my mission,” I tell myself as I walk through the gates of the town. “There’s decent evidence to suggest she may well be connected with some kind of resistance activity, activity that’s been significant enough to draw the attention of the King. It’s important to establish whether she’s acting alone or connected to a more formal resistance. After all, if it’s the latter, my Prince could have quite a military advantage from allying with them.”

The problem is, I already know the answer to that question. Everything about the woman tells me that she works alone and has done so for a very long time. If there is a formal resistance cell in this area, and I’m not convinced of it, she’ll have no connection to it.

Comrades in arms would just be distractions to her. They would get in the way of her dedication to her mission.

But what is that mission? And why am I so curious about it and about her? I don’t have any answer, but I’m not letting that

stop me.

I cross the treeline and let the green light of the sun filtered through the leaves welcome me. I walk as silently as I can, my ears focused on all the sounds of the forest, identifying the ones I can and searching for anything that sounds strange or out of place.

There are two ways to track someone. The first is to look for signs of their presence and follow those until you get close to them.

The other is to go somewhere you know they'll be watching and let them track you. That's what I'm doing. I don't flatter myself that she'll talk to me, not after last time. But I know that if I keep wandering into the forest long enough, she'll start following me eventually.

I stop moving without warning, freezing with one foot still hanging in the air. Just as I suspect, I hear it. One footstep, somewhere behind me. On the ground or among the trees? There's no way to be certain.

I consider turning around and darting behind me as quickly as I can. But it would be a dangerous move. I've seen just how fast she can disappear into the forest when she wants to. And that's not even considering the question of whether she knows I heard her yet. For all I know, that one footstep might have been her taking off.

No, I'll go on. I want to see what she does. Will she take out her bow and shoot me? Or is she curious about me too?

The best I can hope for is a glimpse. I'll have to lead her somewhere with less cover. Then, maybe I'll get my chance to see her.

I can just pick out the rushing of water somewhere in the forest. A river is usually difficult to hide near. I'll lead her that way.

I continue to walk through, and I do my best to follow the sounds of her moving behind me, but it isn't easy. Every once and a while, I hear a sound that I'm sure is her, but just as often, it will come from a direction I don't expect at all. She is

following me, I'm sure of it. But I can't make out anything else beyond that.

At one moment, the direction of the breeze changes, and suddenly, I can smell her. I find myself enjoying her smell. Somehow, it carries something of her focus and dedication with it. Almost as soon as it happens, it begins to fade away without any sound of movement I can hear.

So, she even keeps track of her scent. I should have guessed.

Clearly, this is something she must practice. Probably, she follows groups of soldiers through the woods until one or a few of them are separate from the others. She could probably follow a small band of them for days if she wanted to, waiting for an opportunity to strike. Even when they became aware that they were being followed, it wouldn't help them too much.

She must be considering the possibility of attacking. I don't think it's impossible that an arrow or a small fire blast could surprise me enough to hit me under these circumstances. There's no one else with me. If she wants to kill me, she'll never have a better chance.

But she doesn't. That must mean something. It's a sort of intimacy between us. She has accepted me into her forest, at least for now.

The river is coming into sight. I can feel a physical excitement at the idea of finally getting to see the woman who's been following me all this way. This is about far more than curiosity, I realize. I have feelings about this woman. Feelings that run deep.

That's when I become aware of another scent and another sound. I've been so focused on her that I haven't been paying attention to anything else in the forest, and I should have. There's no mistaking that sharp, musky odor. It's a worg. And where there's one worg, there's a whole pack.

Before I can do anything, one of them is already leaping for me. Its dark fur is interrupted only by its shining green

eyes and its deadly sharp fangs. There are at least three others around me. I manage to twist my way out of its path just enough that it doesn't knock me over. Instead, I end up with a long gash running down my arm.

I draw my sword and step into a fighting stance, even as another worg is running at me. I swing my sword at it before realizing it's a distraction, and the real attack is coming from behind me. I manage to dodge the brunt of it just in time, but again, I wind up with a nasty slash running across my back.

"I'll make a coat out of your fur," I threaten the animals, who just growl in response.

Is she going to help me? No, I realize. She wants to see if I can handle myself in this situation. She wants to know what kind of warrior I am. Well, I'll show her.

Another worg barks at me, but this time I don't fall for it. I wait for the attack, turning as the worg leaps off the ground and giving him a long cut all along the side. Without thinking, the other worg runs at me, and I swing my sword straight into its neck, killing it.

Now two of them, the last two I assume, charge at me together. I manage to repel one of them, giving it a wound in its belly for its pleasure, but the other one jumps up onto me and sinks its teeth into my neck. I stab it in the stomach with all the force I have left.

I stagger back against a tree. Two worgs are dead, and two are injured enough that they won't attack. The last one growls at me for a moment, but finally decides to retreat with his wounded companions. The moment it turns and disappears into the forest, I finally let myself slump down.

"By the gods," I gasp. The world is spinning around me, and things are getting dimmer. For a moment, I see a human shape stepping out of the trees towards me.

It's her, I realize. Finally, I got my chance to see her.

As I continue to sink down and grow fainter, I smile. It certainly wasn't how I planned to draw her out, but at least I managed it.

She wanted to know what kind of a warrior I am. Now she'll get to see the real test of any warrior's character. How they die.

LORELAI

I creep closer. *Is he unconscious? Is he pretending? Or is he...*

No, he certainly isn't dead. His chest is still rising up and down. But he's lost a lot of blood, and the weariness in his body looks very real. And yet, somehow, he's fought the worgs off. Worgs never retreat from combat unless they're afraid of an enemy.

I don't know if I could have survived if it had been me the worgs had attacked. Frankly, I didn't expect him to.

It would be easy to finish him right now. It would be safer, too. He's a potential hitch in all the things I was planning. I don't know what it is he wants or what he's willing to do to get it. If I just put an arrow in him right now, he'd be dealt with forever. I would never have to worry about him getting in my way again.

I kneel down and pull an arrow out of my quiver. I fit it to the string of the bow, pull it back, and aim it directly at his throat.

All I have to do now is let go.

But I don't. I crouch there, looking at him, leaning tired and bloody against the tree.

Obviously, I should shoot him. Why should I leave a dangerous naga alive to interfere with my plans?

"In the condition he's in, it would really be something of a mercy," I mutter.

So why aren't I shooting?

I try to convince myself of several answers. That I don't want to waste the arrow when he's clearly bleeding to death anyway. That it's wrong to kill an opponent who can't fight back. That perhaps he might be useful to me.

But it's none of those. In fact, it's much simpler. The truth is that I'm simply fascinated by this man. I don't want to kill him because it would mean never getting to understand him. And something tells me that never getting to understand him would mean never getting to understand a piece of myself, the piece that sees myself in him.

I slack the string of my bow and return the arrow to its place. Carefully, I creep closer to him. He doesn't react.

Naga's blood is darker than human blood and slightly thicker too. His wounds are gruesome to look at, but I can see now that they aren't as deep as I thought at first. If he's left like this, he will likely die, but he isn't doomed. Even some pretty basic medical care can save him.

He would survive with the medical care I could provide for him.

But that's taking this whole thing a little far. It's one thing not to kill a naga, even one as dangerous as him. But to care for one? Wouldn't that be like making myself into a slave for him? Aren't I better than that?

"Maybe I am. But is it really better to leave someone to die?" I wonder.

My mother told me that we should always fight for love rather than hate, for the ones we want to protect rather than against the ones we want to protect them from. She said that many of the naga may well deserve our hatred, but we have no obligation to give it to them. We can choose not to be filled with anger, even if that anger is merited.

Then, she trusted someone who betrayed her, and she was killed by naga guards in front of me.

I don't know what to learn from that. I would love to be the kind, smiling woman that my mother was. But I've never

felt that circumstances have allowed me that possibility.

Suddenly, sitting opposite this mysterious naga in the forest, I feel that they finally have. Here is someone that I can care for. Here is a chance to show that I am more than a simple tool for revenge and violence.

“I am more than a tool for revenge and violence, aren’t I?” I ponder. I’m not convinced of the answer.

I pull out my satchel, open it, and douse a small cloth in one of the healing lotions I carry. I begin to dab it against his wounds, and he stirs awake, wincing.

“I knew you were following me,” he says, sounding somewhat groggy.

It would be best to keep him talking. If he lets himself fall asleep, I’m not totally sure I’ll be able to pull him back.

“You have good ears,” I tell him. “Most people wouldn’t have noticed.”

“I came here looking for you.”

I had wondered if that was the case. I couldn’t think of any other reason he would want to go through the forest the way he did. Suddenly I realize that he probably went towards the river in order to draw me out into territory it’s harder to hide in. A clever move. Just the kind of thing I would have done if I thought someone was following me.

“Tell me about yourself,” I command, cleaning the wound on his back. “I want to know about you.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Start with your name.”

“Slyth,” he says.

Slyth. I test the name, rolling it over my tongue without voicing it. It’s a nice name. It seems fitting.

“What’s yours?” he asks.

“Lorelai,” I tell him. “But let’s focus on you right now. You’re the one who nearly got killed.”

“I already know about me,” he answers. “If you want to keep me interested, you should tell me about yourself.”

I smile at that. He’s certainly not lacking in dedication.

“I don’t know if I feel like telling you about myself right now.”

“You’re willing to save me from dying, but you don’t want to tell me anything about yourself?”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve told anyone about myself.”

That’s certainly true enough. There have been two, maybe three people who I’ve shared my real name with since my mother died. And none of them knew much more than that about me. I don’t know if I like the idea of someone understanding me. It’s much easier to stay a mystery.

“So you won’t tell me what brings you to this country?” I prompt.

“Not if you won’t.”

“Then I suppose we’re at an impasse.” I pull out bandages and start to wrap up the wound on his shoulder. He’s already sounding a little more sturdy. Once I’ve got him bandaged, he should be able to stand the journey pretty well.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he manages. “I can promise you that. On my honor.”

“Your honor is important to you?” I say.

“It’s the most important thing.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t know that.”

It’s the cautious thing to say, but I do believe him. Maybe it’s the way he said it. Maybe it’s the way he just fought for his life. Maybe it’s just that I want to believe him.

I tighten the last bandage. “How does that feel?”

He lets out his breath in a hiss. “Like I’ve just been mauled by a pack of worgs.”

“Fair enough.”

With that, I slip my arm around his waist and lift him up to stand. He's heavy, but not as heavy as I thought he might be given his strength. I'll make it.

"So you do have a shelter somewhere?" he says.

"Luckily. It's not too far."

"Not how I would have wanted to discover it, but I guess it works."

Again, I smile. I'm a little surprised that he has a sense of humor. I'd always imagined he was such a serious man when I tried imagining him before. Then again, maybe everyone gets a sense of humor when they're on the brink of death.

I set off towards my hide-out. He'll be the first person other than myself who will have seen it. Honestly, I'm a little proud of it. I had been in the forest for three days when I found it, and I knew it would be absolutely perfect.

"Why did you follow me?" I ask as I walk with him in tow. It's getting harder to carry him as I go. A part of me keeps wanting to just drop him on the ground for a rest, but I refuse. I'm going to get there. I will.

"That's a good question," he says. "I wish I had a good answer."

"So no one told you to? You're not under orders from anyone?"

"Not on that."

I shouldn't believe him, of course, but I do. The fact is, maybe I do understand why he tried to find me. It's the same reason I was so happy when I saw him heading into the woods and why I followed him with no thought to how vulnerable it might make me.

Finally, the ridge of rocks which hides my shelter comes up in the distance. The way there still seems unbearably slow, but at least I know exactly how much longer it will be. Just a little bit longer. Just a few more steps.

"Why are you saving my life?" he asks suddenly.

“Well, now you’re the one asking good questions.”

I half-support, half-drag Slyth toward my dugout shelter. Inside, I’ve got all of my supplies and weapons, some various items I’ve stolen off of naga patrols in the forest, and the bed that I sewed together myself.

I carefully lower Slyth onto it. I can tell he’s impressed.

“You made all of this yourself?” he says. “No help from anyone else?”

“That’s right,” I reply. “I don’t work with anyone else.”

“Never?”

I look at him there on the bed. I can’t help finding him handsome, even though he’s a naga.

“I’ve never done it yet,” I say, then step back towards the mouth of the shelter. “I’m going to get a few more herbs for you. You should sleep while I’m gone.”

Before he can say anything, I disappear back out into the forest.

SLYTH

My tongue darts out before I even open my eyes, tasting the air. My brain catches up after my body has already woken up, and the ache along my muscles starts to register. I clench my jaw as I try to stifle the pain and register the stale air on my tongue, but my mouth is too dry to make good use of that sense.

Irritation is already pounding through me at my lack of mobility, but I swallow it back and force my eyes open. Immediately, I cringe away from the onslaught of light.

“Tell me the truth – what are you doing here, in Yadat?”

I jerk back, startled and pissed I hadn't registered the small human standing over me. I blink slowly, but she steps closer, a scowl twisting her plump lips.

“Well?” She cocks a hip, her choppy brown hair swaying around her shoulders. “Are you going to answer me?”

A chuckle works its way through my chest, unexpected and scratching my throat as it spills out, and I only laugh harder when I see her lips press into a thin line. “Lorelai,” I finally say, a smirk covering my face as my eyes rake down her body.

“Look. You are using up my resources,” she huffs, flicking a piece of hair out of her face. “So if you want food or medicine – and trust me, you do – then you need to answer me.”

My forehead scrunches as I cock my head. “Is that so?”

My words cascade through her slowly, and I watch as her muscles tense until her hands are fisted into tight balls. Humor dances through my chest, but I stave off another fit of laughter. I like seeing her angry, but I don't want to push her too far.

At least not yet.

“That is so!” Her body is bent forward as if the weight of her words nearly tipped her over. “So you will answer my questions or I will let you die.”

Her eyes are blazing and both of my cocks jerk as I take her in. She was beautiful before, but this enraged? It's stirring a desire in me I didn't know I possessed.

As I stare at her pouty mouth pulled into a scowl, all I can think about is forcing her lips to part around my cock and make good use of them. She is yelling at me as if she has any right to command me, but I could show her very quickly who is in charge here.

The idea is tempting, and I could use the release. My balls draw up as I think about emptying into her, pumping her full with my seed after she properly earns it. I have to stifle a groan as the image flashes through my mind, and I can't help thinking how beautiful she would look with a broken spirit and a swollen stomach from how deep I pumped into her.

I jerk back, shocked by my own thoughts. Lorelai must see it, too, because confusion dances over her features. She quickly schools them back into a stern glare, though.

“Fine,” she huffs, spinning around. “Die here where no one will find your body. See if I care.”

“I am taking care of some business with Kriseri.” The words slip out before I can think better of it. All I know is I want those defiant eyes back on me, to push her until she hits her limit and then shove her over the edge. I want to see her shatter beautifully because of me and then I'll crush the pieces so that no one else can ever put her back together.

She'll belong to me.

She already does.

My cocks jerk when she spins back around, excited for the fiery spirit I already see blazing in her expression, but I'm caught off guard when she darts toward me. I barely catch the flash of the blade before it's pressed to my throat and her body is hovering over mine.

It's like she's offering herself up to me, like she wants what I have to offer. My eyes dart down to her curvy frame, and I suck in a breath as I think of how perfect she would look freshly fucked and filled to the brim with my release.

Maybe even my eggs.

"I will kill you right here," she seethes, and my eyes jump back up to hers. They blaze with murderous intent and maybe another man – a more rational one – would see the danger he is in. But not me.

My tail slides up one thigh and across her lap, which is hovering just over my twin cocks. As I curl it around her waist, she almost looks like she might hesitate.

But then she leans forward, digging the blade deeper into my skin. "You are working with him?" she snarls, and I jerk on her waist with my tail. Her expression darkens. "You deserve to die for that."

Before she can say more, I pull her harder until she is settled directly on top of my throbbing erections, and my grin starts to fall off my face. I can feel her heat even through the clothes separating us, and I know she has noticed my arousal when she rocks back on top of me. It's slight, almost an accident, but when I see the lust start to filter into her eyes, I know it's not.

"Do it," I breathe, pushing my hips up against her. Fuck, what I'd give to push into her, to force her to submit. I want to hear her pleading for me to use her, fill her, breed her. "If that's what you think –" I raise a hand to grip her forearm and press the blade deeper into my throat. The sting only heightens my pleasure as I rock up into her. "Do it."

"I..." Her eyes dart between mine, and her tongue swipes out across her lips as I pull her down against my lap with my

tail. "I can."

Her words have lost their bite, and I grin when she pushes back into me. "I don't doubt you can, little killer." My hand tightens around her forearm. "I doubt you want to."

Pushing back on her forearm, I flip us over. She gasps as her back slams into the bed and I pin her hand with the knife above her hand. My tail is still holding her waist in place, and I reach up to grab the blade from her.

Leaning down, I drag my tongue up the side of her throat, tasting her and groaning. Her arousal is plain in the air, and my cocks throb as I wonder how delicious she must taste.

"I'm right, aren't I?" I hum in her ear, punctuating the question as I grind down on her.

A soft whimper falls from her lips, and my eyes nearly roll back in my head. "No," she breathes, but there's no conviction behind it.

"We both know I am." I nip along the column of her throat as I keep up my thrusts. "You want this just as much as I do." I reach her collarbone and suddenly the clothes between us are my most egregious enemy. My gaze flicks up to hers as I hover above her breasts. "Don't we?"

Her eyes are wide, pupils blown, as she stares down at me. Her lips are slightly parted, and her chest rises and falls with labored breaths. But still, she dares to say, "No."

Arousal surges through me at her defiance, and I am determined to make her scream yes. I consider choking her with my cock until she decides to be more agreeable, but I decide that the first time I bless her with my cum, I want it shooting so far into her that she has no hopes of getting me out.

I flash her a smirk. "We'll see about that." Lifting up, I press down harder on her hand until she starts to squirm. Then I click my tongue. "Careful, little killer. You might get cut."

She freezes, panic spreading across her face as I lift my other hand. Her eyes immediately go to it, following as I bring it to the middle of her chest. "Wait," she gasps.

I cock my head, my smile spreading. “No.”

I slice down the front of her abdomen, careful not to press too hard. The fabric falls away, leaving only a light red line along her skin. Her back has bowed off the bed, and I lean down to lave one tongue over her pebbled nipple.

“Slyth,” she moans, her hips rising up to grind along one of my shafts.

I chuckle. “What happened to ‘no?’”

Her answer is breathless as she continues to work herself against my lap. “I meant it.”

Anger flashes through me and I drop the knife, gripping her pants in one hand. I jerk down, ripping the material as she hisses, a blush creeping up her skin. I don’t stop until she’s fully exposed to me, and then I hold her eyes as I slip a hand between her legs.

She gasps, and it makes me want to break her more. I want to mark her, cover her scars with ones of my own making, and fuck her so thoroughly she only smells of me.

As I gather her slick arousal on my fingers, I think she just might let me.

Lifting my fingers up to my mouth, I stare down at her. “You can’t deny how much you want me,” I growl, flicking my tongue out to lick her off my fingers. I groan softly, my hips jerking forward of their own accord as I taste her. Her breathing grows faster as she watches, and her legs wrap around my waist, begging me to come closer. “When you are soaked because of me.”

She swallows hard. “What are you going to do to me?”

I smile slowly. “Break you.”

LORELAI

I should be terrified. Or at least pissed off that I've been disarmed. Instead, as Slyth sucks my nipple, I find my back bowing up to meet him.

"Slyth," I moan as his tongue flicks over it. It's rough and feels amazing against my sensitive skin.

"Careful." He chuckles as he moves to the other breast. "You don't sound so certain of my death, little killer."

I run my hands over his hood, savoring the way he hisses as my thumbs run the underside of it. It must be sensitive because his tail tightens around me.

His fangs rake over my breast, nearly drawing blood, and my hold tightens on him. "Watch it," I snap, feeling a bit of my defiance flare.

He rears back, and heat floods through me, settling between my legs as I take in his expression. His eyes are narrowed to slits, and the anger there unleashes a desire so volatile in me I lose my breath.

"What did you say?" he breathes.

I want to submit to Slyth. My initial instinct is to give in to whatever he wants if it will bring his mouth back on me, but then a smirk finds me. He wants to force me into submission. And I want that, too.

Fuck, I hate myself.

“I said watch it.” I pull against his hand pinning me to the bed and he snaps me up, his tail pushing against my lower back as he holds me in place by my wrist.

Slyth snarls in my face. “I think that this mouth—” He drags a thumb over my bottom lip enough to hurt, and it lights me on fire. “Has a better use than your fake threats.”

“They’re not—”

My words are cut off as he jerks me forward onto my knees and rises up above me. His injuries don’t seem to be bothering him now as his tail coils around me and he drops my wrist in favor of sliding his fingers through my hair.

His fingers twist in my strands and yank my head back. “Stop acting like you want to protest this.” He leans in, his tongue flicking out, and my stomach flips. It should be in disgust because I hate naga, but right now, I want nothing more than to feel it on me. “I’m going to show you your rightful place – submitting under me.”

I swallow hard as he stands back up, his eyes never leaving mine. He smooths his hands over my head, the gesture polarizing to the look on his face. His hand comes around to grip my chin, forcing my jaw open. I’m already dripping, but I grow wetter as I take in the fire in his eyes as he stares at my opened mouth.

“Make me,” I breathe, uncertain of the words as they leave me.

He chuckles. “Little killer, I’m going to fucking break you, and you are going to *beg* me for it.”

A soft moan escapes me, and that undoes him. Slyth rips open his pants, and even though I should hate him and everything about him – and I do – I sit patiently with my lips parted, just begging to be filled.

“*This*,” he groans as he fists one of his two erections and grips my head. “Is how you were meant to be. Waiting for me to pump you full just like you need.”

My eyes bounce between the two erections, both thrilled and scared. He steps closer, using his tail to push me up higher

as he rests the tip of one cock on my lips. I part them for him, but he doesn't immediately push forward.

I look up at Slyth, my chest squeezing tight at the dark look on his face. "Do you know how perfect you look right now?" My pussy clenches at his words. "The only way you'll look better is when you are full of my cum and your stomach is swollen with my seed."

I barely have time to process what he said before he pushes forward. I moan as his taste bursts across my tongue, and I flick it across the ridges along his erection.

"Fuck," he groans as he thrusts harder into me, and the tip hits the back of my throat. I gag softly, and he tugs hard at my hair. "Look at you." He drags me up his cock until it slips down my throat and I cough, earning another deep growl. "Taking me just like you were meant to."

His words only spur me on, and I force him deeper, reaching up to grab the base of his other one and stroke up.

"Keep this up," he grunts. "Little killer, you will be the death of me."

I hum softly as I work him, and my muscles tense when the tip of his tail slides down my front. He glides over my clit, and I cry out, his cock slipping deeper down my throat as I grind down on his tail.

"Yes," he moans. "I know you want me to fill you up, don't you?"

I nod earnestly, and I'm rewarded as his tail slides deeper between my legs, probing at my entrance. I tilt my head back as I whimper, pleading for more.

Popping off the head, I tell him, "I want you to pump me so full that you are all I can taste."

Slyth growls as he pushes my hand out of the way and stuffs his cock in my mouth. I let him thrust in and out of my mouth before switching to the other. I'm too enamored with the look on his face and the grunts of pleasure to protest as he uses my throat in earnest.

As his movements grow more aggressive, his tail pushes inside of me, and I cry out as he pulses inside of me. My eyes start to roll back as the pleasure builds, and Slyth drags me to the base of one cock while stroking the other.

Cum spills down my throat and across my breasts, as his tail continues to pulse inside of me. I swallow down his release, and when he finally pulls back, I open my mouth to show him.

His eyes drag down my frame, and my pussy clenches around his tail at the way he's staring at me. "Next time, I will fill you up properly, until your body can't take it anymore and you are swollen with my child."

With the way he's fucking me right now, I don't even care what he's saying. He can breed me all he wants if it lights up my body like this.

His tail rips out from between my legs just as my climax starts to mount, and I whimper as I stare up at him, not daring to protest in case he decides to punish me for it. I never thought I'd submit to someone, especially not like this, but I would do anything Slyth told me if it would bring some relief.

"I can't go any longer," he mutters before I'm flung onto my back, his tail slowly unwinding from my waist as he drops to his knees. "Without a proper taste."

Relief floods me as he dives between my legs, licking up the center before flicking against the clit. His tail slides up my body to tease my nipples as his tongue thrusts deep into me.

"I can't wait to see my cum dripping out of here," he grows as he pulls back to look at me, his tongue teasing my entrance. "To see your body take me like it should."

"Yes," I groan as he dives back in, his hand coming around to pinch my clit. "I want it, Slyth. Please."

He chuckles softly as he speeds up his tongue, pulsing it against my walls until my back is bowing off the bed and my eyes are rolling back in my head. I was already so close before and as he rubs my clit, I know I'm about to go over the edge.

“Soon, little killer,” he murmurs. “Soon I’ll give this body what it deserves.”

His hand and tail pick up speed, and my climax slams into me, drowning out everything else as pleasure wracks me in waves. I gasp for air as it overwhelms me, and I’m faintly aware that he has pulled away from me.

It takes me a minute to regain my composure, and by then, Slyth is sitting next to me. He’s moving a bit slower and stiffer, his injuries clearly catching up with him after all the exertion, but he has a cloth in his hand.

“It’s all I could find,” he murmurs as he wipes my chest clean.

I only smile as he tosses it to the side and collapses next to me. Neither of us makes an effort to move, but I know I should. I’m lying with the enemy here. I need to put distance between us, or at least check his injuries.

Instead, I let the exhaustion lining my body pull me under. Maybe I’ll regret this later, but right now, I can’t bring myself to care. Instead, I let the pleasure sing me to sleep and choose to ignore the fact that it was a naga that brought me to this point.

SLYTH

I wake up sometime after Lorelai. She's worked her way out of my arms without waking me and stood up. As I watch her, she paces up and down in her hideout, muttering something to herself.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

She looks back at me. "What do you think is the matter?"

I stifle a smile, knowing full well that smiling at her scowling face will do little but rile her.

Then again, I do like riling her up.

"What, are you saying you didn't enjoy it?" I sit up, and a pulse of pain burst through my back and shoulder. "If you were faking, you certainly did a good job of it."

"No," she spits, the admission seeming to scathe her tongue. She lowers her eyes from mine, but not before I catch a flash of embarrassment in those dark irises. "I just... don't know what to make of it."

"It's sex," I tell her. "You don't have to make something of it. Just feel it. Your body will know what to do when I fill you with—"

"Don't talk about that again," she interrupts.

"So you can take my cocks, but all of a sudden talking about sex is too much?"

She groans, turning away from me almost entirely. "Just... don't talk about it. There are more important things to deal

with now.”

“Kriseri, you mean?”

A look of pure hate passes across her face as she turns back to me. If I had seen that look on her before last night, it would have struck me more as a threat. Now, it only serves to turn me on, to remind me of the way she looked beneath me. My little killer is capable of burning passion, of love, and of hate, and that excites me.

“That’s right,” she says. “You should be pretty happy that the two of us have a mutual enemy in him. If we didn’t, I’d be treating you pretty differently right now.”

“You’re scared of your feelings for me,” I say teasingly. “You’re trying to come up with other explanations for them. But I saw you last night. It’s not much good to pretend.”

“I’m not changing my whole future for sex. I have other goals. Other enemies.”

“So do I,” I assure her. “But you can’t keep passion like that from changing your life, either. It’s one thing to have more in your life. It’s another to deny this.”

“Is that naga wisdom?” she scoffs.

“It’s something I learned from a friend.”

It isn’t my place to talk about Rory. Zalith’s love for her is his business, even if it will in time have far greater effects on the kingdom that he rules. It has already had deep effects on me. I don’t know if I would have been so open to affection between a human and a naga if I hadn’t seen Zalith and Rory and the happiness that they have found together.

“You can’t keep holding all these secrets from me,” she snaps, whirling around. “How am I supposed to trust you if I don’t even know who you are?”

I nod. “You’re right.” She seems more than a little surprised, but I continue on, not giving her the chance to interject. “I can’t tell you secrets that belong to other people. But you do deserve to know me better. Ask me whatever you want.”

“You have someone you’re fighting for,” she begins, sitting back down on the bed next to me. This isn’t a question, it’s a statement. Apparently, loners know other loners. “Who is it?”

“I am a warrior in the service of Prince Zalith,” I tell her. “I was chosen for that purpose before my birth, and all of my life has been dedicated to him and to his kingdom.”

She nods. “So is that the only reason that you oppose Kriseri? Because he’s the enemy of your Prince?”

I think about Rory again. Of course, Kriseri is my enemy because he is a rival Prince. But the more I’ve spent time in this country, the deeper it’s gone. There are rival kings and queens who I have respect for. Kriseri is not one. He isn’t simply another leader. He represents everything that Zalith and I despise.

“No,” I tell her. “I believe in Zalith.”

But it feels hollow as it rolls off my tongue. Because am I so sure that I wouldn’t be loyal to Zalith if he were as bad as Kriseri? Or if, perhaps, he were better but not better enough? Loyalty is the virtue I’ve been brought up in, not judgment. Yes, I do see things in Zalith that I like and in Kriseri that I hate. But is that the real reason I follow one and fight the other?

“Of course you do,” Lorelai snaps. “It’s easy for one naga to believe in another.”

I want to tell her that I care about humans. I believe in fighting for their dignity against the monstrosities done to them. But do I deserve to say that?

One of the things I admire in her, that makes me want to take her as mine, is her independence. She isn’t bound by loyalty and duty. She makes her own judgments, even harsh ones. I have something to learn from her there.

“Zalith will eliminate the cruelties of Kriseri’s kingdom.”

“I’m sure he’ll make things better,” she replies coldly. “Better enough to calm his own cold-blooded conscience. But I don’t want things to just be a little better. I want justice.”

There's more than the desire for justice in her words, though. There's anger. This is a woman who has been hurt deeply. That's the other side of independence. Your anger and your resentment are set free with you, and the only one who can keep them in check is you.

"I believe that humans deserve justice."

"I believe that you and Zalith are monsters, just like Kriseri!"

The words startle me. They seem to startle her as she says them, too. Does she really believe that, or was it just something that it felt right to say?

We sit in silence for a while. I want to fight back, to defend the honor of Zalith. But I can tell it wouldn't do any good, and I care too much about her to throw myself into pointless arguments like that.

"I can't change what you think of me," I say finally. "Except by showing you who I am. We have a common enemy. Whatever you think of Zalith, I hope you wouldn't refuse an ally against Kriseri."

"Is that the mission you've been sent here on?" she asks. "To fight Kriseri?"

"There are reasons to believe that Kriseri may be preparing for war against my territory. My job was to determine his strengths and weaknesses as best I could. If I can find a weakness to exploit against him, of course, it is my duty to make use of it."

"Would you kill him if you could?"

It's a difficult question to answer. My loyalty is to Zalith, and as war between them becomes more and more certain, that would include taking his life. But as a warrior, I've also been brought up with a loyalty towards the whole of the royal hierarchy, even Kriseri. If there is another way to eliminate him as a threat, I would prefer it.

"I would kill him if I had to," I say finally.

She looks disappointed. “Of course. Your view of justice only goes so far as stopping people from oppressing us. Never punishing them for what they’ve done.”

Once again, her fierce moral clarity and certainty in her own judgment fascinate me. The King certainly has done profound injustices in this land for years. Maybe she’s right that he deserves more than to be simply toppled.

Then again, am I the one to bring it about?

“I believe that Zalith will change things,” I say. “I think he’ll make things better.”

But it is a matter of belief, isn’t it? After all, humans suffer in Lodra too. Not the way they do here, and Zalith is sensitive to it. He says he will change things once he has the power to. And I believe him. But would I believe him anyway?

“If he doesn’t, he deserves death just as much as Kriseri,” Lorelai answers.

For a moment, rage runs through my body. I want to challenge her, even though I’m severely wounded. But I let the anger pass.

She has a right to say that, I decide. She is loyal to humans, not to princes. And if Zalith were no better than Kriseri, she would be absolutely right to strike him down.

But he isn’t. And he won’t be. Rory won’t let him. I won’t let him.

“Maybe it would be better if we focused on Kriseri,” I say. “It seems like he’s the one we agree on.”

Lorelai grows quiet, and for a moment, I find myself wondering if she’s serious about wanting to harm Zalith. I admire her tenacity, and even without knowing the more intimate details of her story, I can understand her rage at the world and her desire to right the wrongs done to her.

What I cannot understand, however, is how she plans to do it. It’s not a matter of being a woman or being human. It is a matter of being only one person against an entire race, an entire planet. Surely she can’t believe that she could single-

handedly topple an entire royal hierarchy across territories spanning hundreds of miles, much less survive for long enough to continue on her tirade?

I pull myself from my thoughts to find Lorelai looking at me. Something in her gaze feels heavy and weighing. The silence between us is deafening, but I feel it the moment the tension breaks. She's decided something, but whatever it is, she won't share it with me.

With that, she starts to check over my wounds and to replace the bandages with fresh ones. It's a strangely intimate activity, an act of acceptance in some ways.

I decide that I'll take what I can get.

LORELAI

FIVE.

I think I am being haunted by my mother more and more. Especially now, when all I think about is Slyth.

My mother, the person who loved me most in the world, is gone and has been gone for so long that sometimes I thought I was starting to forget her.

But no longer. Now, I can feel her with me again, refusing to let me go, refusing to allow me to forget her.

I don't want to forget you, Mama. I'm not going to forget you.

When did things become so complicated?

All I do lately is think of Slyth. I cannot help it. He is one of the most beautiful creatures I have ever seen. And he treats me well. He doesn't treat me like utter shit like the other nagas would. He treats me really well, in fact, and clearly it is messing with my head because I have never wanted anything more than I want Slyth.

Wanting Slyth comes with its own complications. Because I haven't forgotten my plan of revenge on all the naga. I have not told Slyth about my plans for revenge. I would be an idiot to do that. Because as much as I like him, and I know that he likes me, he is, ultimately, a naga.

I cannot trust him. I cannot trust any of them, and I need to remember that as I continue developing my plans of revenge.

I want to help kill Kriseri though. If any naga deserves death by my hand, it is Kriseri. And maybe if I do this, if I help

kill Kriseri and if I help Slyth with this whole thing, he won't hate me when I kill Lodra's royal family.

I look over at him, at the wounds across his body that do not mar his beauty at all.

Then I am forced to look away, swallowing quickly, as I remember the night we spent together.

I am not completely inexperienced when it comes to sex. There are plenty of human boys in Yadat who are willing to do whatever I want for a little relief from our very stressful lives.

But to have been with a naga?

My face grows warm as more details of our night together resurface in my head. I shiver slightly as I stand and inspect the medicines that I have prepared for Slyth's wounds.

It has been five days since I first met Slyth. It has been five days since we collided.

And now my entire worldview has been turned upside down. I am starting to realize that I don't know what I believe anymore.

You need to hold on. You need to hold onto everything that has hurt you. Because if you don't, you'll lose everything.



ELEVEN.

I cannot wait to murder Kriseri. I have been practically dreaming of the many ways in which I could torture him, ever since Slyth told me what his plans were.

I cannot help my frustration, however, when Slyth says that he only wants to kill Kriseri as a last resort.

That doesn't matter. He will die. And you will kill him. You will get your revenge, and you will free the humans under Kriseri's control in the process.

"This doesn't feel right." Slyth grimaces as he sits up, and I hurry over to check the wound on his side.

When he pulls his hand away, I see that blood has welled up across the gash. It is ugly, deep, and vicious.

“I thought my healing salve would be enough to heal it,” I murmur more to myself than to him. “But I’m going to have to stitch it up. It will be very painful.”

Slyth exhales heavily and then nods, his eyes closed.

I take a second to admire his long, curly eyelashes before I get the needle and thread out.

I sterilize the needle first, and then, as quickly as I can, I sew up the wound.

When I pull away, I realize that Slyth has been clutching my wrist the entire time, and I wasn’t even aware of the pressure on my arm.

“You can let go now,” I tell him gently. My chest feels funny, as though something has burrowed its way into me and has taken over control of my heart.

“You can let go now,” I repeat. Slyth has opened his eyes and is looking at me with an expression I cannot identify, an expression that I don’t think I want to identify.

“Do you really want me to?” he asks me.

I let myself sit in the little silence that blooms around us and enjoy the feel of his hand on my wrist, but I do not answer his question.

Then, after a while, I pull away.

Having Slyth on my side, so to speak, is good. Because it means I won’t have to use any humans as distractions when I finally attempt to kill the royal family.

It has been eleven years since I fled Lodra. It has been eleven years since I lost my father. Since my father was taken away to be a slave for the royal family.

It has been eleven years since my mother started teaching me how to use my magic in earnest.

I was too young. I shouldn’t have experienced the kind of hurt I did. I shouldn’t have seen the kind of violence I did.

I might like Slyth, but I cannot let this go unpunished.



SIX.

Slyth's wounds are healing more slowly than I would like.

You're not supposed to worry about him. You're not supposed to care.

The problem is, though, that I do care. I have started caring about Slyth more than I'd like to admit.

And after the night we spent together, I feel like I have given a part of myself to him, in a way that I never did with the human village boys.

With the human boys, I could still protect my heart. But with Slyth, the naga I am supposed to hate, I am defenseless.

"I think you need a little more of the meqixste salve," I murmur as I inspect his wounds for the millionth time.

"Do you really think that will help?" he asks me. I don't miss the tinge of anxiety in his voice.

I didn't think any naga could experience anxiety, I think to myself. I caress his face for a second before I start to slather the wound on his side, and the wounds everywhere else, with the meqixste salve.

"You'll be fine," I say briskly before I walk away. I didn't miss the way his eyes widened and his face softened when I smoothed my palm across his cheek.

I have convinced myself that helping Slyth to heal is a strategic decision at this point. And while I might not completely believe it, I know that it is true.

He has connections that will help me with my plans, and I am willing to use him until he has nothing left to give me. And I know that he will feel obligated to help me after I have healed him.

I just wish things weren't so complicated. I sigh as I start to mix up more of the salve.

Every time that I think of Slyth, I also think of my mother. And my father. They are the main reason I embarked on this journey of revenge in the first place.

And I still want revenge. But with every second that passes that I spend with Slyth, the waters of my revenge become more and more muddied.

How am I supposed to do this, when I feel all these things that I didn't feel before?

I resolve then, as the sun sets, that I will use Slyth as much as I know that he is using me. He is a naga, and he could never want me for anything more than sex.

Your feelings for him don't matter. He doesn't care about you. Remember what the naga have been doing to the humans for decades.

It has been six years since I fled from Jalma with my mother.

My chest still feels funny. As though my heart is no longer beating properly. When I lift my hand to my cheek, my skin is cold and rubbery.

I don't feel like myself any longer. Meeting Slyth has made me come undone. I am coming undone.

I have been losing, losing, losing for eleven years. For six years. For five days.

First I lost my father and the home I was born in. Then I lost my mother. And now I am losing myself to one of the very creatures I have vowed to destroy.

It is only a matter of time before you get to Kriseri and kill him. It is only a matter of time before you kill the royal family. And you'll use Slyth to do it. And you won't feel guilty about it.

Balancing my desire for revenge and my plain desire for Slyth leaves me in a precarious position. Thinking straight is difficult, and I am finding it nearly impossible to sort out my own feelings.

“Are you okay over there?” Slyth calls, and I am dragged out of the dream-like state that I fell into.

“Yes. Are you feeling better? Do you need anything?”

“Yes, I am feeling better, and no, I don’t need anything. Come sit with me.”

His voice is so soft and gentle that it hurts. I swallow the lump that has been growing in my throat for days and sit down next to him.

It is only a matter of time before you take your revenge. And then you’ll need to forget about everything else.

Including how you feel about Slyth.

SLYTH

At some point, I have to go back to the inn. It would be easier to stay in this little shelter with Lorelai, but I've established a base camp there. It was where I returned whenever I finished my day at the marketplace. If I don't show up there eventually, people will think I'm missing and that could mess everything up.

It's also where I've told Zalith and Rory to contact me if they need to. But I don't tell Lorelai about that. It's clearly best not to mention my Prince around her.

On the sixth day, I wake up and don't feel any pain in my body. That's when I finally decide it's time to do it. I simply don't have any more excuses to put it off.

"You're leaving?" Lorelai asks after I explain my thoughts to her. It's the first time she's said something like that, the first time she's shown me any hint of vulnerability, her face uncertain as she looks back at me. Clearly, she's used to people leaving her, and it kills me to know that I must leave her as well, even if only for a short time.

"Yes. I'm needed, as much as I might prefer to be here."

Her gaze is thoughtful and wary as she looks at me, rolling her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Fine."

"Careful, little killer, or I might think that you'll miss me," I tease. Something about her worry and the slight sliver of fear

on her features makes me feel leaden. She'd refuse to admit it if I pressed her, but it's no less clear.

Lorelai scoffs, rolling her eyes, but the tension in her shoulders doesn't dissipate. I decide to try a different tactic and cross the distance between us slowly, my eyes never leaving hers as I kneel before where she sits.

"Will you let me come back?"

She blinks at me, not even trying to hide her surprise. I half-expect her to tell me no, to push me away as she has before, but after a long stretch of silence, she nods.

"Fine. But only because you asked nicely," she adds, arranging her features in a cool mask of indifference. I smile, unable to bite it back as I push up to my feet.

"I'm nothing if not nice," I say with a wink before ducking out of her shelter. The delicious crimson color splashed across her cheeks is almost enough to make me stay longer, even if just to tease her, but I'm behind as it is.

She's already shown me the path back to the village, but I keep very careful track of every landmark along the path. Even though I know it won't happen, I can't stop imagining returning to the forest and not being able to find her little hideout again. The idea of losing her over something as silly as not being able to follow a path worries me, no matter how inane I know the concern is.

What would Zalith say of all this? He knows what it is to care for a human, and for that feeling to matter more than its consequences. But does that mean he'd accept my affection for Lorelai? Would Zalith even trust someone like Lorelai?

I wish he and Rory were there with me to tell me. But they aren't. I have to manage this myself. I have to make my own judgment.

And my judgment is that I'm falling for Lorelai. She seems to be a valuable ally, but even more valuable as a woman. We'll deal with Kriseri together. And then...

I don't know what a life with her will look like after we've defeated our common enemy. She may not return these

feelings yet, but she will. She's mine, whether she knows it or not. We'll make something, I tell myself, a life where there is no more of this separation. Somehow or another, we will.

But I'm also concerned that we won't. That once we defeat the King, we'll become enemies, or worse, strangers. She is mine, I feel it in my bones, but I have no desire to be yet another naga to force a human woman into submission who doesn't want it. Maybe that's another reason I didn't want to come to the inn. As long as I was recovering with her, I didn't have to worry about that. Now, all of it returns to haunt me.

The trees start to separate, and the gates of the village appear in the distance. I quickly run through the path I've just walked in my head. I can refind it again. With that, I enter the village once more.

Almost immediately, I see a naga kicking a human slave for dropping something. The human has dropped onto the ground and is making no attempt to defend himself. Clearly, he knows that it will only make his owner angrier.

For a moment, I want to leap in and show the naga what it's like to fight someone who can fight back. But I can't.

I wonder whether Lorelai would have stepped in, or whether she would have walked past the same way I did.

There's something bigger to fight for here than my loyalty to Zalith. I'm glad to have Lorelai with me, to push me to fight it more directly.

I walk into the inn and go directly to the innkeeper, who's tending the stew on the fire.

"Smells good," I say. "Tonight's dinner?"

She turns to me, obviously surprised to hear my voice. "Why, Mr. Slyf! You're back! I was beginning to wonder if I should relet the room!"

"I hope you didn't," I say. The slight variation on my name is something of a calling card for me. It makes me happy to think that people almost know me, but not quite. "I was just seeing if there were sales to be made in the next town to the

east. Unfortunately, it took me longer to get rid of my wares than I expected.”

“I’m just glad you’re okay.” She smiles. “I’ve heard there are rumors of worg attacks in those woods!”

I can’t resist smiling at that. “Nothing so exciting in my journeys, I’m afraid. Any letters for me?”

“Well, now that you mention it, there was one...”

She runs up the stairs. A few seconds later, she returns bearing a dusty, brown letter, folded and sealed very carefully. I recognize that seal well. It’s Zalith’s unofficial seal, the one he uses in secret communications.

I smile politely, explain that it’s from one of my suppliers, and retreat up into my room to read it. It’s written in cipher, one I’ve learned to read almost as quickly as plain text.

Some of Kriseri’s forces have slipped past us. We have a confirmed sighting of them in Jalma. It’s clear they’re heading for Lodra. The war is about to be brought to our homeland. I ask that you return to Lodra as quickly as possible in order to lend her your force and wisdom.

The note is signed by both Zalith and Rory. I can’t tell from the handwriting or wording which of them actually wrote it.

This changes everything. I have to return to Lodra now. But what do I do about Lorelai? I won’t leave her, I can’t. I’m falling for her, and I have to believe that if Zalith and Rory knew that, they wouldn’t ask me to abandon her.

I stand up and pace the small, dusty room.

There’s only one answer. She’ll have to come with me to Lodra. But I’m even less sure that I can convince her of that. She has no stake in saving Lodra. All she wants to do is kill the King. The only thing that could possibly persuade her to come with me to fight this battle would be the potential violence that could follow, or perhaps her feelings for me.

But what are her feelings for me, truly? How strong are they? Can they match her dedication to revenge?

I can't hide this from her. I need to go back and talk to her about it. Maybe she'll surprise me. Maybe we'll find some other compromise I can't think of. Or maybe...

I don't want to think about that.

I say goodbye to the innkeeper as I head out and assure her that I'll be back shortly. With that, I go back through the gates and start on the path through the forest back to her dugout.

As I get closer, I slow down. The last time I walked through these woods, I wanted her to notice me, to draw her out. Now I sincerely wonder if I can sneak up on her. It's certainly a worthy test of my abilities.

I do my best to move irregularly and to avoid anything that will make a sound I can't control. I have to move slowly to do so, slower than she moved following me, but I'm making good progress. By the time I get in sight of Lorelai's home, I'm proud of how subtly I've approached.

She's in front of the dugout, setting a fire. She hasn't noticed me, I realize. She's sharpening a blade as the fire dies away, and the sounds of the metal scraping have provided excellent cover for me.

The fire is just about to die. I decide that that's how I'll reveal myself. I'll fan the flames a little so that she doesn't have to get up from her work on the knife. She'll be happy to see me, and I'll be happy to be back. It will be a good start to the ugly conversation I need to have with her.

I'm just about to step forward when she does it.

She gestures at the fire from her place near the shelter and suddenly, the flames leap up by themselves. There's no mistaking it. Fire elemental magic! And she hid it from me, even when we were discussing plans for fighting the King.

It explains a lot about her, I think through my shock. There was always something about her passion and anger that seemed strange, even for a human living in this kingdom. But she isn't just a human.

She's a human who knows magic, and that is an entirely different thing. A human has a place here, even if it's a cruel,

degrading one. But a human with magic? Those are abominations. Either they are destroyed, or the entire country has to be.

She's made her choice, I realize. It would be the country, not her, that she'd see destroyed.

I take a step forward, and her eyes immediately leap towards me. She knows that I've seen her secret. I can see her body reacting with all the fear and anger of a human who's been hunted down for her forbidden knowledge many times.

I want to tell her that I understand. I know how she's been hunted. I know that she's been made into a symbol for humans not knowing their place and rising to powers forbidden to them. I want to tell her that I respect the burning fire in her, that I love it and want to hold it just like the rest of her. I want to say something to her, but no words come to my mouth.

And then it's too late. She's already followed her instincts.

A dagger is flying straight at my face.

LORELAI

He ducks out of the way of my dagger, and it flies past him, landing in the trunk of a tree a few feet behind him.

I knew he would dodge that, I realize. I wouldn't have thrown it if I thought it had a chance of actually hitting him. Now is when I could launch a real attack on him. I could bombard him with arrows and daggers and fireballs that sooner or later, one of them would have to hit him.

But I don't. I just stand there, watching him look at me. Even though he's discovered my most dangerous secret, I simply can't bring myself to fight him.

Slyth looks back at the dagger, planted nearly to its handle in the tree. "I thought we were moving past the trying-to-kill-each-other stage of the relationship."

"You mean you're not going to try and kill me?"

He seems genuinely surprised by that. "Is that how you expect me to react?"

"It's how most naga react to seeing a human who can use magic," I answer. "It's what they did to my mother."

His face drops. "I'm sorry."

"I believe that you're not like most of your kind," I say. "You've certainly proved that much to me. But it's hard not to believe there isn't a spark of that fear in you. A little bit of the sense that something is wrong with a human having magic and that it's a talent we aren't supposed to have."

“Maybe there is something like that somewhere in me,” Slyth admits slowly. “But it isn’t what I believe. In fact, I helped another human develop her own magical powers not too long ago.”

That’s interesting enough on its own, but the way he says it strikes me more. There’s something he’s not telling me, something important about this story.

“You did? Who?”

“Her name was Rory,” he answers uncomfortably. “And it was on behalf of my Prince. That’s as much as I’m comfortable telling you.”

So Prince Zalith is involved in this, too? I’ll have to think about that more. Whoever this Rory is, there’s something about her that he isn’t telling me.

“So...” I start, unsure of where my question is leading. *So you still want me? So you’ll still help me kill Kriseri? So you’re not disgusted by me?*

He steps closer and wraps an arm around my waist, tugging me firmly into his chest as he stares down at me with an intensity that makes me feel tiny. “So, I think that fire makes a lot of sense. You’ve got enough burning inside of you already, little killer. Not even your magic does it justice.”

I feel a burning warmth in my chest. How is it that this naga male, who I should be terrified of and hate, manages to make me feel so... seen? The last person who knew I could do magic and still wanted me was my mother. After she was taken from me, I never imagined that I would meet someone else who would feel that way about me.

Very shyly, I ask, “Would you like to see some of what I can do?”

He lets go of me, steps back, and smiles. “I’d love to. If your magic is anything like your fighting, you must be very talented.”

“I like fire,” I tell him. “And I’ve learned a lot of tricks with it.”

I show him a few of the things I've learned. Some basic fireballs, my most common attack. A fire lash, which can wrap around someone like a whip and even pull them to the ground. And then, just a few sillier things. Juggling with fireballs. Making fire change its color and its shape. Making it trace different shapes in the air.

He claps and seems genuinely delighted by each new trick. I've never shown any of these to anyone before, and having someone be impressed by them feels almost intoxicating. Someone respects all of the practice I've put into this. They aren't simply horrified by it.

"You're amazing," he says. "You really are."

"Thank you," I answer. And I feel like I should say something else, but I simply don't know what. It's all just so much to handle.

Suddenly, his face becomes solemn. "There is bad news that I have to tell you."

In a flash, all of the instincts I've just quieted leap back into full gear. "What is it?"

"When I went back to the inn, there was a note from Prince Zalith," he explains. "Apparently, some of the King's forces have slipped by his armies and are marching towards Lodra. He wants me to return to Lodra and meet him there to fight Kriseri's armies."

"Immediately?"

He nods. "Immediately."

It's still not as bad as I thought it would be. He's not telling me this because of the magic. He really did get that letter at the inn. I believe him.

But it does raise a very serious question. One that might still destroy everything between us, even if learning I have magic didn't.

"Are you asking me to come with you?" I ask.

"I understand if you don't want to," he says. "But I can't disobey my Prince's orders. If my country needs me –"

“If *he* needs you,” I correct.

He thinks about that for a second. “Yes. If he needs me, I have to answer.”

My war against the royalty of the naga doesn't end with Kriseri, it never did. All of those who have borne the crown while its forces enslaved humans are my enemies, and I will fight and defeat them. If I withdraw alongside Slyth, and I find myself near Prince Zalith...

Can he really not know what will happen next?

“I'll go with you,” I tell him.

“You will?”

I nod. “It's been a long time since I've felt as close to anyone as I feel to you. Maybe I've never felt close in quite the same way. If you have to fight King Kriseri somewhere other than here, I want to be with you.”

He runs his hand through my hair. It feels good, and I lean against his chest.

“I want you with me, too,” he says. “Everywhere.”

But he must know, doesn't he? That I'm already thinking about killing the Prince he's dedicated his life to serving? And what will he do when that happens?

I want to tell myself that he would forgive me, that somehow, whatever is between us could survive even that. But I don't believe it. I've seen how deep his sense of duty goes.

He would fight me to the death to save his Prince. If he had no other options, he would strike me down before he would let me kill Zalith. And maybe he would kill me even if I did manage it. Maybe he's devoted enough to his Prince that he would hunt me down and avenge his death on me, just like I would be avenging the death of all the humans marked on my bow.

Why doesn't he just talk about it? Tell me you'll kill me if I make a move. Don't leave me in the dark.

“When will you leave?”

“Tomorrow, as soon as possible,” he says. “I’ll sleep in the inn tonight, gather my things, and meet you in the morning to set out together. Unless you need more time to prepare yourself?”

“No,” I reply. “I’m always ready to leave whenever I need to.”

“Prince Zalith may surprise you,” he says. “I know you think you know what the royals are all like from knowing from Kriseri. But I wouldn’t dedicate myself to him as a warrior if he were the man you think he is. I hope he gets the chance to prove to you that he isn’t.”

Something inside me strains, as if a force is pulling it painfully tight. How easy it would be if I could just believe that Zalith is who Slyth thinks he is. But how can a naga warrior hope to see the Prince he was raised to protect as he truly is? The rot in the royal bloodline runs deep, and I don’t believe that Zalith was spared it.

“We’ll see,” I answer.

I think I must sound certain of myself, but underneath it, I’m anything but. Because there is a part of me that wants to abandon everything. To give up on revenge against the naga royals. To simply lean into this man and let him see and accept me.

The people you mourn so much are dead, a voice inside me whispers. But you’re alive. You can have a beautiful life. Why hold on to a debt to people who will never collect it when you could simply be happy? Isn’t it enough to be happy?

Slyth seems to consider saying something else but decides not to. Instead, he simply pulls me closer and continues to stroke my hair.

Maybe being happy could be enough, I think to myself. But every day I would be happy, I would have to think about all the people who never had the opportunity for it. I can’t give them their happiness back, but surely I can do something. And what of all the other slaves and wild humans who are still

alive? Isn't it worth something to protect them? To kill the people who would put them down?

I realize that I've thought of myself as a tool made for violence for so long that it feels strange to simply lean against a man and be soft and gentle. And yet, at the same time, this feels somehow far more natural than fighting ever does.

I had to be trained to burn things and to shoot arrows. And yet, this I can do with no training at all. Somehow, I am also able to be held in the arms of a naga I'm beginning to fall for as the sun sinks over the forest.

I don't know where any of this will go. I'm terrified to meet this Prince, because when it happens, I'll have to finally make the choice, and I don't know how to make it.

But at least, I don't have to make it tonight. Tonight, all I have to do is be here with Slyth.

"We'll see," I repeat. "We'll see."

SLYTH

HAS THE SUN ALWAYS BEEN THIS BRUTAL?

I look over at Lorelai, who rides on the equu next to me. She's barely broken a sweat.

I smile ruefully to myself as we ride through Yadat to Lodra.

You can't even take the sun. This is what comes from spending your life in the castle.

Lorelai's strength and endurance shine brighter with every new day that I spend with her.

I consider myself fit and strong, and as a naga, I have magnified strength, speed, and other abilities when compared with humans.

And yet, now, in the saddle of the steadily trotting equu, I am the one who is suffering.

It is not as though you mind. Admit it! You're proud of her!

And I am. I am proud of Lorelai, although I don't understand the reason why.

Maybe it's because you've shared more of yourself, of your life, with her than you ever have with anyone else.

The equus race forward as we leave the sparse forests of Yadat and are greeted with the sight of miles and miles of sand.

"Fuck." I mutter under my breath, and Lorelai turns in her saddle to look at me. Her dark, deep-set eyes sparkle with

mirth, and she laughs broadly before she turns and urges her equu forward.

We agreed before we left that we wouldn't stop to camp overnight. The sooner we got to Lodra, the better.

I think back to the conversation that Lorelai and I had before we left.

"If we stop overnight, to camp, to rest, it'll take us a week to get there!"

Lorelai's voice was hard and passionate, and when she spoke, I could feel the urgency rippling through the air and practically bouncing off my skin.

"I agree. We'll stop to water the equus, but that is all."

And now, here we were.

I had traveled throughout Nagaland before, years ago when I was much younger.

I could still remember parts of the journey. It was a diplomatic tour for King and Queen Andakya, and I think it was the most freedom that Zalith and I ever had.

But now, as we get ever closer to Lodra, I realize that I had forgotten how hard parts of Nagaland could be.

I was so used to seeing miles and miles of lush, green land. I was so used to staring out at overgrown, healthy forests.

The stark reality is that not all of Nagaland was as beautiful as Lodra.

No. A lot of Nagaland is stunningly beautiful. But the parts that are not have been allocated for the humans.

The logic is obvious. All naga saw humans as inferior, as less than animals.

Why should we allow them to benefit from the city centers that have an abundance of clean, fresh water? Why should we allow them to benefit from the farms close to the villages, where they could plant their own crops?

It isn't a sentiment I agree with, of course. But it hits me at that moment, how the odds were stacked against the humans before they even got started. There was never a chance, because the naga made sure of it.

I look over at Lorelai, at the sweat glistening on her lean, muscular back, and swallow as my mouth goes dry.

Before meeting Aurora, and seeing Zalith's interactions with Aurora, I had never given much thought to humans and the lives they lived.

But, after having spent hours with Aurora, and now Lorelai, a lot is troubling me about the way my people treat humans.

"We should stop!" Lorelai calls to me and urges her equu over to a little dense grove on the side of the trail that we are riding on. "They need water," she huffs as she jumps off the back of the tall, broad equu and lands lightly on the ground.

"They need water," she repeats, "And I need to put my scarf back on before we hit civilization."

The equu I ride, called Ash, follows Storm, Lorelai's equu, and comes to a stop close to the edge of the trail.

This dense grove of trees, and the foliage surrounding it, was the first sign of life we had seen for hours.

Lorelai finds a stream of water instantly, and I pull my satchel off my back and kneel at the edge of the stream.

Lorelai sits down next to me and takes the bread and capra cheese I hand her.

"We can't rest for too long," she murmurs, glancing up at the slowly darkening sky. "I don't think traveling through this place at night is a good idea, and if things were different, I'd insist we take shelter. But the sooner we get to Lodra, the better."

I nod, remaining in contemplative silence as I consider Lorelai and what I have learned about her.

Now that I know she has magic, there are certain things about her that make sense.

“I think we should just stay here for a while. The equus need rest.” My voice is quiet and gentle, to my surprise. Lorelai stiffens next to me and then turns to look at me with narrowed eyes.

I shrug and try to smile.

“I’m not trying to slow us down. I want to get to Lodra as badly as you do. But we won’t get there if Ash and Storm die of exhaustion.”

After a moment’s tense silence, Lorelai nods, though her body isn’t any less tense.

We sit in silence for maybe half an hour as we make our way through some of the food we brought along.

“So,” I speak after the light in the grove has changed. The light is softer and gloomier and casts strange shadows across the space around us.

I follow the dancing shadows with my eyes as I continue speaking. I could almost believe that we aren’t alone in this little grove. I could almost believe that the shadows are alive.

“You use your magic well. Who trained you?” I wince at the bluntness of the question. Lorelai sighs and does not react the way I expected her to.

“My mother did.” Her voice is as soft as the light around us. “She had magic, too. She taught me how to use it as skillfully as she could, but she also taught me to hide it. Because she knew I would be killed for it.”

Something bad has happened to her, I think to myself.

Lorelai’s loneliness has bled off her from the moment I met her, though I don’t think she is even conscious of it.

She continues speaking, and I think I can finally feel her trust in me growing.

“I lost her years ago,” she says reflectively. “And I have lived without my father for even longer. And sometimes I think I’m over it, but then night falls and I am trying to fall asleep, and I have to rock myself asleep imagining that my mother’s hand is on my back.”

Lorelai swallows and her eyes harden, and I know she won't cry.

“Or sometimes, I wake up early. It is winter, and I have to chop wood, and I have to pretend that my hands are actually my father's, just so that I have enough firewood to get me through the winter.”

“Your parents did a good job,” I do not know why I feel the need to reassure her. I don't think Lorelai needs my reassurance, either, because she is strong enough without me. “You've managed to survive a lot better than I would have.” I laugh drily. “And your mother did an excellent job with teaching you how to use your magic.”

I don't say anything else, because I know that she might be thinking a thousand different things.

She might be thinking that when we arrive in Lodra, I'll betray her and give her up because of her magic. She might be learning to trust me, but after centuries of human oppression, how much can she really trust me?

I still don't know if taking her home to Lodra, to meet Zalith and the rest of the royal family, is a good idea.

Any other royal advisor would consider her, a human with powerful magic, magic that she is in complete control of, a threat to the royal family.

You just have to trust that she won't do anything to Zalith or the royal family. She hasn't said anything to give you a reason to believe that she'd be a danger to them.

“We should get going,” Lorelai tells me abruptly, and I can tell she's realized how much of herself she unwittingly gave to me simply by answering my questions.

I nod in agreement, and we get back onto the equus and head back to the trail.

I don't know why she hates the royal family so much, but there has to be more to it than what she has revealed.

And I am determined to get to the bottom of it before she does something she can't undo.

Lorelai must regret telling me everything she did, because she keeps her now covered back, neck, and face turned from me and rides Storm harder and harder.

We ride throughout the night and most of the next morning without stopping. It is close to dusk when I see that we have finally arrived in Lodra. The royal castle is still some miles away, and as we continue riding, the light of the day continues fading away.

Lorelai only slows down around midnight when the equus trot through the gates of the castle.

We stop underneath the sweeping arches that curve around half of the castle, and Lorelai jumps lightly off Storm.

I follow suit, relieved to see that we're alone in the little courtyard where we come to a stop.

"I don't think we'll meet anyone, so I'll show you up to the room now." Lorelai nods shortly, and I gesture at her to follow me.

"Well," a voice shimmers from the darkness. "I'm glad you made it back with all your parts still attached."

I tense up at the sound of the voice but relax when I realize who it is. "Lasta." A smile stretches across my face, and I walk forward to the lumpy shadow that leans against the wall close by.

"I'm flattered by how much you care," I answer him sarcastically.

We shake hands, and Lasta sighs and then asks me a question in a casual voice. "So, when are we going to kill Kriseri?"

I give him a smirk, opening my mouth to respond when I see Lorelai sway slightly beside me out of the corner of my eye. She corrects quickly, ever-wary of showing weakness in front of anyone who could be a threat, but I know her better than that by now.

I shove down the witty retort I intended to deliver back to Lasta, instead offering my arm to Lorelai. She eyes it warily,

but her eyes skate back to Lasta, and the naga's presence seems to be enough to make her accept my silent invitation.

“Later. Tonight, we need to rest. It's been a long journey.”

Lasta eyes Lorelai like he's sizing up a rabid worg but gives me a curt nod, walking away without so much as a goodbye. *Typical.*

I guide Lorelai through the gardens and toward the castle, soaking in the thinly-veiled awe in her expression. In all honesty, I hadn't thought too much about the kind of adjustment this would be for her. Her dugout shelter in the woods is a far cry from the bustle and understated glamor of Zalith's palace, and I make a mental note to keep an eye on her. The last thing I want is for her to become overwhelmed or feel threatened in the place I hold so close to my heart.

Gods know my little killer would fight like a fiend if she felt threatened.

I smother the smirk that thought brings about before it can reach my lips. Lorelai's dark eyes widen as we step inside the palace, but I guide her quickly toward the staircase, not wanting to chance an encounter with anyone else this evening.

I want her awe all to myself.

A wave of heat curls at the base of my spine as I think about the privacy and safety we'll be able to enjoy here in the palace. No one to come tromping through the woods. Plenty of space and time to do with her what I will. No one to distract her.

Not that I'd be entirely averse to an audience. I'm sure my little killer would be soaked at the thought of being taken and filled in front of anyone who might challenge my claim to her.

I bite my tongue, trying to force the thought away. I can't control myself around Lorelai, not that I particularly want to, but this evening is not the time. She's tired after that journey, and in a brand-new place, a place that may trigger her rage at any given moment.

Not tonight. Not unless she provokes me.

Before I know it, we're standing in front of the door to the advisor's suite – my suite. I open it, guiding Lorelai inside as I see a familiar shadow standing at the end of the hall. I jerk my chin at the servant who runs this wing, motioning him over as I hear Lorelai take a sharp inhale.

LORELAI

I have to consciously keep my jaw from dropping as I look around the room – if it can be called that – that Slyth and I are staying in. It’s probably ten times the size of my little hole in the woods. But even compared to normal buildings, it is massive, and the wealth drips off of every wall and fixture.

“Bring it straight up,” Slyth says behind me, and I turn to see a servant nodding as he slips away. Slyth shuts the door, and I quickly turn away.

I move about the room, hesitantly touching the walls, which are expertly crafted. Windows adorn one wall and there is a great view of the city beyond.

“Enjoying the view?”

I jerk around, trying to keep my features schooled into a cool mask as I face Slyth. But there is a knowing smirk on his face, and I realize that I haven’t been hiding my amazement all that well.

“It’s... nice.” I shrug one shoulder, and his grin only grows wider.

He gestures to a small door on the opposite side of the room. “Come on.”

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I start to follow him. His tail comes up to press on my lower back and guide me to his side as he jerks open the door.

This time, I lose all sense of myself. My jaw drops open as I take in what I know now is a bathroom. It’s nearly as big as

the room with natural light from the moon pouring in from windows high up along the walls.

Two basins are fixed to the wall, and I blink at the pipes that jut out above them. “You can fetch water whenever you please?” I ask, shaking my head.

Slyth’s smirk deepens. “Naga have learned to engineer a better way of life instead of using magic like the dark elves.” His words are filled with pride, and I notice he puffs his chest out a little more.

He steps away from me, his tail sliding over my hip in a soft caress, and I fight to ignore the excitement that pounds through me at the touch. I’m so caught up in it, though, that I don’t register what he’s doing at first until water starts pouring out above the bath.

I blink, staring at what looks like steam coming off the water. Surely, they don’t have *hot* water here.

Stepping forward, I stick my hand under the pipe, stunned at the warmth caressing my hand. I’m stunned, and I know it is written across my face.

“Like I said,” he says softly, stepping closer to me, “We have learned how to create the best life.”

I turn toward him, excitement bubbling up inside of me. “You have to get out.”

He leans back, cocky surprise lining his features as he crosses his arms over his chest. “Do I?”

“Yes.” I try to pull him toward the door but I’d have a better chance of moving stone than Slyth as I tug on him. “I want to take a bath.” I switch gears, trying to push him instead, but he only chuckles.

“You can take a bath,” he says lowly as his tail slides up my body, wrapping around my waist. “With me in here.” His words are husky, and desire spikes through my middle, especially as his tail winds tighter around me.

I shake my head, but my voice fails me. “No.” The word is a whisper on my lips.

He chuckles. “I don’t think so, little killer. Didn’t work the first time you tried to tell me what to do.” He jerks me closer, and I’m held in place by his stare and tail. “It won’t work this time.”

I swallow hard, arousal already pounding between my legs. His stare has turned hungry. “So, you’re just going to stand there and watch me?”

“Yes,” he hisses, reaching up with one hand and slowly dragging my tunic with him. “Yes, I am.” The fabric falls to the floor. “You see.” He drags me closer with his tail, shifting it higher up my waist as he grasps my pants. “I take care of what is mine.” I gasp as he tugs at the pants. “And you are mine.”

I gulp as he slides my pants down my legs, leaving me bare before him, and as Slyth stands, his eyes rake up my frame. “Now get in the water.”

His tail slowly uncoils from around me until just the tip is pressed to my lower back, nudging me toward the bath. I step in slowly, looking back hesitantly to find Slyth watching me but making no move to join me.

It feels oddly intimate as I slip below the water and he uses his tail to stroke over my head. I thought I had submitted to him before, but this is different. Having him take care of me is a different type of domination... one that I don’t mind too much.

A knock on the door to the room echoes through the silent air, and Slyth turns away slowly to go to it. I take the opportunity to scrub my scalp and hair clean, coming up from beneath the water as he reenters the bathroom holding a tray of food.

“Hungry?” he asks, his tongue flicking out. I feel the motion acutely between my legs, and a dull ache starts to form as he stares at me.

I realize after a beat that he is waiting for an answer, so I nod, expecting him to set the platter down. Instead, he takes a

seat on the edge of the tub, picks up a piece of fruit, and leans forward. “Open.”

Heat floods through me, but I don’t protest. Instead, I part my lips, letting him feed me a bite. As his skin brushes against my mouth, I feel an irrational sense of arousal shoot through me.

I guess I’ve never really been taken care of, and while I like being independent, with Slyth... I’m starting to think I don’t mind him controlling me.

He continues to feed me bites, his gaze never leaving me. I swear there’s a flash of pride through his eyes each time I open my mouth for him, and it only spurs me on. In fact, I’m no longer thinking about the food he’s giving me. All my mind is on is the pulsing need that is swirling in me.

He must see me hesitate because he pauses, cocking his head. “Are you done?”

I bite my bottom lip. “With the food?” I nod.

He sets it aside, turning his attention back to me, and I am so acutely aware of how much I want him that I can’t help myself. I drag my hand down the front of my body, rolling my thumb over my nipple, which only heightens my pleasure.

I didn’t expect Slyth to see it, but his eyes narrow and his tongue flicks out again. I’ve come to realize that he does that when he’s trying to gauge my emotions.

Maybe I’m playing with fire, but right now, I don’t care. He’s called me his, made threats that I have spent too much time thinking about, and has taken care of me. I’m not sure why, but I want more.

“Little killer,” he hisses, and I clamp my legs together. He only speaks in that tone when he starts to lose it. “What are you doing?”

I cock my head, staring up at him innocently. “What do you mean?” A soft gasp escapes me as I move my hand over my other breast and his eyes flick to the movement. “I’m just bathing.”

His hood flares, and my stomach flips. “No, you’re not.”

“No?” I keep my voice sweet as I bow my back so my breasts float above the water so he can see my nipples pebbled. “I’m in the bath.”

His tail slides up along the edge of the tub, the only sign that he’s growing restless. He leans forward, and a thrill shoots through me. “I think you’re teasing me.”

I drag my teeth over my bottom lip, my heart pounding as I breathe, “Hungry?”

Slyth goes so still it’s unnerving. I’m not sure if I’ve pushed too hard but then he slowly moves forward, his eyes bright. “Starving.”

The first time that he stripped me down flashes in my mind, the words he kept saying that I’ve thought over so much, and my heart pounds as I whisper, “Me, too.” He blinks slowly, confusion clouding his face. “And I want to be full.”

The air between us grows tense, and I start to wonder if I shouldn’t have said that. He kept mentioning filling me up and breeding me, and maybe it is insane that I want to be thoroughly fucked by someone who I thought was a monster not too long ago.

But I know he will soothe this ache between my legs, and I need it.

So, instead of taking the safe route like I should, I push.

“And I want you to fill me up.”

My words shatter the tension between us, and Slyth pounces.

SLYTH

This woman is going to destroy me.

I know that I said I wanted to break Lorelai, but the words that just came out of her mouth have cleaved me in half. My desire for her has been mounting, especially as she has let me dominate her, but this is too much.

I can't stop myself as I scoop her out of the bathtub, crashing my mouth to hers. She parts her lips immediately, and I groan as my tongue flicks inside, swiping her taste.

Using my tail to feel for any obstacles, I carry her to the adjoining bedroom, laying her out on the bed. Her arousal is already flooding my senses, and as I stand, trying to clear them, I know that out of the two of us, she's not the one at my mercy.

"Slyth," she whispers as she pushes up on her elbows, and my cocks jolt to life. The second I stripped her down, my scales parted to release the twin erections, but I've been suppressing the feeling. I want to own her completely, not just command her body, and now, I can do both.

"What?" my voice grates out.

I ran my hand down the front of my pants, squeezing my thick shafts. It only makes the tension worse as my eyes rake down Lorelai's body.

My balls feel heavy as I linger on her stomach, picturing it swollen. Not just with my cum, but with my eggs.

“I want you,” she whispers pitifully, pushing up on her knees.

I don't know who this girl is before me. I'm so used to Lorelai being defiant and feisty, and seeing her give into her desires and submit to me has me unraveling. All I can think about is pumping her full, breeding her, using her until she is bleeding from her pores with my essences and her body is stretched around my cocks as I empty into her.

I almost wish I had my eggs released by a healer just so I could watch her face when she sees that I've buried myself so deep she can't get me out.

It's not a common practice for naga, which is why few males even have their eggs released. The humans have been fertile enough with just our cum – or so I've heard – and the women's bodies break down the eggs more often than they are impregnated by it.

But I want to see Lorelai's stomach bulging with my release, knowing she can't get it out. I want to be buried beneath her skin.

And based on the pouty look she is giving me, she wants that, too.

She just doesn't know it yet.

“Show me, little killer.” The words come out low and deep as I reach for the front of my pants. “Show me how much you want this.” I undo the lacings slowly, her eyes never leaving my hands, and a satisfied sigh escapes her when my cocks pop out. “You want me to fill you? Get me ready.”

It doesn't take much more encouragement than that. She dives forward, one hand on each cock, and brings her lips to one. She sucks the tip, her tongue laving over the slit as she strokes me, and I reach down to grip her hair.

“I thought you were starved?” I coo as I thrust forward.

The air is sucked from my lungs as Lorelai dives down, slamming my cock into the back of her throat and holding herself there. She gags against my length while working my

other erection with her hand and then hollows her cheeks as she pulls back off.

I watch as a string of spit lingers from her lips to the tip of my dick. She makes no effort to wipe it away as she sits back on her heels, smiling up at me and looking so fucking perfect with her swollen lips and watery eyes. Her hands are still stroking me, and she leans forward, sticking her tongue out as she rubs the heads together on it.

“You want me, huh?” I moan. “You’re ready for me to spill?”

“Please,” Lorelai gasps before swallowing my second cock halfway down. I nearly choke on my next breath as she drops her hand and cups my balls, her other hand still working my first cock.

I don’t have much longer, but I refuse to come anywhere but deep inside her again. I jerk back, and she sucks in a deep breath as I move out of her reach. Her eyes stay on me, disappointment filtering through her pouty expression.

My tail comes around to push her chin up. “Get on your back.”

Her eyes flash, and she scrambles to meet my demand. As she throws herself back against the mattress, I slide my tail down her body, flicking over each nipple and stepping closer as I slide it over her stomach.

“You are going to look so beautiful,” I murmur as I kneel on the edge of the mattress before her. “Swollen here.”

I don’t tell her I don’t mean with my cocks. I mean with my eggs.

Not today, but soon I will pump her full with them. I meant it when I said she is mine. I’ve claimed her, and I refuse to let anyone near her.

And once she is heavy with my child, no one will want to.

Lorelai reaches beneath her knees, pulling her legs up and spreading wide. Her arousal glistens along her slit, and as I sink back on my heels before her, I grasp one cock and drag it

through her slick heat. Then I switch, passing right over her entrance to swirl around her clit.

“Slyth,” she whimpers, her pussy clenching around nothing as I continue my slow torture.

“What is it, little killer?” I notch the head of my lower cock against her entrance, and she rolls her hips up, wanting more. “What happened to my feisty girl?” I slide my cock back out, and she whimpers. “I thought you took what you wanted.”

At that, her head pops up, and she wraps her legs around my waist. Digging her heels in, she brings me closer, and I smirk. I wanted to see how bad she wanted this, and it’s clear from the desperate way she’s trying to stuff me inside.

“Fuck,” she groans as just the head slips inside. “I want more. Please, Slyth.”

I lean forward, planting my hands on either side of her head and rocking my hips up. She cries out as I do, the barbs along my shaft stroking along her walls and making her clamp down around me.

“Like that?” I murmur. “You want me to fill you up like that?”

“More,” she gasps, writhing beneath me. “I want you buried so deep I’ll feel you for days.”

Arousal shoots down my spine at her words, and I drive my hips forward, forcing her body to stretch and take me. She screams as I push all the way in, and I pause to let her adjust.

“You’re going to fucking kill me,” she chokes out. “You’re so fucking big.”

I chuckle. “I’m not the killer here.” I pull out slowly, watching the way her eyes roll back in her head. “That’s you.”

I push back in, and her response is cut off as I start thrusting back and forth. I lean back on my knees, watching the place where I disappear into her, and I can make out the bulge of her lower stomach as the tip of my cock slams home. I press a hand there, smirking when she screams.

“You want me deep?” I coo, grabbing the undersides of her legs and pushing them up. I thrust harder, pushing so deep her cries are cut off. “This deep?”

“Yes, please!” Lorelai fists the bed sheets with one hand, and with the other, she reaches between her legs.

I’m about to swat her away when she grabs my shaft, pressing it against her slit. Her back bows off the mattress as, with every thrust I make into her, the barbs drag along her clit.

“Fuck, I’m going to come,” she moans, her free hand coming up to knead her breast.

I speed up my efforts, stars erupting across my vision from the dual action. My eyes are zeroed in on where her stomach pushes out with each thrust, and all I can think about is making that permanent. I want to bury deep in her and feel her with a heavy weight that will make her think of me every day.

The thought sends a thrill shooting down my spine at the same time that Lorelai’s pussy squeezes my cock. “Yes, yes, yes!” she cries. “Oh, fuck!”

Her head tips back as her lips part on a silent scream, and her tightness mixed with the sight of her body stretched around me pulls me over the edge. Cum sprays across her lower stomach, mirroring where I am painting her internally, and I slam up into her as I spill out.

I’m gasping for air when she finally comes back down, looking down at her stomach and smearing a hand through my release. I know I’m in for it when she smirks, looking up at me.

“What a waste,” she says as she rubs my essence into her skin. “I wanted to be stuffed full.”

I blink, my cock jerking with the last spurts of my release as I stare down at her.

She’s going to be the death of me.

LORELAI

I can feel it, though I am deep into unconsciousness, the moment when Slyth pulls away from me, leaving me alone.

At first, I roll over in my sleep, panicking, heart thudding, pulse racing. Then I remember, in my dream-like state, that we are in bed together in the royal castle in Lodra.

The panic, provoked by Slyth's departure from the bed we shared for the night, does not vanish. Panic crawls into my throat and enters my dreams. Even though by now I am more conscious than not, I remain trapped in the darkness of the unconscious realm.

And then I wake up.

Slyth walks into the massive room carrying a silver tray. I have yet to explore the rest of his chambers, but I have a feeling that it is as big as the bedroom we are in.

"Good morning." He speaks sunnily and smiles at me before he walks over to his side of the bed, still carrying the tray. I expect him to get into the bed with me, but instead, he puts the tray down on his side of the bed and removes the silver cover.

"Good morning," I murmur as Slyth leans down and brushes a kiss against my forehead. I shudder slightly, and the hair on the back of my neck rises.

Slyth doesn't seem to notice my reaction and walks over to the windows. He pulls apart the heavy, silk curtains that kept

the room in moderate darkness. Sunlight floods the room, and a lump grows in my throat as I stare out of the window, which gives me an excellent view of all of Lodra.

“It is so beautiful,” I murmur to Slyth, who looks proudly out at the kingdom, his home.

Then I look down at the meal on the silver tray, and it is a feast. A salty, fatty feast, filled with decadent, roasted dripir meat, fried burgona slices, fried Gallus eggs, baked bread topped with Capra, and a chunk of Taura cheese.

“This all looks wonderful.” I smile gratefully at Slyth and cut into the buttered bread, while my heart sinks.

You’re falling in love with him against your better judgment.

My hands shake slightly as Slyth talks, still seemingly unaware of the way the cutlery shakes in my hand and the way my breath escapes me in uncertain tremors.

“Once you’ve eaten, you can bathe, and I’ll send up some servants to get you dressed.” He speaks cheerfully as I drop my knife and fork onto the tray with a clatter.

“Why would I need servants to get dressed?” I ask him, dumbfounded.

“Because it’s their job. Besides, the clothes I ordered for you are slightly more complicated than what you’re used to wearing. You’ll need help getting in them.”

He walks over to the bed and leans down to kiss me again, before leaving the bedroom with a pep in his step that I can only attribute to his being home and my being here with him.

I try to continue eating, though the food tastes like sawdust as I think about everything that Slyth has done for me and continues to do for me.

“What about everything you’ve done for him?” I mutter angrily to myself and cut into the final slice of dripir meat so forcefully that I leave a deep mark on the delicate plate. When I am finished, I pile everything onto the tray and place it on a sideboard in the bedroom.

Then I walk over to the large, wide windows, and stare in awe at Lodra.

“This was never going to end well,” I murmur quietly to myself. I keep my body angled towards the door so that I am aware the minute anyone walks in. I need to talk to myself, to think through my logic, before I go insane.

“You were always going to do this. This is the only reason you agreed to come with him. You agreed because you wanted to kill Zalith. And killing Zalith will destroy Slyth. But it is the only way to do this.”

I cannot stand still any longer, so I walk over to the little side door to the right of the bedroom.

My breath catches in my throat in an overly dramatic gasp as the open door reveals the washroom bathed in a golden light. It was beautiful last night, but this morning, it strikes me all over again how incredibly wealthy and affluent this territory must be. For the gods’ sakes, this isn’t even the Prince’s personal washroom!

“Well.” I cannot help but speak out loud as I open the taps in the enormous bath. “This is a far cry from the rivers of Yadat.”

I burst into near-hysterical laughter, and I force myself to breathe through it as the tub fills with water. Experiencing this without Slyth’s presence looming over my shoulder allows me to really soak in the ingenuity of the washroom. I never realized how much I missed actual baths in all my time in the forest, but now that I’ve been presented with this beautiful room and the opportunity to use it whenever I like, I don’t know how I’ll ever go back.

I would like to stay in the bathtub for hours and hours. I would like to revel in the warm water and the beautiful potions and oils that I am sure Slyth provided especially for me.

But there is no time.

Who knows. Maybe you can enjoy it later. After you’ve killed Zalith and the rest of the royal family. If you’re not a hunted fugitive with a bounty on your head by then.

When I finish in the bath and am wrapped up in a fluffy, white towel, woven from the softest fabric ever, I walk out into the bedroom area.

And stop, as I stare in shock at a group of about ten naga servants who are waiting for me.

They have brought along a pedestal and several bags of clothing. One of them carries a tape measure and scissors, while another carries a box of what looks like pins.

“We’re here to get you dressed for the day, miss,” one of the naga volunteers, and her obvious anxiety sends her voice climbing a few octaves.

“Okay,” I say slowly.

How the fuck did I get here? How did I get to a point in my life where I am being served by naga?

“All of you?” I continue, and the entire group of naga nods in unison.

Well, you were trying to infiltrate the royal family. Somehow, you managed to do it, in an entirely different way than what you planned.

I swallow slightly, licking my suddenly dry lips, and then step forward and let the towel fall.



SLYTH IS WAITING for me outside his chambers and walks in once all the servants who were helping me to dress have filed out of the room.

I am staring at myself in the mirror, which I asked them to leave behind because I still cannot quite believe that I am wearing what I am.

“I had it made overnight.” I look at Slyth, somewhat distractedly, and then I look back at the mirror. “And I made sure that there were extra compartments for your weapons.”

The clothing I am wearing is the finest and most luxurious clothing I have ever seen.

“I noticed,” I tell Slyth with a smile when he walks up to me. “About the space for my weapons, I mean.”

He smiles at me, slips an arm around my waist, and kisses me on the cheek.

“I think that it is time for you to meet your hosts,” he says, and after only a second’s hesitation, I follow him out of his chambers. The rest of the castle is as luxurious as Slyth’s chambers, but I don’t miss the fact that it is very plain. I remember distantly that the naga prize nature above status symbols, but even in the clean lines and empty space, there’s no mistaking that this is a palace fit for royalty.

Slyth leads me to a small room on the floor below us. It is clearly a dining room because we are greeted by a table that groans underneath the weight of the food on it.

And there are two people inside the dining room.

My stomach drops as both turn to me.

One of them is a tall naga, who I presume is Prince Zalith. And Prince Zalith has his arm around the waist of the other person. A woman.

A human woman, a voluptuous woman with bright blonde hair, sparkling eyes, and a belly that is distended and low.

“This is Prince Zalith and his mate, Aurora,” Slyth says gently and steers me towards them.

“Princess Aurora,” Slyth adds as Zalith and then Aurora take my hand and greet me.

I watch as Slyth hugs Prince Zalith. Then he kisses Aurora on her forehead and rubs her belly warmly. The kiss isn’t romantic at all, and it is clear that Prince Zalith does not feel threatened by Slyth’s small action of affection towards Aurora.

“Why don’t we all sit down?” Aurora says brightly as I realize that she must be the woman that Slyth helped with her magic. “Please,” Aurora adds, and there is desperation in her stunning eyes. “My feet are killing me.”

Prince Zalith laughs and ushers his mate to a chair, while Slyth and I take seats opposite them. I do not interact much with Prince Zalith and Princess Aurora as we eat a small meal. I think that Slyth can tell that I am in too much shock.

You need to kill him before you start to like him, a dark and slightly venomous voice in my head speaks after I have laughed lightly at an exchange between Prince Zalith and Princess Aurora, who are talking about baby names.

I know then that if I do not kill Zalith soon, I will start to like him, and my hatred will be more difficult to maintain.

And I cannot have that.

I become lost in my own thoughts for most of the meal, and after a while, Slyth places one of his hands over my own.

“She’s quite tired,” he says to Zalith and Aurora. I look up at the two, and I don’t miss the quick look that Aurora throws Zalith, who returns it with slightly raised brows.

“We’ll see you again soon,” he tells them as we stand. I say my goodbyes, and Slyth steers me out of the dining room.

“I’d like to take you on a tour now,” he tells me excitedly.

I pull away from him, and his expression dims right away.

“I just want to go back to your room, if that’s okay,” I tell him, lowering my gaze that I hope doesn’t look too guilty.

I do not wait for an answer before I walk away.

SLYTH

S *he's doing much better than you first thought she would,*
I think doubtfully to myself as I look at Lorelai.

We are in my chambers, and Lorelai is standing at the window close to my bed. She stands with her arms crossed over her chest. She stares out at Lodra and seems completely lost in thought.

It has been a day since we arrived at the castle in Lodra. It has been a day since Lorelai met Zalith and Rory.

I knew that Lorelai would need time to adjust to life here in the castle. *She has spent her entire life living in the fucking forest. You're lucky she didn't go completely feral on arrival.*

I think back to yesterday when Lorelai met Zalith and Rory. Her shock was obvious to all three of us.

And this morning, I assumed she would have acted more normal around them, but when we had breakfast together, Lorelai seemed even more dumbfounded than yesterday. *She just needs time. She just needs time. She just needs time.* I repeat the words to myself over and over again and try to reassure myself that everything will be okay.

“Would you like to go on a walk?” I ask Lorelai hopefully. Maybe taking a walk through the royal grounds will help her to relax a bit.

When she turns to me, I can see from the expression on her face that she is about to say no.

But she remains quiet for a second and seems to examine my face before she nods somewhat reluctantly.

I take her hand in mine as she walks up to me. Today she is wearing a pale green dress that looks shocking against her dark hair and stark olive skin.

“I know you’ve been dealing with a lot of change,” I say when we’ve left the castle and are out on the grounds. “And I know it hasn’t been easy. But things will get better.” I try to sound reassuring, and I give her hand an encouraging squeeze, but she pulls her hand out of mine.

For a second, I expect Lorelai to walk away from me and walk back to the castle. But she just stands there, looking out at the perfectly manicured gardens that stretch on for miles in all directions around the castle.

“And I know you still have trouble trusting the royal family,” I say, and my voice is hopeful because at least she hasn’t walked away from me. “But I promise you that you can trust Prince Zalith and Princess Aurora. And you can trust me.”

“I promise you, you can trust me.”



YOU'RE in love with her.

The realization comes to me as I am walking toward Lasta's office.

Oh, damn.

I know that I have been falling for Lorelai since I first met her. But I have never given it much thought.

But now that I am actually thinking about it, about *her*, about *us*, I realize that I have fallen.

I have been galloping towards the edge of falling in love with Lorelai since the moment I met her, and I fell over the edge without even realizing it.

After our walk through the castle grounds, Lorelai and I return to my chambers.

I have food ordered and brought up, and I do not miss the way Lorelai stiffens when the naga servants bring up several trays of food.

“I’m just not used to being waited on.” Lorelai shrugs and laughs when I raise an eyebrow at her. Her laughter is tight, and she doesn’t meet my eyes. I swallow a sigh.

“I have never eaten this much in my life.” She groans heavily sometime later.

I look reflectively at her figure as she leans back in her chair. Lorelai has gained some weight since I’ve met her.

Her face is slightly rounder, and her hips are fuller, though her body is still lean and muscular from years of hard physical labor.

“You look beautiful.” My words are spontaneous, and Lorelai looks at me with widened eyes, and I smile when her cheeks turn pink.

I get up to walk around the table and reach for her. She leans up to meet my lips in a kiss, and I caress her face lightly, reveling in the feel and taste of her.

At least she hasn’t shut you out completely since coming here, I think gratefully to myself.

“You should find several sets of night clothes in the dresser,” I tell her when I pull away. “I need to deal with some business for the Prince, so I’ll be gone for a while.”

She smiles at me, and I see the tension leave her face and shoulders for the first time since we arrived in Lodra.

“I’ll try to wait up for you, but I’m a bit tired.”

I kiss her again before leaving. It is as I walk down the corridors that the realization of my love hits me. It is profound and disorienting.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Lasta’s voice reaches me from the darkness, and I nearly stumble into him.

“Why do you insist on lingering in the darkness?” I grumble as Lasta chuckles under his breath.

I right myself, and we start to walk towards Lasta’s office. He walks impatiently, and I know he has been wanting to have this talk since I returned.

Everyone always moves too slowly for Lasta, I think to myself as we enter his office.

“So,” I speak promptly as we sit down in his office. “What has been happening? I’m glad to see the place didn’t burn down in my absence.”

Lasta snorts and leans forward. There is a hard look in his eyes, although I am not sure where it came from.

I always forget that Lasta is highly intelligent and very strategic because it is always hidden underneath his dry humor.

“You’re lucky you had me to take over,” Lasta speaks matter of fact. “Not to speak ill of our esteemed leadership, but none of them could run this kingdom if we put a sword to their heads.”

I cannot help but snort in response. I love Zalith like a brother, and I have no doubt that he will make a great King, but he has no idea yet what it will really take to run a kingdom.

I shrug at Lasta, who looks at me with a sardonically raised eyebrow.

“Zalith will be okay. He just needs my guidance. Or your guidance if I’m not available.”

Lasta grunts and sits back.

“Well, I’m glad you’re back because I’m tired of pushing paper. I need to get back to my real job. I don’t know how you stand it.”

Lasta and I proceed to discuss the affairs of the kingdom, including everything that has happened in my absence.

There are several fires that need to be put out that Lasta could not do on his own.

“I can deal with those in the coming weeks. They won’t bring the kingdom to its knees right away.”

“And what about Kriseri?” Lasta asks me directly.

I hesitate before I answer him because I do not have a good answer to his question.

“We’ll see,” I finally tell him. “But you’ll be the first to know if anything changes.”

He nods, and we both stand up from our chairs.

“So, you’ve found a human girl?” There is humor in Lasta’s voice, and I know his words are innocent, no matter how acerbic they might be.

However, despite knowing that he is usually just poking fun, my hackles rise at the mention of Lorelai.

“Yes. I have. And her name is Lorelai,” I say stiffly.

“Well, I guess we should have seen it coming.” Lasta sighs and tugs on the shirt he is wearing, which is buttoned up incorrectly. “What with Zalith and everything. Just don’t get too close and don’t get blinded by the pussy, no matter how pretty it might be.”

Restraining myself from punching Lasta requires a monolithic amount of strength. But my restraint doesn’t last long enough, and I push Lasta up against the wall closest to us and keep him pinned to the wall with my arm against his throat.

I am breathing heavily, but Lasta isn’t looking concerned at all. Instead, his eyes twinkle with mirth, and when I finally let him go, he has barely broken a sweat. The only thing he does is tug on his untidily buttoned shirt again.

“What is the meaning of your words?” I demand from Lasta. Lorelai’s presence here is tenuous enough that I need to know what the rest of the naga in this castle think about her.

I need them to like her, love her, as much as I do. Because that is the only way she'll be able to stay.

"Come on," Lasta scoffs, and for the first time he looks uncomfortable. For a minute, I think that he'll actually walk away and say nothing.

But Lasta continues in his typical, slightly obnoxious fashion. "It is clear to me and everyone in this place, that the girl is up to something. Not everyone is the same as the lovely Princess Aurora, who I still believe is an anomaly."

Lasta sighs at the expression on my face. But still, he continues. "Listen, you've brought her to this nice castle, you've dressed her in pretty clothes, and you've given her lots of lovely books to read and nice things to eat. But anyone with eyes in their heads can see that she comes from the wild. She's practically feral! How long do you think she's going to manage in this cage you've put her in before she bites someone?"

I turn and storm off in the direction of my chambers with Lasta's words still ringing in my head.

He doesn't know anything! He's just trying to cause trouble because that's who he is!

I come to an abrupt stop outside my chambers. I wonder if Lorelai is awake.

What if Lasta is telling the truth?

When I enter the room, Lorelai is asleep, and instead of waking her, I slip into the bed beside her.

When I do fall asleep, I fall asleep to the sound of Lasta's words ringing in my head.

LORELAI

I ensure, when Slyth wakes up and rolls away from me, that my breathing is even and deep. I ensure that my eyes remain lightly closed and my lips remain slightly parted when Slyth comes around to my side of the bed. I murmur slightly in my sleep and nestle into the pillow when he whispers my name.

I remain still when he caresses my face and pushes errant strands of hair away from my face. I continue remaining still when he kisses the tip of my nose, and then both my cheeks, and then finally my forehead.

My eyes flutter open when I hear the door of the bedroom pull shut as Slyth finally exits the room. *That was hard*, I think to myself as I sit up and run my hand through my hair. My eyes are wet, and I do not know where these sudden tears have come from.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and shiver slightly when my feet touch the cold hardwood floor. I walk quickly to the washroom and splash cold water onto my face, washing the traitorous tears away.

All I can think of, as I look at myself in the ornate mirror that hangs above the basin, is the sweet nothings that Slyth murmured to me when he thought I was asleep.

He said things that I am not sure he would have said if he had known I was awake, I think to myself.

Then I dry my face off and look at myself in the mirror. My eyes are hard.

“There’s nothing he can do to change my mind. There’s nothing he can say to make me give this up,” I whisper to myself.

It doesn’t matter how many times Slyth acts like he wants me here. It doesn’t matter how much time I spend with Prince Zalith and Princess Aurora.

It doesn’t even matter that Princess Aurora is human and pregnant, or that Prince Zalith clearly loves her more than life itself.

Prince Zalith has to die.

And I have to kill him.

Because if I don’t, then everything I have worked for my entire life will have been for naught.

“You’ll be committing the biggest betrayal of your life. I only hope you can live with yourself afterwards.”

Slyth has breakfast sent up, and I eat slowly as I consider my plans for the day. *The servants. Start with the servants. They’ll know everything and will have all the information you want.*

I do not know how to interact with the naga servants very well, but I think that applying the same methods that I have used with human slaves in the past might work. “A slave is a slave is a slave, right?”

After I bathe, I wait for the servants to come up and dress me.

“Good morning!” Some of them look at me with startled expressions, but I smile as gently as I can.

“I’d like to get to know Princess Aurora better,” I speak conspiratorially as I stand with my arms in the air, while they adjust the dress underneath my arms. “But I don’t want to interrupt her schedule.”

My lies must seem believable because they start to tell me how things work around the castle. “You’ll have lots of time to spend with the Princess,” one of the more confident naga says.

“Prince Zalith has a lot of royal duties. He does spend lots of time with the Princess, but he also spends a lot of time in the royal offices. You’ll just have to find her when she’s alone.”

“Maybe one of you can show me around the castle?” I venture to ask, ensuring that my voice is as pleasant as possible.

The naga servants look at one another slightly uneasily.

“I just want to feel like I’m at home here. Slyth is so busy all the time, I cannot really ask him.” I continue speaking as though we’re close friends and this seems to encourage the naga.

After they have completed dressing me, I walk with one of the naga, whose name I learn is Esteria, and she shows me around the castle. “I can show you to Princess Aurora now,” Esteria says as we walk down a hallway that leads to a beautiful indoor garden. “Although, you might have to wait. She is with the Healer right now. She goes every morning and every evening to monitor the pregnancy.”

“It’s okay,” I say with a genuine smile. I have actually liked getting to know Esteria in the thirty minutes that we have been walking together. “I think I’ll wait.”

When Esteria’s tour of the castle comes to an end, I know almost every entrance and exit. And I also know most of Prince Zalith and Princess Aurora’s schedule.

I stand in one of the courtyards, basking in the rolling, velvety warmth of the sun, and close my hand around the hilt of the dagger that I have hidden in my pocket. By the time I leave the courtyard, I know exactly how and when I am going to kill Prince Zalith.

Are you really going to go through with this? Are you really going to do this now, after everything you’ve been through? After everything with Slyth?

But my resolve strengthens when I think of my relationship with Slyth. I am falling in love with him, but sacrifices have to be made. “I think it is time for another

sweep of the castle. Let's see if we can accidentally-on-purpose bump into Aurora," I murmur to myself.

I am halfway up the stairs to the fourth floor of the castle when I see a shadow move away from the wall.

It's Lasta, the naga who was there to greet us when we first arrived in Lodra at the royal castle. Lasta's sparkling, intelligent eyes are hard as he looks me up and down.

"The servants tell me you've been doing a lot of exploring," he murmurs. He doesn't bother to greet me, and while I would like to dispense with the niceties, I know that I cannot be overtly rude to him.

"I'm just trying to find my way around." I smile at him and hope he'll buy my act. "I want to be less of a burden on Slyth."

"How nice of you." Lasta's lip curls snidely, and my blood goes cold. My hand tightens around the hilt of the dagger in my pocket.

I am carrying three other weapons on my body, but Lasta is still bigger and stronger than I am. *No matter. You've killed naga before. You can take him.*

Lasta, however, decides to be the one to dispense with the niceties. "I know exactly what you're doing, human. This little act you're putting on might have fooled Slyth and the servants, but it isn't fooling me."

"I don't know what you mean," I tell him, and I stare at him unflinchingly.

Lasta takes a step towards me and closes the space between us. "I know how to deal with feral animals," he whispers, and I swallow convulsively as his hot breath caresses my face.

"Here, we take feral animals, and we put them down. And that is exactly what I'll do to you if you lay a hand on the Prince or Princess. If you even attempt to hurt them, I'll separate your head from your body so quickly, you won't even have time to mourn your short, pathetic life."

I step away from Lasta and turn on my heel. I don't run until I turn the corner, and when I do run, I don't stop until I get to Slyth's chambers. I am breathing heavily, my chest heaving, when I close Slyth's bedroom door.

Then I walk over to the window, and stare out of it, as I think of everything Lasta said. *At least one person here knows exactly why I am here. Who knows how many other people Lasta has told of his suspicions?*

The thought that Lasta might have told Prince Zalith that I am here to do harm is sobering. "Maybe I shouldn't do this," I murmur to myself. "Maybe I should just give up. Maybe I should just let things go."

But then my mother's face invades my line of vision like a warning bell, and I am flooded with a decade's worth of pain and hate. I might be risking a lot, but I need my revenge. Because I'll never have a moment's peace if I don't get the revenge I have been working towards my entire life.

I remain at the window for the rest of the day. I drag a chair over to the window and sit there, taking in the view of Lodra.

I know that Slyth is busy with royal matters, and I cannot help but miss him as I sit and stare out at Lodra. Directly below me, I have a view of another courtyard, and I watch as various naga servants walk back and forth across it all day.

I am ready to get up from the chair and head to dinner when the sun starts to set. But then I see her, and I know I have finally gotten my opportunity.

Princess Aurora, walking on her own, both hands cradling her large belly as she moves down in the courtyard. I know she is going to the Healer's hut at the other end of the courtyard, and I remember what Esteria told me earlier today. Princess Aurora goes to the Healer's hut twice a day, usually with Prince Zalith in tow.

Except this time she's alone.

I cannot let this opportunity go.

My mother's face is all I see as I leave Slyth's chambers
and follow Princess Aurora into the darkening night.

SLYTH

L asta's words haven't left my head since he said them.

He said them in a taunting manner that seemed to stick to my skin, slip into my ears, and take up residence in my mouth. *Could he be right? Could Lorelai have a different agenda?*

I am starting to think that maybe I shouldn't have brought her to the castle. I am starting to realize that my blatant, endless love for Lorelai has blinded me to the truth.

And that truth is that she might be a danger to Zalith and Rory.

But I cannot help but hope that both Lasta and I are wrong about Lorelai as I head back up to my chambers after a long day of meetings with Zalith.

I haven't seen Lorelai all day – she was asleep when I left this morning – and I am aching to see her. And not just because I want to ensure that she isn't here to hurt anyone. *Should I just confront her? Should I just ask her why she's really here?*

And how exactly are you going to handle it when she tells you she's here to hurt the people you love? How exactly are you going to handle it when she tells you that she's not here because she loves you?

I know as soon as I step into my chambers that Lorelai isn't there. I have studied, I have learned, the intricacies of her

scent after all these weeks, and there is a clear absence of her singular fragrance when I walk into my rooms.

My stomach twists itself into knots as I stand in the entryway of my chambers.

“What am I going to do if Lasta is right?” I say out loud as I try to think of a way to minimize whatever disaster is about to happen.

Because I can feel it. I have learned, after years of being Zalith’s faithful servant, how to predict when things are about to go wrong. Learning how to foresee danger is important when your life revolves around protecting someone.

The first thing I do is force myself to take a few steps into the room. *Search for her weapons*, is what I tell myself as I do a sweep of my chambers.

Lorelai’s small pile of belongings is piled on the bedside table on her side of the bed. I search through them and find no weapons. I go through the closet where the servants placed her new and old clothes, and I find no weapons there, either.

It is only when I am on my knees, peering underneath the bed, that I realize that Lorelai has gone rogue with her weapons. *You’re a royal advisor. If you panic now then what good are you?* I chastise myself as my heart thuds erratically and my breath becomes shallow.

I get to my feet and start to pace up and down the length of the room as I consider what to do next. I have to make a decision, and I have to make it soon. Before Lorelai actually hurts someone.

And if she does hurt someone, that is the end of her. They’ll kill her. And you’ll lose two of the people you love most in the world. Lorelai and Zalith.

I walk swiftly out of my chambers and head for the staircase.

And I stumble over Lasta.

“If you don’t stop doing that I’m going to wring your neck!” I growl at him as I catch myself before I fall down the

staircase.

Lasta laughs out loud and leans back against the staircase railing.

“Why are you in such a hurry? Are you looking for someone?” His voice is wry and filled with mirth, but his eyes are hard and his mouth is grim.

“Don’t fuck with me now, Lasta,” I tell him in way of answer. “I don’t have time for you.”

“You need to find her and take care of her.” Lasta’s posture doesn’t change. If I couldn’t see his face, I’d assume he was having a casual conversation. Lasta continues speaking conversationally. “Because if you don’t, I will.”

His voice is as matter of fact as if he is telling me about a new security measure he has created for Zalith.

“Is that a threat?” I want to kick myself for the way my voice shakes when I answer him.

Lasta laughs again and straightens his posture. He runs a hand through his hair. I become aware of how well-matched we are in height and weight.

“It is a promise. I am a guard to the royal family. And unlike you, my loyalties aren’t tainted by the promise of what is probably very mediocre sex.”

“If you hurt her...” I speak through gritted teeth. But Lasta cuts me off.

“It isn’t a matter of ‘if’. It is a matter of when I hurt her. Because I will. Someone has to. I can’t believe you were stupid enough to bring her literally into the royal castle. What were you thinking? She has spent so much time in the wild that she’s less than human!”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course I do!” Lasta isn’t bothering to keep his voice down, and I flinch at the booming echo of his words. “I know exactly what I’m talking about! She’s only had one thing on her mind since getting here. You can see it in her eyes. You can see it in the way she moves.”

Lasta takes a step towards me. “Get to Zalith’s office now, and go do your duty as royal advisor. Because I’d bet you this entire kingdom that that is where she is right now.”

As Lasta finishes speaking, he pulls a sword from a sheath that hangs loosely around his waist.

I don’t miss the implication of him carrying his weapon indoors.

He’s getting ready to kill Lorelai.

Lasta walks away, leaving me standing on the landing above the staircase.

The potential consequences of Lorelai’s actions race through my mind as I consider what I am about to do. It won’t matter if she is successful or not at attacking and killing Zalith. Whatever happens, she’ll be killed for it. That’s why she has to be stopped before she gets close to Zalith.

And I have to be the one to stop her, I think to myself, and I break into a run. I make it quickly down the stairs and throw myself over the railing, when I realize I’ll have to go down another four flights of stairs to get to Zalith’s office.

I clear nearly five feet of air and land lightly on my feet. My tail curls around my feet as I listen intently to the space around me.

I don’t think Lorelai could have attacked Zalith yet, because I would have heard something. Zalith is an excellent, trained fighter, and Lorelai is just feral. *They’re going to make some noise.*

I start to walk towards Zalith’s office but stop at the sight of an open side door that leads out into the castle grounds. The sun has set, and the light is low, and I can hear fire crackling in the torches that are attached to the walls outside the castle.

I can hear the murmur of the servants as they complete their tasks for the day, and I can hear, in the distance, the raucous laughter of the castle guards as they change their shifts for the night. Standing there feels like an age, although I know I have only been standing there for less than a minute.

My hand goes to the knife that hangs at my belt, and I squeeze my eyes shut as I imagine using it on Lorelai. To stop Lorelai. *I don't think I can do this*, I think to myself.

A stray leaf from a tiphe tree has blown into the corridor from outside. It swirls around before coming to a stop at my feet. I step forward and step onto the leaf, and I hear it tear apart with a crunch.

When I imagine using the knife on Zalith, it is much easier and hurts a lot less.

I start to walk towards Zalith's office which is situated at the very end of the hallway. I still haven't heard anything that indicates that Lorelai has attacked him.

This is it. Once you enter that office, you'll have to choose a side. Lorelai, the woman you love more than life itself. Or Lodra, and your friend who you have protected your entire life.

I know that many, many people are going to get hurt, no matter what decision I make.

If I choose Lorelai, I'll have to watch her die before I am killed for treason. All the humans in Lodra will be affected when the naga realize that they can become an actual threat. And that includes Rory.

If I choose the crown, if I choose Zalith, I will betray myself and Lorelai by doing so.

I belong to Lorelai by now, heart and soul. So if I choose Zalith, I'll be giving away parts of myself that do not belong to me any longer.

The hallway seems to stretch on forever and ever, and I can still hear the crunch of the leaf as it shatters beneath my foot. I can still hear the murmur and sway of the servants as they finish their chores.

I pick up the pace when I hear the shattering of glass in the distance. And I only hope that I get to Zalith on time.

Because I am not sure what I'll do if I don't. If I'm not in time, my entire world will come crumbling down at my feet.

LORELAI

Zalith looks up from whatever he's writing on the desk and gives me a smile. The smile is warm and gentle, just the way he always is.

"Hello, Lorelai," he says. "Having trouble sleeping, too?"

Why does he have to be so kind? It would be so much easier if he could just be a little sharper, a little ruder.

"You learn to sleep pretty lightly when you're on the run for long enough. Can I ask what you're doing?"

"Just writing letters," he replies. "You'd be surprised how much of being Prince is just answering messages. And not exciting ones, either. Just keeping in touch with people, so they'll be there for you when you need them."

My hand reaches into my shirt where the dagger is waiting. All it will take is a single move. The same arc will take the blade out of its pocket and plant it firmly in Zalith's neck. All of the years I've spent planning, hoping for this moment, will finally have paid off. I'll have gotten revenge against the naga and against their royal house.

"Not exactly something I'm good at doing," I say.

Why am I hesitating? Why isn't it already done? Why isn't he already dead?

"So I've heard." He stands up, his smile still warm and kind. "I hope that my wife and I can help to change that for you. And Slyth, of course.

I wish he hadn't brought up Slyth. Slyth is the worst part of it. I don't want Rory to hate me. I don't want to have to go back on the run again after having had a chance to live the luxurious life of a noble. But all of that is nothing compared to what it will do to Slyth. Everything that was ever between us will be destroyed the moment I do this.

But so what? Will I really give up on avenging the deaths of my people just because one of the nagas happened to be handsome and a little nice? Do I really care that little about what I've been fighting for all these years? About who I've been fighting for?

"You look like something's upset you," he observes.

"I'm fine," I say. "Just something I know I have to do but am having difficulty with at the moment."

He nods, a portrait of sympathy. "Would you like to tell me more about it?"

Why can't I make myself do it? I've done it a hundred times before to a hundred different naga. My muscles know the movement I have to do. And yet, here I stand, listening to him talk and limp as a puppet. What's wrong with me?

"I don't know if it's the kind of thing a Prince like yourself would be interested in."

"You might be surprised by what I would be interested in," he replies. "I care about my subjects. And yes, that includes my human subjects."

No, I know exactly why it's so difficult for me to finish this. It's because I don't want to. I don't want to kill Prince Zalith. I'm not angry with him, and I don't want to give up what I have with Slyth. The one thing I've been afraid of this whole time has happened.

"I'm simply too weak."

"I believe you," I assure him. "I believe that you care about us."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I know it probably doesn't feel that way out there. At least, not yet."

But it doesn't matter what I want, because I'm not fighting for myself. I'm fighting for my mother and my father. For everyone else who's been ground into dust by the machine that this man's family has allowed to exist. It doesn't matter what I want. I'm nothing. What matters is my duty.

With that, I unsheathe the dagger and swing it straight at its target.

My aim is as deadly as ever, but my dagger never reaches his throat. There's a sharp clanging of metal, and my blow is deflected to the side. Zalith is holding his own dagger.

He knew what I was doing. And he blocked me!

"I had hoped it wouldn't go this far," he says, stepping into a defensive stance. "And it doesn't have to go any further. If you put your dagger away and go to bed, I won't say anything about it. We never have to talk about this again if you don't want to."

I take on my own stance, stepping carefully closer to him. "It's okay. You don't have to pretend anymore. I've shown you how ungrateful I am. You can take it all out on me. I'm not one of the good ones. And I don't pretend to be."

"I've talked about you with Slyth," he returns. "I know some of what you've been through. Not all of it, of course. He would never betray a secret. But I know you've been hurt. I know that you're angry. But I also know that you're more than your anger."

"It doesn't matter what I am!" I cry. "It's not about me!"

With that, I dive in with my blade. Again, he blocks. I disengage my blade and swing again.

He keeps blocking as I keep swinging. He's letting obvious opportunities pass to put offensive pressure on me, and even ignoring outright weaknesses in my defense. I know he sees them because I can tell what a talented swordsman he is. Being treated like that infuriates me, and my attacks become more reckless and more intense.

"It is about you, Lorelai," he answered, stepping back. "You're important, and so is your happiness. You matter as

much as anyone who you're fighting for."

"You're just saying that because Slyth told you to!" I snap, pushing him further back. A few more steps and he'll be pinned in the corner. "Slyth doesn't know me! And if he did, he'd be happy to have me gone!"

But I'm still only using my dagger, not my magic. Even when I'm fighting, I'm holding back, hesitating. I hate how weak I've become. He should be dead now. Instead...

I feint at his left then stab directly at his throat. He ignores the feint and catches the strike with the guard of his dagger. And then, suddenly, with a twist of his wrist, my dagger is out of my hand and in the air. It falls to the ground and clatters along the stone floor, finally coming to a stop underneath his desk.

For a second, he holds his own dagger in his hand and then calmly puts it away. "I've known Slyth for as long as I've been alive," he says. "Slyth may blind himself to certain things about you. But I promise you that he does love you. Fully and truly. And no, this will not change his mind."

"That's it?" I say. I'm trying to sound taunting, but my voice sounds desperate instead. "You're just going to leave me alive? Even though I tried to kill you?"

"Even if I believed that you deserved to die, I would grant you your life for the sake of Slyth's love," he replies. "But I don't believe anything of the sort. I believe that you deserve to live and to be happy in ways you haven't learned to expect yet."

I can feel tears rising in my eyes, and I push them back. This is my enemy. I won't cry in front of him. I refuse to.

"Do you think I'll stop trying to kill you? Do you think it's over just because you got rid of my dagger one time?"

"What you do is entirely up to you," Zalith says, and he sits back on his chair. "But I hope that you become a friend. To me, and to Rory. For Slyth's sake, yes, but also because I like you, and I'd like to know you better."

The heat starts to build up in my hands. It's as if all of my anger, an anger that I've built up over years of helplessness, is concentrating between my palms and slowly beginning to turn into fire.

"I'd like that, too," I say, and a tear pushes out of my eye. "In another life, I would have liked to be your friend."

He turns around, and his eyes widen. The air between my palms is shimmering with heat. And then a second later, the fire erupts. A fireball, floating between my hands, burning with blue-white heat. The tongues of it wrap around each other, and as I draw my hands apart, it slowly expands.

"Lorelai," he says, his calm starting to drop for the first time this whole night. "You don't have to do this. You don't have to do anything you don't want to. You can just be happy. That's enough."

"Stop it!" I cry. "Just stop it! Don't tell me what I can do! This is about what I have to do! I have to!"

"Please, Lorelai. If you do this, you can't take this back."

The tears flow down my face. Why does it have to be like this? Why does it have to be so hard? This should be a joyful moment. This should feel like success, for all the years of effort I put into it.

Why does it feel like failure instead?

I'm beginning to feel the heat of the fireball I've created in my chest. This will kill practically with a touch. All I have to do is let it go. All I have to do is not hesitate for once.

There's a sound out in the hallway. I need to make this decision. Before it's too late.

It's at that moment that the door crashes open. Slyth is standing there, staring at me, his face as full of love as it is of shock and anger.

So I have to do it in front of him now? *Just as well*, I think.

"Lorelai, no!" he cries as I bring my hands back and aim the fireball right at the Prince's chest.

SLYTH

It's one thing to know what she's planning. It's another to stand there, seeing her hold the fireball in her hand, ready to launch it at Prince Zalith.

“Lorelai, no!” I cry. The words are more of an instinct than anything else. My mind is screaming at me. This can't be happening. It can't have gone this far. No.

The woman I love and the man I have sworn my loyalty to from birth are facing off, one about to kill the other. And somehow, I have to make it come out alright. She can't kill him. I won't let her.

I have to believe that there's a part of Lorelai that doesn't want to do this. I've seen that gentle part of her, and even when she's standing here, ready to kill him, that other piece of her has to be there somewhere.

If it isn't... I don't know what I'll do. I simply don't know.

“Slyth, I'm sorry,” she says, trying to meet my eyes for a moment but then looking down at the ground. “I didn't want you to have to watch this.”

I can't let her do this. I won't.

There's no time for me to get in between her and the Prince. If I take a step towards them, she might release the fireball twisting and burning in her hand before my foot has even touched the floor again. I'm going to have to do this with words.

That's possible, isn't it? She said that she didn't want to do this in front of me. And she hasn't done it yet. There must be some hesitation somewhere in her. Is that enough? Can I grow that hesitation, or is the best I can hope for delaying the inevitable?

"I won't let you get away with this," I declare, drawing myself up to my full height. "I love you, but if you hurt my Prince, I will see that you are punished fully for it. You will be making an enemy of the entire Kingdom of Lodra and of me, and you will suffer all the consequences of that choice."

"Slyth..." Zalith begins, but Lorelai cuts him off.

"Do you think I can't handle that?" she snaps. "Do you think I'd let my fear of you get in the way of doing my duty?"

No. I don't think that. She's right that this is entirely the wrong approach. I'll never scare her into submission, even if I were as sure as I'm pretending to be that I could defeat her in combat. But she's still not releasing the fireball.

It's almost as if she wants me to stop her.

That's it. She wants to believe that there is a reason she doesn't have to do this. She just needs me to come up with it for her.

"You're right," I admit. "You might be able to escape. Between your fire magic, your agility, and how well you know the woods, I'm not sure whether I would be able to stop you or not. I don't think you are, either. But that's not really the point, is it?"

"You think you know what the point is?" she snarls. Her voice is full of confused emotions. That means I have to be even more careful. In a state like this, all it would take is one strong impulse. "You're a naga! You don't know anything about what I've been through! What other humans are still going through out there!"

I certainly don't. I can see in her all the pain that she's had to bear over the years. When that much pain has been ignored for that long, how hard must it be to listen to someone else

telling you not to do something about it? *“If not this, what?”* I can almost hear her thinking. *“If not this, what?”*

“You’re right. I don’t know what you’ve been through,” I answer. “I don’t know what it’s like to be a human slave, and I don’t pretend to. But I do know you. I know you better than you think I do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean that I know how talented and strong and beautiful you are. I’ve seen how much you care about people and what you’re willing to do to help them. I’ve seen you smile and play and have fun. I know that you are a whole and wonderful woman and that you deserve better than to sacrifice yourself out of obligation to the suffering of people whom you won’t even be saving.”

She stares at me. For a moment, her hands loosen, and the fireball between them starts to weaken. Just as quickly, she catches herself, and it roars back to its full force.

“If I destroy the royal bloodline, it will destabilize the naga,” she says. “There’ll be civil war, chaos. Humans will be able to rebel.”

“That’s your plan?” I reply. “You want to destroy the entire royal bloodline? Do you know how much death you’re talking about?”

“Do you know how many humans have died because of your precious royal bloodline?”

That was a miscalculation. As she says it, the fire becomes hotter and bluer.

Another mistake like that and that might be it, I remind myself. Killing Zalith is the easy thing. It’s what she’s prepared for. Letting go is hard. It’s vulnerable. It means trusting us. And she has every reason not to do that.

Every reason except one. I love her. And I won’t let anything bad happen to her.

“It’s one thing to kill people you can tell yourself deserve it,” I tell her. “But if you want to end the royal bloodline,

you'll have to kill more than princes who are already in power. Rory is pregnant with Zalith's children. Will you kill them?"

She looks confused. "No. No, of course not. That's not what I mean."

"But they carry the blood of Prince Zalith. If he dies, they'll be among the heirs to the throne."

"But they're different. They're babies. They're innocent."

"Then someone can be a member of the royal bloodline and still innocent? It's their deeds that corrupt them, not their birth?"

"Of course!"

"Then what has Prince Zalith done? When has he shown anything but a true desire to help humans?"

She stands frozen, uncertain. I risk taking a step towards her. Her eyes follow my movement, but she doesn't strike or make any move to prevent me. Still, I don't risk another step. Not yet.

"How long am I supposed to live off promises and intentions?" she says finally. "My parents are both dead. They were both taken from me. Can good intentions make up for that? Can promises raise a child?"

"No," I agree. "No, there's nothing that Prince Zalith can do to fix things that will make up for what's been taken from you. Not even being struck down by a fireball in his own study."

"It's not fair," she says, her voice on the edge of cracking.

"No, it isn't fair. But we can make it more fair. For other people."

"But they're still dead!" She's barely holding it together, and yet the fireball in her hands is only becoming more powerful. "What has he had to suffer? He grew up like a royal and he never had to leave his parents!"

"Will they still be dead if you kill him?"

There's another pause. I wonder if that was a cruel thing to say. I wish she didn't have to go through this alone. I wish that fire weren't there, because I want to wrap her in my arms and hold her and make her feel like the most loved, cherished woman in the whole world.

I risk another step towards her. Her jaw clenches, and I freeze.

"It's an enormous amount to deal with," I tell her. "More than should ever have been put on you. And even making things better won't fix that. But we *can* make things better. For you and for all the humans of the naga realms. And for the rest... for living with the rest... You don't have to do that alone."

She looks at me. Her lip flutters as if she's going to say something, but she doesn't.

"I want to be there with you and for you. I want to help you bear everything that you've been given to bear. Most of all, I want to make you happy. You deserve to be happy. You are more than a tool of vengeance. You are a woman. You are Lorelai. And you deserve the world."

Another step. Just one more, and I'll be able to stand between her and Prince Zalith. Will that change things? Will she kill me in order to get to Zalith? I'm not sure.

I think a part of her would. But it's not the only part. There's another part that's softer. A part that believes in me, and in Zalith, and that things might be better someday. That's the part I'm trying to talk to.

"I want to believe what you're saying," she says. Her hands are shaking. Still, the fireball hangs steady, even growing.

"I mean all of it," I assure her. "I wouldn't lie to you."

"I want to believe it," she repeats. "But I don't know why you'd say it about me."

And then, she stands straighter. Her arms pull back, and I realize that she's preparing to hurl the fireball forward.

“I wish I knew how to believe you. Please know, I really do wish I could.”

I bend my legs to jump for it, but I can tell it's too late. This is the moment. This is the moment she decides what her future will be. The only thing I can do is watch and hope she makes the right decision.

Prince Zalith stares at her. His eyes widen as her hands finally come together behind the swirling mass of all of her anger and pain brought together into one ball of deadly flame.

LORELAI

This is it, I think, as I grit my teeth and brace myself for the recoil. If I don't do it now, I won't do it ever. Here we go.

I bring my hands around to the back of the fireball, tense all my muscles...

And I dissipate the fire. Slyth catches himself in the middle of trying to jump into the path. Zalith lets out his breath in an audible gasp.

I drop onto my knees and finally let the tears I've been holding back out. The office is calm, except for the sound of me crying. It's the hardest I've cried in... I don't actually remember the last time I cried like this. It's as if all of the anger in me has turned to sadness, and it's all trying to flow from my eyes.

"I'm sorry," I mutter. "I'm so sorry."

Slyth drops down next to me, wraps his arms around me, and pulls me close. He's warm and gentle, and despite myself, I relax into him.

"It's okay," he tells me. With one hand, he strokes my back up and down. "It's all over. You'll be okay."

"Don't lie to me," I whisper.

"What do you mean?" he asks, continuing to pull me close and rhythmically stroke my back.

Zalith has returned to his seat, clearly shaken. But it can't be too much longer before he summons his guards and tells them what I did, can it?

I believe that Slyth loves me. I believe he wants to forgive me. But I'm not stupid. I just threatened Zalith's life, and he's the one who's in charge. I should be trying to run away and fight my way out. But I can't. All I can do is lean into Slyth's smooth, soft body and weep.

That's alright. If there's one thing I can do well, it's accept my fate. At least I won't have killed a man I didn't want to. That's worth something.

"I'm sorry," I repeat. "I ruined everything."

"That's not true," he says. "You haven't ruined anything. I love you. And I have you."

But for how long? How long until the Prince has his revenge?

"It's alright," I say, this time to Zalith, not Slyth. "You can do whatever you have to. I made the right choice in the end. Even if it was too late."

Zalith looks at Slyth. "What do you say, Slyth?"

Slyth returns his gaze but doesn't rise. "You have the authority to override me if you want to. But you know what my request will be."

"Yes, I do," Zalith agrees. "It's not a small request. You must know that."

"I do. That's why I'm making it."

Zalith stands up and approaches. The two of them whisper to each other, and I don't bother trying to make out what they're saying. It doesn't really matter anymore. None of it does. This is the path I chose. I have to accept it now.

I may die, but at least I'll die for something. When it all came down to it, I chose to be better than the people who hurt me. I chose to have principles even when they had none.

That's something to be proud of. And if Slyth is right, and Zalith really does make things better for humans in the Kingdom of Lodra, then my death will be worth it. Maybe I've done something for them after all, even if it was only conquering myself.

There's a pause in the whispered conversation above me. Zalith is making his final decision. I decide that I want to say something.

"Prince Zalith, I want to apologize to you for all of this. I hope that what I've done tonight doesn't make you think less of other humans."

Zalith looks down at me and smiles. "You stopped yourself," he answers. "It wasn't easy, but you did it. You haven't made me think less of humans. You haven't made me think less of you."

With that, he turns back to Slyth. "It's settled then. As far as anyone knows, this never happened."

"Wait, what?" I reply in astonishment. "You mean that? Really?"

He cracks a smile. "Well, you're not going to do it again, are you?"

"No," I say. "No, of course not. But... but I threatened you. I was just a few moments away from —"

"But you didn't," Zalith interrupts. "And I choose to let that matter. You deserve the same mercy that you gave me."

I stand up. His kindness is starting a new wave of tears. "I can't thank you for this enough."

"Then don't try. Go with Slyth. The two of you should have some time together."

I look at Slyth, who has also stood up. He smiles at me, and the fact that after all that, he can still give me that smile sets me bawling again. He wraps an arm around my shoulder, and together, we walk back to his room.

I collapse onto the bed, and he lies next to me. He's quiet, letting me have space to cry and try to process everything

that's just happened.

"He really means it, right?" I ask, even though I know Zalith well enough to know the answer. "It isn't going to be a trick, is it? He's really going to forgive me?"

"Zalith doesn't say anything unless he means it." He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me close to him. "Though take that bit about not telling anyone seriously. I can't make any promises about what Rory would do if she found out you threatened her man."

That makes me laugh, which is a good sign. I'm glad that there are things that seem funny to me.

"Well, I couldn't be too mad at her for that. I'd be pretty mad if she tried to kill you."

"You're comparing you and me to Rory and the Prince?"

I blush slightly. "I guess maybe I am."

"Good," he says. "We should be as happy as they are."

Slowly, the tears begin to dry up. The whole thing feels miles away as if it was a totally different person who stood in that office and conjured that fireball.

"I've never told you my story," I say suddenly. "You know some of the big points. But not the whole thing."

"I'd love to hear as much as you want to tell me."

So I tell him everything, from the beginning. It all pours out at once, full of painful little details I didn't even know I still remembered. I tell him about growing up with my parents, who were barely making ends meet every month. I tell him about my father being taken away for the Andakyas when I was thirteen, and what it felt like to be there in the room, watching them lead him through the door and not be able to do anything. I tell him about moving to Jalma and how we thought we'd be safe there until we heard how they talked about humans with magic. I talk about the secret magic lessons in the darkness, when we were sure no one could see us, and how my mother would rush over every time my fire burned a little too bright or went too high. I tell her about our landlady

betraying us to the soldiers and running away while my mother fought with them... until she stopped.

He listens intently the whole time. Occasionally, he asks a clarifying question or asks me to repeat something, but mostly he simply listens and nods. When I finally get to the end of it, he hugs me tight.

He thinks for a while before speaking. "That's more than any child should bear. And you did better at it than anyone could have asked."

"It's not an excuse for anything I did," I say. "I don't want you to pity me. I just want you to know."

"You're anything but pitiable," he tells me. "And like the Prince said, you didn't do anything. You thought about it, but you chose not to. And that's what matters. Not what you thought about. What you did."

If I hadn't cried for so long already, that would have started me sobbing again. "Why are you so kind?"

"This is what you deserve. The better question is why other people were so mean."

I'm not sure what to say to that. It touches a very delicate, deeply buried part of myself.

"Do you really think that he can do it? Do you think that the Prince can turn things around in Lodra?"

"I don't think he can do it alone," Slyth replies, after taking a few seconds to think seriously. "But I also don't think he is alone. He's got Rory. And he's got me. And I think you could be a powerful ally in that struggle, too."

"You really think so?"

"Killing Prince Zalith wasn't what you needed to do. But that doesn't mean you won't be needed. Sometimes it takes time to find what you're needed for. But I believe you will find something. And I believe you'll do it well."

"I hope that's true. But I've trained myself to be a killer for so long. What if that's all I know how to do?"

“I don’t think you just trained yourself to be a killer,” he says, laying his hand on my shoulder. “I think you trained yourself to be a protector.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you don’t fight because you like to kill people. You fight because you want to stand up for people who have been trampled down. You don’t want to destroy. You want to save.”

I’m about to try and come up with something to respond, but we’re interrupted by the sound of shouting and clashing metal. Something’s going on outside. But what?

Ripped from our tender moment, Slyth and I both stand up and draw our weapons. With him by my side, I’m ready to protect the man who a moment ago I was planning to kill.

SLYTH

My body stills. My muscles relax.

I grip Lorelai in my arms, smoothing her hair back to reassure her. Tears still fall gently from her eye down her cheek.

It's a delicate moment, positioned somewhere between tranquility and chaos. I continue to wipe away the moisture from her soft cheeks, kissing her and embracing her. I've just finished telling her that she's a protector, not a murderer. She thinks of how to respond. I can see her blushing.

She jumps to alertness. "What was that? What's going on?"

In the window, I can see that the once serene moonlight has turned orange, and just noticing the glow of fire outside, my body grows hot.

Screams fill the castle halls leading to us.

The sounds of metal scraping against metal now surround us.

I've trained my whole life for this. I grab my sword, trying to prepare for something I can't even define. I don't know how to answer her question. I don't know what's happening. But I have to face it, anyway.

There's a small voice inside my head that torments me. *Somehow, she's responsible*, it whispers to me.

I shake it off, watching her grab weapons of her own. I want to believe she's using them to help. To be the protector I just told her she could be.

"We need to go," I tell her.

She grips my hand and joins me as we race out of the room and into the halls. We only make it a short way before we run into Zalith, and at least I know he is safe for the time being. Whatever is happening down there, he is with us. We rush through halls and down flights of stone stairs until we see the carnage on the floor below.

Blood stains the normally pristine stone floors. Looking out, we see guards, entrenched in combat against familiar enemies.

"Kriseri."

I ready my sword but immediately see a bright light to my left that swells and fills my vision. Looking over, Lorelai's hand ignites, producing a hot, swirling ball of orange energy that expands in her grasp.

My heart stops, and I remember the office. The enlarged green eyes of the guard, as he turns his head to glance at Lorelai, match the bright coloration of his scales.

The fire hurtles from her hand, colliding with Kriseri's soldier, then dissipating to nothing as his scales are left black and charred and he falls to the ground.

"Oh, come on," she says. "Don't let me have all the fun."

She turns toward us. Zalith's eyes are orbs, bulging out of their sockets, mouth hanging open. I can't bring myself to wonder why I doubted her, even for a moment.

"It's all a ruse." The gruff, stumbling voice comes from the staircase above us as Lasta appears in the threshold.

"Whatever," Lorelai says, walking forward without us. "You're just mad that I got the kill."

Zalith and I stare at each other, both of us shrugging, before we make pace to catch up with her, Lasta following

closely behind us. I kick the dead soldier's sword upward, catching it by the hilt.

The stone-floored halls open up into the grassy courtyard. A fountain that once stood as beautiful background noise is now dismantled and broken on the grounds of the castle gardens. The head and arm of the statue that once adorned the fountain have fallen off and shattered, the water flow disrupted by an unknown source.

Flaming arrows fly through the air, crashing into walls and igniting bushes in the courtyard. The equu of Kriseri's soldiers charge forward and whinny, as their riders swing frantically with tridents, knocking over our guards and soldiers with their mounts and weapons.

We stride forward carefully, trying to watch ahead of ourselves and behind us simultaneously. Zalith stills his sword, ready to attack but not charging in. Lasta strings arrows from behind us, firing into the crowd ahead. And Lorelai easily dispatches enemies with her fireballs.

"I'm glad she's on our side," Lasta says, chuckling. I think back to moments ago when he threatened to kill her if it came to it, and my fists clench.

He was just upholding his duty, I think to myself.

But my momentary mental frustration creates temporary blindness.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see sudden movement advancing toward Lorelai. One of Kriseri's men charges forward toward her, sword drawn and ready to swipe her down. I parry before overpowering him and knocking his sword out of his hand.

I can feel myself trembling, my teeth gritting together as I drive my sword into his shoulder and cleave with all of my force. Then I bludgeon him with my blade, with my hilt, and with every bit of energy left in me, screaming.

I guess now I have an inkling of what she felt.

My breathing is heavy, my heart beating fast.

“I could have gotten that, you know,” Lorelai says, glancing down at the butchered mess on the ground.

I recognize her attempt to add levity to the situation, but I shake my head. “Don’t,” I say, before moving in to embrace her.

Lasta charges forward, dispatching enemies ahead of him, firing left and right. He’s a force of nature, shooting arrows into the chests of mounted combatants and knocking them onto the ground.

“After all that,” I whisper to her as I bring her in. “I can’t lose you.”

She nods. “I understand that,” she says, whirling around nervously. “But we’re kind of in a tense situation right now.”

I shake my head, then move in to kiss her, gripping her tightly.

I want to close my eyes and hold her forever. I wish that this was all a dream and that we weren’t on a battlefield fighting for our lives. The sounds of swords swinging into tridents, of arrows swooshing in the wind, of small roaring fires that need to be put out, and of equu neighing and grunting, all fill my ears.

I open my eyes, and I’m drawn immediately back into life, taking in the devastation before me and the beauty and innocence of Lorelai’s delicate gaze and puckered lips.

Immediately, I hear the screaming of a charging soldier. Even before I can react, Lasta fires an arrow, which collides with a naga behind me. I turn around in time to see the soldier fall to the ground, an arrow lodged in his chest.

“Don’t get too careless now,” Lasta says. “We need to all get out of this invasion alive.”

He’s stolen one of Kriseri’s equu and perches atop it, bow at the ready.

I find Zalith far to my right, clinging tightly to one of the courtyard walls. But he’s not alone.

An extremely pregnant Aurora stands firmly erect, arms folded in front of him. I can piece together the conversation from their body language, though it's impossible to hear them over the soundtrack of a raging war.

"I want to fight," I think I hear her say. "This is my home, too."

He shakes his head. "I can't lose both of you," he probably says. "I can't explain right now, but I've been through enough today. And you mean more than anything."

But she doesn't give, and eventually, he buckles, his shoulders falling while her feet trod forward into the conflict.

I realize that my feet have been moving on their own, as I've been following Lorelai toward the castle walls. She is observing the couple, also, and I wonder if the same thoughts are running through her mind... whether we should be having the same conversation.

Before us stand broken castle walls, having been breached by Kriseri's forces. The remnants of the portcullis lie at the feet of the men, who have siege weapons and every conceivable advantage, but they still hesitate.

They want us to rush forward and attack, or to retreat so that they can fire into our backs. The sword slashes, screams, and fires all dull behind me, and I realize that we are all standing together now, ready to charge.

I turn toward Zalith, awaiting his decision.

In Lorelai's hand, a fire starts to form. She has given up all pretense of hiding who she is now.

Seeing the fire in her hand, a mounted archer panics, drawing his bow and preparing to shoot into her.

But before he can unleash his arrow, he's taken clean off his horse by an arrow that can only have belonged to Lasta.

We all pause, staring at each other, none of us budging.

"Forward!" Zalith shouts, and the men who were able to come in with equu charge first, moving back and forth in circles to try to get an advantage. The mounted bowmen are

most easily dispatched, as before they can find a field of view and begin firing, they are torn from their mounts by melee combatants.

Lorelai and I move toward the castle halls, where we can safely evade arrow fire. The fear of losing her courses through me, but as I watch the flames in her hand intensify and extinguish in equal measure, I feel an exhilaration burning through me. When swordsmen stray too close to her, I cut them down before they can stifle her fire.

There's a sort of rhythm to our dance. Alone, we may fall in combat. But with me reinforcing her, and her reinforcing me, we are an unstoppable force.

Eventually, flames outnumber arrows, and the sky burns red with searing heat. Her fireballs fling forward rapidly, serving to eliminate the enemy forces and burning them down before they can even react.

A stillness enters the battlefield, charred corpses littering the grass and stone before us. We hold our positions, just waiting for one peep to indicate that the conflict still isn't over – a straggling soldier, or approaching forces in the distance.

The sounds of pavo singing and nesting in nearby trees confirm that the altercation has concluded, sunlight falling on the walls of the castle.

We leave no one alive to flee the scene, lest word of Lorelai's true nature escape us and return to the source of the threat.

LORELAI

Slyth knows the second I wake up. His tail starts at my ankle, sliding up the side of my leg until he reaches my waist. And just like he has probably a dozen times over the last few weeks, his tail curls around my middle, pressing at my lower stomach that he keeps threatening to fill with his child.

I haven't told him yet I wouldn't mind.

"Little killer," he coos in my ear as he leans forward, and I chuckle. After I went into battle with him, he's almost exclusively been calling me that. He says I've really earned my name, and I don't mind it.

It's endearing in the most fucked up sense. Just like Slyth.

"You don't believe in giving me one second of rest, do you?"

"You could rest all you want," he whispers as he pulls me back against him, not bothering to hide the erections digging into my back. "If you let me claim you as my mate."

I roll my eyes even as I grin. He's really been pushing this. This is probably the sixth or seventh request... in a week. I've said no every time, if only because I like to make him work for it. And I do love it when he tries to dominate me.

Deep down, I know that I am his mate already. I'm nothing if not his, always willing to submit. I just like to have a little fun, too.

I lift my top leg and drape it over his. I'm already naked from last night when we collapsed immediately after sex, so he slides the tip of his tail down to circle my clit. I tip my head back to rest against his chest as the pleasure starts to build.

"This for the rest of my life?" I breathe as he picks up the pace. "I guess I could get used to that."

He brings a hand around my front, palming one of my breasts and scraping over my nipple. "Yeah?" His tail slides down to my entrance, probing, and I spread my legs wider. "Does that mean what I think it does?"

"Hmm, I don't know." I lift my left arm and wrap it around his neck, arching my back to give him better access. "I didn't hear a question."

He huffs, but I know he's not annoyed. "Lorelai, will you be my mate?"

I laugh under my breath. At this point, the question just sounds exasperated. The first time he asked me, there were treats and gifts and he broke the door when I said no. But I think we both know I'm not going anywhere.

"Yes, I will." I moan softly as his tail pushes deep into me.

Slyth leans down until his breath brushes over my ear, only heightening my senses as he thrusts in and out of me and twists my nipple. "Good," he breathes. "Because the healer released my eggs earlier this week, and I'm going to fill you up in *every* way."

A shiver wracks my body as my climax starts to build. He's told me recently that naga have eggs, something I didn't know about. He said that they don't naturally release anymore, but they are there. Most don't use them, but I can't say the idea of him being lodged deep in me – and a guaranteed pregnancy – doesn't appeal to me.

I break apart as I think about it, shattering around him as he withdraws his tail. I'm still reeling from my orgasm as Slyth pulls me closer, angling my body so that he can slide the tip of his cock against my entrance. With one thrust, he pushes

deep into me, my body spasming against the new sensation as the barbs along his cock stroke my walls.

“Fuck, you look so good like this,” he grunts as he pushes deep into me. “You were meant to take me like this, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” I moan, gripping the sheets as his tail slides between my cheeks. It’s not the first time he’s come to my second hole, and while he hasn’t used both his cocks on me yet, I’m ready for it.

He swirls the arousal on his tail around my hole, pushing gently as he thrusts into me. I cry out, and my body must relax because he slips deeper inside.

“More,” I gasp as I shift my hips to get him deeper. “I want all of you, Slyth. Please.”

“Oh, little killer, I’ve been waiting for you to beg to be properly used.” His tail withdraws immediately as his hand grips my thigh and pulls it up, exposing me to him. “Now you’ll really be pumped full.”

The head of his second cock presses against my hole, and I breathe as he pushes in. It takes me a second to adjust, his shaft being much thicker and harder than his tail, but when his hand comes around to stroke my clit, he slips deeper inside.

Slyth groans as he bottoms out, his hand coming around to my stomach, which is now bulging out. The pressure is intense but not unbearable, and I would be lying if I said I didn’t like it.

“You are squeezing the life out of my cocks,” he pants, withdrawing slowly. I can feel every individual barb as they drag along inside of me. “Fuck.”

He thrusts into me, stealing my breath away, and slowly, he works me open. When it’s no longer such a struggle to move in and out, Slyth starts to pick up speed.

Instantly, stars burst behind my eyes, and he rolls me beneath him so that I’m on my knees. Gripping my hips he pulls out slowly, grunting as he runs a hand along my back.

“Little killer,” he moans as he pushes back in. “I’m not going to last much longer.”

“Me, either,” I whisper through clenched teeth as I push back into him. “Please, Slyth. I need it harder.”

A deep groan rips free of him. “I love when you say shit like that.”

His hips slam into mine as he drives home and I choke on my gasp. I have to brace myself against the bed as he continues his violent onslaught, my toes curling from the pleasure of it.

“Yes!” I scream, my body sagging into the mattress. “Yes, Slyth, please.”

“Come for me,” he grunts, and I know he’s getting closer. “Squeeze my cocks and milk me dry, little killer. Make this pussy earn my cum.”

“Fuck.” My eyes roll back in my head as my orgasm slams into me harder than I ever thought possible.

I barely register that Slyth is still going, fucking me ruthlessly until, with a loud roar, he pushes deep into me. I expect to feel the swell of his cock and the warmth of his cum painting me. Instead, I feel the pressure growing in my lower abdomen.

It’s tight and heavy, rubbing deep inside of me pleurably, and I don’t realize at first that Slyth has already pulled out of me until he speaks.

“Pumped so deep it’s not coming back out.” His words are soft, almost revering, and my pussy squeezes at the praise. I jolt at the way that it tightens around the eggs, which I can feel bulging against my stomach.

I flip on my back, looking down at where there is a swollen bump. Slyth grins as he runs his hand over it. “How does it feel?”

“Tight,” I say softly, shifting to better understand. “It kind of feels like you didn’t leave me at all.”

He leans down and kisses my stomach. “Because I didn’t,” he tells me, his tone prideful. “I won’t ever now. You are my mate, and I have marked you as such.”

I giggle. “Yeah, you worked hard for that.”

“You were always willing to submit,” he murmurs as he kisses lower, bringing his mouth to the insides of my thighs. “We both know it.”

“Maybe.” He licks up my inner leg, the roughness of his tongue making my hips jerk up. “But it took you a while to force me to.”

He chuckles, shaking his head. He blows a breath over my pussy, and a moan escapes me. “I never had to force you.” He brings his lips to hover just over my clit. “You’ve always wanted me, Lorelai.”

Then he dives in, licking and sucking until I am a trembling mess. As he brings me to another climax, I feel the eggs shifting, the pressure intensifying as they move deeper. It only heightens my pleasure as Slyth rewards me for taking him so well.

By the time he’s done, my eyes are too heavy to stay open and I’m exhausted again. Slyth settles me into bed, curling around me as he kisses my neck and cheek. “You’re all mine,” he murmurs, bringing his hand to my stomach and cupping it.

Instead of arguing this time, I just sink into him.

SLYTH

My heart thumps in my chest. Every step forward is more nerve-wracking than the last. I try to remember everything I'm supposed to say. I try to center myself to appear cool and collected.

My feet kick against the dirt, and I glimpse the dense canopy above me, looking up at how the sunlight parts through the leaves, setting the world ablaze with brilliant hues of orange and gold.

Above me, pavos scream and flutter from one tree to the other, unconcerned by anything pressing or mortal. I take a second and breathe deeply, then look down at my feet and at the tail that swings casually behind me.

A wood sign beckons me, guiding me forward with an arrow. It looks well-worn, but only synthetically, bearing the words *Slyth and Lorelai, Your Destiny Awaits*.

Picking up my feet and walking with pride, I carry myself forward before my eyes meet a small crowd of people who have gathered in anticipation of us. I hang my hands at my sides, suddenly unaware of what to do with them.

Several guards sit between the aisles, and Prince Zalith and Princess Aurora smile up at me warmly. Lasta urgently gestures. I can see him gripping his collar, looking down at his neck, while mouthing something blankly. I shrug at him, and he just starts pointing down his neck, wiping something away.

I realize a stray bit of food is on my attire.

Wiping it aside before anybody can notice, I stride onward, carrying myself with big steps in spite of how weak I'm feeling.

Stopping at the altar, I look out over the crowd. Lasta has already moved over to the keg and poured himself a goblet. He downs it casually before immediately refilling it, and I feel a tinge of pity for him.

Having seen how averse he is to any sort of relationship, voicing it on numerous occasions, I have to deny my initial instinct... that he's drowning himself in loneliness.

I shake my head.

I've lost sight of the meaning of this. I'm wracking my nerves and pitying my guests. It's supposed to be a joyous occasion. It's supposed to be our day.

The crowd is far more patient than I am. The priest makes banter with me. I nod and laugh, but his words are utterly lost on me.

What if she doesn't show up?

I know it's an irrational fear, given everything that I know, but I can't stop it from crossing my mind. The later it gets, and the more our guests are kept waiting, the more I worry.

Smiling at everybody in the seats, I look out over the crowd, waiting.

A harp begins to play, and I stand upright, looking as confident as I can. It produces tones both melancholic and jovial at the same time.

Nobody in the crowd is uneasy or nervous. So I try to correct myself, reminding myself that she'll be here and that I have a wonderful celebration to look forward to. I can barely imagine everything working out, but at some point, I need to learn to stop expecting disappointment and tragedy.

Then I see her, garbed in green, and my heart skips several beats.

She's so beautiful.

The dress she's standing in is tailored to her personality. The fabric falls over the massive bulge in her stomach like leaves, and subtle strands of brown have been integrated into the dress, giving the impression of the branches among a dense forest. I look down at her stomach, knowing that my eggs rest deep within her, and I can't help but feel a swirl of pride and a touch of arousal.

What's more, the dress is cut around the waist, ensuring freedom of movement by opening her legs. She glides seamlessly forward, looking both the part of a forest warrior and of my bride.

I still remember dodging her blade and having it stick into the tree behind me with a *twang*. I remember how scared she was that I'd reject her.

Now she is mine, and mine alone.

She smiles up at me. There's a small amount of nervousness on her face, too. Her smile is strained and awkward but still as authentic as possible.

Our friends and family have gathered here to celebrate us. Let's give them a show.

She makes her way forward along the blue-cloth aisle, her feet nearly knocking into the shells that decorate the sides of the path, joining me and grabbing my hands.

The look she gives me is only intended for me, not for anybody else. It stirs my soul. I want to leap out of my body with her. I want to take her hand and soar through the skies.

"I love you," I tell her one more time, looking down again at the lump in her belly.

She smiles at me. She almost doesn't need to say it, but it means the realm to me when she does. "I love you," she replies.

The harp's gentle strumming quiets and the priest speaks to the crowd. Everybody sits at attention, except for Lasta, who is still filling his goblet.

“In the name of Vatia, we celebrate this pairing, honoring the commitment they’ve made to each other in her name, to bring life and love into the realm.”

“We celebrate Vatia’s gift,” the audience recites back.

I can see Aurora and Zalith fidgeting, and I remember their wedding and how it eschewed tradition and formality, taking place on a desolate battlefield.

Zalith has told me, in private, that he hates these kinds of ceremonies, where the audience recites everything back verbatim.

But Lorelai hangs on the priest’s every word, and I remember that this isn’t their wedding... it’s ours.

“We look to the stars, to their grand, beautiful tapestry in the sky, and seek the guidance of the five,” the priest continues. “We live our lives in harmony with their wishes. We thank Feher for the land we stand upon, and the seas we swim within. We thank Feher for this feast, and for the water that nourishes us.”

“Let Feher bless and keep us,” the crowd recites.

“We stand before Mynir, of free mind and clean spirit, to celebrate this union and give thanks for our agency. Today, we are of one mind in welcoming this union.”

The priest looks toward Lorelai.

“Lorelai, do you accept Mynir on this day, standing with free mind and clean spirit to accept this union?”

“I do.”

He turns toward me.

“And Slyth, when you stand before us today, are you bound by Mynir, serving freely in his name, to accept this union of your own free will?”

“I am,” I reply.

He nods, gesturing once more to the crowd.

“We thank Mynir for the beauty of this union,” the crowd replies in turn.

“And may Oella bless and recognize this union, sheltering it from the passage of time, and from the clutches of Atia, the harbinger,” the priest declares.

“Oella bless and see you,” the crowd replies, together with the priest. “May you long bond together in the absence of Atia, but welcome her in her time.”

I smile out at the crowd, in sheer disbelief that this is really happening.

I never once in my life imagined that my time would come. I’ve been to so many ceremonies, and they’ve all seemed so far out of my reach.

“And now, if you’d declare your love before Vatia, so that I may pronounce your bond,” the priest says.

I take out a piece of parchment and unfurl it, but it’s Lorelai who speaks first.

“Slyth,” she says, punctuating the silence. “When I met you, I had a fire in me that burned deep. But it was relentless and ever-burning. It guided me and blinded me. It protected me and damaged me.

“I almost didn’t let you in,” she continues, my heart swelling in response. “But somehow, you found your way inside me. And now we have these children.”

The crowd laughs. I’m not sure if she intended it as a joke, but she goes along with it, smiling extra for the crowd.

I don’t even attempt to conceal my pride. Those are my eggs.

“I look forward to bringing them into a new world, where by your side, I can help protect them from the injustices of our realm and usher in a new era.”

I look at everything I’ve written on the parchment. And I tuck it back into my clothing.

I know the words I was going to say by heart, and yet they don't seem effective here. My heart has a different speech in mind.

"I wasn't sure what life was before I met you," I tell her, clearing my throat slightly. "I had a purpose, but I didn't have a fire. I had legs, but I didn't have a path. I had sight, but no vision."

I pause momentarily, gazing at her lovingly. "But then you opened my eyes to the world. You gave me light. And in your light, I found comfort, but also truth. And I don't know if I can ever thank you enough for that, or if I'll ever know how much you've given me."

She smiles earnestly in response, taking my hands and gripping them tighter.

"Then I grant you permission to bind this union," the priest says, looking between the two of us. "Although, from the looks of it, you already have!"

We kiss each other like nobody's watching, holding each other tightly. I feel the world swirl around us, wrapping and enveloping us.

Nothing matters, save for this moment. I will look back and cherish this moment as long as I live.

When we are lost, it will be a beacon for us to find our way again.

I draw myself into her tightly, pressing myself against her round stomach with my groin, my arms firmly wrapped around her shoulders.

The thought of taking her and claiming her all over again fills my mind. It guides my feet through the crowd as the audience claps for us, the soft melody of the harp playing us out.

My legs wobble forward, my hand tightly clasping hers. I'm elated not only by the idea of what I'm going to do to her but also by the fact that this is our forever.

LASTA

My eyes are everywhere.

I pace through the king's court, keeping watch of everybody's best-kept secrets. There's almost nothing I don't know. And if I don't know it, there's nothing I can't find out with the right methods.

"Easy," I mutter, nearly mistiming my approach and bumping into Zalith's field of vision as he rounds the wall.

Sidling around the corner, I turn back, sneaking through the long gallery.

I'm working with a theory.

I think, given what I know and what I've heard, that King Kriseri might have spies in this very court, supplying him with information on our most private affairs. Suppose somebody in Kriseri's favor has already infiltrated us, and they're just waiting for the perfect time to strike?

That would be a disaster.

And looking back, it feels like the timing of the attack was a little too convenient. I just can't make much sense of it.

I rush along the wall, sneaking through an open door and watching as my fellow guardsmen devour their meals absentmindedly. Salted meat with gallus eggs cover their plates.

My stomach rumbles.

“Where on Protheka is Lasta?” Selliss asks, taking a big bite.

“Who the fuck knows anymore?” Lallinn replies. “Why? Gonna brag about another of your conquests?”

I can't be seen.

We knew it was coming, sure. But the thoughts rattle around in my head a lot. I try to come up with another explanation, but there seemingly isn't one.

Slyth brings home some fiery new dame, and out of nowhere, King Kriseri decides to send his men to us with a violent greeting?

I have to doubt that it was a coincidence. I lost friends in that attack.

Dashing along the long hallway, I look out over the courtyard, relieved to see that I'm alone before opening the door and sliding through.

At the beginning, I kept waiting for her to slip up. I knew that I wasn't mistaken.

She had evil in her eyes, and she set about ensuring the fall of the kingdom... I could see what she was planning in the things she didn't say, and the way she moved.

And somehow, now I don't see that anymore.

Where did that malice go?

I'm a fantastic judge of character. I'm never wrong. I still don't fully understand how it was there one day, and gone the next. I refuse to believe it was never there at all. Something changed her. It baffles me.

I rush up the spiral staircase, then change my pace as I reach the next hallway, trying not to give myself away through the sounds of my clanking armor.

If Lorelai could change, maybe anyone could. For better or worse. Maybe one of the guards who I've trusted for years is working against us. It's a terrifying thought, but one I'm not totally able to dismiss.

I continue creeping through the castle, looking for any sign of something amiss, though I'm not quite sure who I even suspect at this point. Instead, I run into both Princess Aurora and Lorelai as I make my rounds. Sometimes they are together, sometimes they are alone, but the one thing I notice every time is the swelling of their round bellies.

It's hard to look away from, and it unleashes a weird sort of craving within me. I feel my nethers stir at the sight, and a deep sense of shame overtakes me.

No, I think, silently punishing myself. These women are the mates of my compatriots.

I shake my head, then walk forward, now less concerned about being discovered. If anybody asks, I was just out for a stroll. I'm too distracted now to focus on a reconnaissance mission.

Trudging across the empty corridor and down the spiraling staircase, I hum an old melody to myself. I can't carry a tune, but it distracts me a little anyway.

Still, it doesn't do enough. The thought of Lorelai, filled with Slyth's eggs, doesn't leave my mind as I walk. I try to look out at the dark courtyard, watching the poorly mended fountain and finding all of the statue's cracks that still leak water. Several pавos compete for a tree in front of me, screeching loudly while flying wildly into and off of its branches, their wingbeats overpowering the steady trickle of the fountain.

I've got to lay with somebody fast, I think to myself, trying to stifle my throbbing erections. I can't keep having these thoughts.

I actually feel less effective as a male. Not only do my thoughts betray me, but I'm also losing my edge as a guard.

Though I was quick to slight both Slyth and Zalith for their choice of prospective mates, my mind still drawn to the old ways, I have to admit that they've both seemed more put-together since settling down.

Shaking my head and chuckling, I turn to walk away, back toward the guard station, where I'm expected to start the morning rounds.

"Yeah, right," I say to myself, laughing. "I'm going to settle down with some human pet, just like Zalith and Slyth. Pull yourself together, Lasta."

The cries of the pavo behind me die down as they all fly off. I turn the corner, eager to return to my duties and to guide rounds, when I hear screaming coming from the opposite direction.

Without hesitating, I rush through the corridors, trying to discern the source of the noise. The voice is familiar to me. Throwing open the door, I find Aurora, lying down on a bed in the birthing room. Sweat covers her brow, and her expression is vacant and pained.

"Z-Zalith," she says. "Find Zalith."

Her belly is swollen beyond my memory, and she clutches it tightly, squirming under the pressure. In her stomach, I can clearly see the outline of so many eggs, pent up and struggling for space.

I nod. Without bothering to consult my guards, I remember that he was walking the corridors and that I had seen him mere minutes earlier.

He sits in his study, nervously flipping through diplomatic documents. I can tell that his mind is running rampant with reflection as he turns over a letter opener, slamming it down on his desk.

"Prince Zalith," I say urgently. "You need to come with me."

"Why?" he asks, clearly expecting only one answer that would draw his attention. "What is it?"

"The Princess is giving birth! She needs you!"

Sitting up immediately from his chair, he stands to attention, the chair clattering onto the floor behind him. Without any protest, he follows me.

Turning into the spare room, I'm immediately met with Selliss, who attempts to stop me.

"Sir," Selliss says. The guards are waiting behind him, watching in anticipation. "We're ready to begin the rounds."

His eagerness is understandable. We follow a strict code, getting reprimanded severely if we run off schedule.

"Did you not hear the screaming coming from this room?"

He looks at me, puzzled.

"My commitment is to the Prince," I tell him. "The Princess is going into labor! You will all hold your posts until she safely delivers her children. The health of the royal line dictates it!"

He nods. "May Vatia bless this day," he says. Though it looks like something else weighs heavily on his mind.

I shake my head, throwing open the door.

"You need to push," Zalith says, holding Aurora's hand tightly. "You can do this. You're stronger than you could ever know."

The healer arrived while I was fetching Zalith. He guides the process, though right now, Aurora only needs moral support.

I hate to intrude, but one thought does run heavy in my mind. "Prince Zalith," I say. "Would you like me to retrieve the King?"

Zalith shakes his head, trying desperately to keep from worrying Aurora. "He's away on diplomatic business," Zalith says, gripping Aurora's hand still more tightly.

Aurora pushes and screams, trying to expel her young.

"The Queen then?"

"She's not here either," he says abruptly.

I look upon the scene in confusion. The birth of their grandchildren should be of the utmost priority to the King and Queen. What else could be important right now?

I can tell how frightened Zalith is as he watches her intensely. Many naga women do not survive the birthing process. The risk of complications is even greater in human women.

It's one of the many reasons I've always questioned Slyth and Zalith on their mate selection.

Aurora's belly shrinks suddenly in small increments as the first child falls out of her, the healer standing by to retrieve it.

Her breathing eases slightly, but I can see how intense her pain is as one of the nurses moves the child to a safe vessel, its small tail barely formed.

Watching intensely, I observe as child after child falls out of her, the eggs dissolving somewhere inside of her. Every birth is a miracle, given the associated risks.

Why wouldn't I want this?

She gives birth to two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight live young. Each birth is scarier than the last, but as I watch, I realize that each is another life, like my own, given freedom by the grace of Mynir.

She lies back, and for hours, she sleeps.

Zalith looks over at the young, his young, and approaches me.

"Thank you," he says before moving in to hug me.

I am confused. "For what?"

"For standing guard, of course," he says, smiling. "What else would I be thanking you for?"

Moving over to the chair, he falls asleep next to Aurora, and I walk back out into the hallway. Seliss waits for me expectantly.

"Sir," he says. "Is it time to resume rounds?"

But I am speechless as I stare down at the floor, my heart sinking.

I want that, too, I think to myself, feeling like half of a man.

THE END.

To read more about Lorelei and Slyth sign up for my newsletter here: [Celeste King Newsletter](#)

PREVIEW OF DARK ELF'S SECRET BABY

The Worlds of Protheka is a vast and growing world. Check out one of the books, Dark Elf's Secret Baby

Dark Elf's Secret Baby

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LAYLA

I drop my pickaxe at the mouth of the mine as I step into the open air, the metal tip clanking against the countless pickaxes beneath it as it falls. The setting sun glances off the snow capped tips of the mountain range around us, stars beginning to wink into existence in the sky.

After a few steps forward, I reach the small stand where one of the dark elf overseers sits, taking inventory of the product we bring back to the surface from the mines. I shrug off my bag and hand it to him, watching as he rummages through it and pulls a chunk of kirialite out, his eyes glimmering as he beholds the raw stone.

The dark elf gives me a curt nod before sliding a handful of tickets to me. They never give us real money, of course, as it could be used to formulate some type of escape, but these tickets are as good as currency within the camp.

I grab the tickets off the table and return his nod, turning away and letting a small sigh slip through my lips as I start on my way home. Camp Horizon isn't a bad place to be as a human, and if I'm being honest with myself, I rather enjoy the predictability of my routine.

Wake at dawn, to the mines just after sunrise, work until sunset, and on the way home at twilight. The same location, same activity, and same schedule, every day but holidays.

The dark elves aren't as bad here as they are on the other continents, either. Sure, there are some who are too quick with

their whip and take too much of an interest in the human women, but the vast majority are rather apathetic.

My steps fall rhythmically as I walk down the path from the mines toward the village square, the footsteps of the other miners around me creating a strange, drum-like beat, accented by catches of quiet conversation. It isn't long before the squat little cabins of the village square begin to peek into view from behind the massive tree trunks of the surrounding forest.

People mill about in the loose gravel streets, moving from vendor to vendor after their work day and collecting various supplies and food for the coming week. A handful of dark elf guards lean against the walls of scattered stalls and cabins, watching with thinly veiled boredom as the humans move about. The camp is almost peaceful- at least, as peaceful as any dark elf run settlement can be.

The camp is separated into different quarters, which also helps to keep the peace. The dark elves largely stay in their quarter, situated to the west of the main village square, and the humans stay in their eastern residential quarter. The mines lie to the north, and the road into Camp Horizon sits to the south, along with the warehouse where all of what we mine is stored and cataloged.

I sigh, wiping my soot-covered hands across my face. No, Camp Horizon isn't the worst place to be, but the work is hard. And I know, deep down in my bones, that I want something more.

A stray, chilly breeze sweeps up the path from the village, carrying with it the decadent scent of fresh nimond bean rolls. The baker in town, Marshall, always seems to be making something with the spices he trades for with the dark elves.

I half-believe he's managed to stay out of the mines almost solely because of the confections he creates in his little kitchen. I follow my nose to his small shop, the cabin radiating heat from the ovens within and enveloping me in its sweet, yeasty scent as I cross the threshold.

"I already know why you're here," Marshall calls teasingly over his shoulder, not even needing to turn around to know it's

me. This is another bit of my routine, although my trips to Marshall's bakery are far less frequent than I'd like, only happening on a weekly basis.

"Then it's a wonder you aren't more prepared," I rib back, leaning on the counter with a small smile. Marshall clucks at me as he turns around, producing a small box tied with twine and giving me a lopsided grin.

"How could I ever forget my favorite customer?" He teases as he hands me the box. I roll my eyes but give him a warm smile as I accept it, the heat radiating from the bottom of the box soothing my aching hands.

Marshall and I chat about our days as I tuck into the nimond bean roll right there in the shop, Marshall recounting an order from one of the dark elves while I stuff my face between laughs.

This gentle camaraderie is another reason I can't imagine leaving Camp Horizon- there are so few places where humans are allowed to simply be, to form relationships with one another without being punished or watched constantly.

Wiping the crumbs from my face, I reach into my pocket to produce a ticket, but Marshall is already shaking his head at me.

"No, no," he says, backing up a step. "You've repaid me with conversation, that's all I need. Save that ticket for your family."

Ah, shit. My family.

I throw an alarmed look outside the bakery to find that the sky has darkened past twilight and let out a string of curses under my breath, earning a laugh from Marshall.

"At this point, they should expect you to be late," he jokes as I hurry toward the door. I fling him a crude gesture as I rush outside, the sound of his laughter following me out into the cold night.

I pull my sweater tighter around me as I begin to trudge up the path. I'd move faster if I weren't already thinking about the

way Amara's eyes will inevitably skate over me, sizing me up and always somehow finding me lacking.

My cousin is perfect, in every way. The golden daughter, strong and smart and capable, and while I know Leandra and Jethro love me just as much as they love Amara, I can't help but still feel like an intruder sometimes.

My parents brought us to Camp Horizon right after I turned ten. At the time, they told me it was because they wanted to be closer to my father's brother, saying that it was so rare for humans to have extended family and that we should be more grateful, and find ways to spend more time with them.

Now that I'm older, I understand the real reason they fought so hard for us to get here.

The continents are a dangerous place for humans, especially human women, and even more so for the pretty ones. I've never thought of myself as particularly pretty, but I know now that what I think holds little bearing on the way things actually happen.

My parents got us out of Orthani as fast as they could, bringing us here to work the mines and escape the more cruel treatment that runs rampant in the continental cities. For the first few years, everything was perfect.

My aunt and uncle and cousin took us in, and we lived together as a family. The cabin we shared was always warm and full of laughter and conversation, even when Amara pulled my hair or took my favorite doll. I was allowed to work at the tailor's shop until I was 12, mending clothes until I was big enough and strong enough to work in the mines.

It was only a few days before my thirteenth birthday, when I was supposed to start in the mines, that the collapse happened.

To this day, I don't know what really happened. It could've been something as simple as the wrong stone being taken out, or perhaps the planet shifted deep down and the tunnel in the mountains closed because of it. I don't know. All I know is that my parents kissed me goodbye that morning before

heading into the mines, and then a few hours later, the earth swallowed them up.

The dark elves didn't even bother trying to unearth the bodies.

I shiver, only partly from the cold, as the eastern edge of the village comes into view. The path winds through the last of the shops and up a small hill, and on the other side, is my home. And the only family I have left.

Despite the fact that it's late, and knowing that my family is more than likely already worried about me, my footsteps slow to a halt. I do nothing but stare at the crest of the hill, the last stragglers of the villagers pushing past me on their way home.

It's not that I don't want to go home, at least not necessarily. My head just feels too full of thoughts to bear Amara's judgemental gaze or Leandra's lecturing on finding a husband, however well-intentioned.

Whenever Leandra mentions finding a nice, human man to settle down with, I never seem to be able to find the heart to tell her what I really think. The only thing Amara and I seem to agree on these days is our lack of interest in marrying off any time soon.

I understand why Leandra pushes the subject, of course. She wants her family to stay close, wants to be able to play a hand in mine and her daughter's life for years to come, and I can't bring myself to dash her dreams.

While I know I want more for myself than what I have right now, regardless of whether or not Camp Horizon is one of the best places to be as a human, I'm just not interested in any of the human men here.

I'm not ignorant to the sneaky glances some of them give me, both at work and in the village, but I just don't find any of these men... appealing.

Movement sounds from behind me, far enough away that I almost don't turn toward it, until the husky voice of a dark elf calls my name.

“Layla!”

Oh, shit.

KERYM

Layla whirls toward me, her dark curls bobbing with the sudden jerk of motion. I can't help the smirk that rises to my lips as I see the panicked look on her face before she realizes it's me, a laugh nearly breaking free when her features relax slightly and she rolls her eyes.

Layla steps toward me hurriedly, her eyes darting around for witnesses as she hisses "That's not funny, you scared me!"

The laugh that had been building in my throat shakes free as I look down at her and give her a wink.

"You like it," I murmur softly, earning another eye-roll, although she's unable to hide the small smile playing across her full lips. My fingers itch with the desire to brush across them, to feel her soft, tanned skin beneath my hands. I've waited long enough for her.

The rest of the village is quiet, but that's no reason to be sloppy. Before she can react, I grab the crook of her elbow and pull her into the alley behind us, pinning her to the wall with my body weight as I drop a searing kiss to her lips.

Surprise renders her unresponsive for a moment, her human senses struggling to catch up to my elven speed. As soon as her mind catches up with her body, however, her lips part beneath mine, returning my kiss with every bit of hunger and passion.

I can't get enough of her.

Layla's tongue darts from between her lips, brushing against the seam of my mouth in equal parts question and demand. I groan, opening my mouth against hers and letting our tongues tangle together.

I don't think I'll ever be able to get enough of her.

Ever since I first spotted Layla last year, I haven't been able to control myself. Dark elves take human slaves and play things all the time on the larger continents, especially in the bigger cities, but Layla is so much more than that to me.

When I first arrived at Camp Horizon, I was an eager, untried, bright-eyed soldier, intent on making his way through the ranks. Miou soldiers never stay in Camp Horizon too long, finding the camp boring and lacking any real way to move through the ranks.

Soldiers pass through here in rotations, using the camp as a stepping stone to bigger and better positions once they gain enough experience to warrant transfers to more exciting, opportunistic locations.

But the second I found Layla, I knew I wasn't going anywhere. It took nearly no time at all for me to be head over heels for the woman. I don't care that she's human, and I don't care what beliefs or opinions others of my kind hold- she's everything to me.

My ambitions within the ranks of the miou, my dreams of becoming a Lieutenant and proving my worth to my family, all feel childish as my lips move over Layla's. Nothing, no victory or rank or recognition, could compare to the way she makes me feel.

Layla breaks our kiss first, the both of us breathing heavily as we stare at each other. Her warm brown eyes twinkle in the stray spears of moonlight. It's all too easy to forget my responsibilities when I'm with her, to cast aside all of the things I know I want. In this moment, right now, I only want her.

"How was work?" I breathe, falling into our usual, playful routine. Layla loves her routines, and I love that about her. I

especially love throwing a wrench into it every now and again, especially if it means that I get more time with her.

Layla grins and gives me a playfully casual, one-shouldered shrug.

“It was work,” she responds. “How about you, how was work?” I mimic her reaction, loving the way her smile grows wider.

“It was work,” I reply. Neither of us acknowledges what we know is coming. Transfer season is on the horizon, and Layla is all too aware of the ambitions I hold so closely to my heart. They’re certainly not unusual ones, especially for guards who choose to be stationed here for at least a brief time, but my case is made all the more unusual by my family.

Phonipe and Kunardah Torsys, power couple of the decade. My father is well known for his position among the miou ranks, being an influential player in Vhoig among the nobility. My mother was his chosen prize, the beautiful and talented daughter of another strict, traditional miou family.

My older brother, their first son, is everything they’ve ever wanted him to be. The perfect soldier in shining golden armor, with his perfect mate and perfect life. He was stationed in Camp Horizon for a time as well, before leading armies and earning prestige through his victories.

My parents have always wanted me to be the same, to uphold our honorable family name. They waste no opportunity to tell me as much, to push me harder and farther, pointing out all of my numerous flaws and missed opportunities for success.

In some ways, I guess I can’t really blame them. Salnath created an expectation that I don’t know if I’ll ever live up to, and given the social expectations of my dear family, it’s no wonder that they expect only the best from me.

Too bad I’m little more than a disappointment.

With transfer season coming up, my father has sent countless karasus with messages on where I should be

transferring, what I should be doing, and the like. Just like every year since my first at Camp Horizon.

And just like every year before, I have no intention of following his orders. I won't leave Layla, I don't know that I could even if I wanted to. I'll simply have to find a way to become a lieutenant in Camp Horizon, even if it means usurping the current camp lieutenant so I can take his position.

There's only ever one lieutenant here at a time, intended to lead us and run this camp and our sister camp on Zerva, hence why no other miou have lingered here for too long. That's no problem to me, however.

Our current lieutenant is a drunk, and I have no issue with gunning for his job, no matter how long he's been in his seat. Especially if it means I can stay close to Layla without my family breathing down my neck.

Another problem with transfer season, and another problem Layla and I never speak about, is that there will be new guards entering the fray. Guards that are eager to make a name for themselves, who will keep a closer eye on things. Those who might notice the two of us sneaking off together and cause trouble.

It wouldn't be the first time a dark elf has been caught with a human, of course. It's generally accepted as part of the perks for this job by some of the more uncouth miou, but my family would take less kindly to finding out about any sort of dalliance of mine, especially with a human woman.

I can only imagine the position it would put Layla in.

I realize too late that Layla and I have just been standing in silence in the quickly dimming light. There's a certain sadness in her gaze, something distant that I can't quite put my finger on. I can't help but wonder if she's thinking of the coming transfer season, too.

"Stay the night with me," I breathe as I hold her gaze. Layla's face shutters instantly, her eyes dropping mine as they dart toward the mouth of the alleyway.

“I’m already late, my aunt and uncle are going to worry. They might even send Amara out after me,” She says, avoiding answering my question directly. She can’t bring herself to truly say no- she wants to come with me, we both know it.

“You know Amara won’t find us,” I retort, dropping my face into the warm crook of her neck and drawing my nose lightly across the sensitive skin. Layla shivers beneath my touch, her head dropping back slightly in welcome.

“We could get caught,” Layla argues, although her voice is feeble and lacking any real conviction. I graze my teeth lightly over the peak of her exposed collarbone, a purely male swell of pride blooming in my chest at the strangled noise that slips from her lips at the contact.

My obsession with Layla and the looming, ominous feeling of transfer season aren’t the only reasons I’m so intent on making room to have her to myself, although they certainly play a part. No, there’s another reason everything feels more urgent now, every stolen second feels weightier.

Layla’s 24- marrying age. Most human women tend to get married even earlier these days, their lifespans shorter and more pressing on Protheka than they ever were on their home planet. I see the way the men in the village eye her as if she’s some prize to be won, as if she could ever be anyone’s but mine.

The idea of another man with Layla, of her marrying or his hands skating across her curves, fills me with rage. I drown the feeling, unwilling to let my darker nature ruin a perfectly good moment as I withdraw from Layla’s neck and find her eyes.

“We’ve never been caught before,” I say with a grin, my voice rough with my overwhelming desire for her. Layla’s cheeks flush scarlet as her eyes dip to my lips, only making my smile grow wider. She wants me nearly as bad as I want her, a fact that will never cease to make smug satisfaction ripple through me.

“But my family-”

“I’ll send word,” I interrupt her, my hold on myself growing weaker with every passing second her little body is pressed to mine. “I’ll tell them you’ve picked up an extra shift. You’ll be safe with me, I promise.”

“I know,” Layla whispers. It’s all the permission I need as I twine my fingers between hers and tug her down the alleyway, leading us toward the dark elf quarter.

To be continued. To read more click [here!](#)