



TAVIA LARK

PRINCE
AND
BETROTHED

PERILOUS COURTS
BOOK
V

**PRINCE AND
BETROTHED**

PERILOUS COURTS BOOK FIVE

TAVIA LARK

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All characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real persons is purely coincidental.

Content Notes: This book includes violence, past emotional neglect, and mentions of the staged suicide from the previous book. It also includes magical electricity play.

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CHAPTER ONE

Sei

Nobody explains the change in plans to Sei Mallory. He only learns the plan has changed on his second morning in Draskora. That's the day Lady Naoko should have arrived to greet Sei before handing him off to the transport caravan. Instead, a frightening drasgard soldier accompanies the servant with Sei's breakfast and says Sei will be staying in the Port Avar fortress for a few more days.

That was five days ago.

Five days in this fortress guest suite—an improvement over the ship from Fellrin. At least Sei isn't heaving his guts into the waters of the Jaws anymore. But there's not much to do. There are books, but none of them are in Trade. Sei has only studied Draskoran for a year, and he's still rusty.

Sei tries not to worry about the delay. Worrying won't change anything, and stress is bad for his body. The guildmasters taught Sei that at an early age. Sei's role as a grail is to be the perfect vessel of power. Simple diet, movement, and meditation are all key to balancing his mind, body, and magic. Sei has been carefully crafted and kept pristine for his eventual mage.

He can't remember the last time someone hugged him. Anything more is out of the question. Physical intimacy creates bonds between people, and Sei should only form bonds with his claimant.

Which is why, even though Sei is nervous, he's also excited. All the guildmasters reassured him not to be afraid. So Sei tried to hide his excitement. If everyone knew how much he looked forward to this, they might take it away from him.

When Sei is properly claimed, he won't have the guild's comforting rules and structure anymore. But he'll at last be able to fulfill his true purpose. The role he's spent his entire life preparing for.

At twenty-one, Sei was one of the oldest grails in the Porcelain Guild. Most are chosen as soon as they turn eighteen, with negotiations beginning a few months ahead of that date. Sei used to think he might be defective in some way. But if Sei was defective, surely they wouldn't give him to a prince.

Prince Vana of House Dire. A storm mage, and possibly the next king of Draskora. Sei has known he was heading to Draskora for a year, since he was assigned to learn the language. But only a week before he left on the ship did they tell him who would claim him. Prince Vana will be a relief—even though the guildmasters carefully vet prospective claimants, Sei still worried about the cruel blood mages said to wander Draskora's wilderness.

By all accounts, Prince Vana is at least civilized. Hopefully he'll find Sei useful and pleasing.

Sei has never considered himself particularly ugly or attractive. Appearance is important in the guild, but not in those terms. Grails should be blank slates, ready to be decorated however their mage prefers. Sei is short for a man, but not extremely so. Neither obviously muscular nor obviously soft, trained for balance and flexibility.

He's ordinary, except for the magic he can't even feel. That will have to be enough for Sei's foreign prince.

Soon, Sei tells himself the morning of the fifth day. He leans on the balcony railing. Salty air ruffles through his silky black hair. His hairstyle is one of the few things he's allowed to choose—no piercings, no tattoos, no colored dye—and it's currently cropped at a sharp angle just below his jaw. His equally sharp bangs hit his brow when the ocean wind doesn't blow them astray.

Port Avar's courtyard is cavernous and open. So much space would be a luxury where Sei comes from, repurposed as

barracks or even civilian housing. Sei's guest room is three stories up, and the soldiers milling about seem very small. Most of the movement surrounds a wagon across the courtyard. As Sei watches, black-clad drasgard begin escorting boxy, covered wheelbarrows towards the wagon.

A woman in a fancier uniform stops one barrow in three to inspect them. When she lifts the coverings, the flash of shimmering purple is clear even from Sei's distance.

Scalestone.

The almost-mythical ore is the reason Sei is here. He chews his lip, then stops himself before he mars the skin. How much scalestone is he worth? He hasn't dared ask, unsure whether the answer will seem too much or too little compared to his life.

He's worth quite a lot, judging by the number of wheelbarrows.

Behind Sei, the door bangs open. Sei startles away from the balcony, whirling to find his guildmaster escort and a squad of four drasgard. The drasgard soldiers are all very intimidating, with their weapons and purple eyes and unnatural hair.

"Good morning, Guildmaster," Sei says politely. He should wait for a greeting in turn, but he can't help being impertinent and asking, "What's going on?"

Because the drasgard are fanning out to pack Sei's belongings in leather carry-sacks. Sei doesn't mind them going through his things—it's mostly just clothes, all bought new for the journey. Nothing personal. But he hadn't realized it was time to leave.

The guildmaster is an elderly woman charged with security rather than instruction. Sei rarely met her before this journey. Her deeply lined face is unreadable. "Your escort to Ostomar is arriving. I won't be able to accompany you, so this is where we part."

"Wait, you're not coming with me?" Sei asks, then cringes. Stupid, asking a question the guildmaster just answered. Sei is

supposed to be clever, insightful, and intuitive. Not bothersome.

The guildmaster truly isn't an instructor; she doesn't chastise him for the stupid question. "You're no longer under the guild's protection. Remember your training and your calling, Sei Mallory. The guild and all of Fellrin are very proud of you."

Sei suppresses his alarm with a deep, steadying breath. He bows. "Thank you, Guildmaster."

A drasgard steps between them, a stuffed leather bag over her shoulder. "Your guildmaster will send the rest via caravan. Is there anything else you need immediately?"

Sei looks around the room. They've gathered up half his clothes, and all the brushes and toiletries from the water counter. "No, the rest can wait. Thank you."

The drasgard nods. "Follow me."

The other drasgard fall in around them, so Sei barely sees the dark stone hallways. Nobody gets close enough to touch Sei, and they're clearly escorting him. Guarding him. Yet Sei still feels hastened. Like if he slows down, they'll shove him forward.

Don't invent trouble, Sei scolds himself. This is exactly what he wanted: progress. To be released from the limbo of this unfriendly fortress.

"Excuse me, sir," Sei asks as they reach the cavernous main hall. "Do you know why my departure was delayed?"

The lead drasgard looks back at him, a frown on her face. "If I knew, I'm sure I couldn't tell you."

"That's too bad." Sei gives her a small smile. "Thank you regardless."

She seems surprised, like she'd been braced for an argument. "I'm sure you'll get an explanation soon. It's been fucking chaos around here."

In the courtyard, the lead drasgard ushers Sei to a patch of shade. He appreciates not squinting in the sunlight, but the

breeze is colder than it felt from his balcony. Once the caravan is underway, Sei plans to change his light coat for a warmer one from the bags. He can do that on the journey. No need to unpack everything in the courtyard dust.

Their spot in the shade is far from the main gate, but Sei will still have a good view of the escort caravan when it arrives. Except nobody else is looking towards the main gate. Everyone's gazes are fixed overhead.

Sei's heart catches in his throat when he looks up too.

He's never seen dragons before, but there's no mistaking the three dark shapes winging across the blue-gray sky. Barrel chests and sturdy, snakelike necks, with sinuous tails trailing behind them. Bat-like wings slice through the air.

Only their shapes are apparent at first, until the trio circles close and their vibrant scales catch the sunlight. The smallest is black with vivid green mottling its flanks and wings. Another is burnt orange and yellow, warm as an ember. The largest dragon leads the trio—varied shades of dark blue, glossy and nearly iridescent. Sei barely glimpses the harness straps around their shoulders before blue wings spread wide enough to block out the sun, and shadows blanket the courtyard.

This is why the courtyard is so large.

Sei throws up his arm as dust whips along the walls. But he can't resist squinting between his fingers as the massive blue dragon alights in the center of the courtyard. The orange dragon lands beyond, and the black and green dragon remains high overhead.

As the wind settles, the blue dragon retracts their wings. Their neck curves like a swan's, wedge-shaped head pivoting to survey the entire courtyard. Glossy dark horns give way to blunt spikes along the ridge of their spine, down to where the dragonrider sits at their shoulders.

Sei is more interested in the dragon, since he's seen humans plenty before. Until the rider sits back in his harness and pulls the helm from his head. What little sunlight escapes

the clouds seems to coalesce around him, illuminating the shake of his dark blue hair.

Then the clouds deepen, and the sunlight vanishes. The dragonrider is just an ordinary man, unbuckling himself from the harness.

“This way,” the drasgard next to Sei says.

Heart still pounding and legs barely wobbling in awe, Sei follows as bidden. This can’t be his escort, right? Surely nobody expects Sei to ride a dragon.

A commotion rises across the courtyard. Two people have descended from the orange dragon, and one attempts to move towards Sei. The other person marches her instead to the scalestone wagon. Sharp voices collide, then fall quiet.

The blue dragon’s rider pauses halfway out of his harness. Then he slides to the ground and pats his dragon’s elbow, before striding over. Sei is once again dumbstruck by the sight of this man. He’s even more impressive up close. His wyrmskin jacket accentuates the breadth of his shoulders, and in that moment, the rider exudes such raw, casual strength, he’s as much a creature of legend as the dragon he rides.

He’s also tall. Exceptionally tall.

“Sei Mallory?” the rider asks.

This close, every detail of the rider’s face is entrancing. A short, dark beard outlines his rugged jaw. He would probably be paler than Sei without his weathered tan. His eyes are deep purple, nearly black except when the light catches them.

“Yes,” Sei answers, hoping his astonishment doesn’t show on his face.

He only notices the nearby drasgard saluting when the rider nods. “I’m Marek Dire. Is that your luggage?”

Sei blanks out for a moment. He knows that name—Marek Stormrider, Second Prince of Draskora. The younger brother of Sei’s soon-to-be betrothed. Sei should be saluting. Or bowing. Certainly not admiring.

“Yes,” Sei manages again.

Before Sei can decide whether to bow, Marek takes one of the bags. Then the other. “Great. Get on the dragon—we’re due in Ostomar tonight.”

Both bags slung over his shoulder, Marek grabs Sei’s arm and urges him forward.

Sei jumps at the touch, and heat prickles up his arm. Not rough, just unexpected. Nobody ever touches him.

“Farewell and thank you!” Sei calls to his drasgard escort.

Again flummoxed by basic courtesy, the drasgard waves awkwardly.

Then Sei forgets everything, even the strangeness of Marek’s hand on his arm, when he faces the dragon.

The immense scaled head swings around far too quickly. Sei yelps to find himself within arm’s reach of the pointed snout. The dragon’s skull is as large as Marek himself.

Hot breath blows Sei’s hair back.

“Sei Mallory, meet Loska.” Marek sounds more amused than anything else. His hand shifts to a more supportive angle behind Sei’s shoulder. “Loska, meet Sei.”

Any polite greeting sticks in Sei’s throat. Loska could snap both of them in half without even blinking. Though perhaps Marek’s bigger bones would stick in his throat.

A cool, rumbling voice slides into Sei’s head. *Hello, tiny human. Do you know anything about courtship?*

Sei’s mouth drops open. “I beg your pardon?”

“If he does, it’ll be about humans, not dragons.” Marek flicks Loska’s nose, which has no discernible impact. “We’ll strategize your way to Malyra’s heart another time, buddy.”

Very well. I will ponder as we fly.

“Don’t ask,” Marek says, though Sei is still too stunned to ask anything. “You haven’t ridden a dragon before, right?”

Sei shakes his head wordlessly.

Marek pulls Sei towards Loska's side. "Don't worry. It's just like riding a horse, except completely different."

"I haven't done that either," Sei says. Marek must not hear him, though, because Marek's already clambering up Loska's harness to strap Sei's luggage in place.

Watching Marek's strong, sure hands buckle everything down finally hammers into Sei's head that he's going to be strapped down just like that. Those leather straps will be the only things keeping Sei from a very messy death.

Marek descends and holds up a leather-wrapped helmet. "Put this on—never mind, I'll do it."

Sei can only stand still as Marek draws near enough to blot out the sun. The scent of leather, musk, and sky surrounds Sei.

Marek first tucks Sei's hair behind his ears, seemingly unaware of Sei's heart pounding at the touch. Then Marek settles the helmet over Sei's head. It's lightweight and doesn't fit quite right until Marek pulls some strap on the edge. When the inner lining fits better around Sei's skull, Marek fastens the buckle beneath Sei's chin.

His callused hands move so confidently against Sei's throat. Nobody ever told Marek that he shouldn't touch a grail that doesn't belong to him. Sei can't bring himself to protest. He could dream about those hands if he weren't so scared.

No. Terror is unseemly. Panic is impolite. Sei counts his breaths, and hopefully manages to stay calm when Marek urges him up the dragon. The climb is easier than Sei expects, but he's still slower than Marek.

Once he's up, Marek has Sei sit at the base of Loska's neck, at the front of the saddle. The dragon's scales are warm and smooth. Sei braces his palms against Loska's shoulders, trying not to think how much he feels like another piece of luggage as Marek straps him down.

Except the luggage doesn't have Marek Dire sliding into place behind it, wrapping around it in an intimate embrace.

"Relax," Marek says against Sei's ear, which has the precise opposite effect. "Are you ready?"

Sei doesn't have a chance to reply before Loska rocks back on his haunches, throwing Sei against Marek's broad chest. Then they launch skyward.



CHAPTER TWO

Marek

Marek braces himself. Not for flight—his body moves instinctively with Loska's upward surge, bending closer to the dragon's shoulders to create a more streamlined shape. The trick is to be ready but relaxed. Marek's body sinks against the straps, most of the weight on his thighs. Air rushes past, stinging every bare bit of skin in a welcome bite.

No, Marek has launched with Loska thousands of times over the past twelve years. Sometimes he feels like he spends more time in the sky than on the ground. But he has a novice aboard today, so what Marek braces himself for is the screaming.

Better than Marek expected. There's barely an instant of ear-piercing terror before Sei's scream cuts off in a strangled whimper.

The young man doesn't relax like Marek advised, but that's normal for a first-timer. Sei falls back against Marek, only Marek's body and the harness keeping him in place. The impact doesn't affect Marek. Sei is exactly as light as he looks.

Quiet, too. There's another rough adjustment as Loska reaches the height he wants and snaps his wings out to catch the air. Sei's only reaction is another choked gasp, and tensing beneath Marek's body.

Better than most fresh recruits. Marek actually got pissed on once while taking a new rider up on a practice ride. Hilarious, but the recruit was so mortified about pissing on the wing-marshal that Marek stopped training the first-month recruits after that.

Sei's quiet restraint will either be perfect for Vana or absolutely disastrous. Marek can just imagine Vana and Sei

sitting at breakfast together, every word polite and every gesture precise.

Perfect. Just as soon as they *find* Vana.

Marek's frustration with Vana burns all the hotter because this is partly Marek's own damn fault too. He helped Vana disappear in the first place. Marek had known Vana was up to something illicit. He'd just naively expected Vana to come back afterwards.

Vana had never asked Marek for a favor before. As a brother, however fraught their adoptive relationship, how could Marek refuse?

But apparently helping Vana was an even worse decision than Marek expected. Marek had returned to a palace in shambles. A dead count, a dead servant, and a panicking ambassador. King Imrik was the angriest Marek had ever seen his father.

This new, royally approved errand is a relief. Marek would much rather be returning north to his usual post, but fetching Vana's claim-to-be is better than sticking around the chaos of Ostomar right now. Plus, given the circumstances and his passenger's identity, Marek wouldn't trust anyone else with the task.

Send a helpless grail across Draskora with a lightly guarded caravan? A breathtaking strategic failure.

Hopefully by the time they return to Ostomar, Vana will be located, and everything will calm down. Marek will deliver Sei to be betrothed, then fuck off north again with Loska. Electrocuting a few wraiths will improve Marek's mood.

At least Marek can enjoy the flight for now. It would be better without a passenger, but this is still where Marek belongs: in the open sky, his dragon beneath him, at one with the elements.

"How are you?" Marek asks over the rushing air.

Sei answers too quietly.

"Can't hear you."

“Sorry, Your Highness. I just said I’m fine.” Sei sounds more miserable than fine. “Please let me know if I’m doing anything wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

Sei turns, his leather helm sliding against Marek’s chest. “I don’t want to move wrong and interfere with Loska or anything.”

“You’re fine,” Marek answers. “Don’t worry about Loska.”

The dragon’s reply rumbles through Marek’s head. By the mental feel of his voice, the words are for Marek alone. *Really? Don’t worry about Loska.*

Marek rolls his eyes. *Which big blue dragon was just bragging about how many, many people he can carry?*

Loska is silent for a moment. *I can’t recall.*

Dragonbond abilities vary slightly from rider to rider. Marek can mentally convey complete sentences, though he usually prefers to speak out loud and let Loska pick up the thoughts beneath. Telepathy is difficult.

Sei weighs less than the luggage, Marek tells his dragon. But let me know if he’s too big a burden for your delicate bones.

A few wingbeats later, Loska retorts loftily, *Even so. Tell him not to wiggle so much.*

Marek tells Sei no such thing. Because Sei hasn’t wiggled at all, remaining tense and still beneath Marek in the harness.

Passengers are easier to ignore when they ride behind, but putting smaller novices in front is safer. Marek had taken one look at Sei, windswept in the Port Avar courtyard, and decided to put him in the front seat of the two-man harness. Too strong a wind might blow the grail away.

The first few hours of their flight are quiet. Sei seems disinclined to talk, so Marek chats silently with Loska as usual. It’s almost a normal flight, except for Sei’s tense body pressed beneath him.

Sei probably doesn't have the stomach for a midair meal, so around noon, Marek directs Loska downwards. He taps Sei's shoulder to get his attention. "Hold tight. We're landing for a break."

Sei's knuckles visibly whiten on the handles. Very obedient.

A craggy cliffside rises below them, striated black and ochre. It's the southernmost branch of the Nostic canyon, just out of House Komar's territory. Dark green trees, nearly blue, sway along the clifftop, except for the semicircle Loska angles towards. The clearing is home to only bushes and fragile saplings, unaware of their imminent flattening.

The descent is as gentle as Loska can manage. Sei hisses something inaudible as they jerk to a halt, but doesn't scream again. Foliage crunches under Loska's feet, then again at an unnecessary sweep of his tail.

This particular clifftop is a frequent dragon corps stop. The region is too wyrm-ridden for most travelers, but the wyrms don't bother them with dragons around.

Marek hooks both helmets on the harness, then helps Sei down. Which goes smoothly enough until they reach the ground, where Sei's knees finally buckle.

Catching Sei is easy since Marek expected him to stumble. Marek didn't expect the way Sei leans against him for a moment, or the softness of Sei's breath through Marek's shirt.

"I'm so sorry." Sei tries to step back and wobbles again—but stays upright thanks to Marek's hand on his elbow.

"Walk around," Marek advises. "You probably want to sit, but you'll thank yourself for walking a few laps around the clearing first."

"Thank you, Your Highness." After a deliberate, deep breath, Sei steadies on his feet. Marek has no reason to hold him anymore, so he lets go.

Loska cranes his neck around, then slowly extends his head towards a treetop. Probably trying to watch a nest of

birds without scaring them off. Sitting on a nearby tree stump, Marek watches Sei's slow circuit of the clearing.

Sei's heavy coat obscures most of his slim figure, but not the softness of his face. His hair is mussed from the helmet, no longer as precisely perfect as when Marek first saw him. A flush crests his smooth, tawny cheekbones.

Hope he's pretty, Marek had told Vana when their father announced the betrothal. Sei Mallory is certainly that, and he's even prettier all tossed around from a dragon ride.

But Sei wasn't chosen for a royal betrothal because he's pretty. Supposedly, he's one of the best grails trained in Fellrin in the past fifty years. Marek doesn't know exactly how grails are ranked—raw power? There's no institution like the Porcelain Guild in Draskora. A special school for grails would be a great blazing target for abductions.

If Imrik just wanted a grail for Vana, he could have found one easily. What makes this delicate young man worth half a ton of scalestone? Not to mention the complete reversal of Draskoran foreign policy?

Sei stops. "Why are you sitting, Your Highness?"

"I've been riding Loska since you were born," Marek says easily. "My legs don't turn to jelly anymore."

Sei's eyes narrow. "I know you're only twenty-five."

"And you are?"

"Twenty-one," Sei answers.

Marek forgets whether he knew that already or not. Sei looks young for twenty-one—but then, Marek's social circle consists of wind-scoured dragonriders.

There's something else Marek definitely forgot, and he remembers with a pang of guilt. "Hey, I'm sorry about the commotion back at the fortress."

Sei braces himself against a tree. "What commotion, Your Highness?"

“Given everything that’s happened, His Majesty forbade Lady Naoko from talking to you before the betrothal.” Marek winces inside. The decision was strategically sound, but still cruel to deny Sei a last conversation with his mother at the border.

Sei tilts his head. “Was that Naoko across the courtyard?”

Marek nods.

“I hadn’t recognized her from that distance.” Sei shrugs his coat closer. “That’s probably for the best, Your Highness. I haven’t seen Lady Naoko in two years, and conversation with her is always awkward.”

Marek has a complicated relationship with his own parents, sure. Imrik is his king as well as his father, and Queen Aliza has always preferred her son by blood over Marek and Vana.

But Sei’s detachment is so casual, Marek isn’t sure how to reply.

He doesn’t have to; Sei continues. “Excuse me, Your Highness, I don’t know if this is my place to ask. But what do you mean by ‘everything that’s happened’?” Sei gestures around the clearing. “Why am I here, instead of the caravan they told me about? Why was I delayed so long at Port Avar?”

For fuck’s sake.

“Are you kidding?” Marek demands, then sighs when Sei flinches. “I can’t believe nobody told you. One second, have some water.”

He climbs halfway up Loska’s side to grab a waterskin, then hands it to Sei. Waiting for Sei to take a sip gives Marek time to muster the least alarming explanation possible. Fuck, Marek is not the right person for this. But he’s the only person here besides Loska, who’s preoccupied with the bird nest.

“Everything will be fine,” Marek begins. His attempted reassurance clearly fails by the way Sei’s eyes widen. “One of Naoko’s entourage was discovered dead in Ostomar.” *In your new betrothed’s bedroom*, Marek doesn’t add. He hasn’t seen the body. Nobody besides the king’s drasgard has. “The

drasgard are investigating, but Lady Naoko threatened to call off the trade agreement. Which she doesn't have the power to do, now that it's signed. There was still a delay, so King Imrik sent me to fetch you more quickly than the caravan would travel."

Sei's eyes are still wide. "Thank you for explaining."

Marek should probably say the rest, though it will only worry Sei more. "Also, Prince Vana left on an unexpected trip. He might be back by the time we reach Ostomar, but he might not."

Marek tries to read Sei's expression, but he's closed off again. No trace of worry or disappointment. Just a polite smile. "Thank you again, Your Highness. I appreciate the information. The drasgard have been taciturn."

"Yeah, they don't talk much." Marek takes the waterskin back from Sei. He swigs from it on reflex. Flying is a thirsty exercise, even though Marek's used to it. "I'm going to check the harness. We should take off in a few minutes."

"I'll be ready, Your Highness," Sei says politely. Like he says everything.

Marek climbs back up Loska's side to triple-check every strap and buckle. *Anything in the nest?*

The mother bird has returned. She was frightened by my landing. The eggs weren't frightened, because they're eggs. Loska sighs, more a rumble beneath Marek than a sound. *You are disturbed.*

I feel like I'm leading a lamb to the slaughter, Marek admits in his head. Because Sei might be perfect for Vana—but Marek's not sure Vana's up to the task of protecting Sei from Ostomar's politics. Or the rest of Draskora.

That's not Marek's problem, though. It can't be. Fuck, he's going to be glad when Sei isn't his responsibility anymore. With a sigh, he swings around to call Sei over—

But Sei is nowhere in sight.



CHAPTER THREE

Sei

Sei just needs a minute to think. Hugging himself in the chilly forest, he stares blankly at the twists and gnarls of the tree in front of him. Marek's information is just as chilling as the unfamiliar forest, because Marek is clearly underplaying the situation.

Which is insane, because what Marek actually said is bad enough. One of Naoko's attendants is dead? Prince Vana is on vacation? Or an errand? A secret and terrible royal mission?

Closing his eyes, Sei counts his breaths until his nerves settle. There's no use worrying. Sei can't change any of this—and he's not supposed to.

His purpose is to serve. Not to choose or decide anything. This just hammers that fact home even more. Sei follows the plans determined for him, and everything will be fine. As a grail from the Porcelain Guild, Sei is very valuable. The instructors have always told him that. House Dire will surely take care of their investment.

Sei will be relieved when he's back in civilization. Marek is nice but intimidating. Hopefully Osric will still be in Ostomar when Sei gets there. He'd like to say goodbye.

Sei? calls a voice.

“Yes?” Sei answers, whirling around before realizing the voice is Loska in his head.

Marek appears from behind a tree, his face dark. “Don't wander off,” he snaps, seizing Sei's arm. His grip is rougher than before, and Sei stumbles trying to keep up.

“I'm sorry, Your Highness,” Sei stammers. “I was just looking around.”

“Well, don’t,” Marek orders, half-dragging Sei back towards the clearing. Leaves crackle beneath their boots. “You can’t wander off without a guard, understand?”

“I understand, Your Highness.”

Clearly unsatisfied, Marek continues lecturing as Loska peers down at them. “Vana hasn’t officially claimed you yet, but you’re in House Dire’s custody. You *cannot* wander off without a guard.”

Wait. Sei stumbles over a tree root. Is Marek worried about betrothal etiquette, of all things?

“That’s just a formality,” Sei protests. “You don’t actually have to guard me until the wedding.”

Marek stops short and grabs both of Sei’s shoulders. The pressure of his broad hands heats through Sei’s very bones. But it’s the scowl in Marek’s dark purple eyes that holds Sei in place.

“Claiming traditions are *not* just a formality here,” Marek says, quieter now but deadly serious. “Counterclaim abductions are rare, but they still happen. You’re a high-profile grail. Every power-hungry mage in the country will be watching, wondering if they can get away with stealing you. So don’t make it so fucking easy on them, all right?”

Shock holds Sei still. Marek’s words echo every horrible rumor Sei has ever heard about Draskora. But the guildmasters said Sei would be safe. They even sent Naoko to negotiate the agreement with Sei’s well-being in mind, though Sei barely knows his mother. Sei doesn’t know what Naoko’s priorities might have been.

At least Sei can draw comfort from cynicism. If Draskora is full of power-hungry mages, the most powerful of them already sits upon the scalestone throne.

“Would they dare cross House Dire?” Sei asks.

“They shouldn’t, if they know what’s good for them.” Marek releases Sei’s shoulders with a final pat. Straightening up gives Sei space, but only emphasizes Marek’s greater height. “But magic gets to some people. There are some very

powerful idiots out there. Even if they failed, you could get hurt in the attempt.”

The enormity of Sei’s predicament slams into him. He wishes Marek would grab him again, so the novelty of touch could distract him from his own powerlessness. Sei is completely dependent on the strangers toying with his fate.

Why couldn’t he be claimed by an ordinary mage in Fellrin?

Sei recovers his composure. Best not to annoy the royal mage flying him across the country. “I understand, Your Highness. I apologize. I won’t wander alone again.”

Marek waves towards Loska. “Come on, let’s chase some clouds.”

Taking off is just as terrifying the second time, but knowing what to expect helps. Sei doesn’t even scream this time. Momentum throws him back against Marek, who scarcely budes in the harness—unmoved by the launch and Sei’s weight alike.

The flight is quiet, save for Loska’s wingbeats. If Marek and Loska communicate at all, it must be telepathically. Sei doesn’t know exactly how the dragon bond works—nobody does, outside Draskora. Except maybe Silaisans, now. From Sei’s perspective, Marek and Loska move as a seamless unit.

Marek seems content to ignore Sei, leaving him alone to fend off his nerves. Warmth surrounds Sei from Loska’s furnace of a chest and Marek behind him.

Yet most of the heat comes from Sei’s own awareness. He can’t recall the last time he pressed so long against another person. He can’t tell if he despises or craves it.

Each break throughout the day, Sei struggles more to walk around. His entire body aches from being bound in the same position for hours on end. It will be worse tomorrow, he’s sure.

But Marek is right that walking helps once Sei forces himself to move.

Marek also offers him food, and Sei chokes down a few pieces of travelbread. Exhaustion tugs the edge of his vision. Except every time his eyes close, another wingbeat jars him awake again.

The ordeal lasts into the evening, until Marek says, “That’s Ostomar.”

As Loska angles into a wide circle, the palace and city are visible past the dragon’s blue-scaled shoulder. From this height, the palace looks like a jagged crown above the sprawling city. Black spires and violet banners. A number of smaller satellite castles huddle within the great outer wall. One tower on the outskirts appears scorched, the windows broken on the top two floors.

On any other day, Sei would be amazed by the sight. Now he just wants to roll off the dragon into bed.

Loska circles around the palace to a broad, dark courtyard. The outer edge drops off a cliff above the mist-shrouded valley below.

“Great, a welcome committee,” Marek mutters in Sei’s ear. Sei can’t tell whether he’s being sarcastic or not, or whether he’s talking to Sei or himself. It doesn’t matter, because the rush of Loska’s descent robs Sei of any breath to answer.

Loska touches down near the drop-off, claws scratching into the stone floor. His wings settle along his back, and his tail swishes—but not as dramatic a swish as during their rest stops along the way.

Sei doesn’t have a chance to feel relieved the flight is over. Because as Marek sets to work freeing them from the harness, Sei eyes the welcome committee with dismay. Even from this distance, the small crowd looks far too finely dressed to be the servants Sei had hoped for.

Disheveled and tired, his hair and clothes a mess from the day-long flight, this isn’t how Sei wanted to meet House Dire. He must look like a wreck, and he’s so tired he’s likely to say

the wrong thing. The last thing he wants is to make a lasting, offensive first impression on the ruling family.

You're supposed to be a grail, not a filth-covered rat, a guildmaster once said, when Sei came in wet and tracking mud from wandering the garden in the rain. He was nine years old at the time, but he can still hear the guildmaster's precise, disgusted intonation.

Handing his helmet to Marek, Sei steels himself for humiliation.

"Don't move," Marek orders, fumbling in a saddlebag. He presses a small wooden comb into Sei's hands. "You're a mess. Fix your hair while I bring your things down."

Sei must truly be exhausted because he nearly cries with gratitude. His throat is too tight to actually thank Marek. As he combs his hair, Sei tries to compose himself. There's no helping his rumpled clothing, but he feels more confident when Marek finally helps him down to the dark flagstone.

Marek's hand lingers on Sei's arm for an extra moment. When Sei doesn't fall on his face, Marek lets go, giving him space to breathe again.

The stone is gouged and chipped, more ragged towards the edge and smoother as it stretches towards the palace entrance. Sei has to hurry to keep up with Marek's long stride. "Would you mind telling me who everyone is, Your Highness?"

"King Imrik's the one with the crown," Marek says. "Queen Aliza's the one with red hair and a smaller crown. Prince Kazia is the grumpy little rat."

There are more than three people gathered, but they're close enough to be overheard now—Sei will have to learn their names later.

All thoughts of the welcome committee vanish when Sei notices a familiar crimson shape pacing back and forth. Pure joy lights through Sei's exhaustion.

"Osruc!"

At Sei's voice, Osric bounds towards him. Six hundred pounds of muscle and fang might seem intimidating to some. But when Osric skids to a halt, Sei forgets all his dignity and drops to his knees. Flinging his arms around Osric's neck, Sei buries his face in the white and crimson fur.

"It's so good to see you," Sei mumbles into the fluff.

Don't hug me, silly boy, Osric scolds, though he makes no move to pull away. His chin nuzzles Sei's shoulder. *You'll get fur all over.*

"My clothes are ruined anyway. I'm so glad you're still here."

Of course I'm still here. I'm not going anywhere. This place is terrible. Somebody needs to supervise you.

"You're staying?" Sei asks, hoping he hasn't misheard.

Obviously. Look at you. This is ridiculous. What are these idiots thinking? I insist you take a nap as soon as you're done meeting this king and such.

The warmhearted scolding washes over Sei like a soothing balm. Osric is a fellcat—a species of large cat similar to tigers except for their magic and wider color variety. He's also the closest thing Sei ever had to a family in the Porcelain Guild.

Sei was given to the guild younger than most children, and after he left the nursery, the instructors were always instructors first and foremost. Naoko's visits were rare and terribly awkward. She clearly feels some connection towards Sei as his mother—but it's not something Sei can ever reciprocate. He doesn't hate her. He just doesn't know her.

Have emotions into my fur later, Osric advises. *You should probably get up and bow, or some other human gesture.*

Right. Time to meet his new family—the ruling house of Draskora.

Sei straightens to his feet, attempting to brush the fellcat fur from his clothes. Ten paces from the small crowd, he stops and bows. His hair falls in his face, so he can't see whoever approaches with steady footsteps.

“We’re glad for your arrival, Sei Mallory,” a man says, drawing closer. “Please rise.”

Sei obeys. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Does the crown give it away?” King Imrik asks, humor warming his stern visage.

Imrik isn’t Marek’s father by blood, but the first thing Sei notices about him is a similar sense of presence. This is a man who knows himself, who takes up space with confidence. His face is nearly sickly pale, and silver streaks his black hair, but in every other regard, he looks healthy and younger than his years. The white gold and scalestone crown doesn’t weigh him down at all.

Behind him must be Queen Aliza, her peachy complexion dusted with gold powder. A diamond circlet sits in her dark red hair. She regards Sei with curiosity, in strange contrast with the young man standing next to her. Marek’s description of Kazia Dire as a grumpy little rat is uncharitable but fitting.

No, grumpy might be an understatement. The young prince’s lavender eyes fix on Sei with frightening intensity. The word *poisonous* comes to mind, and Sei returns his attention to the king in case eye contact angers Kazia even more.

Sei has never met such unabashed hatred from a stranger. Why would Kazia despise him so much when they’ve never met?

Perhaps Kazia is just like that with everyone.

Wingbeats hammer as Loska drops off the cliff edge and soars away. Marek hands Sei’s bags to a servant, then joins everyone.

“How was the flight, Marek?” Imrik asks.

Marek stops at Sei’s side—nowhere near close enough to touch, but Sei is still too aware of his presence. “No complications, Father. Has Vana...”

He trails off.

“No, Vana hasn’t returned.” Imrik’s glare is for Marek alone, but the air crackles around them all. “Your brother has fled Draskora, abandoning both house and country.”

Sei reels in place.

What does that mean? Vana is supposed to claim Sei in marriage. That’s the plan. That’s Sei’s purpose. If Vana is gone, what happens to Sei in this frightening foreign land?

“Fled?” Marek sounds just as shaken. “That isn’t like Vana. What about the treaty?”

“The treaty remains,” Imrik says. “The scalestone has been loaded onto the Fellrian ship. As for the grail, that’s simple enough. You’re still unmarried, so you’ll claim Sei Mallory in your brother’s place.”

Sei is so stunned, he would topple over if not for Osric pressed against his hip. He sinks one hand into Osric’s plush shoulders for balance. He must have misheard—

Except for Marek’s explosive, “What the fuck?”



CHAPTER FOUR

Marek

Marek must have misheard. Or perhaps Imrik is making a joke—improbable. Or a mistake—even more improbable. The notion of marrying Sei is so absurd, Marek can't even muster counterarguments beyond *obviously not*.

An arranged marriage is one thing. Marek always half-expected Imrik to marry him off. That would be fine. But to a grail? Marek was born in the remote foothills of Helra, where warrior-mages never use grails. Relying on another's power is a mark of weakness, as if one isn't sufficient in oneself.

Marek could resign himself to that. Twelve years with a dragonbond have accustomed him to teamwork. But that's hardly the worst problem with this proposed marriage.

Imrik stands impassive, more like a mountain than a storm. He's a king now, not just a father. He's Marek's commander, and he expects obedience.

Time to disappoint Marek's father and commander in one. "I can't marry him."

The gathered crowd falls dead silent. The handful of drasgard wear helms concealing their expressions, and the servants have already retreated with Sei's belongings. Queen Aliza is unusually interested in the proceedings. At her side, Kazia is as stone-faced as his father—except he's made of sharp quartz instead of Imrik's impassive granite.

How was Vana so calm when Imrik announced this marriage to him? That day at lunch, Vana showed only the slightest hint of surprise before his face closed off. Now Marek knows exactly how great an achievement that was—hardly a flicker of emotion at the abrupt change in his life.

Just like Vana, Imrik's expression doesn't change. "If you're already secretly wed or some other nonsense, that can be easily handled."

By annulling the marriage, or killing Marek's secret spouse? Hopefully Imrik means the former—no, it doesn't matter. Marek doesn't have a secret spouse. That isn't the point.

"You don't need me to keep the treaty," Marek says. "Go dig up a cousin to marry him instead. I'm a dragonrider, and the wraiths are getting bad up north. I can't stay home and take care of a household."

"I'm well aware of your position, Wing-Marshal," Imrik says. "Which perhaps makes you a better choice than Vana would have been. Surely the grail's power will prove useful to you."

The air crackles at the edge of Marek's awareness. His own anger or Imrik's. This isn't a conversation they should have in public, but Marek already lost control with his first outburst. He needs to finish this before it's too late.

"Your Majesty, there's a reason the dragon corps doesn't use grails."

Imrik waves his hand. "Because most dragonriders are soldiers first and mages second. You have the control and strength to use him."

Control? Strength?

"That's why I don't need a fucking grail to do my job," Marek snaps—far too loudly.

Everything falls silent in the echoes of his voice. Sei takes half a step back, unable to hide his dismay behind a cheerful mask. His hand tightens in the fur of Osric's supportive shoulder. The exhausted young man is *afraid* of Marek. As well he should be. Marek is the worst possible claimant for him.

But Marek can't worry about Sei now, because he's faced with a furious king. Imrik's expression says Marek has gone

too far. Marek steps back and bows low. “Your Majesty, I apologize for my outburst.”

Imrik is silent for a long moment, the air volatile between them. “I will excuse your impertinence this once,” Imrik says at last. “The treaty is signed, Prince Marek, and my word is final.”

“I understand, Your Majesty,” Marek says, straightening.

His mind races. Marek needs to take a page from Vana’s book and control himself. Imrik is angry about Vana’s departure already, so now is the worst time to push him. Marek needs time. If he can delay the betrothal until Imrik calms down, maybe Imrik will agree that one of the cousins would be a better claimant for Sei.

“Let’s discuss this tomorrow and pick a date for the betrothal,” Marek says.

Imrik smiles at that—not a good sign. “No need. I’ve already chosen a date to sign the contract. The twenty-third of Raya.”

Marek freezes. “That’s today.”

“Yes, that’s today, and the hour is now, before your new claim falls asleep on his feet.” Imrik turns towards the palace in a sweep of his black and silver cloak.

It’s probably a good thing Loska already took off. If Loska was still in the courtyard, Marek might not have kept himself from retreating in flight. Instead, he moves mechanically in Imrik’s wake, without a glance at his mother, brother, or unwanted claim-to-be.

As the dark pillars and tapestries of Ostomar rise around him, Marek tries to think of how to get out of this. He has a knack for strategy, for figuring out his opponent. Even if his opponent is the king himself, Marek doesn’t believe in impossible fights.

What’s impossible is this betrothal. This marriage. Does Imrik truly expect Marek to use Sei as a grail? The idea gets worse the more Marek thinks about it.

There's a reason the dragon corps doesn't use grails. The dragonbond is complex, natural magic. As powerful and impactful as the inheritance spell—but there's no ritual. No effort. Just an instinctive connection between Draskora's two most dangerous predators.

Dragons are both social creatures and viciously competitive. The bond gives them balance and support during their volatile youths. Dragons also have inherent passive magic. Fueled by scalestone, that magic is what allows them to fly and breathe fire.

The bond strengthens dragon magic. If the rider is a mage, their magic is strengthened too. Some non-mage riders even discover minor latent abilities after bonding.

There's no closing a dragonbond once it forms. Which means that if a dragonbound mage pulls power from a grail, if the mage isn't careful, that power is pulled through the rider into the dragon too. With both dragon and rider pulling on the grail's power reserves, they risk burning the grail out and leaving them a crippled husk—at best.

The mage must be very skilled and very careful. Even then, in the heat of battle? With the rider's concentration already consumed with flight and fight?

The last dragon corps grail died a hundred years ago, burned out against Silaise's previous blood-mage dynasty. King Imrik is well aware of that. Marek has a feeling Lady Naoko wasn't, if she agreed to Marek claiming her son in Vana's place.

Behind Marek, Aliza says cheerfully, "Welcome to Ostomar, Sei. Your mother said so many lovely things about you."

Sei's answer is quiet, polite. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I'm glad to be here."

"Poor thing, you must be exhausted," Aliza says. "Don't worry, this won't take long."

Marek's glad they're behind him, because the tension in his jaw would surely scare Sei even more. He can't do this. He

shouldn't do this. But if he has to obey, he'd rather his mother not be so fucking cheerful about it.

At least Kazia is quiet.

Ostomar's wide hallways seem narrower than they are. Chandeliers hang low, and dark gargoyles loom in alcoves. Murals tell fragmented histories of Draskora through the lens of House Dire's magnificence. Marek tunes out Aliza's conversation with Sei until they reach the throne room.

Sunset streams through the stained-glass windows, golden light transmuted into blues and violets. A great stone dragon twists in flight behind the scalestone throne, illuminated by white-blazing torches. The queen's smaller throne sits beside it. Usually, the thrones are the only bright spot, the rest of the room left in eerie blue. Today, more lamps have been set out, widening the circle of bright light to include a table before the thrones.

Behind the table stands the chief herald, a woman so pale and tranquil she appears transparent. She may as well be invisible when not speaking for the crown. No doubt that's why Imrik promoted her. The herald presides over the table's contents: two ink trays with bottles and quills, and a long piece of parchment pinned to an angled onyx stand.

The attending drasgard file into place around the room, blending with the shadows. Imrik already sits on the scalestone throne, and Aliza leads Sei to the right side of the table before taking her own throne. Osric remains at Sei's side until Sei touches his black-tipped ear. Then Osric retreats a few paces away.

The final witness is Kazia, who glares balefully from the edge of the lamplit circle. His lavender hair looks blue, shrouded in the dim light. The glare is unpleasant, but at least he's not laughing at Marek's predicament.

And that's the grand total of witnesses. In Clan Helra, the home Marek still carries in his name, betrothal is a rowdy, joyful affair. So many couples like to wait for the solstice that every festival becomes a series of public proposals and happy claims. Then there are the pretend raids to claim lovers from

neighboring clans. Everything is loud and public, and Marek never understood the fuss of it until now—

With the realization he won't get that joyful celebration.

Doesn't matter. This isn't a real betrothal. I'll get out of it somehow.

With the confidence and wariness he carries into battle, Marek steps up to the table at Sei's side. He can't remember the traditional words for Draskoran noble claims—but that's fine. He'll improvise if he has to.

Turns out he doesn't have to. The chief herald bows to the king, her ice-white hair not budging from its pins, then turns to face Marek and Sei. "Today we witness a betrothal contract. Marek Helra Dire has already offered and asked his promise by proxy. Sei Mallory has already accepted the offer by his own proxy. You may clasp arms, then sign the contract."

Gritting his teeth, Marek prepares to go through these motions as mechanically as possible. But Sei is suddenly so close.

Even though they were far closer on dragonback, there's something different about standing face to face. Against the surrounding shadows, Sei's illuminated features are even clearer.

Sei is more than pretty. He's enchanting, from his dark brown eyes to his button nose. Even in his flight-rumpled coat, he carries himself with perfect poise. Steady, outwardly calm. Like a new recruit hiding his nerves.

Not Marek's type. He doesn't care how beautiful a man is if that man is scared of him.

They've barely clasped arms when Marek lets go and takes up his pen.

This isn't real, Marek tells himself, putting the pen to parchment. Too much ink follows each sweep of Marek's signature. His name is bold beneath the unwanted contract.



CHAPTER FIVE

Sei

Sei barely registers the journey from the throne room. He just lets the servants and guards direct him. Ostomar is far too large, especially when Sei's entire body is already weak with exhaustion from the dragon ride.

Incredible that he managed to spell his name correctly on the contract.

Marek must have said something to his subordinates, because the dragon corps personnel let Sei into the garrison tower. Sei nearly rebels against the last flight of stairs—but at last, the guards leave. The door closes, and Sei slumps bonelessly on the nearest couch.

Osric prowls the room before joining Sei. It's a wide, spacious room, with fewer gargoyles than the rest of Ostomar. Plain wall hangings, no battle tapestries. Warmly lit, comfortable, but not very personalized. Sei assumes it's a guest chamber in Prince Marek's quarters. Sei's bags are already at the foot of the bed.

Marek left the throne room immediately after the signing, without a word to Sei. No promises, no ceremony. One underwhelming ritual before Sei was alone in a room of complete strangers.

Technically Marek is a stranger too. But after the day on dragonback, with Marek's arms around him and Marek's scent infiltrating his lungs, Sei thought there was some connection.

Clearly that was just in Sei's head. A full day of human touch is unfathomably precious to Sei. Of course a man like Marek wouldn't care.

Osric leans his heavy chin on Sei's lap. *Your bags are here. Wash your face and sleep. Not on the couch, or you'll get a*

crick in your neck.

Sei would gladly pass out on the couch or drag himself to the bed. But he has some questions first. “What happened here, Osric? Where is Prince Vana?”

His hand drops reflexively to scritch behind Osric’s ears.

Osric leans into it. *Vana left with his mate.*

Sei pauses the scritch until Osric nudges him. “His mate? I mean, no. That’s not what humans call that.”

I knew there would be trouble as soon as I saw him and his bodyguard. They just weren’t normal about each other.

Somehow, Sei had never considered his betrothed might be in love with someone else. Not that this arrangement is about love. Of course. That’s just a silly dream. Growing to love his future husband is as far-fetched as Prince Marek feeling anything after a day pressed together on dragonback.

Sei doesn’t need silly dreams like that. It will be more than enough to fulfill his purpose as a grail.

That fool Naoko didn’t believe me when I said to pick an alternate, Osric continues, annoyed. He’s never liked Naoko. Ridiculous, but I shouldn’t be surprised. That woman knows less about human emotions than I do, and I’m a fucking cat. I took great pleasure in telling her I’d told her so, after the lovebirds fucked off.

“I’m sorry she didn’t listen,” Sei says quietly. “Thank you for looking out for me.”

Someone has to. Osric’s plush red shoulders rise and fall with his sigh. I’m unimpressed with this Marek, but he was the best choice remaining. The others were all married or horrible or both.

Maybe so. But Marek doesn’t want Sei at all.

Sei can’t say that out loud. He won’t be able to hold back the stinging tears. “I could have gone with a married mage. One of the not horrible ones. The grail relationship isn’t always romantic.”

No, Osric says firmly. *That's one thing your stupid mother and I agree on. This isn't Fellrin. You need a legally binding relationship for your own safety.*

Sei doesn't particularly feel safe here. Not with the unfamiliar surroundings, from the terrible weather to the too-tall bed across the room. Not with his new family-to-be, the dark and forbidding House Dire. Queen Aliza had acted friendly, but that was all it was. An act.

Certainly not with Sei's new betrothed, who wants nothing to do with Sei.

Then there's the swirl of political scandal. "Prince Marek said one of Naoko's attendants died. What happened?"

Osric is quiet for a moment. *House Dire says Mori's death was an accident. But there are rumors he tried to attack Vana and died in the attempt.*

Oh, this is so far above Sei's head. "What do you think happened?"

I think Mori was annoying. Osric's tail flicks. May his soul rest at peace and so on and whatever. Naoko made some dramatic demands for more information. It was understandable, but unwise. As soon as she agreed to change the betrothal to Marek, they hustled her away on dragonback.

"If her assistant attacked Prince Vana... do you think Naoko was involved?" Sei asks hesitantly. He really doesn't know Naoko. Perhaps she's capable of this.

No, I don't think so.

Sei doesn't feel relieved. He doesn't feel much of anything besides exhaustion at this point. "Thank you, Osric. I think I'm going to sleep now."

Take your boots off first. Osric nudges Sei's knee, then crosses the room to inspect everything again.

Sei obediently unlaces his boots, his head spinning a little when he bends over. His feet are stiff, but standing on the plush rug in just his stockings is a tremendous relief.

From across the room, Osric calls out, *Sei, I don't think this is a guest room.*

Sei doesn't have a chance to react before the door opens. All he can do is turn, stomach sinking at Marek's scowl.

"What are you doing here?" Marek asks, stopping short in the doorway. His dark blue hair is nearly black in the soft light, and he's somehow even taller than Sei remembered.

"Oh," Sei says faintly. "This is your room."

He doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. Finally, one thing has gone according to plan. The guildmasters prepared Sei for this, and he completely forgot in the chaos. Per Draskoran tradition, betrothed couples live together until the wedding. The claim moves into the claimant's quarters. It's a very practical tradition, ensuring the couple can tolerate living together before the wedding.

Sei was nervous enough about this part before his new claimant hated him. Marek was much nicer earlier today—before the treaty bound them together. Sei regrets taking his shoes off. He feels much shorter and much more vulnerable like this.

Osric sits by the fireplace, watching them both intently.

Closing the door behind himself, Marek looks Sei up and down, then exhales. "You're scared of me. That's not what I wanted."

Fuck. Sei is already messing this up. He forces a friendly smile. "Please accept my apologies, Your Highness. I won't be scared of you."

"That's not what I meant." Marek only looks more disgusted. "Fuck. I'm not angry at you, all right? Just this situation."

"I understand."

Marek's eyes flick from Sei to the bed, and the room seems much smaller. New unease creeps through Sei. Even though he's angry, does Marek want to sleep with Sei tonight?

That would be fine. Of course. They're betrothed, so of course they can sleep together. Except Sei is so tired tonight. He isn't ready.

Marek scowls again. "Don't look at me like that."

Sei can't obey the order, because he has no idea how he's looking at Marek. He stays silent as Marek moves across the room. Osric tenses visibly, but Marek passes Sei at a good distance and grabs a bag from his wardrobe.

"Don't worry," Marek says over his shoulder. "You'll have the room to yourself."

Right. Marek wants nothing to do with Sei.

Not that Sei wanted to have sex with Marek tonight—so why does the rejection sting?

Sei drifts closer, following as Marek grabs other items from around the room. "Where are you going? I don't want to put you out. I'm happy to sleep on the couch, so we don't have to share the bed."

Marek stops in the middle of the room, so abruptly Sei nearly runs into him. "Look in there." Marek points to a cabinet. "Find the bottle that says 'hallabark.' Take two tablets if you don't want to limp tomorrow."

Before Sei can muster a response, the bedroom door thuds closed. Marek is gone.

The puppet strings of Sei's willpower snap. He stumbles backwards. Not quite making it to the couch, he sits down hard on the rug instead. Osric bounds over, clearly concerned, and Sei can't control himself anymore. He flings his arms around Osric's neck and sobs.

Ribs hurting with each ragged cry, Sei sobs out all his disappointment and frustration. He was good. He did as he was told, just like always. How has everything gone so wrong?

Except from everyone else's perspective, nothing has gone wrong.

Sure, Prince Vana is gone, and Lady Naoko was ushered off unceremoniously. But at the end of the day, the result is the

same. Fellrin got their scalestone. Draskora got their Porcelain Guild grail, legally bound to a prince of House Dire. After all this commotion dies down, the only lives upended will be Marek's and Sei's.

Marek is a prince and a dragonrider. He can do whatever he wants with the situation. He has his friends, subordinates, family, and dragon. Sei only has Osric, and while he's beyond grateful for that much, Osric is also stuck in a foreign land. Sei's life is now completely dependent on a man who can't stand the sight of him.

Osric just nuzzles the top of Sei's head, letting Sei cry until he's all cried out.

Eventually, Sei releases his grip on his fluffy best friend and slumps back against the couch. Sniffling, Sei wipes his eyes with his sleeve.

Across the room, the cabinet swings open. Osric pads over to inspect its contents. Eight small jars float from the shelves. They dip and swoop across the room, sparkling in the warm light, to hover in front of Sei.

Which one says 'hallabark'? Osric asks.

Sei has to squint. The jars are labeled, but the handwriting is messy. He plucks the correct jar from the air, even though the label looks more like *hallabrrr*. The other seven jars dance back into the cabinet as Sei opens the hallabark. There are handwritten instructions in a much neater hand on the back of the jar, so Sei puts both tablets under his tongue.

The sweet, faintly minty taste floods Sei's senses. An unexpected calm washes over him. Like crying has purged the worst of his emotions, leaving Sei thinking clearly for the first time all day.

Sei isn't helpless. He's certainly not useless. And his present situation isn't that different from the original plan.

From the sound of things, Prince Vana wouldn't have wanted Sei either. That was never a guarantee, even if Vana wasn't mated to his bodyguard—as Osric put it.

Sei spent his last week in Fellrin learning everything he could about Vana Dire. The time constraints meant he learned about the rest of House Dire only in passing. He knows only the most basic biographical details about his new claimant. Marek Helra Dire is twenty-five years old. His birthday is the fourteenth of Marsen, right after Sei's birthday on the second of Marsen. Marek was adopted by the king as a teenager, and he's now the wing-marshal of the Draskoran dragon corps.

Basic facts that tell Sei nothing about the man himself. But how much did Sei know about Vana to begin with? He knew more trivia. Nothing real.

"Thank you, Osric," Sei says.

Osric tilts his broad head. *You've made a decision.*

"I have." Sei rubs his eyes again. The painsoothers have melted away, but the taste lingers. "I'm stuck here in Draskora, and I'm stuck in this betrothal, so I have to accept that."

Unfortunately, yes. I've been unable to think of an alternative.

"Prince Marek doesn't like me," Sei continues, his voice growing stronger. "But I *don't* have to accept that."

Osric's ears prick.

Sei loops his arms around his knees. "Marek doesn't like me because he doesn't know me. But he's stuck with me too, and I'm very likable. So, I'm going to make this work."

The comb for his hair. The painsoothers for his sore muscles. Marek isn't a bad man. Sei could grow to like Marek, given a moment to breathe.

They don't have to become lovers, and Sei doesn't dare set his hopes that high. But they could at least become friends. They could become partners. Marek could at least use Sei the way a grail is meant to be used.

"I'm going to make Marek like me," Sei declares, exhausted but determined. "Whatever it takes."



CHAPTER SIX

Marek

The third-floor lounge is full of off-duty riders, aides, and hangers-on. Tankards and cards cover every available surface. That's normal. There are hours left until midnight, which means it's prime carousing time.

What *isn't* normal is the dead silence when Marek enters the room. Or the dozen pairs of eyes following his every move.

Gossip runs fast through Ostomar.

"Fuck off," Marek growls, not in the mood. "Yes, I just signed my life away. No, it's none of your business, except for some orders for the ground guards. Kamil!"

Kamil swings his arm away from a pretty bedworker's shoulders and hops over a table to salute Marek. His black and green hair is the same color as his dragon Yavran's scales.

"Yes, Stormrider?"

"I'm stuck in Ostomar for the next month," Marek says. "Don't stay up too late tonight, because you're leaving for Talorna tomorrow. Tell Velka she's in command until I'm back north."

"How late is too late?" Kamil asks, eyes sliding towards the bedworker.

"That's up to you." Marek makes eye contact with Kamil's adjutant on the other side of the room. "Because Delline will make sure you wake up in time regardless."

Laughter roars around them as Kamil swears.

"Is Loska upstairs?" Marek asks the room.

"Yes, Stormrider," someone answers.

Marek doesn't wait around. His riders only have so much self-restraint, especially this many beers into the night. Marek doesn't want to answer questions right now, so best not to give anyone the opportunity to ask.

His title is wing-marshal, but they all call him Stormrider. Part name, part title, part legend. Marek has never felt less legendary than tonight, caught in such ordinary palace drama.

This should be Vana. That snake is good at navigating this sort of—

Marek stops on the stairs, hand tightening on the railing. This *should* be Vana. And Vana had to have known the likely consequences of skipping out on this betrothal. Kazia doesn't have magic, so he would have no use for a grail. The easiest way to keep the treaty intact was to use Marek as Vana's replacement.

Was Vana already thinking about that when he asked Marek's help flying south? Probably. Smart of him not to say anything. Brotherly obligation or no, Marek wouldn't have been so eager to help if he knew the pit Vana was pushing him into.

Fuck, he's an idiot. He still doesn't know why Vana left. Something to do with the Fellrian's death in the Opal Tower? The betrothal itself?

Marek resumes his ascent.

Loska curls up on the roof, his chin resting on the parapet. Wind whispers around him, and while Marek could redirect the wind, he doesn't bother. He's tired and annoyed and in no shape to safely control unnecessary Dire magic.

Marek drops his bag and sits at Loska's side, leaning right behind his foreleg. One of the recruits must have taken the harness off, but the rig base is still on his neck.

Did your new mate kick you out of bed? Loska asks.

Of course. The gossip has even reached the dragon roosts.

"I kicked myself out," Marek grumbles, crossing his ankles and settling more comfortably against Loska's warm

side.

Ah, playing the feisty cliff wyrm.

“The what?”

The feisty cliff wyrm is difficult to catch, Loska explains. It’s a clever ploy. Don’t be too difficult, though, or the hungry dragon will give up in annoyance.

A hungry dragon is not how Marek would describe Sei. More like a startled rabbit, freezing in place instead of running away. Marek feels monstrous for distressing Sei today—both the outburst in the courtyard and his foul mood in the bedroom. He owes Sei a better apology, but it’s useless when he’s still so fucking frustrated. His anger clearly scares Sei, so until Marek calms down, he needs to keep his distance.

No, that still might not work. Sei was already nervous of Marek from the start. And the way Sei apologized for being scared of Marek?

Sei might want this betrothal even less than Marek. He’ll be relieved to be rid of Marek, as soon as Marek figures out how to end it.

“Nobody will be catching anybody,” Marek says. “This betrothal is just political. I’ll be rid of him as soon as I can.”

Comforting affection flows through the dragonbond. *This is nice. The night is beautiful. The stars are so bright they sing.*

His shoulders finally unlocking, Marek closes his eyes. “This is nice,” he agrees.

Tomorrow can wait. Tonight, he’ll play the cliff wyrm and hide out under the stars.

Marek’s bedroom is empty when he returns at dawn, so he isn’t surprised to hear voices in his parlor the next floor down. Pausing in the doorway, he tries to gather a sense of calm. He

had hoped Sei would still be asleep, so Marek could have more time to prepare. But apparently Sei is an early riser.

“Let me know what you like for breakfast, Lord Mallory.” That’s Clem, one of Marek’s aides. They have a fondness for studded leather boots and even more frequent hair changes than most Draskorans. This week, their hair is a mess of gold, green, and orange curls, and gold eyeliner gleams against their warm brown complexion.

Right now, they’re setting the usual spread out on the table.

“Please, I’m not lord of anything,” Sei says, so quietly Marek barely hears him. A cup of tea steams in his hands. Instead of his heavy coat from yesterday, he’s wrapped in a dark brown dressing robe. He looks far too comfortable in Marek’s parlor.

“Lord or no, you must like breakfast,” Clem says.

Sei sips his tea. “What does Prince Marek usually eat in the morning?”

“Sausage, fruit, and cheese, usually. Heavy on the gravy for the sausage.”

“Oh, good, I like those too.” Sei smiles. “Thank you for asking. I really appreciate it.”

Clem smiles back—far more cheerful than Marek has ever seen them this early in the morning. Though Marek tries not to see anyone this early in the morning. “Of course, dear. Just tell me if you have any special requests. Do you like pastries? I’ll bring some up with lunch.” Then Clem notices Marek and grins—the traitor. “Morning, Stormrider!”

Sei turns too quickly, looking down at his tea so he doesn’t spill it.

“Thanks, Clem.” Marek slumps down at the table. He reaches for the teapot—but there’s already a full cup at his usual place. And his plate is already full up with sausage, fruit, and cheese.

Clem doesn't do that. They always drop off the tray and leave. So that must have been Sei—which Marek finds disturbing. Did he get saddled with a claim or a servant?

The way Sei keeps standing doesn't help, like he's going to try waiting on Marek or something. As Clem gathers last night's dishes, Marek points at Sei. "Sit down and eat."

Sei sits gingerly across from Marek. If Marek wasn't paying attention, he might not have noticed the slight stiffness to Sei's every moment.

"Did you take the hallabark?"

"I did, Your Highness," Sei answers.

That was still a lot for the man's first dragon ride. "Take more if you need it."

For some reason, Clem chokes at the other end of the table.

"Are you all right?" Sei asks.

"Fine! I'm fine!" Clem picks up the tray of empty dishes. They fix Marek with a fiery, disapproving glare before leaving the room.

Only when the door closes behind them does Marek realize what that conversation sounded like. He suppresses a groan. In about five minutes, every rider in the Ostomar garrison is going to hear the rumor that Marek fucked his new claim so hard he needed extra hallabark the next morning.

Fantastic. Marek can take the teasing, but if any of them breathe a word to Sei, they'll be scrubbing the lavatories for a year.

"How did you sleep, Your Highness?" Sei asks politely.

Digging into his breakfast, Marek pushes down his initial resentful reaction. It's a normal, polite question. Except it's too normal. Too polite. They aren't an ordinary couple chatting over breakfast. They aren't really a couple at all.

"I slept well," Marek answers.

"That's good. Where did..." Sei cuts himself off. "What are your plans for today?"

Okay, no. Marek can't keep up with the domestic bliss roleplay. "What are you doing?"

Sei sets his tea down. "Yesterday was very stressful for both of us. But we're betrothed now, Your Highness. We should talk about what that means."

That's very reasonable.

And it's very *unreasonable* for Marek to resent that so much. How can Sei be so cheerful about the complete upending of their lives?

"Of course, your position as wing-marshal comes first," Sei says. "I don't want to interfere with your duties. If there's anything I can do to help, let me know."

Marek can't picture Sei being of any use to the dragon corps. The soft robe makes him look even more delicate than he looked yesterday. "You won't get in the way."

"I'm glad to hear that." Sei straightens up, his posture subtly improving. "What His Majesty said yesterday, about being secretly wed—"

"I'm not secretly married."

"If you're seeing someone, though," Sei says. "That's all right. I know this arrangement surprised you, and of course I don't even know if you prefer men or women or anyone else."

Marek prefers men, though he doesn't mind women or other genders joining for group play. But instead of answering, Marek sits back. It would be so easy to get dragged into this conversation. Sei is being so reasonable. So accommodating.

Too accommodating. Like Sei is just saying whatever he thinks Marek wants to hear, based on Marek and Imrik's argument last night.

Instead of acknowledging Sei's implicit question, Marek asks, "What do *you* want?"

Sei blinks. He pours himself another cup of tea, his thin wrists steady supporting the heavy pot. "Osric needs free passage in and out of the garrison. If you could arrange that with the guards, I would be grateful, Your Highness."

Not the answer Marek wants. Even when he asks specifically for Sei's wants, Sei asks for something on behalf of someone else.

"Does Osric eat people?" Marek asks.

"No." Sei hesitates. "Not without reason, Your Highness."

"I'll talk to the garrison guard. Do you need anything else?" Marek sets down his knife before he gestures with it. That tends to alarm people. "You personally. Not Osric."

Sei is struck silent, and Marek knows this conversation has to end.

Of course, Marek needs to focus on the dragon corps, and figuring out their relationship boundaries is a sensible early step. But that very conversation assumes the permanence of this arrangement.

"I'm not going to marry you," Marek says. "I'm going to figure out how to end this betrothal."

Sei's eyes are dark and wide, like a scared rabbit.

"I'm not seeing anyone else, and I won't while we're together. I'd recommend you keep your belt buckled too, until you know your way around court." Marek doesn't want his father to wrongfully blame any tryst for the broken betrothal. And he can too easily see Sei tumbling headfirst into some courtier's schemes. "But do what you want. You're safe in my household while we're stuck together. I won't be cruel to you."

Sei lowers his eyes. "I appreciate that, Your Highness."

It's impossible to tell if he's being sarcastic or not.

Marek feels bad for deflating Sei like this—the man was so cheerful when the meal started. But Marek won't play along with this twisted charade. Not when the entire conversation was about how Sei could accommodate Marek's needs. Marek can't trust anything Sei says like that.

After their silent breakfast, Marek calls for a herald. He needs to request an audience to get yelled at.

Two royal drasgard escort Marek to an audience chamber. Smaller than the throne room, the chamber holds only a tall wooden table and a king in a stone chair.

Imrik appears engrossed in a large, leather-bound notebook. Marek doesn't usually imagine Imrik as a reader—books are Aliza's passion. But Imrik approaches the notebook with a soldier's intensity.

Marek waits until his father looks up.

"I didn't expect you to request an audience today," Imrik says.

"I didn't expect you to grant it, Your Majesty."

Imrik remains impassive, his face colorless except for his dark purple eyes. A faint crackle in the air is Marek's only warning before lightning blazes towards him.

Marek's own magic flexes in perfect instinct. Electricity bends to his will and ricochets. Lightning arcs towards Imrik instead.

Imrik dissipates the lightning in a sizzle of smoke. "You were always better at Dire magic than Vana."

"He has his own strengths." Secrecy, patience, restraint. Marek wishes he had more of the latter sometimes. "Your Majesty, the betrothal took me by surprise yesterday. I acted impulsively. That's because I didn't have enough information. I'm asking as your wing-marshal, not your son. What's the situation with Vana?"

Marek might not play court games like Vana, but he's not an idiot. He can't allow yesterday's confrontation to fester. Better to address the matter clearly. Imrik won't apologize, and Marek won't either. But Marek can make the first move.

Sure, this audience risks deteriorating into another argument. But if Vana is gone, Imrik won't want to fight one of his remaining sons. Not right now.

Imrik closes the leather-bound book. “Vana is presently crossing the Jaws on a Kaiskaran ship. His course leads to the Isle of Tavoc.”

Marek exhales. *Fuck you, Vana. And fuck me for a complete idiot.*

Vana didn’t just vanish. Vana deserted, and Marek was unwittingly complicit. He was so eager to help his older brother. “Father, I had no idea what he intended. I knew he was up to something, but not this.”

“I don’t blame you.” Imrik sounds tired. “I didn’t foresee this betrayal either. Vana always had his flaws, and he was never a true Draskoran. But if nothing else, I believed in his ambition.”

Fuck me twice, with wyrmblood for lube.

With Vana out of the picture, the most logical candidate for the Draskoran throne is Marek himself.

Marek has dodged that candidacy since he was old enough to realize it was a risk. His place is in the dragon corps, not on the throne. He wants to protect his country, not rule it.

Imrik must see the rejection in Marek’s face, because he laughs drily. “Don’t worry, son. I remember our last conversation about the crown. Keep your focus on the dragon corps. I value your strength there.”

That should be reassuring. But there’s another problem. “Who are you considering instead?”

Imrik’s lips twitch in another smile. He answers Marek’s real question: “Kazia is entirely unsuitable. Don’t concern yourself with the succession for now. The matter is important, but hardly urgent. I have much left to accomplish.”

“I don’t doubt that, Father.”

“As for your betrothal,” Imrik continues. “You will remain in Ostomar until the wedding. Aliza is handling that—rather, my seneschal is keeping matters on track.”

“Thank you, Father.” Hopefully the reluctance isn’t too clear in Marek’s voice. “Is there a date yet?”

“Two months from now. They need time to invite the foreign guests.”

Marek relaxes. Last night’s argument is too recent for Marek to push against Imrik’s authority again. But two months is plenty of time to break the betrothal. “Is there anything else I need to know about this arrangement?”

“I expect you to treat Sei Mallory well in public,” Imrik says. “Do as you wish with him in private. Use his power or not. All I require is that you keep him alive for a few years, so relations with Fellrin don’t get awkward.”

Marek’s relief sours into pure disgust.

“I understand,” Marek says, wishing he didn’t.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Sei

Draskoran tea is stronger than Sei is used to. He blames the caffeine for his jittery nerves that first full day in Ostomar. At least he has plenty to do. Putting his belongings away is easy because Marek hardly has any clothes in the wardrobes. Sei meditates. He brushes Osric's fur while Osric extols the virtues of Draskoran cuisine. He takes more hallabark, then explores.

Marek's quarters take up the top two floors of the Ostomar dragon corps garrison. There are public stairs and landings to the north, but private stairs as well, so Sei can explore the entire suite without straying across anyone. None of the doors are locked. Some of the cabinets might be, but Sei doesn't try them. That would be intrusive.

He likes the parlor on the lower floor best—more of an all-purpose lounge space than just a parlor. In addition to the breakfast table, there's a bar with kegs along one wall, and broken-down, comfortable couches. The whole southern side is an open patio, with enchanted heat-lamps keeping the chill at bay. Sei spends a while entranced by the jagged mountains and sparkling city below.

The rest of the floor is mostly storage and miscellaneous rooms. There's a small library and an armory that smells of leather and iron. One room is clearly some sort of meeting room, with a fancy table and chairs. That room is clean, but clearly barely used. A mural sweeps along the windowless wall, a dark blue dragon across a background of white smoke and yellow flames.

The color matches Loska, which means the rider must be Marek, a small figure raising his fist in triumph.

That mural is the most Sei sees of Marek the rest of the day.

Sei's next morning in Ostomar is much like the first. He rises with the dawn and performs his morning stretching sequence despite his aches and bruises. Then he meditates until he feels centered, which takes longer than it should. Sei still makes it downstairs by the time Clem brings breakfast up.

Sei likes Clem a lot. Clem is cheerful and talkative, and Sei can't look away from their curly green and orange hair.

"Where does the name Stormrider come from?" Sei asks as Clem tidies the room.

"All sorts of reasons," Clem answers. "Loska is big and blue and dark like a storm. Then there's Dire magic, which goes without saying. House Dire mages have ridden dragons before, but none quite like Stormrider."

Sei sips his tea. "What do you mean? I don't really have anything to compare it to."

"That's right, you got to fly with him. Lucky bastard." Clem leans on the table, tidying forgotten. "Marek just has an instinct for it. He manipulates the weather like he's riding the sky itself. The older riders couldn't stop talking about him when he first joined up."

"Everyone talks about him like he's more of a legend than a man," Sei says. "It's a little intimidating."

"Well, he is a legend, isn't he? You know the story, right?" Clem pulls out a chair when Sei shakes his head. "*Well*. Most dragonbonds are sort of intentional. We send recruits out to camp in the mountains and hope a wild dragon will take a fancy to them. On the rare occasion we have a tame nest, we assign a gaggle of magelings to shovel shit. The baby usually picks one of them."

"But Marek was different? I know he's from Clan Helra."

"Right." Clem rocks back in their chair, settling into storyteller mode. "One hard winter, a wild blue dragon rampaged down the mountains, ready to eat anything or anyone he found."

Sei can't imagine Loska rampaging. The dragon seems so nice. Less intimidating than Marek, once Sei got past the immense claws.

"All of Clan Helra hid in their caves while Loska burned the outer farms. Nobody dared do anything, and the nearest dragon corps wing was too far away to help." Clem narrates without pausing to think, as if the story has been told so many times that everyone knows how it goes. "Clan Helra was ready to lose a whole harvest when Marek decided he'd had enough. He rode out until his horse got scared and threw him. So, Marek walked out directly to Loska and told him to *stop*."

"And Loska just stopped?"

"Loska just stopped," Clem says. "The story spread across Draskora until it reached Ostomar. King Imrik was so impressed, he rode out himself to adopt Marek as his own."

Sei had known Marek was adopted, but not the why and how of it. "What about Prince Marek's family in Helra?"

Clem fiddles with a green curl of hair. "I don't think he had one. Anyway, that's why we talk about Prince Marek like he's a legend. Believe me, all the recruits hop to his orders. If a wild dragon will listen to him, they'd better listen too."

Sei doesn't have a chance to listen to Marek that day. His claimant is as elusive as a legend until that night, when Marek appears in the middle of dinner. He must have bathed somewhere else, because his hair is dark and wet. His bare arms gleam with traces of water, and his sleeveless shirt clings to his broad back.

Do most people even have that many muscles in their backs?

Sei is so surprised, he doesn't manage to say anything before Marek vanishes up the stairs to the bedroom.

The guild teaches grails to eat slowly and thoughtfully, so Sei doesn't rush through dinner. When he gets upstairs, he wishes he had. Marek is nowhere to be seen.

"Where did he go?" Sei asks.

Osruc answers from his spot lounging on the bed. *The stairs, towards the roof. I think he's sleeping outside like an animal.*

“Look who’s talking,” Sei says, because annoying Osruc is better than lingering on the hurt. Marek would rather sleep outside than share quarters with Sei. So far, Sei’s mission to win Marek over is a resounding failure.

Marek promised he wouldn’t be cruel. But he can’t be kind to Sei either if he’s never around.

Sei’s third day in Ostomar begins much the same, except that it’s lightly raining. By mid-morning, Sei has finished exploring Marek’s quarters. While he could occupy himself with reading, meditating, or playing aerie with Osruc, Sei would rather not.

Should Sei maximize his opportunities to interact with Marek? Maybe.

Is Sei hiding in Marek’s quarters because he’s nervous about venturing out? Definitely.

Sei needs to go outside before his nerves calcify into inertia. Besides, Marek clearly wants nothing to do with him.

“I want to explore the castle,” Sei tells Osruc. “What’s an interesting place to start with?”

Osruc stretches up from the bed, which creaks underneath him. He’s already fond of Marek’s comfortable furniture. *The stone garden is good, but the roof will be closed for the rain. Plus, it’s in Her Majesty’s private wing, so we would have to sneak in.*

“We don’t have to sneak. We could just ask.”

Pretend you don’t speak the language. It can be very convenient to get out of trouble.

Sei contemplates his closet's array of boring coats. "Do you know what's more convenient? Not getting into trouble in the first place."

You would make a terrible cat.

"Good thing I'm not a cat, then." Sei selects the cream coat that buttons up to his chin. It's boring, but at least it isn't dark and boring like the brown or navy. Grails are meant to serve, not to draw attention to themselves.

Most grails don't have to *try* to attract their mage's attention though. Maybe Sei should acquire a flashier wardrobe. Would Marek be more interested if Sei dressed up in sheer silk and gold chains?

Sure, and with what money? Marek's? They haven't discussed an allowance yet.

Osric bumps his head against Sei's hip. *Oh, I know where we should go. The laboratory.*

"What laboratory?"

Radovan Ark's laboratory. There are purple rats.

"Again, not a cat." Sei ruffles Osric's head. "But sure, lead the way to the purple rats."

Sei can easily follow Osric's guidance through the dark maze of a palace. Even so, he asks servants for directions along the way. It's an excuse to add more names and faces to Sei's growing stockpile of familiar people.

When they reach the correct corridor, Osric pauses. *The door is open. I'll go in first. You don't have any scalestone on you, do you?*

"No, why?"

Radovan was fussy about scalestone. Don't jump on the counters either. It stresses him out.

"Why would I jump on the counters?" Sei's eyes narrow. "Osric, you didn't."

Of course not, Osric says before slinking through the open door. Sei hurries after him, hoping Osric isn't dragging him

into trouble after all.

The towering hallway glitters with wonders. Sei has trouble focusing on any one thing. High windows only allow thin streams of light through the pattering rain, but myriad silver and brass lanterns encircle the pillars and balcony loft. Perplexing metal instruments rise between ribbon-tagged trees in terracotta pots. Shelves of jars and bottles crowd the walls.

There are living creatures too—a tall bird cage to the right, a tank of fish to the left. The rats Osric mentioned have the largest enclosure. Between the small animals and the rotating metal instruments, the laboratory is so full of movement that Sei almost misses the figure at the center of everything.

A black marble counter stretches down the middle of the hall. On the counter sits a small wire cage. Next to the cage sits Kazia Dire.

The prince appears intent on the cage's contents. His long lavender hair is gathered in a high tail, falling forward to obscure his face. Without turning around, Kazia calls out, "What are you doing here?"

The hostility is so clear, Sei nearly takes a step back. "I apologize for interrupting, Your Highness."

Kazia twists around to face Sei. Perched like a bird, he cocks his head. "That's not what I asked you, grail."

Sei's stomach clenches. He's been a grail all his life, but nobody has ever said the word like an insult before. "I wanted to admire the laboratory, Your Highness. Osric told me it was interesting."

Osric moves forward protectively. Touching the fellcat's shoulder, Sei hopes Osric understands the silent signal. Sei might be nervous of Kazia, but he's even more nervous of the consequences if Osric threatens the prince.

"The lab's all right, I guess." Kazia shrugs. "Don't try to steal anything. The doorway will melt your feet off."

That isn't true, Osric tells Sei privately. I've watched him and Daromir steal things from here before, and their feet are fine.

Maybe so. Or maybe the foot-melting charms are new. Sei doesn't want to steal anything anyway, so it doesn't matter.

"Are you trying to scare me, Your Highness?" Sei asks.

"Only if it's working. You're lucky you got Marek instead of Vana, by the way. Marek is stupider."

Sei isn't sure where this is going, but any unhappiness is his own personal business. "I'm very happy with Prince Marek."

"You poor bastard." Kazia shakes his head in exaggerated sympathy. "Nobody here cares if you're happy."

Sei is too stunned to reply.

Kazia hops to the ground. He's at least five inches shorter than Sei, who isn't tall. The young prince has to lift his chin to make eye contact, but his presence and confidence are riveting.

As if turning away risks a knife in Sei's back.

"You're a grail," Kazia says. "Every mage in this palace wants to wring you dry. Try not to forget that."

A low, threatening growl rumbles through the room.

"Osric," Sei snaps. "Go look at the rats."

He rarely tells Osric to do anything, and thankfully Osric listens now. The fellcat walks unnecessarily close to Kazia, then veers towards the tall glass cage.

Kazia doesn't flinch at the fellcat's threat.

Whatever Kazia is doing, Sei refuses to play along. "I'm grateful for the advice, Your Highness. Considering all that, could you tell me more about Prince Marek?" Sei smiles. "I would value your unique perspective."

Kazia's eyes narrow like he's angry. Or like he's assessing Sei anew.

Then Kazia gives an answering smile, so sweet it transforms his face. He would be very pretty if he wasn't so angry all the time.

“You’re fun. Yes, I’d love to gossip about Marek. I want to show you something first, though.” Kazia waves Sei towards the central counter.

Sei follows past the wire cage—which contains one of the purple-spotted rats chewing on a block of wood—to a small metallic object hovering half a foot over a brass plate. No, it’s multiple pieces of metal, spinning in a shifting, abstract almost-sphere. Like gears, except shaped wrong. More like leaves, all balanced impossibly around a central branch that doesn’t quite touch any of them.

“What is this, Your Highness?” Sei asks.

“You’ll see in a second. Touch one of the leaves.” When Sei hesitates, Kazia reassures him. “It won’t hurt. It just looks cool.”

This might be stupid, but the spinning thing is very interesting. And befriending Kazia can’t be a bad thing. Sei holds his breath and touches the edge of a floating leaf. The metal is pleasantly warm against his fingertip.

Then all the leaves shatter apart and clatter from the air.

Leaves skid in every direction along the counter and floor. Several rain down on Sei’s feet. Once fallen, the metal leaves lie still, the enchantment broken.

Kazia covers his mouth. “Oh, *no*. You stay there. I’m going to fetch a mop. Or a broom, or whatever.”

“Thanks,” Sei says, stepping gingerly out of the crash site.

Kazia takes off, and Sei starts looking around. Maybe there’s a broom in here. Sei doesn’t have high hopes for Kazia knowing where to find cleaning implements. Though he’s probably just going to yell at a servant...

Sei, Osric calls from across the room. I don’t think he’s going to get a broom.

Sei freezes. “Oh. Shit.”

Kazia is long gone, leaving Sei alone with the ruined experiment. Should Sei nobly wait for the consequences? Or should he and Osric sneak out now, before they get caught?

Footsteps outside the door render Sei's moral dilemma obsolete. "What is going on in there?"

A man in a brown coat sweeps into the laboratory and stops short at the sight of Sei and the broken instrument. Lord Radovan—at least, Sei assumes this is Radovan—has normal brown and silver hair. But his eyes are as purple as any Draskoran's, glaring behind his gold spectacles.

Purple eyes or no, he gives off the same strict, intellectual air as the guildmasters. Sei braces himself for a scolding. Osric pads closer, seemingly calm but always watching.

Except Radovan's glare softens. "Lord Sei. Forgive my surprise."

"I'm so sorry, my lord. I didn't intend to break your experiment." Sei's hands twist behind his back. "I'm not lord of anything either. I'm just Sei."

"Then allow me to introduce myself as just Radovan." Surveying the room, Radovan approaches. "Was Prince Kazia here?"

Perhaps Sei isn't in trouble after all. But he doesn't want to antagonize the third prince either. "Yes, he was. But I'm the one who touched whatever this is."

Radovan picks up one of the metal twigs. "Did His Highness tell you to touch it?"

"The accident was my responsibility," Sei says, compromising between truth and tact.

Radovan picks up another twig. "Enough said, Just Sei. This is hardly the first time Prince Kazia has wreaked havoc in my laboratory. But this mischief isn't a disaster. Look."

He touches one twig to the other, and magic sparks white between them. Together, they rise from Radovan's hand. All the other fallen leaves and twigs float up and coalesce around the center, until the intricate tangle again spins above its plate.

"Oh, wow," Sei breathes.

"This is a mere trinket, but thank you." Radovan straightens his cuffs. "See, all better. So long as Sir Osric

remains off the counters.”

Sei is indignant on Osric’s behalf. Osric is a fellecat, not an unruly animal. But when Sei glances back, Osric looks away, studiously observing anything else in the room.

“What brings you to my laboratory?” Radovan asks. “I didn’t expect to meet you here.”

“Osric said this was one of the most interesting places in Ostomar,” Sei answers. “I can leave if you’re busy, but if you have a moment, I’d love to know what you’re working on.”

Sei would ask no matter what, because he was raised to be polite. Plus, the more people he tries to befriend in Draskora, the better the odds that some of them will actually be friendly. But it so happens he *is* interested in this laboratory, just like Osric knew he would be.

“I can spare a moment.” Radovan adjusts his spectacles. “I’m working on a number of things, but this trinket is a test of magical magnetism. Separate halves form a single enchantment, so the pieces resonate with each other to produce different effects.”

His cadence reminds Sei of the instructors at the Porcelain Guild. “Fascinating. What’s your project goal? I’m guessing this trinket isn’t the finished product.”

“Clever. The nobles are always impressed with the pretty floating things, but I have more practical aims.” Radovan gestures like he’s leading a lecture. “Small-object teleportation. Imagine if I could put a message scroll in an enchanted box, right here in Ostomar. Then seconds later, someone in Parsk could open the matching box and retrieve the scroll.”

Sei doesn’t know where Parsk is, but it must be far away. “That sounds incredible.”

“Don’t get too excited,” Radovan says, though he sounds pleased. “It’s only incredible if it works—which it decidedly hasn’t yet.”

Sei’s laugh is genuine. But his next question dies on his lips when the door slams open.

Marek Dire fills the doorway, anger clear on his face.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Marek

“There you are, Sei.” Marek does his best to repress his frustration. He’s used to hiding problems from outsiders. Dragon corps business stays in the dragon corps. Family business stays in the family. “Apologies, Radovan, but I need to retrieve my betrothed.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Radovan says with a bow. Then he turns to Sei. “Feel free to return whenever you’d like. I enjoyed our conversation.”

Marek barely stops himself from growling, *Absolutely not.*

Because that’s the fucking problem. Sei can’t just go wandering Ostomar whenever he wants, completely unsupervised. It might even be worse than wandering off in the woods. Marek’s just glad a drasgard caught him in the hallway to point out Sei’s direction. The garrison guards on duty will regret allowing Sei to leave without an escort, against Marek’s orders.

But that’s none of Radovan Ark’s business. Especially since Radovan is likely to report this conversation to his dear friend Queen Aliza.

“Ready to go, Sei?” Marek asks.

Sei meets Marek’s eyes with a hint of hesitation before smiling at Radovan. “I’d love to return when it’s convenient. Osric, let’s go!”

The fellcat weaves gracefully through the crowded laboratory. Sei moves nearly as silently to Marek’s side.

Marek reaches for Sei’s shoulder, not really thinking about it. Just an instinct to make sure Sei walks next to him. He only

realizes what he's done when Sei flinches away from his touch.

Right. Fuck.

Sei doesn't want this forced betrothal any more than Marek does. And he's only gotten *more* scared of Marek since they met.

They walk in silence through Ostomar's dark halls, except the time Sei mutters, "Not now, Osric."

Marek is highly aware of every watchful eye. The guards, the servants, the occasional courtier. Even the gargoyles seem to be spying on them. That's one thing Marek dislikes about being stuck in Ostomar. Don't these people have anything better to do than watch and gossip?

Perhaps the keenest eyes pick up Marek's astonishment when Sei waves to several servants. How has Sei met so many people already?

They don't speak again until they're back in the garrison—then all the way back to Marek's bedroom, because Clem is cleaning the parlor. Clem already gave Marek an earful about not *overwhelming* Sei, and Marek doesn't need any more misdirected euphemisms.

"Have I done something wrong, Your Highness?" Sei asks as soon as the bedroom door closes.

"We talked about this already." Marek crosses his arms. "You can't wander around on your own. I've personally instructed the garrison guards to accompany you whenever you want to leave. After today, I will personally instruct them to accompany you even if you tell them not to. Understood?"

Sei's eyes flash, and Marek steels himself for an argument. He almost looks forward to it. But a breath later, Sei relaxes. "I wasn't on my own, Your Highness. Osric was with me."

"That doesn't change my orders," Marek says tersely.

Sei doesn't react—but Osric steps forward, putting himself between Marek and Sei. From his pinned-back ears to his raised hackles, the fellcat's animosity is clear.

Marek's magic prickles beneath his skin in response.

“Osric, leave the room,” Sei says, but Osric doesn't move. “Osric, I'm fine.”

Osric still doesn't move.

Marek steps back. He doesn't understand how Sei gets under his skin so easily. Sei is so polite. So accommodating. Maybe that's the problem. Marek doesn't want a grail. He doesn't want a subservient claim.

Except Sei is only outwardly accommodating. This is the second time he's wandered off on his own. The garrison guards must have stopped him on his way out, yet he disobeyed Marek's direction and left anyway.

Marek is used to being responsible for soldiers. He's used to ordering around people who have trained together, people who understand their role in the hierarchy. However casual dragonriders may be off duty, nobody questions Marek's orders.

If Sei were a new dragonrider, Marek would raise his voice and discipline him. But he isn't. He's a grail, bound to Marek against his will. Marek has no idea how to handle this. He just knows he's fucking it up now by acting like his father—expecting obedience without explaining why.

“I said I wouldn't be cruel, but I'm not doing a very good job of that, am I?” Marek asks.

Sei looks away. “You haven't been cruel, Your Highness. I'm just frustrated.”

“Tell me why you're frustrated.”

Osric bumps his head against Sei's hand. Sei pets behind his ear, then answers, “I thought I studied very well, but I don't understand Draskora at all. Do you really think I could get abducted from your family's palace? There are guards everywhere.”

“I don't think it's likely, but it's not impossible.”

“Why, though?” Sei lifts his hands helplessly. “I'm hardly the only grail in Draskora. Why would I be worth so much

effort?”

“You’re not just any grail,” Marek says. “You’re the grail my father bought for half a ton of scalestone.”

Sei freezes for a moment. Not a flinch, just a moment of stillness. Marek’s stomach twists, wondering if Sei’s thoughts align with his own. Naming Sei’s price tag feels wrong, though Marek isn’t the one who put it there. That was King Imrik and Lady Naoko, debating how much scalestone one Porcelain Guild grail was worth.

What tremendous irony that Sei has been given to Marek, the one mage in Ostomar who would refuse to use him. Perhaps the only Draskoran mage outside the clans.

Marek hates the responsibility, but he can’t deny it. After he’s broken the betrothal, he has to find somewhere safe for Sei. Even if he can’t think of a solution yet.

“Prince Kazia warned me about mages today too,” Sei says after a moment. “I thought he was just trying to frighten me.”

Wonderful. Marek rubs the bridge of his nose. “You met with Kazia?”

“He was in the laboratory before Radovan arrived,” Sei says. “I don’t think he likes me very much.”

Even better. Marek sometimes feels ridiculous harboring so much animosity towards a teenager, even if Kazia started it. Kazia was only six when Marek was adopted into House Dire, and Marek used to think Kazia was jealous of their parents’ attention. But Imrik and Aliza have always clearly favored Kazia, so that doesn’t make sense.

Marek suspects Kazia resents Marek’s magical inheritance. Kazia was born with neither Imrik’s storm magic nor Aliza’s blood magic. Imrik could have granted him magic through the inheritance spell, but perhaps Kazia wasn’t strong enough.

Or Imrik sensibly decided Kazia’s temperament was unsuited to lightning powers.

Whatever the reason, Kazia doesn’t like anyone, and he especially doesn’t like Marek. He has every motive to fuck

with Sei.

“Don’t meet with Kazia alone, all right?”

“I wasn’t alone,” Sei protests.

“That’s even worse,” Marek says. “If Kazia is being a brat, can you trust Osric not to maul him?”

Sei glances across the room, where Osric lounges peacefully in front of the fireplace. “Point taken, Your Highness. I’ll take guards with me next time I leave the garrison.”

“Thank you,” Marek says, glad to figure that out.

Except next Sei asks, “Who can I discuss the schedule with? I don’t want to take people away from their work without warning. There are a lot of places I want to go this week.”

“Like where?”

“I want to tour the castle. I also want to visit Queen Aliza if she’s free.” Sei looks up and away as he thinks. “Osric told me about the queen’s stone garden, which sounds lovely. I should also check when Radovan is available so I can visit his laboratory.”

Osric stretches along the hearth.

Sei nods, hair swaying around his delicate jawline. “Thank you, Osric. Yes, I want to go into the city too.”

“Is that it?” Marek asks, taken aback.

“Yes,” Sei says, which is a relief until he adds, “That’s all for this week.”

It’s not possible. The Ostomar dragon corps garrison is small and tightly run. Everyone has their own duties, and extending guard duty to Sei is enough of a stretch already.

“You can talk to me or Kamil Ivo about scheduling outings in advance.” Marek feels too guilty to refuse upfront. They’ll figure things out.

“Thank you,” Sei says.

Marek claps his hands. “Great! All right, I need to go—”

“Wait, Your Highness,” Sei interrupts. “Could I ask why you’re avoiding me?”

Marek isn’t avoiding Sei. He’s just busy. Flying Loska, managing the garrison, taking border reports from the north and east. Checking the roosts. Working out. Reviewing the past five years of garrison supply records...

All right, Marek has been throwing himself into busy work. Because Marek isn’t even supposed to be in Ostomar. His only job here is *commanding*—which is easier than he wants it to be right now. Draskora isn’t at war. Marek’s subordinates all know their jobs.

“I’ve been busy,” Marek says.

“Where have you been sleeping?” Sei asks, then bites his lip. “I apologize. That’s none of my business.”

Inexplicable guilt twists around Marek’s heart. Marek’s sleeping habits aren’t Sei’s business, but he can’t deny to himself that he’s been avoiding Sei.

In fact, avoiding Sei is the right thing to do. Why shouldn’t he? Sei is obviously scared of Marek. Neither of them wants this betrothal. Though maybe if this charade continues, Marek should set up another bedroom, instead of spending every night on the roof.

“I’m not avoiding you,” Marek says, preparing to be called out on the obvious lie.

“I’m relieved to hear that,” Sei says instead. “I’m sorry for overthinking things.”

Marek doesn’t understand Sei at all. At every turn, Sei defuses the argument, leaving Marek with nowhere to vent. And suddenly, that skill seems dangerous.

One morning out in the castle, and Sei befriended Radovan Ark and half a dozen servants. Plus a private meeting with Kazia Dire. Marek doesn’t understand Sei’s balance of nervousness and extroversion. Perfect manners, except when

he interrupts and disobeys. Alone, vulnerable, except for the fellcat ready to murder anyone who raises their voice at Sei.

Marek doesn't understand Sei, and that's a problem. He knows better than to enter battle with an unknown enemy. Marek learns the landscape, the winds, the mountains. Under his leadership, the dragon corps has learned more about wraiths than in the past hundred years.

Sei Mallory is a mystery, and keeping a mystery in his bedroom is dangerous. Marek needs to keep his distance, to protect them both.

But too much distance leads to situations like today. Plus, Sei needs supervision. Everyone Marek trusts has enough on their plate.

So, Marek makes his next offer out of caution. Pragmatism. Not fascination. "If you want to get out of the garrison, you can accompany me this week. I'll mostly be working with Loska, but we can visit the queen's stone garden and those other places too."

The offer should delight Sei. But there's just one flash of excitement before Sei replies, "Thank you, Your Highness. I'd enjoy that."

Sei doesn't even smile like he did in Radovan's laboratory. Marek doesn't know why that bothers him so much.



CHAPTER NINE

Sei

“Do I really need this, Your Highness?” Sei asks as Marek settles the helmet over his head. When Marek asked if Sei wanted to accompany him this week, all of the activities had sounded very grounded. “We aren’t flying, are we?”

Marek frowns, seemingly more focused on the helmet’s fit than Sei’s words. Satisfied at last, Marek buckles the strap under Sei’s chin.

Sei could do that himself. He just can’t muster the words to say so, not when Marek’s rough fingers so carefully brush the skin of his throat. Trunks and harness racks close in around them. The spacious tack room feels far too small.

It doesn’t help that Marek is sleeveless again. His loose black shirt leaves bare each muscular curve of his arms. The sight flusters Sei, which is ridiculous. They’re just arms.

Strong, gorgeous arms.

“Helmets aren’t for flying,” Marek says. Sei’s confusion must be clear, because Marek taps Sei’s helmet. “If you fall from journeying height, this won’t help. You’re done unless your dragon catches you. Helmets are for debris or projectiles. They’re also for falls during takeoff or landing. Or clambering around with a scale-brush on the ground.”

It’s the most Marek has said to Sei all day. Clearly, dragons are the way to get Marek talking.

“Why aren’t you wearing one then, Your Highness?” Sei asks.

Marek looks startled. “I’m not going to fall off.”

“Neither am I, Your Highness.”

Marek stares at Sei for a moment, as if he might argue. What does he see when he looks at Sei? A weak, useless toy? Sei may not be a big, muscular dragonrider, but he isn't useless. He's been trained since birth to be extremely useful.

Of course, that depends on somebody else making use of Sei.

As if he doesn't want to waste breath arguing, Marek grabs another helmet. "Come on," he says, sliding it on. He slings a coil of rope over his shoulder and leads the way outside.

This broad stone ledge is north of Ostomar castle proper, stretching along the deep canyon. Mist floats across the crevasse below, but sunlight warms the ledge itself. The sunny weather is unusual for Draskoran autumn. Perfect for dragon-brushing, which Sei still isn't convinced is a thing.

Very few dragons are regularly stationed at Ostomar. Today, there are only two on the ledge. Loska looms closest, his dark blue scales iridescent in the sunlight. Farther away curls a black and green dragon Sei remembers from the day he met Marek. The dragon is much smaller than Loska, and a rider sprawls motionless on the hump of their scaled back.

"Is that rider okay?" Sei asks. He can't see any movement.

Marek glances over. "Kamil is just napping."

"Won't he fall off?"

"Yavran won't let him. She's not a brat like some of these giant lizards."

Loska swings his head towards them, his massive violet eyes intent. *Yavran is a gentle and caring soul. Considerate and merciful. She always decapitates prey animals on the first bite.*

"Practically a vegetarian." Marek pats Loska's snout. "New crush, huh?"

New perhaps when you count in hours. But you cannot measure destiny in hours and minutes.

Marek grins brighter than the sun. There's no storm in his eyes now. "That's very deep for a giant lizard. Ready for your

beauty treatment?”

I am already beautiful, but you may brush my scales.

Sei feels like he’s intruding when Marek waves him over. Loska isn’t wearing a harness today, even the heavy leather collar missing from the base of his neck. Sei waits on the ground as Marek climbs up first, moving as naturally without the harness as with it. Once he reaches Loska’s shoulders, he unwinds the rope and loops it over a dorsal spike. He throws the rest down, and it shakes out into a rope ladder, each of the ends looped.

“Keep your feet and weight on Loska when you can,” Marek instructs. “Just use the ladder for balance.”

“Got it,” Sei confirms, and takes a moment to settle his nerves before grabbing the rope. He just said he wasn’t going to fall. He refuses to embarrass himself so quickly.

Gloves would help his grip. Sei’s hands aren’t as strong and callused as Marek’s. Sei manages to climb up regardless. Slower than Marek, even with the help of the rope. But he pauses to regain his balance whenever he’s uncertain, and he never falters. Triumph sparks in his chest when he joins Marek at Loska’s shoulders, and he looks over—

Marek draws the ladder up, then hooks a center loop over Loska’s dorsal spike, instead of the end loop. Half the ladder now hangs on either side of the dragon. Marek is focused on the task at hand. He’s not about to praise Sei for a job well done.

Sei isn’t in the guild anymore, and Marek isn’t an instructor, doling out just enough praise to motivate the grails in training.

“Is there any special way I should stand up here?” Sei asks, shoving down his disappointment. “I don’t want to hurt Loska.”

I am too strong! Loska protests. How can a tiny human like you hurt me?

Marek grins. “Don’t step directly on his spine, and don’t step on the wing joints. You won’t hurt him, but he gets

ticklish.”

I do not!

“You can move the ladder along Loska’s back,” Marek continues, gesturing along Loska’s spine. “Brace yourself with it to get any spots farther down his side, or leave those to me.”

Sei pays careful attention. “What spots am I looking for?”

Marek sits at the base of Loska’s neck. He runs his hand along the dark scales, then waves Sei over. “Spots like this. Come and look.”

Walking on a dragon is strange. Possibly stranger than riding one. That was a rush of pure terror, then overwhelming sensation and nausea and so much warmth. This is almost ordinary. A calm, sunny day. A task to learn. Everything is slow enough that Sei can *think* about the immense, majestic creature beneath him, and the far more intimidating man beckoning him over.

“See the dirt ground in here, and the rougher patch of scales?” Marek asks. He pulls a stiff-bristled brush from his trouser pocket. “Try it here.”

Marek scoots back enough that Sei can take his place. Sei straddles Loska’s back, grateful for his flexibility, and first searches with his fingers for the patch Marek indicated. He doesn’t see any change in the scales at first. They’re smooth but have more distinct ridges closer to the spine and anywhere that doesn’t bend much.

A paler stripe of scales encircles Loska’s neck. The stripe is broader than Sei’s hand, or even Marek’s. The scales aren’t rough, and it’s not the patch Marek pointed out. Just a slight difference in color. “Is this where that big leather collar goes?”

“It’s the rig base, not a collar.” Marek doesn’t sound mad, just firmly correcting Sei. “We only take the rig base off every few months, to re-fit and clean. We check the fit and condition every time we rig up, of course. But the rig base makes harnessing quicker in an emergency. That’s for off-duty. On-duty, we keep the whole rig on.”

Sei frowns. “That sounds uncomfortable. Do the dragons mind?”

What a considerate... person you have found, Marek. Loska sounds amused—and like he was about to call Sei something more specific.

“If the dragons minded the harnesses, no force in this world would be able to keep them on,” Marek says. “Dragons are easier than horses that way, though. The bond lets us each clearly explain what we need and why we’re doing things. Dragons can—and will—tell us if they’re uncomfortable.”

“That makes sense.” Sei finds the patch of rough scales. They’re ragged on the edges, with dirt ground in. “Do I just brush?”

Marek moves closer behind Sei. They don’t touch, but somehow Marek’s presence is warmer than the dragon beneath them. “Just like currying a horse. Try it.”

“I’ve never curried a horse either.” Sei puts the brush to Loska’s scales regardless. He tries to gently brush the debris away, but only seems to be stirring it up, not getting rid of it.

“Here.” Marek leans forward—and covers Sei’s hand in his. “Harder.”

The word burns through Sei’s ears with the brush of Marek’s breath. Every thought scatters in inappropriate directions. Marek’s strong, powerful hand feels incredible, his palms warm against Sei’s knuckles. He moves Sei’s hand with the brush in a firm flicking motion that whisks the dirt away.

“That’s right.” Marek’s approval doesn’t help, heating Sei’s blood even as Marek releases his hand and moves back. “Wild dragons shed scales before any surface damage becomes a problem. But we have to be more careful with the pressure of the harness and the specific movements of combat.”

Desperate to think about something, anything that isn’t the memory of Marek’s broad hand, Sei asks, “How does the dragonbond work, anyway?”

Marek sits back like he's poised for takeoff, minus the harness. "Dragons are very particular creatures. They're as social as they are aggressive. Most wild dragons find a balance that suits them, but some of them get restless. Combine that with their inherent magic, and they can get a little... crazy over the years."

"Like Loska attacking your clan?" Sei asks, then tenses. Maybe he shouldn't have mentioned that.

I wasn't crazy, Loska protests. I was bored.

"You know that's worse, right?" Marek nudges Loska's side with his heel. "Exactly like Loska attacking Helra. Turns out some humans and dragons balance each other out. A bond forms if there's the right bond."

Loska's scales look better. Sei touches the brushed-out spot, which now feels just as smooth as the rest of Loska. "A bond forms if there's a bond?"

"Circular, right? People like Radovan will argue about how it works forever. I just know what me and Loska have." Marek is more relaxed than Sei has seen him before. "Our magic is stronger and more stable. We can communicate quicker than thought—not just the mental voice like Loska uses with others. And Loska is happy, well-fed, and unlikely to rampage across the countryside."

Sei has trouble imagining that from Loska. "Would you really be like that without the bond?"

Loska rumbles contentedly beneath them. *Without the bond, I would eat Kamil first.*

"What? Why?" Sei has barely met Kamil, but the man seems fine.

I don't know. He just annoys me. Something about his face.

Across the ledge, Kamil continues napping peacefully on his dragon's back. He's too far away and has a hat propped over his face, so Sei will have to examine him more closely later.

“It will probably be difficult to court Yavran if you eat Kamil,” Sei points out.

Loska rumbles again. *Good point. I will have to decide which is stronger. Adoration or aggravation?*

Marek laughs, and cautious delight flutters in Sei’s chest. He hadn’t been trying to amuse Marek, but this is good. Today marks perhaps the first hint of progress in Sei’s plan to make his claimant like him.

Sei doesn’t dare hope for adoration. He’ll settle for a lack of aggravation.

Someone emerges from a corridor and enters the tack room. By her uniform, she’s either an aide or adjutant. Sei doesn’t really know the difference yet. He’s more interested in her hair—long braids of pastel pink and green. What would Sei look like with dyed hair? Blue like Marek’s, or green streaks like Kamil? Or something else entirely?

As Marek works on the scales where the harness sits, Sei walks along Loska’s back. It’s easier than he expected, the dragon firm beneath him. “Can you feel me walking?” Sei asks. Talking to Loska is becoming more natural. Easier in some ways than talking to Marek.

Yes. You have nice feet.

Sei muffles a laugh—but before he can reply, Loska slips into his head again.

Sorry. Marek says I can’t just tell people they have nice feet.

“Excuse me?” Sei whirls around to find Marek covering his face.

Sorry, Loska says again, not sounding sorry at all. Marek says I wasn’t supposed to say he had said that.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear it,” Sei says after a moment, and continues his journey past Loska’s furred wings. He left the ladder by Loska’s shoulders, so he decides to just focus on any rough patches he sees up close.

When he turns around, he's surprised to see Marek watching him. Not amused like earlier, but not angry. Sei can't read him.

"Is something wrong, Your Highness?" Sei calls out.

"You're just more comfortable up here than I expected," Marek says. "You have a good sense of balance."

"Balance is very important, Your Highness." Sei is fairly average as far as guild grails go, but he'll take the compliment. "This is a lot easier when Loska isn't moving. I know I was rather pathetic during the flight."

"No, you handled that well." Marek drops down between Loska's wings and starts checking the scales beneath the joints. "Everyone's scared shitless their first flight. Some of them literally, so you're ahead of the curve."

It's Sei's turn to surprise himself with a laugh. "Were you scared too, Your Highness?"

"Of course not. I'm not everyone."

"What was it like, then?"

Marek tilts his head back. His arms practically gleam in the sunlight. "My first flight was like coming home. I finally knew where I belonged."

His voice holds such longing and satisfaction, like a waking dream. Sei can't answer at first, choked by his own yearning for a home like that. This betrothal represents Sei's purpose, a grail bound to a mage. Could Sei belong to the sky too, at Marek's side?

"Do you think we could try sharing power soon?" Sei asks before he can stop himself. He knows it's the wrong thing to say as soon as the words leave his mouth.

Marek's smile falls away. "No. I'm not taking your magic."

Sei's stomach twists. "Your Highness—"

"Don't ask me about that again," Marek orders, and moves farther up Loska's shoulders. He swings down the rope ladder,

dropping from sight and ending the conversation.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Sei whispers, blinking away the sting of disappointment.



CHAPTER TEN

Marek

Bringing Sei along might be a mistake. Marek made the decision on an impulse, for selfish reasons. This visit needs to look like an ordinary social call, not an investigation. Bringing his betrothed is the perfect camouflage. Still, surely this isn't the city outing Sei had in mind: paying condolences to Countess Zora Bernek.

“Is there anything I should avoid talking about, Your Highness?” Sei asks quietly. “I haven't studied Draskoran funeral customs at all.”

They wait in the antechamber of House Bernek's Ostomar City estate. The dark murals and carved pillars are as overwrought as any Draskoran noble residence, but the opulence is hollowed out by piles of packed trunks. Wrapped paintings lean against the walls, and a constant flow of servants transports the luggage.

The new countess arrived in the city two days ago, and she'll be gone by the end of the week. Zora is only here long enough to move her family's belongings from the estate, which she apparently intends to sell. She already cleared out the palace guest suite in which her brother Petir died.

Zora's speed means everyone else's condolences, social calls, and interrogations of varying subtlety will be squeezed into the one week. Which is why Marek and Sei are waiting in the antechamber now. Zora is already seeing another visitor.

Most nobles would have ushered out any other visitors upon Marek's arrival. Etiquette strongly discourages leaving a prince waiting. But Marek knows Zora well—her family rules the city of Parsk, where the dragon corps training grounds are

located. Zora in turn knows Marek is more patient than many give him credit for.

“Don’t worry about it,” Marek says. “Zora isn’t a stickler for etiquette.”

“I just don’t want to say anything wrong,” Sei says, and only then does Marek realize Sei is genuinely nervous. Maybe it shouldn’t be a surprise, but Sei looks so calm. So put-together, from his pin-straight hair to the polished toes of his boots. His lips curve in a slight, friendly smile.

“Saying ‘don’t worry’ again won’t help, will it?” Marek tries not to grin at Sei’s brief glare. It’s strangely tempting to trick Sei out of his usual composure. “You’re here with me, which means you’re supposed to be here. I’ve known Zora for years, and I’ll handle the talking.”

Marek should have prepared Sei better for this. He hadn’t considered it before they left the palace, Marek on horseback and Sei in a carriage. Because Marek dislikes being closed in, while Sei doesn’t know how to ride.

Sei needs riding lessons before Marek breaks the betrothal. Marek can’t turn Sei loose without knowing how to ride a horse.

Before Marek can decide on an equestrian teacher he trusts with Sei, an inner door opens. The woman who emerges is someone even more familiar than Zora Bernek. Her short-cropped hair is the same white and red as ever, but she leans more heavily on her cane than Marek remembers.

“General Gabra.” Marek raises his right fist to his heart in salute. “It’s been a while.”

“I bet you’re glad of that, Stormrider.” Gabra moves slowly, placing her cane carefully before each step. A weathered, pale woman in her sixties, just a few years ago she was Marek’s predecessor as wing-marshal. She seemed primed to continue in the position forever until a sudden illness stole her sense of balance and forced her retirement. “Nobody wants the old crone breathing down their necks and interfering with their command.”

Marek salutes again. “I admire your confidence thinking you could interfere.”

Gabra’s amusement is little more than a sparkle in her eyes. Most people would just see the deepening scowl. Her temper has only worsened since retirement.

“Is this the grail?” Gabra asks, barely glancing at Sei.

Her attitude doesn’t usually bother Marek—but he bristles now. Chewing out recruits is one thing. Sei never signed up for Gabra’s scrutiny.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, General.” Sei bows before Marek can introduce him. “I’ve heard so much about your paintings.”

“Have you?” Gabra asks, unusually pleased.

“I would be honored to see them if you’re ever free,” Sei says earnestly. “I have a small interest in landscapes.”

Marek must be dreaming. The only other possibility is that he’s stuck in the most complex illusion he’s ever encountered. Because General Gabra smiles back at Sei.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Sei Mallory.”

“Well, Sei, have your claimant’s people talk to my people,” Gabra says. “Nice to get some culture in the dragon corps.”

Marek hadn’t known Gabra had taken up painting. He hadn’t known Sei had an interest in landscapes either. He navigates the rest of the conversation on reflex until Gabra hobbles out of the Bernek estate. Then he turns to Sei.

“How did you know about Gabra’s paintings?”

“Clem mentioned it the other day,” Sei answers. “They said General Gabra was intimidating, but she seemed nice.”

Nice is not how Marek would describe Gabra. As wing-marshal, she was a brutal taskmaster and a fervent warmonger. But she was better placed there than her previous position training recruits. That was before Marek joined the dragon

corps, but everyone knows Gabra presided over the highest trainee fatality rate in dragon corps history.

Before Marek decides whether to scare Sei with that information or not, a servant walks over and bows.

“Thank you for your patience, Your Highness,” she says. “The countess can see you now.”

As the servant retreats, Sei touches Marek’s arm. “Your Highness?”

“Yes?”

Sei’s friendly smile is gone, replaced with caution. “We’re not just here to offer condolences, are we?”

“Of course we are.” Marek won’t admit otherwise anywhere someone can hear him.

If Petir Bernek didn’t kill himself, someone else did.

Marek has no reason to suspect misdirection. The late count was an unstable alcoholic for years. The palace drasgard conducted a thorough two-week investigation, neither too hasty nor too dragged-out.

There’s just the matter of timing. Petir died the night before Vana fled the palace. The same night Lady Naoko Mallory’s servant died by accident.

Marek can’t help his intense interest in the events of that night, since those events are the reason he’s saddled with his unwanted betrothal. If he wants to revoke his claim without infuriating his royal father, Marek needs to understand the circumstances that led to it.

“Your Highness,” Sei says. “If I’m here as your claim, you should offer your arm.”

Sei is right, and Marek feels a brief flicker of embarrassment. The sort he thought he overcame long ago. Vana would have remembered that. Vana grew up in distant Kaiskara, but he was always noble. He absorbed every layer of etiquette from birth until it was more instinct than memory.

Marek offers his arm. “If you’re ready.”

Sei's touch is feather-light on Marek's forearm.

Marek has been much closer to Sei than this. They shared a harness for a day-long dragon ride. But as they walk into the Bernek visiting parlor, somehow this feels far more intimate. The slight pressure of Sei's hand, the awareness of Sei's far smaller form at Marek's side. Marek slows his stride so Sei can keep up.

The symbolism is heavier than the touch itself. So far, Marek has avoided playing into this charade of a betrothal. Every nerve in his body screams to tear away from Sei Mallory. Not because the hand on his arm feels wrong.

Because it doesn't.

Zora Bernek rises from her chair as they enter. Her plain cotton mourning robes are a stark contrast to her painted face. Blue dust glitters across her deep brown cheeks, brightening the violet of her eyes. Her black hair is undyed but braided up in a crown.

"Welcome, Your Highness," Zora says with a bow. "It seems I owe you congratulations."

Marek pats Sei's hand, and Sei jolts beneath his grasp. "Zora, this is Sei Mallory. Sei, this is Countess Zora Bernek."

"It's an honor to meet you," Sei says.

"Welcome, Sei." Zora rests her hands on her hips. "I'd offer refreshments, but we're packing up the place. I leave for Parsk the day after next."

Marek doesn't point out that Zora wouldn't have offered refreshments anyway. Remembering that she *should* must be a new concern after becoming countess. "So I heard. I wanted to give my condolences before you left."

"You and half the palace." Zora sighs. "I don't mind seeing you, Your Highness. It's just been a long fucking month."

Marek can relate, for different reasons. "I'm sorry about Petir. I knew he was struggling, but I had no idea it was that bad."

“Neither did I.” Zora glares then. “No, don’t bother asking me.”

“Asking you what?”

Zora throws her hands up. “What everyone has been asking. Did Petir really kill himself? Do I think something *sinister* has happened?”

At Marek’s side, Sei tenses. He draws closer to Marek, and Marek feels an incredible urge to pull Sei behind him. To stand between him and Zora’s anger.

Her anger isn’t directed at Sei, though. Nor at Marek.

Zora deflates. “I’ve been mourning my brother for years. I have to let him go if I want to protect the house he left to me.”

“I won’t ask, then.” Marek will find another angle of investigation. He doesn’t have the heart to dig into Zora’s pain. “I’m truly sorry for your loss.”

The routine words, however sincere, wash over Zora without changing her. She must have heard the platitudes a thousand times these past few weeks. “Thank you, Your Highness. Was there anything else?”

“Lady Zora.” Sei’s grip tightens on Marek’s arm. “I didn’t know your brother personally, but my fellcat told me that Count Petir snuck treats to him at parties a few times.”

“Did he really?” Zora asks, her surprise mirroring Marek’s.

Sei nods. “Osric remembered your brother’s kindness well.”

Zora’s painted lips spasm. She looks away and takes a slow breath before answering, “Thank you.”

Sei’s grip tightens more. Marek covers his hand.

“We’ll leave you be, Zora,” Marek says. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“I’ll be fine, Your Highness. I’ve been running House Bernek for years already.” Zora smooths out her already-pristine mourning robes, collecting herself. “But I hear that

man Ludvik is in the city. You might dig him up and see how he's doing."

Marek hasn't heard that name in years.

Ludvik was Wing-Captain Irenka Miraz's adjutant. A non-rider member of the dragon corps whose duty was assisting Irenka with anything she required of him. Ludvik left the dragon corps after Irenka died letting Rakos Tem escape.

And Petir Bernek was obsessed with Irenka. Her death was the catalyst for his downward spiral and official suicide.

"Maybe I will," Marek says. "Thanks, Zora."

"Do *not* mention it," Zora replies with a bow.

Sei clings quietly to Marek's arm until they return to the waiting carriage and horses. This time Marek waves his groom away and enters the carriage after Sei.

The carriage is too small. Even sitting on the forward bench, all the way to the left, with Sei on the opposite facing bench all the way to Marek's right, they're too close together. Marek prefers the open sky. He doesn't like being enclosed. But he needs to talk to Sei in private now.

"I'm sorry for ruining the visit." Sei twists his hands together. Then he catches himself and folds them in his lap. "I didn't mean to upset her."

The carriage jerks forward, and Marek settles against the bench. "You were perfect. You knocked her off balance. I wouldn't have gotten half as much information without you."

Sei's mouth opens, then closes. Marek is distracted by the soft, round curve of Sei's lower lip until Sei finds his next words. "Any help was an accident, Your Highness. I just thought she might like to know something nice about her brother."

Marek resists the urge to knock his head against the carriage wall. Fuck, he's an asshole. He prides himself on being straightforward, not getting tangled up in palace intrigue. But even that is a strategy. A necessary strategy,

because there's nothing people with power hate more than other people grasping for it.

Sei's sincerity puts Marek to shame. Especially when a nagging part of Marek insists, *His sincerity could be just another scheme.*

"That was kind of you," Marek says eventually. "Don't worry about upsetting Zora. It was the sort of upset she needs right now."

Sei twitches the curtain open. Sunlight gleams across his soft features before he sits back on the bench. "What information were you looking for?"

Marek doesn't believe Sei is a double agent sent to wrest information from him. But if Sei was, his every distracting breath would put Marek off guard. "It's safer if you don't know."

"You brought me with you, Your Highness," Sei points out. "I won't reveal anything."

Fuck. Marek isn't usually this much of a hypocrite. "Petir Bernek died the same night as your mother's servant."

Sei understands immediately. "Before Prince Vana disappeared."

"Might be a coincidence. Might not."

Marek debates how much more would be wise to share, but Sei falls quiet for a moment. Shrugging in on himself, Sei hardly takes up any space. Like he's trying to reduce his presence. But that only means Marek focuses harder on him. Like Sei is a puzzle he needs to solve.

"I always thought having siblings might be nice," Sei says. "I imagine reality is more complicated."

Marek snorts. "You could say that."

"What do you... never mind."

"Ask whatever you want," Marek says, because Sei seems like he needs permission. "I might not answer, but I won't get mad."

Sei fiddles with his coat sleeves. He always dresses warmly, clearly not used to Draskoran weather. “I know you and Prince Kazia don’t get along. Did you get along with Prince Vana?”

The carriage rocks to a halt. Marek hates not being in control of their movement. “Don’t bring up Vana in front of my father, all right?”

“I’m not *that* naive, Your Highness.”

Marek leans forward, elbows on his knees. “Vana and I got along well enough. We were never close, though. Maybe we should have been. He’s only a few years older than me, and House Dire adopted us only a few years apart. But Vana has this distance to him.”

Sei listens intently. Marek is used to people paying attention to him—mostly fellow riders jumping to his orders. Sei’s watchfulness is different.

“Talk about naive,” Marek continues. “I thought we were closer than ever the morning he asked for a ride south. Turns out he was just using me to leave the country.”

Sei’s eyes widen. “You helped him desert?”

“I didn’t know that’s what I was helping him with, but yes.”

“No wonder King Imrik was so angry the night we arrived.”

Marek has to laugh. “Yeah, I was already in trouble *before* my tantrum about the betrothal.” Guilt twists through him again. However trapped Marek feels, it must be so much worse for Sei. “I’m sorry you’re stuck with me for now. You would have liked Vana better.”

“I’m not certain of that.” Sei relaxes back against the carriage bench. “Isn’t Prince Vana on a boat? I strongly dislike boats.”

“Bad trip across the Jaws?” Marek grins. “If Vana was in Ostomar, he wouldn’t be on a boat.”

“True. But Osric says Vana already had...” Sei trails off and glances away. “I mean, Osric agrees that Prince Vana was very distant. I had enough distance in the guild.”

Suddenly, Marek wants to know everything about Sei’s childhood. How he was raised, how he was trained. How he grew into the infuriating, fascinating man sitting in this carriage across from Marek.

“What do you mean?”

Sei shrugs. “Just tedious guild customs. Nothing interesting.”

“I’m interested,” Marek says, and feels a pang of guilt that Sei looks so surprised.

“The guild teaches that greater intimacy forms a stronger connection between a mage and grail,” Sei explains. “Any sort of intimacy—physical, emotional. Sexual. We’re discouraged from being close with others, so we can someday be closer with our mage.”

The first part isn’t new. Everyone knows pulling magic from a grail is easier with familiarity. But the rest of Sei’s explanation disturbs Marek. He tries to sound neutral as he asks, “Were you allowed to have friends?”

Amusement tugs at Sei’s lips. “Most people fixate on the sexual part.”

“I don’t want to fluster you.”

“Very considerate.” Sei’s ears turn red as he continues. “I had friends, of course. My best friends were all chosen years ago, but I got along with the younger grails too.”

“Do you miss them?” Marek asks.

“Maybe I should, but I don’t,” Sei admits. “And Draskora’s not as bad as I expected either.”

The dread eases from Marek’s heart. He’s certain now that Sei and Vana would have been terrible for each other. Vana is too reserved. Sei is too sincere. They’re both far too concerned with duty. Marek can just imagine them throwing everything into this royally mandated arrangement. They would both try

so hard to survive their marriage, never once considering that either of them deserved to be happy.

Sei and Vana would never have worked.

Marek can't figure out why that realization is such a relief.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sei

Afternoon light pours gold into the tower bedroom. Comfortably ensconced in warm fur and bedding, Sei flips the page. Osric sprawls across the top of Marek's bed, forming the perfect giant pillow behind Sei's back.

Over the past few weeks, Sei has started thinking of this as his bed. His room. Marek barely ever stops by the room, and he never sleeps in the bed.

Sei still doesn't know where Marek sleeps, and he tries not to speculate. None of his business.

Marek has had important dragon corps duties all day today. The sort of meetings Sei isn't allowed to attend. Sei doesn't mind—relaxing in their garrison quarters is easier now that he doesn't feel so trapped.

A full morning of leisure is something Sei never got in the Porcelain Guild. Extending that leisure into the afternoon is an unimaginable luxury. There were plenty of rest periods for guild grails, but those all had a purpose. Meditating to align body, soul, mind, and magic.

Sei has neglected his meditation recently. There's nobody telling Sei to sit still, and preparing himself for use as a grail seems pointless. His mage doesn't want to use him, after all.

That book must be fascinating, Osric says. You're so absorbed, you haven't noticed Marek standing in the doorway for the past five minutes.

Sei jerks his head up. Sure enough, Marek's presence fills the doorway. Golden light brightens his dark hair, but his gaze is unreadable.

“Didn’t mean to startle you,” Marek says, moving into the room.

“No, you didn’t.” Sei feels awkward and ungainly. Should he clamber out of bed and bow? Or just stay here? Osric hasn’t moved at all. “Is something the matter? Osric says you’ve been there for five minutes.”

Osric’s laughter runs silently through Sei’s head as Marek stops. If this wasn’t Marek Stormrider, Wing-Marshal and Prince of Draskora, Sei would say Marek looked *awkward* now. But this *is* Marek, so surely that can’t be true.

“You just looked comfortable. I didn’t want to disturb you.” Marek looks around, as if avoiding Sei’s gaze. “Why is it so clean in here?”

“I just put a few things away, Your Highness.”

Marek grimaces. “Don’t do that. You’re not a servant.”

Sei marks that down on his mental list of things Marek dislikes. This is a good one—Sei doesn’t particularly enjoy cleaning. “How was your meeting?”

“Good.” Marek opens a wardrobe and stops short. He doesn’t say anything about all of Sei’s clothing hanging up, though. “How was your reading?”

“Interesting.” Sei extricates himself from his cozy blanket and felled cat nest. Osric stretches out to take the rest of the space as Sei hops down. “I was reading about... now what’s wrong, Your Highness?”

Marek grabs Sei’s navy coat from the wardrobe and tosses it over. “Put this on. You’re not wearing enough.”

Sei barely catches the coat. He hadn’t felt cold until Marek said something, but it’s true. His silk pajamas are very thin, and the loose collar doesn’t help. Marek’s consideration is even warmer than the coat, though. Beneath his intimidating presence, Marek is such a nice person.

If only he liked Sei, even a little.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Sei says, wrapping the coat around himself.

Marek doesn't look at him until the coat is on. "What were you reading?"

"I was reading about wraiths," Sei answers. "They sound terrifying."

Marek closes the first wardrobe and moves to another, which still has his things in it. "Why were you reading about wraiths?"

Because Marek hasn't been around to answer Sei's questions. "Because they're important, and I don't know anything about them."

"Let me see that book." Marek moves to the bed, hesitates, then takes the book from beside Osric's fluffy belly. "*Legendarium Draskora*. This book is just scary stories to frighten children and scholars. Of course wraiths sound terrifying if this is what you're reading."

"The book says they're giant dragons made of bone, darkness, and malice," Sei says. "They descend upon Draskora from beyond the northern sea. Is that true?"

"That part's true," Marek concedes.

"The book also says they have a ravenous hunger for human and dragon flesh."

"That part's true too."

"What's missing?" Sei asks, because that all sounds pretty terrifying to him.

"The part where we fight back," Marek Stormrider says, teeth bared in a fierce and glorious grin. "Sure, wraiths are scary. They're damn near impossible to kill. But they're not invincible."

Sei's heart skips a beat. "What hurts them?"

"Magic, dragonfire, and scalestone." Marek returns the book.

Sei holds it to his chest. "Of course. It's always about scalestone here."

“No kidding. But we actually don’t use it much against wraiths. A scalestone blade would hurt a wraith, but they don’t exactly sit still for that.” Marek brings his hand up, then down in a sort of swooping motion. “We can’t waste that much scalestone shooting them out of the sky. So, we use other means.”

“Magic and dragonfire,” Sei repeats.

“Things aren’t as scary when you can light them on fire.” Marek grins again, then moves back to the wardrobe, leaving Sei alone to recover.

How can a man’s smile be so blinding?

Then Marek pulls off his shirt, and Sei can’t help his undignified squeak.

Marek’s exquisitely contoured back muscles tense up. “Sorry. Forgot myself.”

“It’s fine,” Sei says faintly. “Completely fine.”

Drooling like that is not completely fine, Osric comments, his amusement clear.

Sei throws the Legendarium at Osric’s head.

Osric telekinetically catches it, then sets it on the bed.

“I’m used to living with other riders,” Marek explains, instead of putting on a shirt. Every moment’s delay allows Sei to trace another faint scar on Marek’s back. “We all share space when we’re on-duty.”

Which means it’s fine that Sei can’t tear his eyes away, right?

“Of course. Yes,” Sei manages. “We each had our own quarters in the guild.”

“Never would have guessed.”

Sei would be pleased to recognize the friendly sarcasm if he wasn’t still stunned by Marek’s muscles. He knew about Marek’s biceps and shoulders thanks to Marek’s apparent sleeve allergy. But he didn’t know backs could look like this.

Maybe he shouldn't be surprised. He spent an entire day surrounded by Marek's bulk when they flew to Ostomar. But seeing is entirely different, especially when Marek turns around.

The bed frame creaks as Osric stretches out. *Stop. Please. You're embarrassing me.*

Marek's chest is no less impressive than his back. He isn't cut and rippling—he's solid. Pure, functional strength.

A shirt dangles from Marek's hand. He seems in no hurry to put it on. "Why do they call it the Porcelain Guild anyway?"

Sei rubs his hand through his hair. His coat is too warm now. "The founding guildmasters thought of their purpose as crafting. Shaping grails into masterpieces."

Marek doesn't respond, long enough that Sei looks up—to face Marek's cold disgust.

"Crafting?" Marek spits out. "Like you're a fucking teacup?"

The warmth shatters into ice.

Sei can't deny the cruel description. That's what he is, isn't he? Sei has been shaped and trained since birth to be the perfect power source. He can't feel or control the magic sleeping within him, waiting for someone else to sip from.

Sei's power will make Marek stronger than ever, transcending his already legendary abilities. Sei himself will kneel quietly in Marek's shadow, supporting him without stealing any of his glory.

Except Marek says it like grailhood is disgusting. Not beautiful.

Marek drags his shirt on. He doesn't apologize, but his voice is softer when he says, "I'm heading to the city to track down Ludvik. Did you want to come with me?"

Reluctance stings Sei's heart. He doesn't want to accompany a man who thinks he's a teacup. But this is an opportunity to be close to Marek. If Sei just doesn't mention the guild, maybe he can make progress.

Besides, Sei enjoyed their last outing, except for the grieving countess. And one more thing...

“Can I open the carriage windows this time?”

Marek frowns. “Were they stuck? I’ll remind the driver to check the latches.” He heads for the door. “We leave in an hour. Don’t wear anything too nice.”

Sei slumps on the edge of the bed, too many emotions swirling inside him. He had been asking permission—but Marek assumed the windows were a technical problem. Like it never occurred to him that Sei might need permission for something like that.

“I don’t understand him.”

Not surprising. Osríc nudges Sei’s shoulder. *You don’t understand yourself either.*

“I do,” Sei protests. “I know my purpose very well.”

Exactly, Osríc says, which doesn’t make any sense. *I think Marek is good for you.*

“If only Marek agreed.” Sei closes his eyes and centers himself. Time to stop moping and get dressed. He has another opportunity to win over his betrothed today.

Guards clear the avenue ahead of their party, so the carriage rolls unimpeded. Crowds still press in the side roads, giving Sei brief glimpses of Ostomar City’s inhabitants. Everything is much more colorful than Sei expected. Sure, the buildings are dark and foreboding. Scarcely a corner exists without a snarling gargoyle. But curtains and awnings flutter in bright jewel tones. More people wear rainbow hair than plain yellow or brown.

Sei fiddles with his own black hair until the carriage draws to a halt. The door opens before the most distinctly un-Draskoran building Sei has ever seen. As Marek hands his horse to the groom, Sei takes the time to gawk.

The building is a pale stone tower covered in creeping vines. Green shutters flank the windows, not a gargoyle in sight. Trees surround the outskirts of the property. Autumn-red leaves scatter across the yard.

A huge sign hangs above the door. Made of wood but carved to look like a cloth banner, it's emblazoned with the establishment's name: The Topsy Tree.

"Is this a... Silaisan tavern?" Sei asks when Marek joins him.

Kamil Ivo answers instead. "Silaisan *themed*. It's a bit ridiculous, but the wine is good."

Kamil and his adjutant make up the rest of their party today. The dragonrider's hair matches Yavran's scales—black with streaks of yellow green. The black might be his natural hair color, judging by his dark eyebrows and light brown complexion. The green clashes terribly with his red wyrmskin jacket and flashing violet eyes. He's taller than Sei, but how much is difficult to tell. The soles of his wyrmskin boots are very thick.

His adjutant is a woman named Deline, a head taller than Kamil. Her Fellrian ancestry is clear, though her features are rounder and deeper than Sei's. The long pink and green braids had thrown Sei off from a distance, as well as the Silaisan name. Their shared heritage aside, Sei isn't sure about getting closer. Deline wears a brace of knives over her flowing black dress.

"Don't scare Ludvik off," Marek tells them.

Kamil salutes, then races to catch up with Deline, who's already halfway to the entrance.

"Will this Ludvik not want to see us?" Sei feels like he's missing a lot of context.

"We're about to find out." Marek hesitates. For a second, Sei thinks he's going to offer his arm. Instead, Marek just touches Sei's shoulder and urges him forward. "This place should be safe, but stay in eyesight. No wandering off."

“Yes, Your Highness.” Sei tries not to read anything into the touch burning behind his shoulder blade. “I’ve never been to a tavern before.”

“You’re joking. No, of course you’re not joking.” Marek pulls Sei closer as they pass a group of patrons stumbling out of the tower. It’s not necessary—drunk as they are, the group clearly recognizes Marek. They give Marek and Sei space, bowing to the prince.

Or they’re just falling over.

Marek waves with the hand not glued to Sei’s shoulder, then escorts Sei into the Tipsy Tree.

Sei blinks against the assault of color. Every surface is carved and painted. Pink roses and purple tulips, green and gold leaves, bright red strawberries. There are real plants too, flowering bushes and trees ensconced in patterned pots. A wide staircase curves up to the next floor, vines wrapped around its railing.

More than a bit ridiculous, as Kamil described it.

The rest of the clientele doesn’t seem as surprised to see Marek as the drunks outside. Maybe Marek comes here often.

“I don’t see Kamil,” Sei says.

“He’s upstairs.” Marek nods towards the staircase, where Deline lounges against the banister. Seeing they’ve noticed her, she heads up the stairs. “They must not have seen Ludvik down here. Come on.”

“Are we not following them?”

“We will in a minute.” Marek moves them both towards the bar. “First, we’re getting a drink.”

“Oh, yes, of course!” Sei says, trying to sound natural.

Marek stares down at him with some trepidation. “You have at least tasted wine before, right?”

“Not quite,” Sei admits.

The Porcelain Guild emphasizes health and balance. Magic, soul, and body are all connected. As an extension of

his magic, Sei's body isn't entirely his own. He can't use it selfishly, and excessive alcohol harms the body. Sei absolutely can't overindulge, and complete abstinence is better.

Even though the guildmasters certainly enjoyed their spirits during festivals.

“What *have* you done?” Marek shakes his head. “Come on. I'm grabbing a drink, but you don't have to.”

“No,” Sei says quickly. “I mean, yes, I want a drink.”

Marek kindly doesn't laugh. “They don't have any good ale here, so we're drinking wine. Do you want something sweet, or something tart?”

A few minutes later, Sei cradles a glass mug shaped like a rose. Pink wine refracts through the petals. Sei half-expects a guildmaster to jump out from behind a potted tree. But nobody is here to scold him. There's just a light crowd of people not paying Sei any attention at all, and Marek Stormrider watching him consideringly.

Marek's own rose-glass holds a darker, nearly purple wine. He taps it against Sei's glass. “Clear skies,” Marek says, and takes a sip.

“Forever,” Sei replies in reflex, and takes his own sip. Marek chose well—the wine is incredibly sweet. The tiniest sip floods his mouth with flavor.

“Forever?” Marek asks.

Sei licks a stray drop of wine from his lip. Is the alcohol working yet? Does he feel anything? “That's how we salute in Fellrin. It's short for, ‘May we share wine forever, so we don't kill each other later.’”

Marek snorts. “That makes more sense. Ours is short for, ‘clear skies for us and terrible storms for our enemies.’” Marek points with his glass. “You're not going to get shit-faced on one sip, by the way.”

“Was I that obvious?” Sei can't help grinning. “Wait, don't answer that.”

Marek's gaze drops briefly to Sei's lips, then away. "We should head upstairs."

The next floor of the Topsy Tree is less garish. More a forest than a garden, with soothing green tapestries. Every table is round and uneven, with visible tree rings. There are fewer people up here too. One couple, one table of three, and one man with sky-blue hair sleeping on a table near the back. Kamil and Deline sit at a table near the staircase, dealing out a game with cards shaped like leaves.

Marek steers Sei in their direction. "Stay with Deline."

"Not me?" Kamil asks.

"Deline is responsible," Marek says, and doesn't stick around for Kamil's grumbling.

Deline doesn't say anything. She just flips a braid over her shoulder and deals a hand of cards for Sei.

"Hello, Sei." Kamil lifts his own glass in greeting. "I'm excited to get to know you without Marek breathing down our necks. Do you want to play cards or something?"

Sitting down without Marek feels strange. Sei has almost gotten used to Marek's hand at his back, and he misses the guiding warmth already. At least he has his wine, which is starting to warm him up. "I'm delighted to join you. What's the game?"

Sei doesn't recognize the name of the game or the symbols on the cards. He drinks half his wine before Kamil finishes explaining the incomprehensible rules. When Sei chances a glance behind him, Marek is sitting across from the man with sky-blue hair. The man is still sleeping, and Marek's back is to Sei.

Nobody is supervising Sei. Not his guildmasters, not his claimant. Sei's new babysitters don't seem nearly as grouchy as his previous minders.

"Did you get that?" Kamil asks.

"I'm completely lost." Sei takes another sip. "Actually, I think I want more of this wine. If I put a bottle on Marek's tab,

will you two help me finish it?”

Kamil drops his hand of cards. “Stormrider’s letting you order on his tab? He never lets *me* order on his tab.”

Delline points at Sei. “I like you already. Kamil, clean up the cards. We’re heading downstairs.”

Giddiness bubbles in Sei’s stomach. He finishes his glass before following Delline. This is fun. Maybe they can have *two* bottles.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Marek

The Topsy Tree is Marek's favorite tavern in Ostomar City. The decor is excessive, sure. Marek has only visited Silaise once, but he's certain they don't actually decorate like this. The wine is good, though, and the clientele is accustomed to dragonriders. Nobody bothers Marek as he waits for Ludvik to wake up.

There's a pitcher and cup on the table next to Ludvik's slumped form. Marek is disappointed to see it only holds water—not that drinking from random pitchers is wise. Hopefully Ludvik will wake up before Marek finishes his wine.

Marek doesn't have to wait long. Something crashes downstairs, and Ludvik stirs. He rubs his hand over his face, then peels himself from the table.

“Hi,” Marek says.

Ludvik blinks. He's in his mid-thirties but looks younger with his messy sky-blue hair and wide, unfocused violet eyes. His right cheek is red from pressing against the table.

“Been a while,” Marek adds.

Ludvik just blinks again. Then he groans and rubs his eyes. “Fuck, no. I didn't take nearly enough to hallucinate today. Which means Marek Fucking Stormrider is actually sitting at my table right now.”

“Here in the flesh,” Marek confirms.

Ludvik slumps back in his chair. “How long have you been here?”

“A while. How are you feeling?”

“Fuck, I hate dragonriders,” Ludvik mutters. “I was feeling great a minute ago. The Topsy Tree has the most comfortable tables of any tavern in Ostomar City. What do you want, Stormrider?”

Despite his annoyance and drug-dilated pupils, Ludvik keeps his voice down. He’s alert enough not to cause a scene.

“I was hoping you’d tell me.” Marek keeps his own voice low. “Countess Zora Bernek told me to talk to you. Why would she suggest that?”

“Ask the countess. Fuck, nobles are worse than dragonriders.” Ludvik rubs his eyes again. “No offense, Stormrider.”

“None taken, and you’re not wrong.” Marek pours the glass of water and pushes it across the table. “Are you happy here, Ludvik?”

“Being interrogated? No.” Ludvik inspects the water suspiciously. “Napping in my favorite bar? Yes. Like I said, comfortable tables. Never sticky.”

Marek finishes off the last of his wine. “I mean since you left the dragon corps.”

Ludvik bristles. “I’m not a sad drunk or a charity case, Stormrider. I don’t get high every day. I just like to enjoy my days off.”

“Days off from what?” Marek says.

“This and that.”

Marek might have believed it, except he already knows a great deal about Ludvik’s recent activities. “I know you’re unemployed.”

“I’m between jobs,” Ludvik counters.

“I had you investigated. How do you think I found you today?”

Ludvik downs more of the water. “A happy accident.”

“Look, do you want a job or not?” Marek asks, and Ludvik jerks upright. “I can get you a new position in the corps.

Something in Talorna, not Parsk. Do you want that?”

“Yes,” Ludvik says immediately. “I accept.”

“I didn’t say what the job is.” Marek hasn’t even decided what the job is. He offered on a whim, sensing Ludvik would be interested.

“Doesn’t matter, Stormrider.” Ludvik lifts his water glass in salute. “I’m accepting before you change your mind.”

“Then consider this your job interview. Why did Zora tell me to talk to you?”

Ludvik sets down the glass. His eyes are more focused, his high fading. “Probably because I was Irenka’s adjutant. Irenka wanted Count Petir’s connections. Petir wanted inside Irenka’s sexy wyrmskin trousers. Oldest and stupidest story in the book.”

Every gossip in Ostomar knew what Petir wanted from Irenka. It’s the other half of the transaction Marek has never been able to figure out. “What did Irenka need those connections for? She was already a wing-captain. Her career was going well.”

Fuck. Marek probably should have asked this before Ludvik’s high wore off. Ludvik is too lucid and cautious now.

“I can’t answer that.”

“You’re in the dragon corps again,” Marek says. “That means you obey me as your wing-marshal, not just your prince. Why did Irenka need Petir?”

Ludvik chews his lip, eyes darting across the room. “Fire me if you want, Stormrider. I still can’t answer.”

Marek’s blood runs cold.

Ludvik isn’t a bad soldier. He enjoys experimental herbs and elixirs, sure, but only on his days off. The man is loyal to Draskora and the dragon corps. If he’s refusing an order, that can only be in obedience to a higher authority.

Obedience or fear. Because only one man in Draskora outranks Marek.

“Thanks, Ludvik.” Marek fishes a metal token from his pocket. It will get Ludvik through the palace gate. “Report to the garrison on the sixteenth. Kamil or Zilata will meet you.”

A couple days’ delay will give Marek time to figure out a job for Ludvik.

Marek leaves Ludvik there, to the man’s clear relief—and stops. The table that should host Sei, Kamil, and Deline is completely empty.

Nothing to worry about, Marek tells himself. Kamil and Deline have strict orders to watch over Sei. No doubt they’re just somewhere else in the Topsy Tree. Sei has probably befriended the bartender, three servers, and a dozen other patrons by now.

Marek descends the garlanded staircase at a normal, unhurried pace. He definitely isn’t worried about his betrothed leaving his sight. Kamil and Deline are more than capable bodyguards, even if Marek gives Kamil shit.

Downstairs is more crowded than upstairs, but Marek spots his claim immediately. The three of them have moved their card game to a table near the bar, joined by two wine bottles—one empty, one half-full. Kamil faces the front door, Deline faces the kitchen door, and Sei sits in profile, picking a leaf-card from the pile.

Then Sei turns, and his smile steals Marek’s breath away.

Marek noticed how pretty Sei was the first time they met. He tried to ignore it because Sei was intended for Vana. Eyeing his brother’s claim would be wrong. Besides, Marek has never been particularly drawn to pretty men. Pretty or handsome, plain or ugly doesn’t really matter. He’s drawn to energy. To strength.

Right now, Marek is drawn to the sheer unrestrained delight of Sei Mallory.

Shoving that revelation aside, Marek marches to the tableside. “You’ve had too much to drink, haven’t you?”

Sei cranes his head up, still plastered with a silly, gorgeous grin. “No, I haven’t. I hardly feel the wine.”

Marek lifts an eyebrow. “Really? Stand up for me.”

“What? Why?” Sei drops his cards and stands up. As soon as he’s upright, he sways and grabs the back of his chair. “Wow. I totally feel it.”

Wordless, Marek stares down Kamil and Deline.

“What?” Kamil protests. “He barely had anything. That’s only his second glass.”

Deline straightens up from peeking at Kamil’s cards. “Well, we also did shots of zalvin.”

Sei braces himself on Marek’s forearm. “The zalvin was in a cute little glass, so it doesn’t count,” he says earnestly. “I didn’t like the zalvin as much. The wine is *way* better.”

Maybe Marek should have warned Deline that Sei had never drunk alcohol before. A tiny shot of zalvin is as strong as both the glasses of wine combined. Still... Marek can’t regret it too much. Sei looks so happy right now.

He’ll be happier still if Marek gets him back to the palace before the buzz wears off.

“I’m glad you had fun. Time to go home.” Marek grabs Sei’s hand, just to make sure they stick together on the way to the front door.

“Am I in trouble?” Sei asks, trailing at Marek’s side.

“What? No.” Marek squeezes Sei’s hand. “I don’t care how much you drank, though you’ll probably care in a few hours.”

Sei squeezes Marek’s hand in return. “That’s fine. As long as you’re not mad. We should do this again someday, except you should play cards with us too.”

Their journey home hits a snag in the tavern yard. One of Marek’s accompanying drasgard rushes up after a conversation with the tavern staff. The grooms hadn’t expected Marek to leave so early, and another carriage is double-parked behind theirs.

“Send the carriage back later,” Marek says. “We can just ride.”

“Yes, Stormrider,” the drasgard answers.

“Um,” Sei says, which is when Marek remembers Sei has never ridden a horse before. He probably shouldn’t try learning after his first shot of zalvin.

“Just bring my horse,” Marek tells the drasgard. “My claim will ride with me.”

Which seems like a perfect solution for the next five minutes. Right up until Marek settles into the saddle behind Sei and realizes what a terrible mistake this is. Because Marek’s saddle is large, but not that large.

Sei presses close to him, just like on dragonback. Except this time, Sei isn’t shocked quiet by the rushing sky, and he isn’t strapped down in the harness. He’s tipsy and excited and he keeps *squirring* as he looks around. Luckily, North Wind is a very large, very tolerant mare.

“This is fun. I like riding.” Sei leans forward to pet the horse’s gray neck.

Marek hauls Sei back to sit properly in the saddle—and leaves an arm around his waist for good measure. “Sit still. You’ll like it more if you stay on the horse.”

“Yes, Your Highness. What’s the nice horse’s name?”

“North Wind. But the grooms all call her Hungry.”

“That’s cute,” Sei says, relaxing against Marek’s chest.

Sei falls quiet as they leave the tavern yard. Drasgard ride before and behind them, clearing the road as they travel. Marek focuses on the laundry drying from city windows. The multicolored smoke rising above apothecaries and magecraft shops. The grimacing gargoyles. Anything except the gentle weight of the man pressed against him.

Marek appreciates the ridiculousness of the situation. Shouldn’t a man want to be attracted to his betrothed? But Marek intends to break their arrangement as soon as he can.

No gorgeous smile, no glimpse of unfettered joy, can change that. Marek is still a terrible match for Sei.

Drinking. Riding. What else has Sei never done?

Sei is far too eager to please. Marek would never forgive himself for leading Sei on with false promises.

“Can you really use lightning for sex?” Sei asks suddenly.

Marek chokes on his next breath. He coughs so loudly that even placid North Wind flicks her ears in irritation.

Sei tries to turn around. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Marek manages, holding Sei still. “What are you talking about?”

“Kamil says you can use Dire magic for more exciting things than blasting wraiths. I asked if he meant sex, and he started coughing just like you did.”

The only time Marek mentioned that to Kamil was a drunken game of truth-telling when they were teenagers. He can't believe Kamil remembers. “I don't use actual lightning. I can control much smaller amounts of magic electricity.”

“That makes sense,” Sei says. “I want to dye my hair.”

Marek welcomes the reprieve from electric sex talk. “Sure. What color do you want?”

“No idea. I also want a tattoo. Kamil has a tattoo.”

“How the fuck did you see Kamil's tattoo?” Marek demands, because he knows exactly where that tattoo is on Kamil's body.

Sei shifts in the saddle. “I didn't see it. Deline told me about it.”

“Good.” Marek tightens his grip on Sei's waist—he can't handle much more squirming. Or much more talk about Kamil, who is never permitted guard duty of Marek's claim again.

“So, can I get a tattoo?”

“Sure. You don’t have to ask me to dye your hair or get a tattoo.” Marek’s stomach twists, remembering Sei’s explanation of the Porcelain Guild. A perfectly crafted teacup. Is that why Sei keeps asking permission for things he shouldn’t need permission for? That being said... “But we should talk about it again when you’re sober.”

Sei turns his head against Marek’s chest. “No. I think too much when I’m sober.”

“What do you think about?”

“How much you hate me,” Sei answers, matter of fact.

Marek doesn’t flinch in the saddle, only due to long years of combat training. “I don’t hate you.”

“You don’t like me either. You want to get rid of me.”

The worst part is that Sei doesn’t even sound sad or hurt. Just certain. Resigned.

Guilt and frustration war through Marek’s heart. He might not hate Sei, but Marek has made no secret that he hates this betrothal. He hates the parameters of the relationship they’ve both been forced into. The expectation that he’ll use Sei’s magic without any regard for the risk to Sei himself. The way Sei seems determined to fulfill that expectation.

Far more selfishly: Marek doesn’t need another man’s power. He has his own magic, and he has his dragon. He doesn’t need to lean on anyone else. Fuck, he’s the only rider in the corps without an adjutant.

But Marek should still do better by Sei while they’re stuck together.

“I’m not going to abandon you,” Marek says. “You know that, right? I’ll take care of you and make sure you’re safe, even after I break the betrothal.”

Sei’s sigh is a storm wind through Marek’s soul. “Promise?”

“Promise,” Marek says. “Now, you’re not getting a tattoo today. But if you did, what would you want?”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sei

Sei is beginning to figure out the unspoken boundaries of their arrangement. Marek is stern, intimidating, and expects obedience—but only regarding Sei wandering off alone. And Sei's grail magic. Other than that?

Opening windows. Dyeing his hair. Taking shots with Kamil and Deline. All of those are fine. Sei doesn't need permission to simply exist and act in the world. Marek hasn't given Sei any new rules to cover the situations the Porcelain Guild never envisioned for Sei.

Marek still intends to break the betrothal, and Sei is no closer to winning him over. But after their day at the Topsy Tree, Sei resolves to relish this freedom as much as he can.

He even put sugar in his tea this morning. Two entire spoonfuls.

As they walk through the palace, Marek speaks quietly with an aide. He doesn't have an adjutant like the rest of the dragonriders. Sei isn't sure why. Maybe assisting the prince is too complicated for any one person to handle. Or maybe Marek just prefers not relying on anyone else.

Meanwhile Sei trails behind, listening to the silent lecture of the fellcat at his heels. Not everyone in Sei's life is so permissive.

You are far too cheerful today, Osrice accuses.

Sei tries not to grin.

You should have a terrible hangover, Osrice continues. That would teach you something! Now you won't learn anything.

After yesterday's adventure, Sei avoided the headache Osrice thinks he deserves. He just feels tired and embarrassed.

Maybe he should have taken a few more shots, so his suffering could blot out the memory of how terribly honest he was with Marek. Even if Marek was only kind about it.

I don't mind you drinking. You're an adult. Osric doesn't sound sure of that part. I just don't like you going out and drinking at taverns. Anybody could be at taverns! If you have to drink, I would rather you drink at home.

No. Sei wouldn't forget yesterday for the world. He got to ride a horse! Marek held him the entire way back to the castle! Sei only wishes the journey had been longer, so Marek would have to keep holding him.

All those years in the guild, Sei never knew what he was missing. Now his skin yearns for touch.

Careful distance separates him from Marek today. A reminder that Marek only touches Sei when he has a reason to. Riding Loska. Showing Sei how to use a scale-brush. Acting as claim and claimant in front of Countess Zora. There's no reason now, because even though Marek promised not to abandon him, he still doesn't *want* Sei.

The wedding is a month and a half away. Sei only has that much time to prevent Marek from breaking the betrothal. The last thing Sei wants is to start over with some new Draskoran stranger.

Osric sighs mentally. *You aren't listening at all, are you?*

Sei just scratches Osric's head.

The aide runs off when they reach Radovan's laboratory. Radovan emerges to greet them before they knock.

"Welcome, Your Highness and Sei." Radovan bows. "Are either of you wearing scalestone?"

"Not today," Marek says, and Sei shakes his head.

Radovan eyes Osric suspiciously but waves them in. "I'm glad for visitors to brighten the tedium of progress. Do you want to see anything in particular, Sei?"

If anything is new in the crowded chamber, Sei can't tell. "Actually, I asked to meet because I think you and Prince

Marek should talk.”

Osric flicks his ears. *I thought you wanted to look at the interesting rats.*

“No, that was you.” Sei jumps, remembering himself when Marek and Radovan look at him oddly. “Sorry, I was talking to Osric there. Perhaps I’m wrong, and this is a foolish notion. But last time I was here, Radovan described his teleportation enchantments.”

Osric stalks away. *I’m going to look at the rats.*

“Teleportation enchantments?” Marek asks politely.

Radovan adjusts his spectacles. “It’s a difficult magic to render as an enchantment anyone could use. My experiment focuses on very small objects, and it fails more often than not.”

“It’s still very impressive,” Sei says. “Yesterday, His Highness told me that scalestone can harm wraiths, but the army can’t afford to waste scalestone on them in battle.”

“Right, it’s not practical,” Marek says.

Sei takes a deep breath. “What if you could shoot the scalestone projectiles, then teleport them back after they hit?”

Both Marek and Radovan stare blankly at Sei. The only sound in the laboratory is the quiet clicking of metal instruments. Then Marek’s eyes light up, and Radovan’s eyebrows lift.

Marek turns to Radovan. “That would be really fucking useful.”

“Temper your expectations,” Radovan cautions despite his clear excitement. “It’s theoretically possible. I can’t imagine a *portable* setup, not something you could carry on dragons. But some sort of catapult...”

Marek gestures. “We could install them in the more remote mountain villages. A first line of defense while they signal for the dragon corps.”

“So, it could work?” Sei asks.

“It very well could,” Radovan says. “Though a workable prototype would take years.”

“Wraiths won’t stop being a problem any time soon.” Marek crosses his arms, his expression sharpening with thought. “Radovan, I’ll send a couple corps enchanters your way this week. Catch them up with your results so far. Unless you personally have time to travel north with us?”

Radovan slumps, some of his creative light dimming. “Unfortunately no, Your Highness. I’ll have to talk to your enchanters. I’m in the middle of a project for the king and queen that I simply can’t abandon. Teleportation is just a small side project I’ve been toying with in my spare time...”

Sei doesn’t have much to contribute to the conversation after that. The theory and strategy all go over his head, and he doesn’t recognize half the Draskoran military terms Marek and Radovan throw around. They don’t talk long before Marek says they should go, and Radovan says, “You surprise me, Sei. You’re not at all like Lady Naoko.”

“What do you mean?” Sei asks, startled. It’s strange to remember his mother walked these palace halls before him. They may share space, but never time.

Osric returns to bump against Sei’s hip.

“Lady Naoko was interested in my work on a theoretical level,” Radovan says. “She thought in abstractions. You have a far more practical mind.”

Sei rubs Osric’s shoulder. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“A very good thing,” Radovan says. “Do visit again when you have a chance. You as well, Your Highness.”

As he leaves the laboratory with Marek and Osric, Sei tries not to smile too hard. Maybe the experiment will have worthwhile results. Maybe it won’t. Marek and Radovan still took Sei’s idea seriously. Even if teleporting javelins don’t work, maybe the dragon corps enchanters will invent something else along the way.

Today is the most useful Sei has felt since he arrived in Draskora.

“That was brilliant, you know,” Marek says, as if Sei’s ego isn’t soaring enough already.

Sei pushes his hair behind his ear. “Really?”

“You’re going to make a tremendous impact with this.”

All right, that’s a little much. “All I did was talk to both of you.”

Marek squeezes Sei’s shoulder. The brief touch melts through Sei’s entire body. “Don’t discount the value of listening and making connections. Courtiers build entire careers on that.”

“Someone else would have thought of teleporting scalestone.” Sei touches his own shoulder, then realizes what he’s doing. Chasing the memory of Marek’s touch. “Radovan was already working on teleportation enchantments.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure someone else would have.”

Sei looks up, drawn to Marek’s contemplative sound.

“Teleportation is just a side project for Radovan,” Marek says. “He works directly for the king and queen, not the drasgard or dragon corps. If he abandoned the project, we might never have heard about it. Except you have a knack for befriending people.”

Sei is again unsure whether that’s a good or bad thing. “Thank you.”

Marek grins. “It’s a compliment—if you’re careful who you befriend. Now, did you still want to dye your hair?”

“Yes!” Sei says immediately, as Osric adds, *Excuse me?* “Yes, definitely.”

Marek’s grin widens. “Great. I asked Clem to set aside some time this afternoon.”

All Sei’s tiredness washes away in the thrill that Marek remembered. “Really? Right now?”

“Right now.” Marek squeezes Sei’s shoulder again.
“Unless you change your mind by the time we get back.”

Osric abandons them as soon as they return to the garrison, seeking a warm hearth to sleep on. Sei and Marek meet Clem in the half-kitchen off the side of Marek’s lounge. There’s a wide sink set in the counter, and the tiled floor is already stained rainbow from previous dye jobs.

“What color do you want?” Clem asks as they arrange colorful bottles on the counter. “Dark blue to match Stormrider?”

“He doesn’t have to match me,” Marek says, quickly enough that Sei tries not to be offended.

“I don’t mind either way.” Sei hops up on a stool near the sink. “Matching or not is fine with me.”

Clem rolls their sleeves up their freckled arms. “That really narrows it down. What’s your favorite color?”

Sei doesn’t have a favorite color. “This isn’t permanent, right? I can always change it later?”

“I can change your hair every day, as long as Stormrider keeps giving me overtime bonuses.”

“No overtime,” Marek says. “Just stop sweeping the floors. I’ll assign that to Kamil.”

Sei tugs on a strand of hair. “I don’t care what color you dye it, then. Surprise me.”

Clem’s eyes light up, and Marek growls. “Surprise him with something that *looks good*.”

“Right, right.” Clem deflates, then perks up again. “The wedding’s next month. I’ll pick something that will grow out nicely with black roots.”

Clem sorts through their dye bottles, holding a few up to the light. Sei avoids Marek’s gaze but knows he’s not alone in

his sudden tension. He had forgotten the wedding too, about to tell Clem that he doesn't care if he looks good or not.

“Got it!” Clem exclaims. “Get comfortable. This is going to take a while.”

Sei's experience in meditation comes in handy. Dyeing his hair takes much longer than he expected, considering that his hair barely reaches past his chin. Marek comes and goes throughout the procedure, and Osric arrives once to both comment disparagingly and praise Sei for making his own decisions.

Clem works carefully, brushing layers of dye into Sei's hair. Occasionally they make Sei bend backwards over the sink so they can rinse some out, then they towel out the water and continue. The process involves a lot of touching, which makes Sei nervous at first. Thankfully, Clem's hands don't inspire nearly the same reactions as Marek's.

Sei almost doesn't believe it when Clem claps their hands and says, “You're done!”

They give Sei a hand-mirror, and Sei gasps.

His hair is a perfect gradient, deep midnight blue at the roots, fading through brighter blue to pure white at the tips. The colors are unreal, but when Sei touches his hair, it feels the same as ever. Soft, still damp from the last rinse.

That's really him in the mirror—Sei Mallory, clearly disobeying his guildmasters. Regretting nothing.

“It's fine if you hate it,” Clem says.

“I love it!” Sei turns his head with a thrilling swish of his new hair. “I love it so much.”

“Let me see,” Marek says from the doorway.

Sei hadn't heard Marek come in. He lets Marek take the mirror, and Marek touches Sei's chin.

The slightest brush of Marek's callused fingertips ignites Sei's every nerve. Completely unlike the hours Sei just spent under Clem's hands. Perhaps unlike anyone else's touch in the entire world.

Marek turns Sei's head back and forth. "Looks good," he says quietly, and Sei's face heats. "Come out onto the balcony. You should see it in the light."

He takes Sei's hand, and Sei feels like he's floating through the lounge, all the way out onto the balcony. Late afternoon sun blossoms around them. Marek hands Sei the mirror again.

"Oh, wow," Sei breathes.

The gradient is so much more intense in the sunlight, from the cloud-white tips to the midnight roots. The roots are the same color as Marek's hair, but they don't *match*. They're clearly connected, but different.

"Clem does great work," Marek says.

Sei can't contain his giddy smile. "You too. You remembered I wanted this."

Marek shrugs, strangely bashful. "You're not the only one who can listen."

Gratitude surges through Sei, so intense it tastes like adoration. He sways half a step forward, then catches himself. Lifting the mirror gives Sei the excuse to look away.

Oh, no. I actually like him.

Sei turns his head as if inspecting every angle of his new hair—but he sees none of it. He's too stunned by the unbearable urge to kiss his betrothed.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Marek

Silver clouds stream around them, obscuring the Ostomar canyon below. Marek took to the skies to clear his head, but his thoughts remain just as murky as they were on the ground. He claimed Sei Mallory a month ago, and he's no closer to escaping the betrothal. The solution seems as distant as the canyon floor.

Loska hovers, secure in the air.

According to mundane anatomists, dragons don't make sense. Based on muscle and bone, mass and volume, they shouldn't be able to fly. But considering dragons without magic never made sense to Marek. Dragons nest in scalestone, amplifying and strengthening their magic before birth. They roost in it whenever they need to refresh their power, but the magic itself is inherent.

Like Sei. Except instead of allowing him to soar through the skies and breathe fire, Sei's magic condemned him to life in the Porcelain Guild. An organization Marek dislikes even more the more he learns about it.

Fucking teacups.

Why do you want to un-betroth him, anyway? Loska asks. *I like Sei.*

Marek slips his arms from the harness and sits upright in the saddle. "I like him too. That's not the problem."

Do you like-like him?

"Don't be childish."

Don't avoid the question.

If anyone else asked, Marek would be annoyed. But this is Loska. They connect on a deep, mystical level that centuries of scholars and riders have never been able to explain. Loska knows Marek needs to talk this through.

“He’s attractive, obviously.” The admission feels insufficient. “I mean, he’s fucking gorgeous. Those dark brown eyes, and the way he *moves*. Anyone would be into him—okay, I know he’s not your type. Anyone interested in human men, which I am. Plus he’s so damn easy to talk to. Too easy. I’m worried that he’s tiring himself out, talking to so many... What?”

Marek narrows his eyes as Loska’s laugh rolls through his mind.

Thanks for answering my question, Loska says smugly.

“What I think of him doesn’t matter.”

I know. For your mysterious human reasons, I understand that being mated to a man you want to mate with is the worst thing in the world. Loska smoothly adjusts to maintain his place in the current. The slight rock barely budes his rider. *My condolences.*

“Oh, fuck off.”

Now that you have this attractive man in your grasp, how do you intend to get rid of him?

“Still working on that.” Marek can be honest with Loska, even though he hasn’t been honest with himself the past few weeks. “Actually, I don’t think I can avoid the wedding.”

Loska’s laugh is restrained. Somewhat.

“Fuck off,” Marek groans again. “I’ll divorce him as soon as it’s politically possible. I just don’t have the full picture yet.”

He had wanted to figure out if the deaths the night of Vana’s desertion were related to the betrothal. He’s not certain they are, but the information he’s uncovered is even more disturbing.

Three years ago, before Marek became wing-marshal, Rakos Tem deserted the dragon corps. Irenka Miraz led the operation to hunt Rakos down. She recaptured him near the roosting grounds, but he escaped again. Irenka died in the pursuit.

Simple enough. Except for Ludvik, Irenka's adjutant, refusing to talk about it.

Which means King Imrik is involved.

Marek isn't an idiot. He doesn't want to rule Draskora—he lacks the patience for politics. But even if he wanted the crown, the last thing Marek would do is let his father know about it. Imrik Dire doesn't share power easily, and every king's worst enemy is his successor. Marek has risen to wing-marshal on his own strength, his inherited magic, and his sincere determination to stay out of Ostomar politics. The slightest hint of conflict with the crown could eradicate any fatherly affection.

So, whether or not Petir Bernek's death means anything, Marek has to abandon that investigation for now. Besides, it was only a secondary pursuit to the matter of his betrothal.

Loska shifts beneath him, and Marek braces his arms in the harness again before they take a few wingbeats higher.

If you can't tunnel beneath the mountain, can you fly over it? Loska asks.

Another angle of attack. Petir and Mori's deaths may or may not be related, but Imrik and Naoko signed the treaty *before* Vana vanished. And Naoko Mallory's role as ambassador means Fellrin always intended to offer Sei Mallory as their bid for scalestone.

"Fellrin has offered grails in exchange for scalestone before," Marek muses out loud. He doesn't raise his voice over the wind—Loska hears him half out loud, half through the bond. "They've offered just about everything over the years."

Did they just make a new offer, or did your grumpy king-father finally ask for something?

Marek snorts. Imrik Dire doesn't ask for anything. He demands, or he accepts tribute. But something must have driven him to accept Fellrin's latest trade offer. "He doesn't like Silaise getting dragons. He's shoring up Draskoran power."

Your father thinks too much, Loska complains. *I am already very powerful.*

"Most powerful lizard in the skies." Marek pats Loska's neck, then leans in. "Let's get back in time for dinner."

Today's flight hasn't improved the situation. Imrik doesn't make useless trades, which means he intends Sei to be used. If Marek breaks the betrothal, what will Imrik do with Sei instead?

Marek needs to bide his time and move carefully. After the wedding might be easier. Surely a few months of marriage won't be so bad, as long as they both remember this isn't real.

Correction: a few months of marriage will be torture if they're anything like tonight's formal dinner. The change in hair color seems to have transformed Sei. Like it's unlocked a hidden chamber of confidence inside him.

Sei has always been more talkative than his polite demeanor would indicate. But tonight, he's bolder than ever, easily slipping in and out of the dinner conversation. He doesn't seem intimidated by the lofty titles surrounding him.

That's not the torture.

The torture is the way Sei keeps smiling whenever Marek says anything. Not a huge smile—just a pleased curve of his eyes, the corners of his mouth deepening.

Marek would suspect the wine was spiked with nightrose, except he's been feeling like this all week.

They sit at the high table in Ostomar's great hall. During festivals, King Imrik oversees the chamber from the center of

the table. Tonight is an ordinary dinner, so Imrik sits at the head of the table, facing down the length of it. The far end is empty in Queen Aliza's absence.

Marek, Sei, Kazia, and several courtiers sit to Imrik's left, their backs to the wall. Warlord Navlin, Radovan Ark, General Gabra, and several more courtiers sit across from them, their backs to the lower tables.

Gabra is more cheerful than Marek has seen her since she first fell ill. Wine flushes her cheeks, and she carries a lively conversation about painting with Sei and Radovan.

Marek addresses the woman across from him. "What brings you to Ostomar, Navlin?"

Warlord Navlin is a tiny woman with formidable magic. She started using feminine pronouns a few years ago but changed nothing about her masculine clothes and short-cropped hair. Raising her glass, Navlin answers, "You do, Your Highness."

"Really?" Marek asks. "I must have drunk too much after sending the letter."

"Navlin will host your wedding next month," Imrik says. "She's here to confirm details and arrange transportation."

Once again, the details of Marek's own wedding are a surprise. "We're holding it at Raya Keep?"

Imrik gestures, and one of his personal servants steps forward to fill his wine glass. "I'm not about to host Silaisans in Ostomar. Julien Sandry has accepted our invitation on his family's behalf."

The high table falls quiet, and Sei goes tense at Marek's side. Sei might be a sheltered teacup, but he studied Draskora before his departure. No doubt he's wondering the same thing as Radovan, Gabra, and everyone else at the table: is this a wedding invitation, or an act of war?

But Marek understands his father enough not to worry about that. Imrik's declarations of war have never been subtle. He saves the subterfuge for his home and family.

Marek pats Sei's leg under the table, intending to reassure him. Sei only tenses more. "Diplomatically bold as always, Your Majesty." Marek raises his glass. "I'll leave everything in Warlord Navlin's capable hands."

"You know me. Consummate party planner," Navlin says drily.

Gabra gives a hiccupping laugh. "Better you than me, Navlin." She stretches for a pitcher. Ale spills over the side of her glass as she pours.

"Where is Raya Keep?" Sei asks, finally relaxing.

"Near the Silaisan border, across from Greenhaven," Marek answers, removing his hand from Sei's leg. "It's a week away by caravan, but that's a problem for Navlin to sort out. You and I will take Loska, I assume."

"You'll head north directly after the wedding," Imrik says. "I know the wraiths must miss you."

Polite chuckles follow the king's joke.

Finally, a pleasant surprise. The news is a weight off Marek's shoulders. Doubtless the rest of the Ostomar garrison will be relieved too. They're tired of their wing-marshal's supervision.

"I look forward to the reunion," Marek says. "Any other surprise wedding guests?"

Imrik gestures, and Navlin answers. "No more surprises. Fellrin's plans to send an ambassador fell through, as expected. It'll just be Draskorans, Prince Julien's retinue, and a delegation from Patha."

Gabra scoffs from behind her glass. "What about Tavoc? No invitation for Prince Vana, I assume?"

The table falls silent again. Then the nearest table on the main floor, then the next, attention drawing fearfully to the high table as the air pressure changes.

Imrik Dire sits as cold and still as the canyon walls. Only his eyes flicker like scalestone in the depths.

Gabra shouldn't have mentioned Vana.

Marek's thoughts race. He can't save Gabra, but he braces himself to pull Sei out of the way before—

“General Gabra,” Kazia calls out, loud enough for half the hall to hear him. It's the first time he's spoken all dinner, and his voice is sweet with poison. “Do you prefer tonight's soup, or the salad?”

Gabra's wine-flushed face turns ashen with the gravity of her mistake. Gone is the fearsome former general. In her place sits an aging, frightened woman. “The soup, Your Highness.”

“That's a pity,” Kazia says, pushing his seat back.

The entire dining hall waits spell-bound as Kazia hops onto his chair—then steps directly onto the table. Marek dares a glance at their father's face but can't read anything there. Everyone else watches with Marek, waiting for the king's reaction to tell them how to respond.

Imrik says nothing.

Kazia stoops to pick up his glass salad bowl, which he hasn't touched. Placing his leather boots carefully between plates and pitchers, he stalks across the table. A jar of salt trembles but doesn't fall. Kazia's path leads him to stand above General Gabra.

Flipping the bowl over, Kazia dumps the salad over Gabra's head.

Marek holds Sei down by the shoulder almost before Sei tries to move. Sei can't quite muffle his yelp of shock—but it's lost in the cries thundering through the dining room.

Gabra sputters beneath the rain of vinegar and vegetables. Grabbing for her cane, she shoves away from the table.

The cane clatters from her grasp. She stumbles and catches herself on Radovan's chair. With a wince, Radovan leans away.

Kazia drops the bowl. It bounces off the edge of the table, then shatters against the stone floor.

“Vana preferred the salad,” Kazia says. Turning on his heel, he crosses back to his side of the table. He jumps down next to Sei and throws himself into his chair.

Along with everyone else in the room, Marek turns away from the brat prince and the lettuce-covered general. King Imrik leans back in his seat. When a smile slowly spreads across his face, relief ripples through the crowd.

“Go clean yourself up, Gabra. The crown will compensate you for your wardrobe.” Imrik waves a scalestone-ringed hand in dismissal. “Prince Kazia, I’ll speak to you later.”

Gabra bows clumsily. A piece of lettuce falls from her hair. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

She looks around as if finally taking in the gawking eyes. Shards of glass scatter between her and her fallen cane. In the end, Gabra abandons the cane and limps slowly towards the side door. She’s halfway there when Warlord Navlin lets out a dry chuckle.

Radovan takes the cue and joins her. Then the laughter spreads across the entire room. Just like the wave of relief before it. Just like the wave of fear.

Sei tries to jump up again, and Marek yanks him back into his seat.

“What are you doing?” Marek hisses into Sei’s ear.

Sei glares up with fierce, dark eyes. “I’m going to grab her cane for her! Do you have no shame?”

“Absolutely none,” Marek murmurs. “Please trust me. Helping her now will only hurt her.”

Sei ducks his head. “Fine.”

Marek loosens his grip on Sei’s wrist but doesn’t let go until Gabra has vanished into the hall. Sei doesn’t speak again for the rest of the meal.

Afterwards, Marek sends Sei back to the garrison with guards. He needs to talk to Sei, but first, he wants something usually best avoided: a conversation with his little brother.

The desire apparently isn't mutual. Kazia allows Marek into his parlor but doesn't look happy about it.

The room hasn't changed much since the last time Marek was here. Three years ago? Four? The parlor is still neatly furnished. Violet sofas and wall hangings, cream-washed stone walls. Everything is refined. Elegant. Clearly Aliza's work. Kazia looks out of place with his fondness for tight black wrymskin and excessive silver buckles.

So do the crudely carved dragon statues looming on either side of the fireplace. Marek doesn't have much of an eye for art, but even he can tell they're ugly.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Kazia demands. "Doesn't your new little pet miss you?"

Marek regrets this already. "You will not refer to Sei like that," he growls.

Instead of snapping back, Kazia tilts his head. "Huh. Interesting. You're serious about that."

Kazia plucks a token from the box on the mantle and tosses it into the fireplace. "I still want to know what the fuck you're doing here."

The minor enchantment sparks, and flames flicker into life among the ashes.

Marek bites back his instinctive bristling. Remembering why he's here, he says, "That was kindly done."

"You have a peculiar sense of kindness."

"You saved Gabra's life."

"I did not. Unless she was dying of scurvy." Kazia taps his chin. "Does lettuce even cure scurvy?"

Marek refuses to be baited. "You deliberately humiliated Gabra to improve Father's mood. You drew Father's temper

onto yourself instead, since he might kill Gabra, but he would never hurt you.”

Kazia flinches.

For a second, he stands as still as the hideous statues, motionless except for the fire reflecting in his pale purple eyes. Then Kazia laughs sharply and reaches for another fire enchantment. “Kindly fuck off, brother dearest.” The flames dazzle brighter. “If you repeat that nonsense about saving lives, I’ll rip your eyes out.”

Serves Marek right for trying.

The conversation lingers unfinished in Marek’s wake. But he’s confirmed what he needed to confirm. Kazia knew exactly what he was doing at dinner tonight.

There’s something about the sight of Sei curled up in bed that wipes out Marek’s every thought. Sei just looks so comfortable, like he belongs there. The possessive instinct is strange when this bed has never felt like Marek’s. He has no true claim on Sei. He certainly has no reason to be jealous of the giant crimson fellicat curled up on the bed with Sei.

Before Marek can recover, Sei sets down his book and slips from the bed. Marek averts his eyes from the shadow of bare collar bone before Sei adjusts his robe.

Osrice snores gently.

Sei’s demand is quiet, but no less urgent: “What was that?”

“*That* was why I hate being stuck in Ostomar.”

Marek has never hated it more than this moment. Forget his own yearning for Talorna. The gray northern skies where the deadly enemies are so much easier to understand. Marek can’t wait to remove Sei from his father’s court. Sei is too friendly. Too sincere. Marek can protect Sei from almost anything, but not from saying the wrong thing in front of the king.

Would Marek have jumped up in defense if Sei had been the one to mention Vana today? Marek likes to think he would. But today he sat helpless while bratty, vicious Kazia rescued Gabra instead.

“Things will be better in Talorna,” Marek says, still mindful of the sleeping fellcat. “I promise.”

“You promise,” Sei repeats with a derisive grimace.

Marek pauses. He’s missing something. “What’s wrong?”

“We have a date. We have a venue.” Sei takes a deep breath, then another, before he can calm down. “If you’re going to break the betrothal, do it quickly, Your Highness. Don’t humiliate me in front of the wedding delegation.”

“I’m not breaking the betrothal,” Marek says.

Sei stares. “What?”

“You’re right,” Marek says simply. “I’m out of time. So, we’ll get married. It’s not much different than being betrothed, right? We’ll just stay friends and bide our time until it’s easier to divorce.”

Marek expects Sei to be angry again. It would be fair—Marek has botched every step of this forced betrothal. Whoever’s fault it is, Sei is the one stuck in a foreign country.

“That’s very sensible,” Sei says instead, with a tiny smile. “I was wondering one more thing. Where have you been sleeping?”

“Sometimes in the lounge.” Marek shrugs. “Sometimes on the roof.”

“The roof.”

“When the weather’s nice,” Marek clarifies.

“The weather here is never nice.” Sei pushes his newly dyed hair behind his ear, then fiddles with the bleached ends. “You could sleep in here. I could take the sofa. Surely there’s an extra cot somewhere in this giant castle.”

In the firelight, Sei’s exposed throat gleams with an amber luster. His eyes are deep enough to get lost in. The invitation

echoes, and if Marek accepts, neither of them will be sleeping on the sofa.

Marek almost agrees. He wants to agree. But Sei is trapped in this betrothal too. Marek can't trust whether Sei truly wants this—or if Sei is just doing what he thinks he's supposed to do.

“The roof is fine,” Marek says, and tears himself away before this sham betrothal becomes far too real.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sei

“Are you going to the birthday party later?” Clem asks as Sei pours a mountain of sugar into his morning tea.

Sei pauses in the middle of stirring. He must have misheard. “What birthday party?”

“Didn’t someone tell you?” Clem sets a plate of meat scraps on the table for Osríc. “We’re holding it early, since everything will be so busy with the wedding. The party will be downstairs in the riders’ lounge. Starts at five. You should rest up—I certainly will. Dragonrider parties never end at a sensible hour.”

Oh. The birthday party is for *Marek*.

Sei falls silent as Clem leaves the room, and Osríc floats a piece of meat from the table to the floor. All the sugar in Ostomar can’t sweeten Sei’s next sip of tea.

Today is the second of Marsen, and Sei is now twenty-two years old.

Sei is fine with the date passing unremarked. Nobody here has any reason to know his birthday, much less plan a party for him. Even Osríc wouldn’t remember, because he doesn’t pay attention to things like birthdays. There was no fanfare over birthdays in the guild either, just a few small gifts.

Sei just didn’t expect to celebrate someone else’s birthday today instead.

Marek’s birthday is the fourteenth of Marsen. Easy to remember. Maybe Marek was named after the month. Sei had planned to ask Clem about typical Draskoran birthday gifts.

Too late to arrange anything now.

After breakfast, Sei stops at a gold-framed mirror and fiddles with his hair. The dye felt like a symbol of change. Of his new future. Now Sei just feels like he's playing dress-up.

He's been in Ostomar nearly two months, and it's not as terrifying as he expected. He's made friends, or at least friendly acquaintances. He likes Loska. He likes Clem, Kamil, Deline, Radovan, and others too.

Sure, his claimant still prefers sleeping on the roof to sharing a bed with Sei. Along with refusing to even discuss sharing power.

But even Marek seems to be warming up to Sei. Going through with the wedding means Sei has more time to win Marek over. That's a huge relief, because Sei still isn't sure how to do that. He hasn't hated his attempts so far, at least.

Sei reaches for a hairbrush. He can't blame anyone for not knowing his birthday. It's not anyone's fault. Sei can shove down the unfairness and show a happy, supportive face at the party.

Just like a good grail should.

As music and laughter drifts into the stairwell, a problem occurs to Sei. He pauses on the landing, realization prickling uncomfortably under his skin. Nobody actually invited him to this party. Clem just assumed Sei was coming.

Did Marek simply forget? Or does he not want Sei here today?

Sei takes a deep breath. If he isn't supposed to be here, he'll figure that out quickly and retreat upstairs. Otherwise, he'll just try to meet more people. The dragon corps is very important to Marek. Sei should familiarize himself with as many riders and adjutants as possible so he can be more useful to his claimant.

Noise rushes out in a torrent when Sei opens the door. A dozen riders and three times as many aides and adjutants fill the room. All the couches and tables are still in place, but the occupants only pay them mind when it's convenient.

Kamil sits on a table, badly strumming the Pathan lute as a pink-haired woman throws peanuts at him. A man with gold-orange braids walks directly across a couch to reach the pyramid of kegs in the center of the room.

Sei recognizes a few riders by hair color now, but he hasn't spoken to most of them. Skirting the edge of the gathering, he searches for familiar faces. Someone who isn't Kamil. Sei doesn't fancy getting caught in the peanut crossfire.

Movement catches the corner of his eye. Sei barely dodges the quartet dancing—or stumbling?—past him. But the room isn't big enough for all these people, so Sei bumps into someone else.

“Careful there,” Deline says cheerfully. Even as she stumbles, her mug of ale remains steady. “I didn't expect to see you here.”

Maybe Sei *isn't* supposed to be here. He smiles anyway. “Have you seen His Highness?”

“Which one?” Deline points across the room. “Never mind. They're both over there. Past the kegamid.”

“Kegamid?”

“Keg pyramid.”

“Of course,” Sei says, but Deline is already gone. She grabs the bag of peanuts from the pink-haired woman and throws one.

Kamil catches it and flings it back at her.

Sei doesn't wait to watch the rest of the combat. He cuts across the room instead of sticking to the edges. Everyone gives him space, and Sei struggles to smile back at the people he recognizes. He hasn't felt this lost since he first arrived in Draskora.

On the other side of the kegamid, Prince Kazia sits at an aerie board. A very stressed adjutant sits opposite him. Nearby, Marek is surrounded by people.

Sei's heart twists painfully.

The chaos only makes Marek seem that much larger than life. He stands at least several inches taller than the next tallest person. His laughter isn't loud, but it fills the room.

Sei doesn't have time to turn and flee before Marek spots him.

Marek says something quietly to everyone else, then arrows towards Sei. The immediate attention would be gratifying if not for Marek's first question upon reaching him:

“What are you doing down here?”

“Happy birthday,” Sei says, in an absurd polite reflex. “I'm sorry, should I leave? Clem just mentioned—and I thought...”

Marek winces. “I just didn't think this would be your scene. Let me get you...”

Someone across the room calls out for Stormrider.

Marek squeezes Sei's shoulder. “Give me a minute?”

He steps away before Sei can answer.

Sei gives Marek a minute. Then he waits until enough big, burly dragonriders move away from the kegamid to let Sei pour himself a mug. Sei gives Marek another minute as he sips.

The ale isn't as good as the wine at the Topsy Tree.

One more minute. On Sei's next sip, sourness creeps through his heart. He tries to muster his usual certainty, but his sense of purpose wavers just out of reach.

Is this what the rest of his life will look like?

Trying and trying to be good, while Marek Stormrider keeps walking away from him?

Clutching his mug, Sei eyes the exits. He should take the stairs back up to Marek's chambers, where he can bury his

face in Osric's fur and cry. But part of him wants to escape into the rest of the garrison. To sneak out of Ostomar and lose himself in the city or canyon or forest. Anywhere except this stupid arranged betrothal.

Before he can escape, Prince Kazia appears at Sei's elbow.

"Follow me," Kazia says, beckoning like he's calling a dog.

Sei hesitates. But Kazia doesn't have any salad bowls to wield, and there are no delicate enchantments to destroy. So, when Kazia pauses to glare over his shoulder, Sei hurries after him.

They slip into a wide hallway, then an empty workroom. Leather scraps cover the tables, and repair tools and boxes sit neatly on the shelves. Kazia perches on the edge of the table and waves at a bench. "Sit."

Sei sits with perfect posture, except for clutching his half-empty mug. Last time he was in a room alone with Kazia, the young prince tricked Sei into breaking Radovan's experiment, then left him to take the blame. Nonetheless, Sei finds himself relaxing now.

His heartbeat is less frantic, his attention less scattered in the quieter room. The door muffles the laughter and lutesong. Whatever Kazia's intentions, Sei is glad to be here instead of there.

Unless...

Kazia's intentions can't be to rescue Sei from the overwhelming party, right? Sei has never sensed anything besides animosity from Kazia. Maybe a kinder soul hides deep beneath Kazia's abrasive personality.

"Stop that," Kazia says sharply.

Sei jolts upright. "Stop what, Your Highness?"

"Whatever you're thinking. I can tell it's stupid." Kazia pulls a flask from his brocade and leather jacket. He grimaces at the taste but takes a second sip.

How much of that too is posturing? The insults, leather, and liquor? Prince Kazia is only eighteen. That's four years younger than Sei, as of today. Yet everyone treats Kazia like such a dangerous person.

Sei sips his own ale, which tastes better now that he's getting used to it. Still not as good as the sweet wine. "Why did you bring me here, Your Highness?"

"To fuck with my brother," Kazia answers. "Marek will assume I'm up to something nefarious."

"And are you?"

Kazia shrugs. "Usually."

"I see."

They fall silent until Kazia groans and flops back on the table. All that's visible of Kazia are his knee-high boots as he addresses the ceiling: "You are infuriating, you know that?"

"I'm sorry, Your Highness?"

"That!" Kazia gestures with both arms. "That right there."

Sei hesitates. "I still don't understand."

"You're so fucking agreeable. It's repulsive."

Sei doesn't know how to respond. The accusation is preposterous. No, actually the accusation is correct. Sei is agreeable. How can that be repulsive? Sei is supposed to be agreeable. He's supposed to get along with his mage and his mage's associates, so he can be helpful. So he doesn't get in the way.

Except it isn't fucking working.

Sei is still mulling over Kazia's words when footsteps thunder down the hall outside—and a familiar voice calls out Sei's name. Kazia sits up, watching the door gleefully. Sei rises to his feet just as the door flings open.

"What are you doing?" Marek demands—of Kazia.

Not Sei.

Because of course, Sei is never the one who *does* anything.

Except in this moment, when Sei's well-trained composure shatters.

“Why the fuck do you care?” Sei snaps, and flings his beer at Marek.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Marek

Ale splashes through Marek's shirt before he can dodge. He barely feels the wet cold, too stunned by the unbridled fury in Sei's face. The rage seems too large for his slender form, too large for the mending room they stand in.

Marek opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. Behind Sei, Kazia gapes, just as stunned.

The wooden mug drops from Sei's hand and clatters away. Sei waves sharply, gesturing to Marek or Kazia or the entire room. "Maybe Kazia didn't do anything. Maybe I just wanted to socialize with someone who doesn't tell me to wait a minute!"

Guilt spurs Marek's voice. "I'm sorry, Sei. I lost track of ___"

"Lost track?" Sei demands. "You weren't tracking anything in the first place! You just do whatever you want, like a fucking boulder rolling over everything!"

Marek bites back a defense. He meant to come back to Sei. But that doesn't matter, because he didn't.

"I felt like shit for not getting you a birthday present." Sei's hands tremble until he clenches them into fists. "But that's stupid. I know your birthday is twelve days away. How was I supposed to know you were celebrating early when nobody told me?"

"You don't have to get me anything." Marek feels lost, the ground unsteady beneath him. "I wouldn't expect you to."

Sei's laughter is painful. "Of course. There's no fucking point. I would have to ask you for the money anyway." His

laughter dies, and his gaze falls from Marek's face. "The only thing I can give is myself, but you don't even want that."

If Kazia hadn't been watching, his shock brightening to delight, Marek might have answered, *I do want you*. But the confession dies in his throat. "Let's talk about this upstairs, okay? We can—"

"When is my birthday?" Sei demands.

Marek has no idea. It never occurred to him to find out.

Sei sneers at his silence. "You talk so graciously about not taking advantage of me. Real generous of you, Stormrider. But you don't give a shit about me either."

Marek stumbles backwards out of Sei's way. He's vaguely aware that other people have arrived to gawk in the hallway. They're drab and unimportant compared to Sei's bright-burning fury.

Sei strides down the hallway without faltering at the audience. "Fuck the rest of you too!" he yells before vanishing through the door.

The only sounds in the garrison are Sei stomping away. Then a distant door slams shut. It echoes in the slow claps from the mending room.

"Amazing," Kazia says. "I didn't think he had it in him."

Marek didn't either.

Without a glance at anyone else, Marek leaves to find Clem. Then he retreats to his balcony, under the enchanted heat lamps. Low clouds weave a canvas for the fiery sunset. Marek's thoughts coalesce and scatter, a slow and indecisive storm.

Nearly two months ago, at this very table, Marek played aerie with Kazia, Vana, and Daromir. Marek knew something was wrong then. The shiver before a lightning strike. He just hadn't known what.

Marek doesn't know whether he would have agreed to the favor Vana asked had he known its consequences. Perhaps

that's the kindest thing Vana has ever done for Marek—saving him from the choice between his brother and his home.

Today is different. Marek knows exactly what's wrong. But that doesn't help him fix it.

Protecting Sei has been a noble excuse, but Marek has really been protecting himself. In doing so, he's done exactly what he claimed to be protecting Sei from. Marek has been treating Sei like a pawn. An obedient claim and grail without wishes of his own. A burden instead of a partner.

First Marek decided to break the betrothal. Then he decided to go through with the wedding. He never asked for Sei's opinion.

How hypocritical to hate the Porcelain Guild for shaping Sei into a polite little teacup. Sure, Marek encouraged Sei to break out of his shell. To drink wine. To dye his hair. Small, convenient rebellions.

Whenever Sei strayed out of line, Marek scolded him from wandering without a guard. He should have explained the danger from the start, so Sei could make his own decisions.

Heavy boots thud behind Marek, and Clem joins him on the balcony. Their hair is silver and green today but looks washed out under the sunset. From their stricken expression, Marek already knows what they're going to say.

“When is it?” Marek asks.

“Today.”

Marek grimaces. “Thanks, Clem. Can you come back in an hour?”

“Yes, Stormrider.”

Hopefully by the time Clem returns, Marek will have figured out what he's going to do about his betrothed.

He hasn't figured it out ten minutes later when someone else joins him. Marek turns his head on instinct more than anything else. The giant crimson fellcat slinks onto the balcony patio without a sound. Meeting Marek's eyes, Osric

pauses for a moment. Then he sits near the railing as if to watch the sunset.

Marek waits until he's reasonably sure Osric isn't going to lunge for his throat. "Are you here to yell at me too?"

He doesn't expect an answer. Osric is the least talkative talking animal Marek has ever met. But today is a day for surprises. A low voice rumbles into the back of Marek's mind, more intrigued than angry. *Did Sei really yell at you?*

"I assumed Sei would tell you all about it."

Usually he tells me things. Today, he kicked me out of the bedroom so he could sulk alone.

Marek winces. "Today is his birthday."

Oh. Interesting.

"I didn't know. I didn't even think to find out."

I don't pay attention to birthdays. I didn't know Sei cared about them. Osric turns, regarding Marek with golden eyes. *Maybe Sei didn't care about them before.*

"I expected you to bite my head off for hurting him."

You didn't just hurt him. You infuriated him. Osric sounds thrilled. *You're the best thing that's ever happened to him.*

Marek disagrees. But even if he's terrible for Sei, even if it would take months to fix everything he's fucked up? Marek can start by trying to make up for his failure today. The storm in his head clears enough for a tentative ray of light to shine through.

"Osric," Marek says. "What are Sei's favorite foods?"



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sei

Sei sleeps in late the next morning. By the time he makes it to breakfast, Clem is already gone. After picking at his food, Sei cleans up and gets dressed. Then he lies face-down in bed for the next several hours.

His head hurts worse after half a beer and a tantrum than after all the wine at the Topsy Tree.

Something nudges his shoulder. Again. Sei swats at it sleepily, then hisses when his knuckles hit the hard object. Rolling over, Sei glares at the hovering hairbrush—and the fellcat sitting safely out of swatting range.

“Leave me alone,” Sei grumbles.

I will after you get up.

“You’re lying.”

Such a clever boy. Osric nudges him with the hairbrush again. Do you intend to wallow about the birthday thing all day?

Sei sits up. “No. I’m wallowing about losing my temper in front of Marek and Kazia and everyone. It’s deeply embarrassing.”

It will still be embarrassing however long you put off seeing people, Osric points out. Is it not preferable to bite the rabbit’s head off quickly?

“You have a way with words, Osric.”

Thank you.

“You also have something planned.”

Sei waits, but Osric refuses to elaborate. Osric also refuses to move, and Sei knows he won't win a contest of wills against a fellcat. The hairbrush nudges him again. Sei snatches it from mid-air and begins resentfully brushing his hair.

Oh, absolutely not. Sei attempts to retreat downstairs as soon as they reach the garrison tower top. Osric pushes him out onto the roof anyway, then telekinetically closes the door. A latch slams shut. Osric stretches out in front of the door for good measure.

“Bad cat,” Sei mutters, and reluctantly faces the gathered party.

Clem, Kamil, and Deline wait beneath the patchy blue and silver sky. Marek towers over all of them. A few parcels are piled on the nearby parapet, and for some reason, everyone looks... nervous.

“What’s going on?” Sei asks.

Clem lifts their hand and counts three beats in the air. On the third, everyone shouts in unison: “Happy birthday!”

“-day!” Kamil echoes off-beat.

It’s the most stunningly awkward thing Sei has ever seen. He stares, dumbstruck. Then bursts into helpless laughter. Doubling over, tears stinging his eyes, Sei gasps for breath.

“Great,” Deline drawls. “You broke him.”

A shadow covers Sei, and familiar broad hands straighten him up by the shoulders. The nervousness in Marek’s rugged face quells Sei’s laughter. “Are you okay?” Marek asks. “I’m sorry. Fuck. This was a bad idea.”

Sei wipes his eyes. “What exactly *is* the idea, Your Highness?”

“I’m trying to throw you a birthday party.” Marek lets go of Sei. “If you want a grand banquet, I can do that too, but I’ll

need at least a week to arrange it. I could only manage something small today.”

“No grand banquet. Please.” This is already the largest birthday celebration Sei has ever had. He doesn’t know what he would do with an entire banquet. Besides, Draskoran banquets seem very dangerous. “I’m sorry for my outburst yesterday. That was inappropriate and embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing?” Kamil exclaims. “That was amazing. You were incredible. You yelled at Stormrider! The entire garrison is in awe.”

Delline elbows him. “Don’t act too excited.”

“Yes, Lady Adjutant.” Kamil hands a parcel to Sei. “Here, this one’s from me.”

Sei glances at Marek, then catches himself. Right. Sei doesn’t need permission to receive gifts. The parcel is solid, wrapped in paper, and very clearly shaped. “Is this a bottle of wine?”

“Maybe!” Kamil says. “Maybe it’s a surprise!”

There’s no surprise. Unwrapping the paper reveals a bottle of wine, labeled in Draskoran. “Thank you, Kamil.”

“Don’t mention it.” Kamil rubs his hand through his black and green hair. “Stormrider gave us about twelve hours’ notice, so I had to grab something from my cellar.”

“His closet,” Delline clarifies.

“I have a proper cellar in Talorna. Not my fault we have to live like fucking recruits in Ostomar.”

“Complaint noted,” Marek says drily, and takes the wine bottle so Sei can accept the next gift from Delline.

This one is a long, narrow box, polished wood with a brass clasp. Sei unfastens it to find a sheathed dagger nested inside. The blade is as long as Sei’s forearm.

“Every pretty boy should own a knife,” Delline says. “Never know when you need to stab someone.”

“Thank you,” Sei manages, both touched and alarmed.

Marek takes the box from his hands. “We’ll get you some training with that. If you want.”

“Yes, please,” Sei says. “Thank you, Deline.”

“Clem put the food together, so there’s just one more gift.” Marek picks up the final parcel, larger and softer than the others. “Well, there’s two more. I ordered a gray one too, in case you don’t like this one. But it won’t be ready until next week.”

Sei accepts the linen-wrapped bundle. “This is from you?”

“Only if you like it,” Marek says. “Otherwise, it’s from Kamil.”

As he pulls the linen aside, Sei’s mouth drops open. “Oh, *wow*.”

He hadn’t known wyrmskin could be dyed that color. The jacket is blindingly pink, with equally bright purple lining. Dark steel buckles glitter along the straps.

Marek shifts his weight. “Like I said, if it’s a bit much...”

Sei spins to hold the jacket up to the light. “Marek, I *love it*.”

Marek stands stunned, before a huge grin spreads across his face. “Great. That’s great.”

“This is disgusting,” Deline mutters.

Clem clears their throat. “You two should get going, Stormrider. It’s nearly noon.”

Sei can’t tear his gaze away from the pink wyrmskin jacket. “Where are we going?”

“That’s up to you,” Marek says. “Osric said you wanted to see more of the country, and you said you liked landscapes. I thought we could have a picnic. If you want.”

Sei hugs the jacket close. It smells rich and acrid from the dye. “That sounds nice.”

“You can pick where we go, then,” Marek says. “The Organ Caves or Rainbow River.”

Osric chimes in. *The caves are named for the instrument. Not viscera.* That lessens Sei's alarm, but the other option still sounds nicer.

"Let's go to Rainbow River," Sei says.

"Great." Marek is saying that word a lot today, like some sort of talisman. "Osric, could you unlock the door so everyone else can get out of the way?"

Ugh. I suppose.

As Osric ungraciously lets everyone else file through the door, the sky above darkens. Marek pulls Sei to the side, hugging him away from the storm winds of Loska's descent. Sei's hair whips across his face, and his entire body hums with the feeling of Marek's arms around him.

Sei doesn't know what's more remarkable. How easily Marek can win him over with gifts—thoughtful, personal, perfect gifts. That Marek would try in the first place. That Sei isn't in trouble for losing his temper yesterday.

The burning temptation to forget the picnic and kiss Marek against the ramparts.

Loska settles, taking up most of the rooftop. *Happy hatching day! I didn't bring you anything. Where are we going?*

"Thank you, Loska," Sei says, trying not to pout when Marek releases him. "We're going to Rainbow River, wherever that is."

That's my favorite place. Except for my other favorite places.

Marek makes quick work of checking the harness and fastening their picnic basket to the rig. Then he looks down and says, "You should put the jacket on."

Sei unfolds the buttery-soft wyrmskin, and a tendril of greed snakes through his heart. "Can you help me put it on?"

Marek's attention sharpens. He hops down from Loska's rigging and takes the jacket from Sei's hands.

“Turn around,” Marek says, soft like a suggestion. Or a plea.

Sei’s heart beats too fast to reply. He turns around, and somehow Marek feels even closer now than when Loska landed. Entire inches of space shiver between them. Marek touches Sei’s wrist through his sleeve, his fingertips like wine in Sei’s veins. The silk lining slides up Sei’s left arm, enclosing him in Marek’s gift. Friction whispers along his skin. The acrid dye is sweeter when combined with Marek’s scent.

Every touch makes Sei hunger for more.

Marek smooths the jacket over Sei’s shoulders, then spins him around. Sei nearly stops breathing as Marek buckles the jacket up his torso, his huge hands gentle and certain. Reaching Sei’s chest, Marek’s fingertips pause above Sei’s heart. His dark violet eyes anything but gentle, Marek doesn’t pull away. But he doesn’t draw closer.

Until Sei hooks Marek by the shirt and drags him down for a kiss.

Sei has never kissed anyone before. He used to worry he would be terrible at it. His worry vanishes with his first taste of Marek’s lips. Dry, soft, gentler than Sei expected. Marek’s short beard rasps against Sei’s chin. Marek barely moves, except for his hand falling to Sei’s hip, holding him in place.

They barely move, except the entire world flips over and settles into place, brighter than before. When Sei finally drops down on his heels, he already yearns to kiss Marek again.

“I hope that was all right,” Sei breathes.

“I haven’t earned that yet,” Marek says roughly. “I need to apologize for being a boulder.”

“You can earn a kiss for yourself, boulder.” Sei takes a step back, smile widening. “That one was for me.”

Marek extends his hand. “Let’s start with a picnic. I have a few more apologies planned.”

Sei places his hand in Marek’s. “I look forward to them.”

The process of mounting up is unexpectedly relaxing. Fastening helmets and testing straps becomes a ritual. Marek's touch is professional. Reassuring. Until Marek slides into the harness behind Sei, and they both inhale with the sudden proximity.

The harness holds them together, from Marek's chest firm against Sei's back to the hard line of his cock trapped against Sei's ass. Sei's thoughts scatter. Surely he's imagining the sheer size of Marek.

New rule, Loska says, gathering himself for takeoff. No fornicating on the dragon.

"Here we are," Marek says not long after, over the rushing wind. As Loska banks around, Sei looks past the dragon's dark-scaled shoulder and gasps.

Rainbow River isn't really a river. It's a crookedly shaped lake, and its waters gleam iridescent in the faint autumn sunlight. Stones of every color sparkle beneath the clear water, along with swaying, translucent beds of kelp.

The colors shine all the brighter in contrast to the darkness around them. Black-earth fields crumble into white sand at the banks, and a gloomy forest stretches south.

Loska leaves Sei and Marek on the high northern shore, which drops off in a short cliff to the lakeside. They're far from the water but have a good view of the lake and the forest beyond it.

Have fun. Loska's tail swishes with poorly restrained mirth. If you need an extra hour, set the picnic blanket up as a flag, and I'll stay away.

Sei hides his flush by removing his helmet and fixing his hair. Marek just flings a pebble at Loska's tail. Loska bats the pebble back, then takes off with a telepathic cackle.

Leaving his helmet next to their pack, Sei walks to the edge of the cliff. Schools of sleek fish dart through the shallows, their white scales reflecting the many colors of the water.

When people in Fellrin talk about Draskora, they talk about the magic-warped forests. The harsh mountains. The unchecked blood magic. The scalestone, always the scalestone. Nobody ever talks about places like Rainbow River.

“It’s beautiful,” Sei says quietly.

“It’s also super poisonous,” Marek says. “But the razor fish will strip the flesh from your bones before the poison takes effect.”

Sei turns and stares.

Marek shrugs. “We’re here to eat and sightsee. Not swim.”

He’s spread a rough blanket over the ground. Sei sits down, folding his legs as Marek sets out the food. Clem must have been paying attention to all Sei’s favorites so far in Draskora. There are pastries upon pastries, sweet and savory.

Then Marek removes a small bottle from the basket, and chokes.

“What is that?” Sei asks, picking a savory hand pie.

Marek pauses before answering. “Lubrication.”

Sei nearly chokes on the flaky crust too. “Oh,” he says when he finishes coughing. “Who put that in the basket?”

“It could be literally any of them.” Avoiding eye contact, Marek tucks the salve back in the basket.

The little bottle’s presence burns in Sei’s mind, but he sets the notion aside for now. Marek was right earlier—they need to talk some things through. And Sei has an apology of his own to give.

“I’m sorry for shouting and throwing beer at you yesterday.”

Marek lowers his cheese roll, his expression helpless. “Come on. You don’t get to upstage my big apology picnic.”

Sei holds back a smile. “Are you telling me what to do, Your Highness?”

Marek’s mouth opens, then shuts.

The berries are sweet. Sei eats three of them before continuing. “I forgive you for throwing your early birthday party on my actual birthday. Especially since I know the riders planned it. Additionally, if I wanted something done for my birthday, I should have mentioned it.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think it would bother me until it did.” Sei pops another berry into his mouth. The taste is almost as sweet as Marek’s attention following his lips. Is that new? Or has Marek always done that without Sei noticing?

Marek takes a berry for himself. “I think I understand. I always assumed Father would arrange a marriage for me. But when he actually did, I was angrier than I expected.”

“I noticed.”

“Which is why I owe you apologies for more than just the birthday party.”

Sei is tempted to joke. To deflect and call Marek a boulder again. To smooth out the awkward edges of the conversation. Marek is vulnerable now in a way Sei isn’t used to. His openness threatens to expose Sei’s own vulnerabilities.

Brushing the crumbs from his fingers, Sei stands up to gaze over the beautiful, poisonous lake. He remains quiet, resisting the lure of an easy escape.

“Neither of us chose this arrangement, but our circumstances aren’t equal,” Marek says. “It bothers me that you think you’re supposed to obey me. Not because I’m a prince, but because you’re a grail. That’s not how it works here.”

Marek’s eyes are so much brighter than the water. Even sitting, his presence rivals the sky.

“It still bothers me, but I handled it all wrong,” Marek continues. “I never asked what you wanted to do about the betrothal. When you told me anyway, with and without words, I never listened.”

Sei fingers the hem of his jacket. Marek has listened far more than he gives himself credit for. He’s listened to things Sei never even said, things Sei never even knew about himself. How could Sei have known the particular iridescence of pink wyrmskin?

He sits down, much closer to Marek than before.

Marek exhales. “I’m asking now, Sei. What do you want?”

A year ago, Sei’s answer would have been different. A month ago. Even a week ago. “All my life, I dreamed of being chosen by a mage. That’s how I saw it. Not being sold or traded. Being chosen.” Sei’s mouth twists. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? You never chose me.”

Marek doesn’t answer. He doesn’t need to.

“I can’t live out that dream. But that’s all it was. A lovely, convenient story.” Sei’s hand shifts on the rough blanket, sliding the fabric over the stone beneath. “Now, I want something true.”

Marek’s hand closes the remaining breath to cover Sei’s. His grasp is gentle, his eyes piercing. “What a coincidence. We want the same thing after all.”

Sei’s next desire feels like another dream. A better one. “I also really want to kiss you again.”

“Another coincidence.” Marek touches Sei’s chin and tilts up his face. Lifting him up while holding him to the ground. When they join together, Sei realizes he was wrong. This isn’t a better dream. This is real.

Sei doesn’t need dreams when he has this.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Marek

Marek barely tastes Sei's lips before Sei surges against him, eager to deepen the kiss. It's clumsy, desperate, perfect. Sei is so soft compared to the hard earth beneath their blanket. Marek can't remember why he resisted this. Why claiming Sei is a bad idea. Marek could have been doing this for weeks if he simply slept in his own bed.

Except it would have been different. This moment is flavored with every moment they've shared before. Marek didn't truly see Sei the first day they met. Sei was still scared of Marek.

Rightfully so. Marek traces Sei's jawline with his thumb, gently pushing some distance between them. He wants a read on Sei's mood—and gets one very clearly.

“Show me how to kiss you.” Sei leans into Marek's touch. His eyes are warm. More mesmerizing than the deadly rainbow waters. “What do you like?”

“I like lots of things.” Marek is ravenous for any way Sei wants to kiss him. He's tempted to counter by asking what *Sei* wants. But Marek promised he'd start listening. If Sei wants guidance, Marek can oblige. “Let's start with this.”

Marek pulls Sei up and over. It's clumsy, awkward, and Sei yelps in surprised delight before settling in Marek's lap. They sit face to face, and Marek tugs Sei closer by the hips. The shocked thrill in Sei's eyes is even better than the pressure against Marek's cock.

“Touch me however you like,” Marek says. “But kiss me slowly.”

Sei nods, eyes intent.

Marek pushes strands of sleek white and blue hair behind Sei's ear. Just as soft as Marek imagined. Then he pulls Sei in for another kiss.

This one is slower, more controlled. Sei kisses back hard at first, then catches himself. His palms flatten on Marek's chest, and he melts into Marek. Clearly paying attention, Sei easily picks up Marek's rhythm.

Careful. Leisurely. Barely restraining the urgency boiling through Marek's veins. He wants this to be perfect for Sei—because with everything else Sei has never done before, Marek doesn't have to ask about this too.

Sure enough. When Marek finally lets Sei sit back, Sei blinks up, dazed. "I've been missing out. Is kissing always like that?"

Arousal pounds against Marek's ribs. "Definitely not. I've been missing out too."

Sei surges forward to kiss Marek again. Marek doesn't expect it. Setting down a hand to brace himself, he knocks into the jar of berries. The jar rolls away, trailing berries as it goes.

"Fuck." Marek lunges to catch it before it rolls onto the dirt.

Sei squeaks and clutches Marek's shirt—then bursts into laughter as Marek lifts the jar triumphantly.

"I don't know what you're laughing about," Marek says haughtily. "These are very important berries?"

"Why is that, Your Highness?" Sei asks, still smiling. "Wait. Should I call you Your Highness? Or just Marek? Maybe Storm—"

Marek pops a berry into Sei's mouth. Which both silences Sei and lets Marek touch the well-kissed curve of his lips. "Please call me Marek when we're alone. Stormrider makes me think I'm commanding troops."

Oh. From the way Sei shifts in Marek's lap, that might not be a bad mood to bring into the bedroom. They can explore

that some other time, when they know each other better. When they can think clearly.

Thinking clearly may be impossible with Sei. Especially when Sei plucks a berry from the jar and presses it to Marek's lips.

The berry is sweeter than Marek usually prefers. He's far more interested in the soft brush of Sei's fingers. Holding Sei's gaze, Marek catches those slim fingers between his lips and licks the juice from them. When he sucks them deeper, Sei gasps and rocks against him.

"Marek," Sei says, strangled.

Enough teasing. Marek releases Sei's fingers to ask, "Do you want to come in my mouth or my hand?"

"Yes," Sei answers, then covers his face. He watches Marek through his fingers, clearly at war with himself, before confessing, "Your hand. I've been thinking about your hands."

Oh, fuck me. Marek will have to explore that later. He squeezes Sei's hips. "Help me put the food away."

Sei scrambles from Marek's lap. If picnic basket-stuffing was a competitive sport, Sei would be the reigning champion. Marek only has time to toss the fallen berries into the river. As the deadly razor fish swarm to devour them, Sei latches the basket closed.

"I'm not going anywhere," Marek says, amused.

Sei freezes for a second. "If I thought you were, we wouldn't be doing this."

Marek nods. There's still so much they have to talk about. But that can wait until Marek solves the far more urgent problem visible through Sei's trousers. "Set your jacket aside and sit down with me. Facing the water."

He drops to the blanket, and Sei hesitates. Not nervous. Just assessing the logistics. Marek had thought somehow that Sei would be a nervous virgin. That's part of what kept Marek away—not that there's anything wrong with inexperience.

Marek just knows himself. He's big and gruff and hardly reassuring.

But Sei has never shied away from new experiences. Not since the day Marek met him, a stranger lost in a foreign land, without any friends or allies. At least when Marek was adopted into House Dire, he had Loska in the back of his mind. Sei is far braver than Marek gave him credit for. Asking for some guidance doesn't diminish that.

Sei sits between Marek's legs, his back to Marek's chest. His hands tense against Marek's thighs as Marek strokes his shoulders.

"If you tease me again, I'll get myself off," Sei warns.

Marek chuckles, his breath stirring Sei's hair. "Message received. Reach up and loop your arms around my neck."

The order is just to give Sei something to do with his hands. Something simple, because Sei tends to worry when he thinks he's doing something wrong. Anything and everything Sei could do right now would be perfect, of course. But Marek doesn't want the worry to even cross Sei's mind. Marek just wants Sei to feel good.

The way the pose stretches Sei out against Marek, baring his entire torso for Marek's wandering hands, is a happy coincidence. Sei's head doesn't even reach his collarbone, giving Marek a perfect view.

Marek unfastens Sei's belt first. "Is that more comfortable?"

"Yes," Sei says, fingers tangling in Marek's hair.

Marek is hyperaware of his own hands as he rucks Sei's shirt and undershirt from his waistband. What exactly has Sei been thinking about them? Marek's hands are ordinary. Rough. He would have been a hunter, shepherd, or blacksmith if he hadn't bonded to Loska. Dragonriding isn't a soft life either.

Now, Marek enjoys how much of Sei's smooth, tawny skin his hand can cover at once. The way his calluses make Sei *squirm*. Sei's body clearly demonstrates the differences between them. No scars, no rough edges. He's not soft,

though. The muscles beneath Marek's hand are firmer than he expects.

Marek promised not to tease, so he unlaces Sei's trousers quickly.

"This wasn't the plan, you know." Marek grasps Sei's cock. His own cock throbs with Sei's full-body jerk. "I really just meant to take you out for a nice picnic."

Sei arches up, hands tightening behind Marek's neck. "What changed?"

"I opened my eyes."

Sei's cock is hot and perfect. He isn't particularly small, but Marek's hand completely engulfs him. Marek pulls Sei's shirt up for a better view of the dusky head peeking between his fingers. With every slow stroke, Sei grinds instinctively into Marek's palm.

Marek's other hand wanders up Sei's chest. He traces the pebbled skin of Sei's nipple. "Do you like this?"

Sei responds slowly, breathlessly. "I think so."

"What about this?" Marek asks, and rolls the nub between his fingers. The reaction is electric.

"Yes. Yes, definitely."

The wonder in Sei's voice is nearly enough to send Marek over the edge. Playing with Sei, tugging his nipples and cock, feels like Marek is touching himself. Sei's every response is so erotic, so unrestrained. Marek's cock pulses with every moan and movement.

It's like Marek has never done this before either. He can't wait to discover what else Sei enjoys. If Sei reacts like this to ordinary touch, how would he react to a tiny spark of Dire magic?

Getting ahead of yourself, Marek, he scolds himself with the last shred of his sanity.

Sei's hands scrabble behind Marek's neck, slipping in the sweat. His next moan is higher.

“Are you close?” Marek murmurs into Sei’s hair.

Sei’s only answer is a gasp. He arches up and comes in Marek’s hand.

Marek has never seen anything more beautiful—until the next moment, when Sei completely melts against him. His arms drop to Marek’s thighs, and his head turns against Marek’s chest. His every heaving breath echoes through Marek’s lungs.

Marek forgets his own arousal until Sei stirs in his lap, and asks, “What do you want?”

Need slams into Marek. What does he want? He wants to dive into Sei’s body and claim every part of him. But Marek won’t last the journey to grab the salve from the picnic basket.

“I want you to kiss me,” Marek says instead. “Show me what you’ve learned, teacup.”

Sei twists around to sit on Marek’s thigh. His fingertips rest on Marek’s face, holding him in place with feather-soft touches, in perfect contrast with the intensity of his gaze.

He’s learned a *lot*.

Marek closes his eyes as Sei softly, gently steals his breath away. He barely needs his own touch before he’s spilling into his come-slick hand.

When they can both breathe again, they sit slumped together at the edge of the cliff. Sei fits perfectly under Marek’s arm, and rainbows dance through the waters below.

“One year,” Sei says. “That’s what I want.”

“What?”

“This was wonderful. Incredible.” Sei sighs. “But it doesn’t change everything.”

Marek’s nervousness is its own wonder. He’s never feared rejection before. “I’ve been terrible to you.” Marek strokes Sei’s arm through his sleeve. “I was wrong about... just about everything. But I’m selfish enough that I want to make it up to you. So, has it changed enough?”

“I don’t know.” Sei catches Marek’s hand and starts tracing his knuckles. “But I want to find out. That’s why I want you to promise me a year. Just one year of making this arrangement work. After that, we’ll decide what to do.”

Blissed out from orgasm, Marek would promise a lot more than just a year to Sei right now. But he restrains himself. Sei doesn’t want reckless promises. Sei wants something true.

“That’s very sensible.” Marek kisses the top of Sei’s head. “I accept. I’m yours for a year.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sei

Sei has never had a birthday like this. He thinks it's already perfect until late that night. Alone in the bedroom, Sei faces the massive, comfortable bed and realizes he wants one more thing.

After today, he doesn't think Marek will refuse.

Sei pads barefoot downstairs to the dining parlor. The balcony patio is shuttered off, making the space smaller and cozier. Marek and Osric sit on the floor, an aerie board between them. They both look up as soon as Sei reaches the doorway.

Osric has been blessedly circumspect since Sei returned from the picnic, though the fellcat can't completely hide his smugness. Marek had it worse—Loska heckled him the entire flight back.

At least, Sei assumes so, given Marek's muttering behind him:

“Stop it.”

“None of your business.”

“Yes, you were right, but do you have to be insufferable about it?”

“No. Okay, yes, but don't say it like that!”

Now, Sei asks, “Are you sleeping on the roof tonight?”

Marek regards him like Sei is an aerie piece and Marek is trying to decide the correct move. There isn't a right or wrong move, though. Just the move Sei wants and the one he doesn't.

“Go to bed,” Marek says. “I'll join you after we finish this game.”

Osric swishes his tail. *Don't bother. You already lost three moves ago.*

Marek's eyes narrow. "You're bluffing."

"I doubt he's bluffing." Sei leans against a nearby wall to watch. "Osric takes aerie very seriously."

Marek plays out the rest of the game anyway, his army of wyrms swiftly dwindling under the assault of Osric's wraiths. Sei's just happy the two of them seem to be getting along. Osric is the closest thing to a real family Sei has. This marriage will work much more easily with Osric's support.

Today was almost perfect. There's just one thing that would make it better—sharing magic.

But that's the part Marek has always resisted most. Sei is too selfish to ruin his perfect day with that argument.

Nice attempt for a novice, Osric says not long after. He telekinetically swipes Marek's monarch away. *Practice a little more, and you'll begin to approach competence.*

"Thanks for the guidance," Marek says cheerfully. He stretches to his feet. "I'll take my consolation prize now."

"What prize?" Sei asks—then yelps as Marek scoops him off his feet. "Marek!"

Marek cradles him easily in both arms, as secure as harness rigging. Like Sei weighs nothing at all. "You look tired. I don't want you falling asleep on the stairs."

Sei can't control his grin. Again. He's been smiling at random all day. Like he's drunk on sheer joy and touch. "So considerate, Your Highness."

Wrinkling his nose at the title, Marek carries Sei away. Sei barely even moves in Marek's arms as they ascend the stairs. Marek isn't just strong—he's completely in control of himself. He isn't as wild and reckless as Sei first assumed. Marek's sense of control might be better than Sei's.

Marek lays Sei on the bed so gently, Sei hardly feels the transition. Like he's been floating on clouds since the moment

he unwrapped the pink wyrmskin jacket. Or maybe he's just lost in the depths of Marek's purple eyes.

The first night Sei slept in this bed, he worried that Marek might want to join him. He offered to sleep on the couch. Now, Sei can't believe he's become so lucky.

"Thank you," Sei says. "This was the best birthday ever."

"Your best birthday so far," Marek says, and kisses the next smile from Sei's lips.

Sei is still drunk on that kiss when he crawls under the blankets. Half-asleep, he watches Marek strip down. Sei has plenty of ideas about Marek sliding into bed completely nude. But they remain just that, ideas. Sei drifts to sleep before he can act on any of them.

That's fine. He has one entire year for great ideas.

Radovan looks harried when he answers the door. "I didn't expect you today."

"Is this an inconvenient time?" Sei asks.

"No, come in." Radovan pushes the door wide and gestures for Sei and his guards to enter. "How can I help you?"

"I just wanted to say farewell before the wedding." Sei and Marek leave for Raya Keep in two days, and the wedding is six days after that. The prospect is overwhelming and absurd when everything feels so new with Marek.

The guards linger at the door. Sei's getting accustomed to the supervision, though he prefers accompanying Marek. Being followed by dragon corps guards isn't much different from life at the Porcelain Guild, except the guards never tell Sei what to do or where to go. They just follow Sei's decisions.

The laboratory is different today. Trunks and cases pile next to the central counter, and many of the shelves are empty.

But one thing is familiar—Kazia Dire sits on the counter, swinging his legs.

“Hello, Your Highness,” Sei says, unsure whether he should bow.

Kazia waves. “Don’t mind me.”

“His Highness was just leaving,” Radovan says. His hint falls on deaf ears, as Kazia doesn’t move.

Sei gestures to the pile of trunks. “Are you going somewhere?”

“I am, in fact.” Radovan pats down his dusty robe. “I’ve hit a snag in my project for Queen Aliza, and I won’t get the new research results for at least six months. So, I’ve agreed to join you and Prince Marek up north after all.”

Sei brightens. “To work on the teleportation experiment?”

“That’s the one.” Radovan smiles. “I’m traveling by horse, which means if I leave tomorrow, I should reach Talorna by the time you and His Highness fly up.”

“I’m sorry your project is delayed, but I’ll be glad to have another friend up north.” Life in Draskora has been easier since Marek stopped avoiding him, but Sei is still nervous about starting over in yet another new place.

“I’m glad as well.” Radovan’s smile fades at the sight of his laboratory. “I apologize for the mess. I find packing rather stressful. Most of this isn’t even coming with me. But I have to store the more sensitive items away, to protect them from meddling hands.”

His glare at Kazia isn’t subtle. Kazia ignores it.

Unlike Kazia, Sei can take a hint. “I find packing stressful too. I’ll leave you to it and see you in a couple weeks.”

Kazia hops down from the counter. His boots echo against the floor. “Yes, Lord Radovan is very busy. Walk with me instead.”

Sei glances at the guards—who simply wait for Sei to move.

Marek probably wouldn't want Sei to hang out with Kazia, but Sei isn't exactly afraid of angering Marek anymore. So, Sei submits to his curiosity. "Yes, Your Highness."

He follows Kazia from the laboratory, and the guards trail after them. After several turns, they end up in an unfamiliar corridor, which opens into an equally unfamiliar library. Comfortable tables and chairs fill the wide chamber. The glass-enclosed bookshelves only rise halfway towards the ceiling, leaving the rest of the walls free for ornate tapestries.

Scalestone fragments shimmer overhead, wrought into an elegant chandelier. Lavender light reflects here and there throughout the room, punctuating the soft golden glow of the ordinary lamps.

Kazia points to the chandelier. "Pretty, isn't it?"

Sei hesitates. "Why does that sound like a trick question, Your Highness?"

"Because you're less stupid than I expected." Kazia gestures at the guards. "You two can wait at the door. I'm not going to eat him."

At Sei's nod, the guards take up positions at the door. Sei follows Kazia on a winding path between the tables. "If you're not going to eat me, what *do* you want?"

Kazia stops at a table on the far side of the room and braces his hands against the back of the chair. Scalestone reflections pass over him, the same color as his long hair. His face is as sharp as ever, but for a moment, the young prince looks incredibly lonely.

Sei leans against the chair next to him and waits.

Eventually, Kazia asks, "Does sharing magic hurt for you?"

"What?" Sei stares, but Kazia doesn't repeat the questions. "No. Of course not."

Sei has only shared his magic a few times. Guild mages draw power from the grails at various points in their training. Just enough to confirm the grail's magic works as it should,

and to teach the grails how it's supposed to feel. Sei found the process satisfying, for lack of a better term. Strange at first, but it didn't hurt.

“Your Highness.” Sei lowers his voice even more, so the guards across the room can't hear. “Why do you hate grails so much?”

“The chandelier is new,” Kazia remarks instead of answering. He twists a strand of hair around his finger. “Mother had it installed before the Fellrian ambassador visited. The old chandelier would have been so awkward to explain.”

Uneasiness itches behind Sei's neck. The Fellrian ambassador was Lady Naoko. Why is Kazia bringing up Sei's mother?

“Ages ago, Queen Eliska the Second had a favorite grail,” Kazia continues. “A beloved pet. The man's name isn't recorded anywhere. Guess what happened to him.”

Sei shakes his head.

“Eliska burned out her pet during a war with Silaise. She was a gracious queen, so she kept the man around even though he was deranged and useless. After the grail died, Eliska turned his bones into a chandelier. The skeleton has hung in this room ever since—until this summer.”

Sei's vision blurs. His hands tremble, clenched into bone-white fists.

“I don't hate grails,” Kazia says. “I hate mages, because they're monsters. Never forget that.” Smiling brightly, Kazia pushes away from the table. “Happy wedding.”

Any polite response dies in Sei's throat. He ducks his head and clings to the back of the chair until his stomach stops churning.

Kazia's warning is crystal clear, his motive less so. Does he just want to warn Sei, or is Kazia also trying to drive a wedge between Sei and Marek? Sei hasn't seen anything monstrous in Marek. The opposite. Marek doesn't even want to use Sei as a grail.

Now, Sei thinks he has some idea of why. And he's long overdue for a real talk with his betrothed.

Sei finds Marek meeting with a few other riders in the harness repair room. Nobody remarks when Sei slips in, but the riders aren't subtle about eyeing him. The smirks are obvious—but more admiration than mockery. Sei doesn't care about the attention. He's supposed to be here.

If the riders make lurid assumptions about why Sei is waiting for Marek's meeting to be over? That's also fine. Sei has nothing to hide.

Settling against the wall, Sei doesn't have long to wait. One rider finishes her report about the Nostic outpost, and Marek says, "All right, then."

Which ends the meeting. Like a flock of birds taking off, the riders rush out of the room. Marek closes the door behind them with a thud.

There's a quieter thud when Sei throws the latch. Then a louder one when Marek kisses him against the door.

Sei indulges for a breathless moment. Will he ever get used to the wonder of Marek's touch? He doubts it. But that's exactly why Sei needs to have this conversation.

"Wait." Sei slumps against the door. "That's not why I'm here right now."

Marek touches Sei's throat, then his shoulder. His violet eyes turn cautious. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"No, but I hope you'll listen to me anyway." The repair room smells of leather and oil. Broken things surround Sei—and the tools to mend them. "Why don't you want to use my magic?" Sei lifts a hand to forestall Marek's protest. "I'm not demanding that you use me. I just want to know why you won't."

Marek's jaw tenses beneath his beard. Just like last time Sei asked about sharing power. But this time, Marek answers. "Because it's too dangerous with the dragonbond."

"How does that work?" Sei asks.

"My mind and soul are always connected to Loska. I can't turn that off. Dragonriders used to use grails in battle, but they had to be incredibly careful not to pull too much power. In the heat of aerial battle?" Marek grimaces. "We burned out too many grails before the dragon corps stopped using them."

Sei's mind races. Until very recently, Draskora was the only nation in Alantha with dragons. The guildmasters never trained Sei to fuel a dragonrider. But they warned about burning out.

Grail magic renews over time, but it isn't infinite at any given moment. If a mage takes too much at once, then scrapes for more, they can trigger a final, violent burst of power—leaving the grail an empty husk forever after.

Burning out isn't necessarily fatal. Symptoms vary. Weakness, memory problems, depression, paranoia. If the grail is lucky, their mage will continue taking care of them. If the grail is unlucky, they're discarded as useless.

That isn't supposed to happen. Not anymore. Burning out a grail is a capital offense in Fellrin. Even Draskora outlawed it a few years before Sei was born.

But the disturbingly recent law isn't what reassures Sei.

"Thank you for worrying about that," Sei says. "But burning out won't be a problem for us."

Marek crosses his arms. "It's a big fucking problem. I won't hurt you."

"Indulge me in a thought exercise." Sei takes Marek's hand. He presses it against his own chest, wondering if Marek can feel Sei's heart thudding against his palm. "Pretend you're using my magic. Then I tell you to stop. What do you do?"

Marek yanks his hand away. "What the fuck do you think? I'd stop and make sure you were all right. Sei, this is serious."

“You would stop,” Sei repeats. “Yes, this is serious. Which is why I would tell you to stop long before I started burning out.” He shrugs. “You’re trained as a mage and a dragonrider. I’m trained as a grail. I know what I’m doing.”

“That’s different. You never had a choice.”

“How much choice did you have, becoming a mage and a dragonrider?”

Marek doesn’t answer.

The prince wears his legend like a mantle. Yet twelve years ago, Marek was a young teenager riding out to face a dragon. Reckless, alone. He didn’t know he would tame the dragon when he rode out.

Afterwards, when the Dire king arrived in the foothills, did the Helra boy have any say in his adoption?

Ostomar and the Porcelain Guild aren’t as different as Sei thought when he arrived. The guild may have been a darker place than Sei believed while growing up. But at least in the guild, all the rules were spoken out loud. Sei never had to guess.

“You’re also right,” Sei says quietly. “In other ways, being a grail is completely different from being dragonbound. This has always been my path. Even if my parents kept me, I would still be a grail. I will always be a grail.”

Marek reaches out. “This is important to you?”

Sei takes Marek’s hand. So much larger than his own—but Sei doesn’t feel weak in comparison. “If you take too much, I’ll tell you to stop. Can you trust me to be what I was born to be?”

“We can try.” Marek tugs Sei closer. “Not because of who or what we are. Not because of my father’s treaty.” He lifts Sei’s hand and kisses his knuckles. “We can try because you’re asking me.”

Warmth spreads through Sei’s veins. Instead of Marek pulling grail magic, Sei pulls happiness from Marek, right into his heart.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Marek

Marek is getting used to riding with a passenger, at least when the passenger is Sei. The sky has been Marek's true home since the first time Loska took him up, and usually Marek resents intrusion. Passengers involve so many little annoyances—adjusting his position during launch and landing. Remembering to signal Loska's sudden movements. Avoiding the fun loops and spirals.

But with Sei, none of those are annoyances. Every tiny adjustment is a reminder that Marek's claim is right here, warm against his chest, safe between his arms.

Marek would rather think about this journey than their destination. The notion of marrying Sei is even stranger now that Marek wants it. He can't dismiss the event as a political inconvenience anymore. Now that Marek actually wants Sei?

Their relationship is too new. Too fragile.

Sei has been quiet too, so Marek asks over the wind, "What are you thinking about?"

Sei's gloved hand flexes in the straps. "I'm just worried about Osric."

Transporting fellcats on dragonback is complicated. Marek could have figured out a workable harness, but Osric flatly refused.

If fellcats were meant to fly, we would have wings, he had said.

So, Osric departed with the caravan taking servants, guards, and Radovan Ark to Talorna by ground. By the time Marek and Sei fly up after the wedding, the caravan will already be there.

“Osric will be fine,” Marek says. “The wilderness is dangerous, but I trust the caravan master. They have more than enough defensive mages.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” Sei sighs. “What if Radovan or someone annoys Osric, and he eats them?”

For a moment, the only noises are Loska’s wingbeats. Loska doesn’t say anything, but Marek feels the dragon’s amusement and interest in the concept of eating people.

Marek hopes Loska doesn’t get any ideas. “Is that a problem? You told me Osric didn’t eat people, and I thought fellcats were tame.”

“They’re not tame,” Sei corrects. “They’re civilized.”

Right. And civilization has worked so well for humans.

“I’m sure everything will be fine,” Marek says. “Besides, as long as Osric only partly eats Radovan, the blood healers will be able to put him back together.”

“Thank you. That’s reassuring.”

The wind cools around them. Barely perceptible, but Marek has been waiting for the change the entire flight. A small storm builds to the south, and it will break over them soon. Usually, Marek and Loska would fly over the storm or skirt around it. Marek has a different idea today.

Catching the idea in Marek’s mind, Loska angles downward.

Marek leans his chin against Sei’s shoulder. “There’s a storm coming. Want to help me hold it off?”

Sei’s surprise is palpable. “You mean as a grail?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

“Yes! Absolutely, yes.” Sei reins himself in. “I mean, if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” Marek kisses Sei’s neck, right under the helmet. “Not up here, though. Loska’s bringing us down.”

He wants to concentrate on one thing at a time. Flying might be second nature, but Marek still has to pay attention in case something goes wrong. He intends to use Sei's magic as safely as possible.

That's why the rain today is a perfect opportunity. Lightning would be too dangerous a test case. The region below is a sparsely inhabited expanse of forest. Few travelers pass through, even though the bloodsucking shadow-sloths only come out at night. Marek will only have to worry about Sei, Loska, and himself.

I can take care of myself, Loska says, affronted. He pulls up, and the air echoes beneath his wings.

Sei rocks back against Marek for the landing. He's steadier than he was during their previous flights.

Marek holds onto the excitement in Sei's voice to quell his own nerves. If this is a disaster, they're never doing it again. Marek has plenty of magic, and that's before considering his dragon. He doesn't need to risk Sei's wellbeing to grasp for more. But Marek is willing to try since it means so much to Sei.

Loska sets them down in the middle of a wide dirt road. He sits up to watch birds as Marek leads Sei to a nearby clearing.

Distant thunder rumbles, and the air is damp by the time they reach the clearing. A great monarch of a tree took down its neighbors when it fell in some long-ago storm, and now rests as a moss-covered wall. Feathery silver grass rustles around their feet. With his pink jacket, Sei is the brightest thing in the entire forest.

"All right," Marek says. "How does this work?"

Sei prods the ground with his toe, then sits cross-legged. He begins peeling off his gloves. "We don't always have to touch, but physical connection helps when you're new. Take my hands?"

Marek sits cross-legged in front of Sei. As the tiniest raindrops begin to tickle, Marek takes Sei's hands.

“You’re going to do most of the work,” Sei explains. His enthusiasm has cooled to more serious composure. “I can’t use or control my magic. I can’t even feel it until someone else calls it.”

“Just tell me what to do.” Marek is the novice here, and Sei is the expert.

“First, try to feel my magic. Just like finding your own magic. Linking is also easier when a mage and grail have been intimate with each other. Whatever intimacy means to them.” Sei glances away briefly. “Go ahead and try.”

That much is familiar, in theory. Thinking about it in relation to himself and Sei is still strange. Marek closes his eyes and searches.

And it’s easy.

Marek’s own magic is a constant, chaotic storm inside him. A rioting force of nature. Sei’s magic is a well of clear, quiet water. Endless and still. Marek’s soul has never felt so parched.

Their magic is so different. How can Marek use such quiet power?

When Marek opens his eyes, Sei sits just as quietly as the magic inside of him. Raindrops glitter in his hair and trace sensual paths down his cheeks.

“You found it.” Sei’s eyes curve in a smile. “Well done.”

“Can you feel that?” Marek asks.

“Not yet. Now, take a bit of my magic and use it for something small. See what it feels like.” Sei squeezes Marek’s hands. “Starting with lightning would be unwise. But don’t worry about taking too much from me. I’ll tell you if you need to stop.”

Marek rubs his thumbs over Sei’s knuckles. “You can’t stop me from worrying.”

Sei’s smile deepens. “Don’t blame me if you wrinkle.”

Marek grins back, then takes another deep breath. Sei does the same. Marek watches Sei this time as he finds Sei's magic. Searching uses a sense beyond sight, beyond touch. When Marek circles the edges of Sei's power, Sei tenses, then relaxes.

"Does that hurt?" Marek asks.

"You haven't done anything yet." Sei lifts his chin. "Stop stalling."

Marek isn't really stalling. He's just figuring out the best approach. Bonding with Loska was instinctive. Learning Dire magic was harder, but Marek had Imrik to guide him. He recalls his father's early instructions.

Visualization can guide magic, Imrik explained. Don't let it become a crutch, because magic is capable of far more than human eyes can comprehend. But it helps in the beginning, before power becomes instinct.

Marek imagines reaching into Sei's chest. Just above Sei's heart. Marek's real hands remain wrapped around Sei's, but in his mind, his fingertips trail across the surface of the quiet water.

Power pours into him. Pure, exhilarating power.

Before Marek can pull away, Sei grabs him tighter. Marek exhales and remains seated as his soul staggers against the rushing water. His own magic hungers, eager to feed new energy into his never-ending storm. Marek grits his teeth and imagines pulling his hand from the water.

The surge diminishes to a trickle, then vanishes. Only tiny droplets of Sei's magic cling to Marek's. For a moment, they remain distinct. Then with a reflexive shiver, Sei's power assimilates completely into his.

There's none of the struggle Marek expected. He didn't have to fail before getting it right. Before Sei's magic melted into the storm.

Using the tiniest drop of magic, Marek pushes the rain away.

He just wants a dry space large enough to enclose two people. Yet with Sei's magic igniting his, the barrier rushes to cover the entire clearing. Stillness sweeps over the clearing, the barely noticeable patter of raindrops shifting. Overhead, rain lands in midair, then slides towards the edges of the clearing.

"It worked." Sei stares upwards. "We did this together."

"How do you feel?" Marek asks.

"Amazing." Sei laughs and rises to his feet. He spins around, his delight filling the entire clearing.

The spell is simple. Marek could have done this under his own power—but it would be more difficult. Now, he barely has to concentrate to hold the barrier firm. Rain lashes harder overhead, and not a drop gets through.

Sei whirls to face him. "Thank you. That was amazing. Can we do it again?"

"Of course," Marek answers without thinking. As the rain intensifies overhead, Marek runs his fingers through Sei's hair and concentrates.

Grail magic jumps even more easily between them this time. So easily it scares Marek—and Sei's dark lashes flutter.

Marek tries to focus beyond the giddy taste of Sei's magic. "Talk to me."

"Nothing bad," Sei says. "This just feels so much better than when the guildmasters tested me."

Marek suddenly, viscerally hates every guildmaster who has ever touched Sei before. How dare they lay hands on him?

The well of Sei's power truly seems endless. Marek knows it isn't. But fuck, Marek has never felt so much magic in one place before. Like a mountain's worth of scalestone—all contained in one slight, fragile body.

Marek is wing-marshal of the Draskoran dragon corps. He enlisted half a lifetime ago. Military strategy seeps into his every instinct, and his mind leaps to the possibilities.

Sei's magic would be damned useful against wraiths.

Against anything.

Marek shoves the thought away. Not now. All that matters now is the joy in Sei's eyes. Marek takes what Sei offers and flings their magic skyward.

Clouds slice apart. A thousand dark ribbons race away, until the sky above is crystal blue. Sunlight scatters through the shower of abandoned rain.

"It's beautiful," Sei says.

Marek isn't done yet. He hasn't let go of the clouds, because he's not irresponsible enough to unleash stray magical storms on the local weather patterns. Next, he draws them together again, feeding them into a single, twisting column. He shapes the winds far too slowly for a true tornado. This is a clearly unnatural monument, and Marek has never had such precise control over the sky.

What should he do with it? Marek could write Sei's name overhead. Maybe draw something. A dragon or a fellcat? Though Marek's artistic skills aren't very—

"Stop," Sei says.

Panic arcs through Marek. He wrenches away, instantly severing his connection to Sei's magic. The loss shivers through his magic like soul-deep nausea. Overhead, the column of clouds wavers.

Marek forces himself to unravel it slowly, feeding each strand of the storm into its natural path. Only when the sky is completely gray and light rain rattles down again does Marek turn to Sei.

"Are you all right? Did I hurt you?" Marek can't see anything wrong. Would the signs be visible?

"You didn't hurt me." Sei spreads his arms. "You didn't take too much. I just wanted to prove you would stop when I said to stop."

Marek's mind blanks out. He doesn't move as Sei crunches through the rain-damp meadow grass to reach him.

Sei looks at Marek like he's searching Marek's soul for magic too. "I like how careful you are with me. It makes me feel good. But you can be careful without being scared."

Nobody has ever accused Marek of being scared.

Of course, Marek has never met anyone quite like Sei before either. He takes Sei in a kiss. Deeper, harder than he's ever kissed Sei before.

Sei kisses back just as hard.

"Thank you," Marek breathes against Sei's lips. "Let's get back to Loska before you give me any more heart attacks."

Marek's worries don't quite ease as they pick through the watery forest. Now he knows what grail magic feels like. He's tasted the smallest possibilities of Sei's power. Yet Marek has no idea what he should do with that knowledge.

He was so prepared for this to go wrong. He isn't prepared for it to go right.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sei

Warlord Navlin conducts the wedding rehearsal more like a battlefield than a social event. Barking orders, she deploys the participants like troops in enemy territory. Not that Sei has been to any weddings for comparison. Perhaps every Draskoran prepares for marriage under the command of a fierce, diminutive warmage.

Thankfully, Sei's role is simple, for all its importance to the proceedings. At the moment, he just has to wait in Raya Keep's great hall while Navlin sends a herald to find another herald to figure out...

Sei has no idea.

The great hall is an imposing space. Dark and gloomy, even more oppressive than the Ostomar throne room. Scalestone pillars line the central aisle, flanking a runway of scalestone tiles marking Sei and Marek's path from entrance to altar.

"I've never seen so much scalestone in my life," Sei whispers. "Do you truly use it for flooring?"

"Hardly. This is just to impress the Pathans and Silaisans. It'll be dismantled after the wedding."

Sei hasn't left Marek's side since they arrived at Raya Keep, but in between clothes fittings and social calls, they've barely had a chance to talk. Marek claims this is a small ceremony, but dozens of Draskoran nobles and their entourages fill the keeps. Each of them wants a private audience to congratulate Marek ahead of the wedding—or curry favor, as Marek puts it.

Raya Keep is composed of three fortresses arrayed north to south. Shaped like arrowheads, the dark stone fortresses point

towards the eastern border with Silaise. The aggressive symbolism is ironic, given the Silaisans currently residing in Raya South.

The Silaisans are some of the only wedding guests Sei and Marek haven't met with yet. That's the topic Warlord Navlin turns to while they wait for the heralds.

"I still need to arrange a face-to-face for you and Julien Sandry," Navlin says. "I'm thinking out in the public courtyard. We can schedule it for tomorrow morning before the ceremony. That will give both sides enough time to organize guards."

"No," Marek says firmly.

Navlin blinks, clearly just as surprised as Sei. Marek has been extremely cooperative throughout today's proceedings, and this is the first time he's resisted.

"No to which part, Your Highness?" Navlin asks.

"No to the public charade. Invite Prince Julien for a drink in our quarters. He can bring a small entourage, but I won't have guards. Just me and Sei."

Navlin glares. "Understood, Your Highness."

As Navlin summons yet another herald, Sei leans against Marek and touches his bare forearm. "I expected her to argue."

"She wanted to," Marek says. "She doesn't care that I outrank her. But she knows I'm right."

Scalestone shimmers beneath Sei's feet. "There's enough pageantry already."

"Exactly. This is the first time Silaisan royalty has entered Draskora since the Sandries took power." Marek pauses, then corrects himself. "The first time they've *openly* entered Draskora, anyway. None of us have met with Julien since before the war. I want to see what he's like now for myself."

The rest of the rehearsal goes well. Sei studied Draskoran wedding traditions at the Porcelain Guild, so all he has to remember is the choreography within Raya Central's great

hall. As overseer of Raya Keep, Warlord Navlin will conduct the ceremony. Sei and Marek just have to follow directions.

It goes well—until Navlin reads one line in particular. “Sei Mallory, will you accept this claim and join House Dire, forever bearing the name Sei Marek Dire?”

Sei is supposed to reply, *I’m honored and glad to be claimed*. He doesn’t get a chance before Marek demands: “What the fuck?”

Marek’s voice echoes through the great hall. The sudden anger transports Sei back to the beginning of all this—the moment Sei learned he was to be claimed by Marek Dire.

The moment he learned Marek didn’t want him.

A muscle twitches beneath Navlin’s eye. “I’m reading the vows, Your Highness. That’s what they always say.”

“I know the vows,” Marek snaps. “What the fuck did you say his name was supposed to be?”

“Stop,” Sei says, so loudly that everyone in the hall freezes. Pushing down his nerves at the sudden attention, he continues. “Everyone leave the hall. The rehearsal will resume in half an hour.”

Servants and soldiers hesitate, uncertain whether to obey. Sei has no true authority—his only title is as Marek’s claim. Ignoring everyone else, Sei stares directly into Warlord Navlin’s eyes.

Navlin nods, then strides from the room. Her acceptance gives Sei’s demand the authority he needs. The other soldiers and servants file out too.

Sei doesn’t understand Marek’s sudden fury, any more than he understood Marek’s reaction to the betrothal. But Sei isn’t scared of Marek’s anger anymore.

He’s just determined to figure out the cause of it.

“Explain the problem to me.” Sei crosses his arms. “Without shouting.”

Marek leans against the marble altar. He's quiet for a moment, a nexus of coiled energy. Then the storm calms. "As your claimant, I'm bringing you into House Dire and giving you our family name. That's normal. Giving you my full name isn't normal."

"You have a problem with the name Sei Marek Dire."

Marek nods, and Sei still doesn't understand. There's a cultural difference, yes. Sei isn't surprised Marek hasn't studied the nuances of Fellrian naming conventions. Nobody warned Marek before saddling him with a Fellrian claim.

But Marek's vehemence sounds deeper than that.

"It's normal in Fellrin," Sei says. "Grails take their mage's full name as their last name, so everyone knows who the grail belongs to. Whether they're married or adopted or simply claimed without another obligation." Sei leans against the altar at Marek's right side. Not quite close enough to touch. "Why does that bother you so much?"

"Where were you born?" Marek asks, which is a partial answer.

"The guild is in the city of Takeria," Sei says. "But we don't use our birthplaces as middle names in Fellrin."

Marek isn't angry anymore—just sad. "I'm not named after my birthplace either. The place is named after the people. My name is the last part of me that still belongs to Clan Helra."

Sei leans closer. Marek is the one who erases the last tiny distance, pressing his arm against Sei's.

"Do you miss your clan?" Sei asks, resting his head against Marek's arm.

"Not usually." Marek shrugs against him. "Right now? I'm marrying you tomorrow, and nobody from my clan will be there."

"That's not right. The king should have invited them."

"I'm sure he did, but Helra is all the way across the country. They'll have sent gifts." Marek sighs. "Sorry, I

shouldn't complain. At least I have a few House Dire cousins here. I still can't believe Fellrin didn't send anyone."

Sei traces the gaps between Marek's finger, feeling the contrast between Marek's heat and the cool marble of the altar. "Complain away. I'd really like to have Osric here, but otherwise? I don't have any family to miss."

"Not even Naoko?" Marek asks.

The question strikes Sei unawares. A knife slipping past his guard. A wound Sei hadn't even realized he was guarding against.

Sadness burns without warning between Sei's lungs.

"Naoko's husband is probably my father." Sei barely hears his own voice. "He could have visited me at any time, but I've never met him. He and Naoko are married to another woman too, and I've never met her either."

Sei tries to recite the facts calmly. They've never hurt him before. But Marek still gently rubs warmth into Sei's arm.

"Plenty of families raise their grail children," Sei says. "Naoko didn't have to give me up. She just didn't want me enough to keep me."

Marek exhales. "I think she cares for you, in her own way."

"That's great for her. I wish she'd keep it to herself."

Marek kisses the top of his head. "You're allowed to feel hurt."

"Thank you," Sei whispers, then shakes himself. "Damn you. I was trying to comfort you, and I've made it all about me."

"I don't mind that at all, teacup."

Warmth flutters in Sei's chest. The nickname sounds so fond now. "Boulder. Tell me something nice about Clan Helra. I want to know more about them."

"Let me think." Marek squeezes Sei tighter, then lets his hand fall to Sei's hip. "My first parents died of illness when I

was five years old. Wait, I promise this is a happy story.”

Sei snuggles closer under the weight of Marek’s arm. “It doesn’t look good so far.”

Marek’s voice brightens the gloomy hall. The warmth of his body against Sei must be what scalestone does to mages. It’s empowering. Addictive. Or maybe it’s something even more foreign than scalestone. A sense of belonging.

“I spent the next nine years moving from family to family,” Marek says. “Not because nobody wanted me, but because they all did. I was a delightful child. Have you ever had hadarcakes?”

“I haven’t.”

“They’re made from hadarnuts, and they’re annoying to make. Nobody ever does except for special occasions. Families spend the whole week up to the solstice making them.” Marek sighs happily. “Because everybody took care of me, it was so damned easy to scam them from a dozen different families.”

Sei pokes Marek’s thigh. “No wonder you’re so tall. How much did they feed you?”

“My real growth spurt was later.” Marek shifts to play with Sei’s hair. Pleasant tingles follow wherever he touches Sei’s scalp. “Clan Helra was lucky Imrik adopted me. The hadarcakes were nothing compared to how much I ate at seventeen.”

Sei leans into Marek’s touch. Marek pauses, as if suddenly noticing what he’s doing.

“Thank you,” Sei says. “I’m glad you shared that.”

Marek resumes stroking blunt fingers through Sei’s hair. “Giving you my full name feels like I’m erasing your past. Like I’m claiming too much of you.”

“You’re not erasing anything. I don’t even have a middle name to erase. Besides...” Sei trails off, unsure if he’s about to reveal too much. Maybe he’ll scare Marek away again.

“Besides what?” Marek lets go of Sei’s hair, but only to stand in front of him. He touches Sei’s chin. “Your turn to talk.”

“In Fellrin, you don’t use middle names unless a noble honors you with one. Or you can choose an extra name for yourself. Something important to you.” Sei touches Marek’s wrist. “I don’t care whether I’m Sei Mallory or Sei Dire. I would rather just be Sei Marek, because you’re the part of House Dire I actually want. But that would sound insane to you Draskorans.”

Marek’s eyes lower. He touches Sei’s throat. “Say that again.”

Sei’s pulse jumps beneath Marek’s hand. “Which part?”

“The part where you want me.”

“Marek.” Sei leans forward. “I want you.”

The vast hall fades away. The only real place in the world is the breath between them.

“How long did you tell everyone to leave the room for?” Marek asks, his eyes dark.

“Half an hour.” Sei chews his lip. “Do you think that’s enough time?”

“One way to find out,” Marek says, sinking to his knees.

Marek’s cheek rests against Sei’s thigh, mere inches from Sei’s hardening cock. At Sei’s nod, a wicked smirk curves Marek’s lips. He unlaces Sei’s trousers.

“Stay quiet—if you can.”

Covering his mouth with one hand, Sei clutches the altar with the other. He nearly chokes with the effort of keeping quiet as Marek’s hot mouth closes around him.

They have enough time for Sei to come twice before the rehearsal resumes.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Marek

Marek hasn't seen Julien Sandry in years. There's been plenty of hostility and one outright war between their countries in the meantime. But Julien arrives with only two other men in his entourage, which means he's on the same page as Marek today.

They want a real conversation.

Prince Julien is a dark-haired, confident man. A smirk hides in his smile, and a pointedly Silaisan green and gold cloak hangs over his shoulder. At his left is a slight man around Sei's height, perhaps a bit taller. With his golden hair and Draskoran purple eyes, that must be Julien's lover Whisper.

Intelligence on Whisper is hazy and prone to hyperbole. The most dramatic rumor calls him a former Kennel assassin. Marek wouldn't believe that from Whisper's unassuming presence—which might mean Marek *should* believe it.

At Julien's right is a man in a dark green coat. Nearly Marek's height, with striking red hair and a watchful blue glare. Marek doesn't recognize him on sight.

As the door closes on the hallway full of guards and aides, Marek extends his arm. "Good to see you, Julien. Let me introduce my claim, Sei Mallory."

Julien clasps Marek's arm quickly, then turns to Sei. "A pleasure to meet you, Sei. Congratulations to you both."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Sei grips Julien's arm in greeting too.

He doesn't seem at all intimidated, which shouldn't surprise Marek anymore. Sei thrives on social situations as

long as he knows what to expect. Marek spent the brief time after the rehearsal running through the protocol. As Marek's claim, Sei doesn't bow to foreign royalty.

"No drasgard lurking under the sofa?" Julien asks. "You're a bold man, Marek, meeting us two to three."

"You're the brave one, Julien, meeting us three to two," Marek counters cheerfully.

Julien considers him, then chuckles. "Good thing there's no need for bravery today. It's been too long, hasn't it?"

"Have you met before?" Sei asks.

"I spent an equinox festival in Greenhaven, not long after joining House Dire," Marek explains.

The red-haired man's glare sharpens. "Before visits to Greenhaven became diplomatically awkward."

A chill shivers through the room. Everyone in this room is well aware of the scars left by the Long Summer War. Today's meeting will only work if everyone refrains from clawing them open.

Sei extends his hand to the stranger. "Welcome to Raya Keep. I'm afraid I didn't catch your name."

"This is Lucien Vaire." Julien claps Lucien on the shoulder. "And this is Whisper, to my eternal delight."

Whisper shifts the box he carries to one arm for the next round of diplomatically fraught handshakes. "I hadn't known Prince Marek visited Greenhaven."

The remark is very neutral, but Julien's grin widens. "Are you jealous? Marek, put my partner's mind to rest. He's subtly asking whether I seduced you when we were teenagers."

Julien did no such thing—but the suggestion makes Marek turn for Sei's reaction.

Sei only tilts his head. "I'm suddenly curious as well."

As a very confident fifteen-year-old, Marek might very well have bedded a foreign prince. Except Marek had found Greenhaven suffocating. It was the longest he and Loska had

been separated since they bonded. Neither House Dire nor House Sandry had wanted a Draskoran dragon visiting Silaise.

“As I recall, we barely spoke,” Marek says, before this turns into something stupid. He’d rather talk about imaginary gossip than about the war, though, which he suspects is why Whisper brought the topic up.

“See?” Julien says, but Whisper looks strangely skeptical until Julien sighs. “All right, fine. Audric heavily supervised me the entire time to prevent an international scandal.”

“That makes much more sense.” Whisper smiles at Marek and Sei. “Queen Margot sent gifts on behalf of House Sandry, but we have a rare vintage of Pellerin red as a personal gift for the occasion.”

Marek gestures them farther into the room. “Our personal thanks, in that case. Let’s open it together.”

There’s a ritual to sharing wine between foreign agents. Julien uncorks the bottle as Marek sets out glasses. Then Marek pours the wine, and Julien selects his glass first. The tradition isn’t a failsafe against poisoning—but that’s what the enchanted charm sitting on the tray of glasses is for.

The charm remains dormant, and everyone is cordial on the surface. Tension still sharpens every word and movement, especially from Lucien Vaire. Marek hardly expects Lucien to be friendly, but the edge of personal animosity still takes Marek aback.

Marek has never met the man before, but he knows Lucien well by reputation. Lucien appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the Long Summer War, bursting onto the scene in the first of many deadly conflagrations. The young mage wrote his name in fire across the latter half of the conflict. Perhaps the second most dangerous Silaisan mage, after Prince Audric Sandry himself.

That was only the beginning of Lucien’s military career. He’s now the commander of the new Silaisan dragon corps—Marek’s direct military counterpart. Just like Julien is Marek’s counterpart as second prince of Silaise.

No. Marek is the first prince now. He keeps forgetting that.

Marek has another concern as they move to the sitting area. A few sofas and chairs surround the low table, and everyone is waiting for Marek to sit first.

First Prince Vana would know the diplomatically optimal seating arrangement. Marek has no idea, so he may as well just do what he wants: pull Sei onto the sofa next to him.

Sei presses against Marek's side, close enough that the rose and amber of his soap fills Marek's lungs. The soft curve of Sei's lips begs to be touched. Before Marek can move, Sei leans up and presses a gentle kiss to Marek's cheek.

Marek hasn't even tasted the wine, and his head's already spinning.

"Congratulations again on your happy betrothal," Julien says, his amusement clear.

Right. The Silaisans exist.

Lucien has taken a chair across the table from Marek, and Whisper perches on the arm of Julien's chair. Whisper's attention wanders the entire room, his wine glass untouched. Even without sitting too close, he and Julien occupy each other's space with obvious ease.

"Thank you again for the wine," Marek says in lieu of the traditional salute, lifting his glass.

He may not have Vana's sense of tact, but he knows *clear skies for us and terrible storms for our enemies* won't play well with this room.

The wine is strong and smooth. Marek pauses after his first sip. "Let's save the small talk for the banquet hall."

"Gladly," Julien says. "What do you actually want?"

"I want to know how Vana and Daromir are doing."

Julien tilts his head. "Who's asking? Prince Marek or King Imrik?"

The king had asked. But in a small act of family treason, Marek doesn't intend to relay the answer. "Neither. Just Vana's

brother.”

Sei shifts a bit closer to Marek. The subtle comfort is both welcome and terrifying. Since when has Sei been able to read him so clearly?

“Then your brother is doing well,” Julien says, without his earlier cockiness. “He and Daromir are safe, and they’re spending a lot of time on the beach. According to Bellamy, Vana is starting to tan.”

Marek can’t imagine Vana relaxing on an island beach. Then again, Vana grew up on an island. Vana always seemed perfectly suited to Ostomar’s dark halls, but maybe his birthplace lingered in his heart. Just like Marek’s.

Whisper’s attention briefly focuses on Marek. “Discreet messages to Tavoc might be possible, if you were interested.”

The offer is kind. It’s also dangerous. Doubtless Whisper knows how to hide messages from Draskoran eyes, but the Silaisans would read everything anyway. That’s what Marek would do in their place.

“I’ll think about it,” Marek says, without commitment. “Speaking of settling in, Lucien, how are your dragons doing?”

Lucien raises his glass. “Our nice Silaisan weather agrees with them. Any advice?”

“Sure.” Marek matches Lucien’s toast. “Don’t fall off.”

Lucien grins, not quite as hostile now. “Brilliant. I don’t know why we didn’t think of that.”

According to reports from House Dire’s spies, the Silaisan dragon corps is off to a competent start. One thing in particular interests Marek. “I hear you ride without a dragonbond. How does that work?”

Whisper clears his throat.

“I wasn’t going to fucking tell him,” Lucien protests, waving Whisper off. “Sorry, Wing-Marshal. My genius dragonriding technique is a state secret.”

“Fair enough.” Marek drapes his arm around Sei’s shoulders. “We’ll have to carry on with our centuries of expertise.”

Apparently talking about dragons is the way to Lucien’s good graces. A happy accident. Marek is just genuinely interested in the Silaisan dragons’ wellbeing. Keeping wild dragons in Draskora is a strategic priority, but if any slip through the net, Marek wants them well taken care of.

Julien leans forward. “Speaking of secrets... Whisper?” At his lover’s nod, Julien continues. “I’m interested in two names. I wouldn’t ask you to search for them, but if you happen to come across anything, I’d appreciate a letter.”

Marek sips the rich wine. There are limits to hospitality. “I can’t agree to that.”

“Of course,” Julien says. “Only if it’s convenient.”

“Who are you looking for?” Marek asks.

Julien’s face softens as he looks up at Whisper, who answers instead. “We’re interested in two people who died or vanished eighteen years ago. They were likely a couple with a six-year-old child.”

Sei’s wine is half gone. Marek grabs the bottle to pour him some more. “That’s not much to go on.”

“They had enemies who could afford a Kennel Hound,” Whisper says lightly.

Marek pauses, then finishes pouring. “That would narrow it down.”

Sei’s fingers kiss Marek’s as he accepts his glass. “What happened to the child?” Sei asks.

“He vanished,” Whisper answers, his violet eyes steady.

Leaning back, Marek settles his arm around Sei again. “I can’t agree to anything, but if I run across names that might fit, I’ll consider it.”

“Only if it’s convenient,” Julien says again.

Before the room can fall silent, Whisper changes the subject. “I heard you have a fellcat too, Sei. What’s his name?”

The transition is a splash of cold water. Marek hates the thought of House Sandry *hearing* about Sei. Like Sei is a political or military asset.

Even though Sei is exactly that as Marek’s claim and grail. Their relationship itself has political implications. Marek’s arm around Sei’s shoulder will be reported to Queen Margot as military intelligence.

But Sei lights up at the question, so Marek bites his tongue. Sei, Julien, and Whisper spend the rest of the meeting talking about how lovely and sweet their giant deadly cats are. Marek and Lucien spend the time pretending not to warily watch each other.

Only when they’re alone again does Sei’s smile drop away.

“What’s wrong?” Marek asks from the door.

Sei turns his empty glass, as if fascinated by the last traces of wine. “Julien and Whisper were nice.”

“Watch out. That’s the most dangerous thing about Julien Sandry.”

Sei glances up. The entire parlor separates them, but they still feel close. “Did you fight in the war?”

“Barely.” Marek crosses the room, because feeling close isn’t enough. “I slapped back a few Silaisan mages who tried to circle in through the north. Otherwise, Gabra kept me away from the front. I was still fifteen when the war started.”

“That’s very young.”

“War is more fun when you’re young, especially when you barely dip your toes in.” Marek contemplates the bottle of wine and the poison-tasting charm. “I’ve never understood why Father agreed to an armistice.”

Sei sets down his glass. “What do you mean?”

“Father declared war over territory, because he believes about half of Silaise rightfully belongs to House Dire.” Marek doesn’t quite agree—maybe a quarter of Silaise at most was originally Draskoran. Reclaiming it now would be more trouble than it’s worth. “But the war ended without any borders changing.”

“The guildmasters said that was because both sides were evenly matched.”

“Imrik is a careful, stubborn man.” Marek turns the question over. “He wouldn’t withdraw without achieving his objective.”

Sei is a quick study. “You think His Majesty wanted something besides territory.”

“Exactly,” Marek says. “And whatever it was, I believe he got it.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sei

Arriving at the ceremony is a bad time for Sei to realize he isn't ready. Dizzying purple light floods from the open doors. Sei forces himself to lift his chin as he and Marek cross the threshold. The ceremonial glass goblet trembles in Sei's grasp. He can't let the Fellrian wine spill.

If the great hall is meant to impress, Warlord Navlin has succeeded. The scalestone pillars are hollow and filled with magelight. Their shimmer dances through the entire room. Even the scalestone path to the altar glows with magic.

Hundreds of illuminated faces turn towards Sei and Marek. Sei's chest tightens with quiet panic.

Draskoran nobles. Delegations from Silaise and Patha. Sei has met some of the wedding guests over the past few days. He enjoyed the meetings, especially with Marek at his side. But right now, his mind is too numb to recall names or titles. Everyone is a stranger. A threat.

Sei is a grail. He's supposed to be treasured. His magic is a wonderful gift. But Prince Kazia's warnings echo in Sei's head. Do these strangers see Sei as a treasure to be cherished or a tool to be used? A weapon to be wielded?

Do they see him as a person?

Sei's training carries him the rest of the way down the aisle. By the time he and Marek reach the dais, the wine in Sei's goblet barely trembles.

He feels tiny and insignificant at Marek's side, especially with the bulk of Marek's house cloak. Violet brocade and silver fur trails the ground behind them as if the chains of House Dire whisper at their heels. A silver and scalestone crown sits in Marek's dark blue hair.

Sei has neither crown nor cloak. His undyed silk suit is colorless except for the floral epaulet on his right shoulder. Fellrin's ruby red, without marking a particular house. As Sei crosses the scalestone tiles, the refracted light stains his boots and trousers purple.

Drasgard line the walls. Practically, they're there for protection. Traditionally, they're to keep the prince's claim from escaping. That's why Sei and Marek walk into the hall side by side. Because by tradition, Marek and his household have been guarding Sei ever since the betrothal.

The supervision chafes. Weeks ago, Sei forbade Marek from leaving him at the altar. Now he's the one who wants to run.

But he doesn't. Because when they halt before the altar and face each other, Sei's nerves are mirrored in Marek's eyes. That same trapped anxiety hides behind Marek's stern features. It's subtle. Perhaps only Sei would notice.

This ceremony is wrong. Sei and Marek are about to promise their lives to each other in a room of hostile strangers. But the promise Sei wants is the one he's already chosen—one year. One true beginning.

Today is just one day in that year. Sei can live with his own worries, but he would rather see Marek smile.

So, when Warlord Navlin begins reciting the ceremony, Sei offers a tiny smile of his own. He's addicted to the way that simple action warms Marek's face in return. As if Marek's violet eyes are scalestone too, lit by magic from within.

The ceremony is in Draskoran, not Trade. Sei listens carefully until his first cue, when Navlin asks if he'll renounce his family name. The part when anyone with an inheritance or title would renounce that too. All Sei has to surrender is his name.

Sei presents the glass goblet with both hands. In careful Draskoran, he says, "I offer my past."

Marek's hands close over Sei's. At the next cue from Navlin, Marek drains the goblet dry. Then he tosses it over the

dais.

Glass shatters across the scalestone.

Sei shivers, alone and exposed and nameless through the rest of the ceremony. Until an attendant passes over the house cloak, and Marek fastens it around Sei's shoulders.

The brocade and fur aren't nearly as warm as Marek's hands. However fine the garment, it hardly compares to the bright pink wyrmskin jacket Marek already gave him.

The ceremony is wrong, but Sei's heart still flips over when Marek recites the final promise: "I vow to shelter you, body and soul, from every storm."

Scarcely listening to Warlord Navlin, Sei grabs Marek by the front of his cloak. Marek leans in, his gaze jumping across Sei's face like he can't believe what he sees. The next moment, Sei is surrounded by Marek's arms, and the rest of the room falls away.

And Sei Marek Dire goes dizzy again with the taste of Fellrian wine.

The banquet is much more enjoyable than the ceremony. Draskoran tradition says the new spouses should eat from one plate and drink from one cup, representing their newly sworn unity.

Tradition says nothing about handfeeding each other sweet tidbits. Also nothing about Sei climbing into his claimant's lap to see if South Draskoran ale tastes better from Marek's lips too.

"Sit still," Marek hisses, clamping his hands down on Sei's thighs. "Or we're leaving this banquet early."

"Do you promise?" Sei touches Marek's lips, then his jaw. Marek's short beard tickles Sei's fingers.

The dining hall is full. Warlord Navlin sits to one side of Sei and Marek; to their other side sits Prince Julien. Subtly or blatantly, everyone is watching the new husbands. Their scrutiny is far more welcome now. Maybe because Sei is exactly where he wants to be, not following ritual instructions.

Maybe because Marek's cock is so hot and hard against his thigh, Sei can't think about anything else. Meeting Marek's eyes, Sei deliberately rocks into his lap. "What was that about leaving early?"

Marek exhales against Sei's lips. "I don't know, husband. That might be rude."

"For fuck's sake," Navlin mutters. "*Please* leave early."

On their other side, Julien leans towards his lover's ear. "See, Whisper? I'm very restrained."

Sei pecks a kiss on Marek's cheek, then smiles at Navlin. "Thank you for your hard work organizing everything. Today was so lovely."

Navlin's eye twitches. She gestures for a servant to refill her wine glass.

Conceding to the tragedy of leaving Marek's lap, Sei allows Marek to bid cursory farewells to the Silaisans. House Dire's cloak is heavy, but Sei welcomes the weight of it. Like Marek's arm over his shoulder.

Then Marek grabs his wrist. He would have pulled Sei from the room if Sei wasn't already flying ahead.

Their borrowed chambers are too far away. An entire hallway and two flights of stairs. By the time they reach the suite, Sei is desperate for touch. Any touch, every touch. Marek's hand is sure around his wrist, but Sei is greedy for more.

Marek must be just as desperate. As soon as the door closes, Marek lifts Sei against it. The door slams in its hinges, and Sei opens to Marek's ravenous kiss.

Sei's wedding cloak drags on the floor as his legs hook over Marek's hips. Marek holds him up effortlessly, and it's

the hottest thing Sei has ever experienced.

He still wants more. His teeth ache until Marek's tongue slides behind them. His back stings until Marek's fingernails dig through the silk.

Growing up in the Porcelain Guild, Sei always expected to have sex with his mage. Physical intimacy is such a convenient route to magical compatibility. Not necessary, but convenient. Sei didn't dislike the idea. It sounded special. A prize worth the intervening solitude.

Sei never expected to crave touch for its own sake. He doesn't care about having a purpose. He just loves getting drunk on Marek's breath.

Marek kisses Sei's jaw. His neck.

Heat races through Sei's veins, and words spill from his lips. "I hated the ceremony, except for the part where you kissed me."

"I loved kissing you in front of everyone." Marek cups Sei's ass. Fuck, Marek's hands are so large. His fingers tense, pushing into Sei's muscles with maddening friction. "Are you all right with every noble in Alantha knowing I can't keep my hands off you?"

Sei's fingers sink into Marek's thick hair. "All right may be an understatement."

Marek's low laugh vibrates against Sei's throat. "I owe Navlin an apology. I haven't been polite today. I want everyone to know this isn't just an arrangement to me. Not anymore."

Every word ricochets between Sei's bones. "Marek Helra Dire," he says sternly. "I don't want you to be *polite* to me."

"Is that so?" Marek presses a wet kiss right in front of Sei's ear. "Tell me how you want me, then. I'm down for anything."

"Anything?"

"Anything regular." Marek eyes Sei with a smirk. "A few irregular things too, if you want to get creative. I can do some

interesting things with Dire magic.”

Sei’s heart pounds. Creativity is beyond him. All he can think of is the most basic, complete connection. “Don’t stop touching me,” he begs first.

“I can do that.”

“And I want your cock inside me.”

Marek’s grip tightens on his ass. “I can do that too.”

The world lurches as Marek yanks him away from the wall. Sei falls against Marek’s chest, heart thudding with anticipation. His arms drape over Marek’s shoulders, and his whole world narrows to the look in Marek’s eyes.

Difficult to believe Marek is just as desperate for this. But the evidence is convincing.

The bedroom is nice, but impersonal. They’ve barely spent any time in it the past few days, too tired for more than lazy touches and kisses. Now, the fireplace crackles, and mage lamps flicker to life with their presence.

Marek holds Sei up with one arm as he fumbles through a cabinet. Sei assumes Marek is tossing the jar of salve on the bed, but he doesn’t look. He’s too busy kissing Marek’s throat, drowning in his scent. He clutches the fur cloak around Marek’s shoulders.

“Setting you down,” Marek warns before he sets Sei down so carefully, he doesn’t even stumble. Marek’s hand remains at Sei’s waist. “Can I undress you?”

“Please. There are so many buttons.”

Marek circles him. He traces Sei’s shoulders through the heavy cloak. Then Marek’s fingertips press above Sei’s heart. A beat echoes through them both. Marek unfastens the clasp at Sei’s throat. House Dire’s cloak falls away. Marek lays it in front of the fireplace, then progresses to Sei’s many buttons.

“What are Helran weddings like?” Sei asks.

Marek pulls the jacket from Sei’s arms, his touch sliding through the silk shirt beneath. “Simpler than this. All the

mountain clans hold their weddings outdoors so the open sky can witness.”

“What if it rains?”

“They reschedule for disasters, but rain is good.” Marek brushes aside Sei’s hair and kisses the back of his neck. Sensation races down Sei’s spine. “It helps things grow. It washes everything clean.”

“That does sound nice,” Sei manages as Marek circles around to his belt buckle.

“There’s no officiant either.” Marek slides the leather free. Each movement tugs the tight fabric of Sei’s trousers against his cock. “Claim and claimant swear their vows to each other, without anyone else in the way.”

Sei’s breath catches. He doesn’t need to ask his next question, because he already knows the answer. Marek wishes they had that kind of ceremony instead.

While Sei is glad they didn’t.

Today’s wedding was a showpiece. The culmination of an international treaty. A trade arrangement in which Sei is one half of the merchandise.

This, right now? Marek’s hands exploring beneath his shirt? The pleasure building like a storm inside Sei?

This is what really matters.

At last, Sei stands completely bare. The fur-trimmed wedding cloak is plush beneath his feet. Sei thought everyone was watching him at the ceremony. That was nothing compared to how intensely Marek looks at him now. His gaze rakes from Sei’s throat to cock, then back up to his lips.

“My turn,” Sei says.

Marek removes his own boots and cloak. He spreads his cloak out next to Sei’s, then steps onto it so Sei can strip his finery away too. The clothes aren’t as complicated as they look. Or maybe Sei’s motivation is so great, he finds each buckle and button with skill born of desperation.

There's just one problem.

"You're too tall," Sei complains halfway through Marek's shirt. "Do the rest of your buttons."

"Are you sure? I'd have to stop touching you for about twenty seconds."

Sei considers. "I'll allow it."

Grinning, Marek finishes stripping on his own. Sei sits back on the cloak to watch. His cock leans against his stomach, aching for touch, but he denies himself. He wants to soak in every moment of watching Marek.

Sei doesn't know where to look. He wants all of Marek, from the pelt of dark chest hair to the thick contours of his thighs. Beneath the flickering firelight, Marek's body maps out his life. Scars from wounds not fully healed by blood magic. His sun-tanned arms, almost as dark as Sei's, contrasting the paler skin of his legs. Then there's his cock.

Proportionate would be an understatement.

The past few weeks have been too busy for Sei to get better acquainted with Marek's cock. He really wants to fix that now.

Marek tosses aside his trousers and snags the bottle of salve. He pauses above Sei, a towering figure so tall and broad, he makes Sei feel tiny. Then Marek sinks to his knees, breathing, "Fuck, you're so gorgeous."

The way Marek says it, Sei has to believe him.

Sei winds an arm around Marek's neck, pulling him closer. "Your twenty seconds are over," Sei says between kisses. "You have to keep touching me now."

"I think I can manage." Marek runs a hand along Sei's side. "I've been trying to decide how I want you this time. Turn over, beautiful."

Sei scrambles onto his knees and elbows. Marek crowds behind him, and the glass jar clicks open. Marek's knees tickle the insides of Sei's thighs, almost making Sei laugh before blunt, wet fingers meet his legs.

“I had grand plans about teasing you for hours.” Marek traces the curve of Sei’s ass. “I was going to make you come on my fingers, then play with you until you were ready to come again on my cock.”

“Interesting,” Sei says, dazed by the idea. “Maybe another time. If you make me wait tonight, I’m divorcing you.”

Marek’s laugh shakes through them both. “Fuck, I—”

He cuts himself off.

Sei barely wonders what Marek was going to say before Marek’s fingers slide over his hole. Instinct pushes Sei back in shivery pleasure. He’s never done this before, but Marek doesn’t question him. Sei said what he wanted, and Marek agreed.

Of course, Sei has fingered himself before. That’s nothing compared to Marek’s thick finger sliding into him. Sei tenses on instinct—then relaxes with a deliberate deep breath. Guild training proves surprisingly useful as Sei’s nerves sing around the new intrusion.

“Really like your hands,” Sei gasps out as Marek works a second finger into him.

“I like every part of you.” Marek leans over him, the heat of his body surrounding Sei. “I think I’m into ears now, because yours look so fucking delicious turning red like that. You’ve got these dimples above your ass. And this tiny mole right next to your...”

Sei laughs. “I get the picture.”

“I don’t think you do.” Marek fucks his fingers deeper until Sei sees stars. “I don’t have the words to describe how much I like your ass.”

“Just fuck me, Marek, please,” Sei begs. “Your cock isn’t going to get any smaller.”

“It better not. I want you on every fucking inch of me.”

Marek’s words alone nearly finish Sei off. He manages to last as Marek replaces his fingers with his cockhead.

“Relax for me, gorgeous,” Marek says, which is when Sei realizes he’s tensed up again. He exhales, and Marek pushes inside.

It’s slow, steady. All Sei can do is breathe, open-mouthed and stunned. Just when he thinks Marek is done, Marek pushes in another inch.

“How is that?” Marek asks roughly.

Sei forgets how to string words together. “Yes. Fuck.”

“Is that good or bad, teacup?”

Marek’s nervousness forces Sei into coherence. “Really good. Wow, you feel bigger than you look.”

Marek’s helpless laugh feathers through Sei’s hair. “Okay, don’t tell me if that’s good or bad.”

“Very, very good.”

“I’ll take it.” The fondness in Marek’s voice is almost as overwhelming as the cock spearing between Sei’s lungs.

All right, that’s an exaggeration. Probably.

Sei ducks his head. Can he see Marek’s cock through his stomach? That’s not how it works, he’s pretty sure, but fuck, Marek feels enormous inside him.

Marek braces one arm beside Sei, the other on Sei’s thigh. He rocks slightly. “How’s this?”

Then he rocks again, this time sliding perfectly along Sei’s prostate. Sei’s incoherent whine must be answer enough, because that’s right where Marek stays. Short, quick movements, the slightest thrust while keeping them tied together.

Sei clutches the cloak beneath him. He doesn’t focus on relaxing anymore. He doesn’t focus on anything except Marek above him, inside him, holding him up and pinning him down.

He’s never been so aware of his own body, the connections between every muscle and tendon. When Marek fucks just right into him, Sei feels it tingling blissfully through his arms.

When Marek pants against his shoulder, Sei's stomach tightens with each hot breath.

When Marek comes with a groan inside him, Sei's mind blanks out. His body is so full, as if Marek pours new magic into him instead. Marek barely touches him before Sei soars into his own orgasm.

They collapse together in a mess of come and sweat. Emptiness echoes through Sei, his body relearning its usual shape. He looks into the crackling fire and says, "We ruined the cloaks."

"They'll wash out," Marek answers easily.

"Will they?"

Marek rolls behind Sei, looping a heavy arm around his waist. "They'll *probably* wash out."

That's the moment they're truly wed. Not a violet cloak or a broken glass. The weight of Marek's arm is the only shelter Sei wants.

Sei closes his eyes. "Marek?"

"Hm?"

"I'm glad Vana left."

Marek exhales into Sei's hair. "So am I."



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Marek

Marek thought his life was complete the last time he flew over these foothills. His dragon was all he needed—solid scales beneath him, the constant presence in his mind. Now, Sei nestles between them in the harness. Instead of intruding, he fits perfectly.

“How are you feeling?” Marek asks, his helmet pressing against Sei’s.

Sei’s laughter vibrates through Marek. “The hallabark is still working. Your cock isn’t *that* big.”

Marek grins, and strokes Sei’s hip. “That’s not what you said this morning.”

Are you going to fornicate on top of me? Loska asks—projecting to both of them, by the way Sei chokes. *Go ahead if you must. Just know that I will commentate.*

“No, no fornicating in the sky,” Sei says weakly. “With or without commentary.”

“Yeah, that’s advanced level flight. You need another year or two of training first.” Marek squeezes Sei’s hip again, then takes mercy on his husband and slides his arm back into the harness.

His husband. Fuck, that sounds good.

Sei leans back against him. “The dragon corps is even more exciting than I thought.”

“Draskora’s finest. Always making me proud.” Marek nuzzles against Sei’s shoulder. The hint of floral soap is barely there, whisked away by the rushing sky. It’s probably a good thing they needed to fly back to Talorna. Otherwise, Marek might have spent the next week in bed with Sei.

Which sounds like a great idea. But not quite as perfect as bringing his new husband back to his true home. In Talorna, they'll be able to thrive and grow together without the chains of court politics. The northern shore is Marek's domain. He's sure Sei will love it too.

We're getting to the boring part, Loska complains not long after. *Make us go faster.*

The landscape below is a patchwork of blackened hillsides and mist-shrouded valleys. The mist conceals all manner of dangerous creatures, and the surrounding sky is cold and slow. Marek doesn't mind the view, but he's happy to indulge Loska. He wants to reach Talorna faster too.

Marek mentally nudges agreement to Loska, then stretches out his magic. His next breath connects him to the sky. The wind surges and twists to his will. The sky has always been part of Marek, but today it's so, so easy.

Loska's elation hums through their bond. The magic that keeps him aloft surges with every wingbeat. New wind propels them faster. The rush is exhilarating, easier than—

"Marek!" Sei bites out.

Horror shatters Marek's exhilaration. Brings him back into the present. The harness pins Marek against Sei's rigid body—and Sei's soft magic seeps into him.

Marek yanks away from the connection, abruptly severing the new tailwind. Loska snarls in surprise, and they *plummet*. A single gut-twisting moment before Loska catches them with a violent snap of his wings.

What was that? Loska demands.

"Fuck, Sei, I'm so sorry." Marek slips his arm free, compulsively checking the straps. Panic buzzes beneath his skin. "Are you all right?"

Sei trembles. "I'm fine. You didn't have to stop. I just didn't expect you to use me right then."

I didn't expect that either, Loska tells Marek, eavesdropping. *Your mate has nice magic.*

“I didn’t mean to,” Marek says, his horror rising with every word. “It was an accident.”

“Of course. That makes sense.” Sei takes a deep breath. His intentional relaxation is obvious. “Sharing magic is easier when grail and mage are more intimate. Which describes a wide range of connections, but to get very specific...” Sei’s voice warms. “I feel much closer to you after last night.”

In any other circumstance, that memory would heat Marek’s blood too. Instead, Sei’s easy forgiveness only worries Marek more. “So, the closer we get, the more likely it is that I might take your magic without intending to?”

Sei doesn’t answer at first. He must sense Marek’s concern. “We just need to practice more. Your control will improve the more we—”

“No.”

Sei goes rigid again. “What?”

“We can’t do this.” Marek hates having this conversation now. Far above the ground, where neither of them can escape and breathe for a moment. But Marek can’t pretend to be okay with this for another fucking minute. “I can’t use you as a grail.”

Sei takes another deep breath. “You stopped when I said to stop.”

He sounds calm. Reasonable. Marek might have been persuaded, except he can read Sei too well by now. When Sei called out his name, Marek heard the fear hidden in his voice.

That fear hammers home the risks. Every reason Marek shouldn’t claim a grail punches like nails between his ribs.

“I stopped today, during a flight through clear skies. No storms, no wraiths, no Silaisans. What if I didn’t hear you in the heat of battle?” Marek strokes Sei’s arm, trying to convey his concern through touch as well as voice. He wishes they were on the ground, where he could look Sei in the eyes. “This was the least of my magic. What if I needed a larger spell, and I took too much before either of us could react?”

“You wouldn’t do that. I wouldn’t let you.”

“You couldn’t stop me,” Marek snaps. Then softer, in Sei’s stunned silence, “I know I promised to listen to you, but this isn’t up for debate. I won’t take that risk.”

Grails can’t control their own magic. It’s a sick joke of nature. If Marek wanted to use Sei against his will, Sei couldn’t resist.

Sei can’t do anything if Marek refuses to use him either.

“I understand,” Sei says.

Marek’s stomach twists. “I’m sorry, Sei, I know—”

“Please don’t talk to me right now,” Sei whispers. He clings to the saddle as if desperate for any inch of space he can put between him and Marek.

It’s useless. They’re trapped together in the sky as Loska carries them north. The rest of the flight is quiet. Even Loska doesn’t comment, and Marek’s nausea lingers. The sky has never felt so empty.

Marek’s grim determination doesn’t falter. Sei is upset now, but surely, eventually, he’ll understand.

Arriving at Talorna is nothing like arriving at Ostomar. Dragons swoop through the sky like colorful banners, spinning around Loska in greeting. Loska weaves between them, mindful of his inexperienced passenger. Marek listens as Loska greets sunny yellow Liliana, dark pink Malyra, and mottled brown Antex. He envies Loska’s lifting mood as they descend to an empty landing court.

Talorna is a massive patchwork of light and dark stone. Centuries of repairs and renovations have shaped the fortress into a city-sized maze of towers. The great walls house entire neighborhoods of civilian staff, dragon corps and adjacent drasgard barracks, and cavernous halls large enough to fit three dragons at a time.

Four dragons, if none of them are as big as Loska.

The dragons prefer to roost outside. In addition to today's welcoming committee, Marek spots Kamil's Yavran and Zilata's Raiba sunning themselves atop the northern towers.

Beyond the towers is a length of open ground, large enough to field armies with room to spare. But when this land sees violence, the battlefield is in the sky. The shoreline stretches beyond the open ground. Dark waters break white upon its rocks.

Far to the north, the sea disappears into the ghostly, eternal fog.

Mountains and towers flank the shoreline, nature and humankind united against their common enemy. These mountains are where ancient Draskorans first bonded to dragons, the beginning of a long-burning alliance. The tower-tops can be lit by torch or dragonfire to warn of wraiths.

As Loska lands, a small group waits at the edge of the courtyard. Marek is grateful to recognize Clem among them, as well as Wing-Captain Velka. Clem can show Sei to their rooms while Marek meets with Velka for a status update.

Marek wants to escort Sei himself. But judging from Sei's silence as Marek frees them from the harness, Sei doesn't want anything to do with Marek right now.

"We'll talk more later, all right?" Marek says, braced on Loska's side.

Sei's face is only visible in profile. "Thank you. I just need an hour alone."

Climbing down after Marek, Sei navigates the rig with far more grace than before. He's a quick learner.

His talent would be so valuable in the skies.

Marek forces himself through the next few hours. It's easier after Clem leads Sei away, except for how guilty Marek feels that it's easier.

At least Marek can lose himself in the minutia of survey missions and watchtower renovations. A storm damaged one

of the far western towers, but repairs are underway, and the warning fire is functional. Three newly graduated trainees arrived from Parsk last month, and they're settling in well. Ludvik is doing well too, assigned to care for riderless Miklan.

Only two recent wraith sightings, and neither of them came ashore.

After Velka's report, Marek takes off to inspect the main towers. He tours the towers every time he returns to Talorna, but today, he can't deny that his real purpose is avoiding Sei.

It doesn't work. Every new room and hallway is somewhere Marek had wanted to show off to Sei.

Later. Marek will show Sei around Talorna later. They just need space to calm down before Sei realizes Marek is right.

Marek's last stop is a guest suite on the ground floor. Lord Radovan Ark has turned the parlor into a makeshift workshop. Delicate enchanted instruments spin over the rustic tabletop. Sei would be fascinated—but this is one visit Marek needs to make alone anyway.

"I'm honored by the visit," Radovan says with a bow. "Your Highness must be tired from your journey."

"I find the ground more tiring than the sky." Marek circles the room and stops at the table. A heavy book sits open to a diagram of wraith anatomy. Most of the labels are question marks. "Are you getting into biology or blood magic?"

"I'm simply curious about local fauna, Your Highness. Can I offer you something to drink?"

"I'd rather have an answer, Lord Radovan." Marek glances down at the enchanter. "Why are you here?"

Radovan's brow furrows. "This was your idea, Your Highness. I'm here to work on the scalestone catapults."

"Except you already gave my enchanters your research, and you were busy with your duty to my royal parents." Marek closes the book in a dusty thud. "We're not in Ostomar anymore. King Imrik is very far away, and I rule this entire fucking shoreline. Tell me, Radovan—what changed?"

Radovan straightens up. He's tall, but not as tall as Marek. "As I told Sei, I ran into a failed hypothesis for my primary project. While I await new research results from the academy, I'm at liberty to pursue other projects. Her Majesty graciously granted me leave for this."

Marek stares until Radovan starts to fidget. Then Marek smiles. "I'll give you one more chance not to fuck with me."

Radovan's eyes widen behind his spectacles. "I wouldn't dare, Your Highness."

"Drop the title. We were both born common as dirt, and we both know Aliza has never been gracious about anything in her life." Marek gestures at the spinning brass instruments. "You owe Aliza everything, and she's the sort of woman who will rip that away the moment you displease her. Why are you in Talorna instead of fixing her fucking project?"

Radovan removes his spectacles. Without them, his face is older. Harder. "Would you believe that it's a matter of ethics?"

Marek doesn't move. "I might."

"I didn't hit a research block. I hit a breakthrough." Radovan wipes his spectacles on his sleeve, then puts them back on. "You're almost right. I owe Her Majesty everything—except the shred of principles remaining to me. I would be very grateful if you allowed me to stay until I can neutralize my breakthrough."

Yeah. Marek would believe that. "What was the breakthrough?"

"I can't say." Radovan shakes his head ruefully. "No matter who rules this entire fucking shoreline. Strike me down if you must."

Fuck. Marek likes exactly none of this. Radovan's mysterious experiments. Imrik's scalestone trade. Vana's sudden departure. And everywhere Marek turns for information, a door slams in his face.

Perhaps Marek can pry one door open.

“You can stay in Talorna on one condition,” Marek says. “How far along are you on the teleportation capsules?”

Radovan sags in relief. “We’re still refining the larger versions. It’ll be a while before we can use them with scalestone. I intended to test a prototype next week, actually, if you wanted to come along.”

“I’d like to see that,” Marek says. “But I meant the original version. The message boxes Sei told me about.”

“Oh, those work beautifully.” Radovan moves towards one of his trunks. “The trouble is they’re prohibitively expensive to manufacture, so I’m a long way from—”

“That’s great. I want two of them.” When Radovan gapes at him, Marek frowns and reconsiders. “No, make it three.”

Marek’s satisfaction lasts until he arrives at his quarters in the marshal’s tower. The barely touched remains of supper sit on the table, and Marek’s luggage is piled by the couch. Sei is nowhere in sight. There’s only Osric, sitting at one of the tall, narrow windows.

He retired early for the night, Osric says without moving. He said he’ll talk to you in the morning, but for tonight, you should sleep on the fucking roof, or the manure pile, or wherever the fuck you want. He doesn’t give a fuck.

Marek exhales, suddenly numb. “I’m guessing those were his exact words.”

Osric doesn’t answer.

Marek turns on his heel and leaves. But his hope doesn’t burn out until the next morning, when Sei descends for breakfast. Fully dressed, his hair glowing blue and white in the morning’s light, a perfect, polite smile on his face.

“Good morning.” Sei crosses to Marek’s side of the table. “Do you have time to show me around the fortress today?”

“Of course,” Marek says, off-balance. “Did you sleep all right?”

“I did. Thank you for asking.” Sei presses a kiss to Marek’s cheek. Brief, dry, perfunctory. He sits down as Marek’s stomach sinks.

Because everything is wrong, and Marek doesn’t know how to fucking fix it.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sei

Rocky hills cut the wind away from the valley. The day is cold, the sky the same drab gray as Sei's wyrmskin jacket. As Marek and Radovan unpack the equipment, Sei lingers near Loska. The dragon acts like a massive, scaly heater. Kamil and Yavran already took off on their scheduled patrol after dropping off Radovan.

Sei shared a harness with Marek, of course. Today was easier than last week, when Sei was still too shocked by Marek's rejection. Guild training helps a lot.

Polite. Pleasant. Helpful.

Small stones rattle as Loska shifts in place. *How long will you and Marek be arguing? This is very unpleasant.*

"We're not arguing. His Highness made that very clear."

Guild training helps, but the past week has still been torture. Sei hadn't realized how misplaced Marek was in Ostomar until he saw him here. Marek moves through Talorna as if he owns every inch of space. He's a force of nature, and he belongs here.

Just watching him hurts. Marek so clearly doesn't need Sei.

Adding insult to injury, Marek's confidence is magnetic. The man has never been more attractive. Today is particularly bad. Can't Marek have the courtesy of wearing sleeves after shattering Sei's dreams?

"Perfect!" Radovan exclaims, stepping away from the device. A glossy brass cylinder sits on a complicated tripod. "You two wait here. I'll set the second part up across the valley."

Shouldering another pack of equipment, Radovan trudges away. Marek returns to Sei and Loska. Not a shiver or goosebump mars his sculpted arms.

'You two,' Loska complains. *Does he not see me here? I'm very large. Such disrespect cannot be tolerated. I should eat him.*

"Are you warm enough?" Marek asks Sei.

"Yes, thank you." Sei avoids looking at Marek or his arms. He can't avoid thinking how much warmer he would be with those arms wrapped around him.

Marek maintains a polite distance. "This would be easier if you yelled at me again."

"Easier for you, Your Highness," Sei says frostily. "That's all that matters, isn't it?"

Oops. That wasn't very polite.

"I don't want to hurt you," Marek says, for the hundredth time.

Sei's fists clench in his gloves. "That's very admirable. Someday I might forgive you for it."

Marek still doesn't understand. There are worse things than being hurt. Including being set on shelf, gathering dust like a fragile fucking teacup.

It would be absurd for Sei to forbid Marek from flying for fear Marek would get hurt. Sei has seen Marek's scars. He's traced most of them, and every fiber of his being wants to explore the rest.

That's the worst part. Sei still wants Marek so badly. He wanted Marek before they ever agreed to try Sei's magic. Like Marek is an endless wellspring of love, and Sei's entire body starves for it. If Sei has to choose between being a grail and being with Marek?

Sei will choose Marek. Even if the choice kills part of him.

This is insufferable, Loska interrupts, wings rustling. *Fortunately, we have something else to worry about.*

Marek looks up and swears.

“What is it?” Sei asks.

“Northwest. Second nearest watchtower.” Marek calls out, “Radovan! We’ve got company.”

Radovan rushes back over. On a distant mountaintop, the violet-white light is barely visible.

Sei’s pulse thuds. “Does that mean a wraith is coming?”

“Could be heading west to the village instead.” Marek swings up onto the harness. “You two wait in the tree line. Once you’re under cover, don’t move.”

“Wait.” Sei touches a harness strap behind Loska’s arm. He doesn’t dare ask to help with magic—Marek would never agree. But Sei wants to see this for himself, even if wraiths sound terrifying. “Can I go with you?”

“That’s far too dangerous!” Radovan exclaims. He puts a hand on Sei’s shoulder.

Sei shrugs him away. “Please, Marek. You don’t have to use me. I just want to see the wraith.”

“No.” Marek buckles his helmet on and leans down in the saddle. “Go hide. Now.”

Sei stumbles away. As soon as he’s clear, Loska launches into the sky. Sei ducks away from the gusting winds, but even though he protects his face, his eyes still sting. Mere seconds later, Loska and Marek are a dark spot in the sky, surging northwards.

Another mountain flares with the warning fire. This one is much closer. Which means the wraith is *not* heading for the village farther west.

“Let’s move,” Radovan says at Sei’s side.

“Just a minute.” Sei hugs his gray jacket closer, wishing he’d said something else before Marek left. Something nice.

Maybe it’s silly to worry. This is what Marek does. Sei still should have said something better.

“No, we’re going now,” Radovan says, and slips something around Sei’s throat.

Sei jumps at the touch of cool leather. He yanks away—

“Stand still,” Radovan barks.

Sei stands still. He doesn’t struggle as Radovan buckles the collar around his throat. Sei can’t feel anything beyond the valley’s chill and Radovan’s careful hands. Nothing binds him in place, but he can’t move.

“Don’t scream or speak.” Radovan circles in front of Sei, eyes narrowed. “Don’t touch the control collar.”

Horror crests through Sei’s confusion. His chest tightens with the useless urge to scream. He thought they were friends. What is Radovan doing to him?

Why?

“Good.” Radovan stoops to grab a bag from the ground. He slings it over his shoulder, then points towards the tree line. “Walk with me. Don’t be scared. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Sei’s body moves against his will, falling into place at Radovan’s heel. Scattered, scrubby grass crunches under their feet. The thing around Sei’s neck—the control collar—has limitations. No matter what Radovan orders, Sei is still very scared.

That’s good. The collar isn’t perfect.

Sei looks up, just to prove he can look up as long as he keeps walking. Light flares far away, and the sky darkens in a new twist of storm clouds.

At the other end of the valley, Radovan pauses at the second device. Sei stops too. Another brass cylinder sits atop another tripod, but this one hums with a shimmering silver aura.

“This can summon wraiths,” Radovan explains. “I wish I could take credit, but it’s a very old device. All I did was rediscover it in the archives.”

Sei's mind races, trying to figure out the parameters of the control collar. It can't control his emotions. It enforces obedience for simple, physical movements. The orders are either time-limited or nuanced; Radovan said, to walk with him. And when Radovan stopped walking, the order to walk must have ended too. Sei was able to stop without another order.

Was he able to stop walking, or was he required to stop walking? Sei takes one step back as a test. It works.

"Don't run away," Radovan snaps.

Sei can't take the next step, even though he tries to move slowly. Not running. That means the control collar isn't conveniently literal.

"I'll leave the device up," Radovan decides out loud, then gestures. "Let's go. Keep walking with me. Stay quiet."

Sei has no choice but to follow. His fear mounts with every step closer to the tree line. The dark, dense trees close overhead like hands clawing over his eyes and throat. Sei swallows hard and tests the collar's boundaries again.

"What are you doing?" Sei asks quietly.

Radovan glances over but doesn't tell him to stop talking. "I didn't have a choice, Sei. I'm sorry to take you with me, but without your power, I'm not strong enough to hide."

No. Sei's blood runs cold. *No, no, no.*

Giving his magic to Marek is one thing. Sei trusts Marek to stop when he says to. But with this collar, Radovan can silence Sei with a word. If Radovan took too much of Sei's magic, Sei might not even be permitted to speak.

"Why do you need to hide?" Sei asks, trying to think clearly. None of the orders stop him from shaking inside. "You're so successful at court. Your own talent won the queen's favor."

The flattery works. "I have the king's favor too, but Imrik and Aliza value results. Not the people who provide the results. They're so protective of information."

“That sounds complicated. What do you mean?”

“No, dear Sei, I won’t burden you with the full truth.” Radovan sighs. “Suffice it to say I achieved a breakthrough. The greatest enchantment of my lifetime. Perhaps the greatest enchantment ever created.”

Every word of fawning flattery sickens Sei. “That must be incredible.”

“That’s the problem—my achievement is too incredible.” Radovan pulls out a compass and changes course. “Delivering my results would have signed my death warrant. Even so, I nearly made that mistake. Believe it or not, I’m not immune to pride.”

“I never would have guessed.”

“Hubris is the hero’s downfall,” Radovan says seriously. “House Dire eliminates those who know too much. Fortunately, Prince Kazia reminded me in time.”

The name stings. Did Kazia betray Sei too?

Sei thought he was nearing an understanding with Kazia. Not quite friendship—Kazia is too prickly and unpredictable for friendship. But Kazia helped Sei more than once.

Or did he?

Kazia told Sei to touch the instrument in Radovan’s laboratory. That simple action led to Sei’s first conversation with the enchanter currently abducting him.

“Did Prince Kazia help you plan this?” Sei asks, barely more than a whisper.

“He may have mentioned you, but no. This was my idea. Who would listen to...” Radovan trails off, then stops short. His glare sharpens behind his spectacles. “Perhaps you need a lesson on hubris too, Sei. You won’t get information from me.” Radovan rattles off a string of orders. “Don’t talk. When I move, follow me quietly and quickly. Don’t touch the control collar. Don’t question or harm me.”

The orders don’t take force with any tangible power. They’re binding nonetheless. Sei tries to run, but his legs

refuse to move.

Radovan smiles sadly and approaches. “Don’t worry. I know how Fellrin values their grails. I promise, I value you just as much.”

Sei still can’t move as Radovan runs dusty, gloved fingers along his cheek.

“I’ll treat you very well.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Marek

Storm clouds gathering in their wake, Marek and Loska hurtle through the sky. Urgent magic crackles beneath Marek's skin. The air he breathes is laced with the smoke of Loska's building fire. Marek hasn't fought a wraith in half a year. He would look forward to the exercise if not for the worry chasing his flight.

You're an idiot, Loska informs him.

"Not the time, Loska," Marek grits out.

Of course not. The time to talk was a week ago! Now you've abandoned a perfectly good mate on the mountainside.

Marek doesn't have a chance to argue. Extending like a searching net, Marek's magic catches on a dark, cold presence above.

Loska feels Marek's thoughts before they form words. He dives sideways, gracefully evading the wraith plummeting towards them.

The wraith takes shape in midair. Dark fog coalesces into scale and bone and tattered wings—a dragon formed of death and shadow. Silver magic races like mercury along its spine. Empty eye sockets flicker as the wraith turns its skull towards them.

Across the continent of Alantha, different nations play the game of aerie according to their own centuries-old traditions. Silaise plays stags against wyrms. Fellrin plays cats against wyrms. Patha plays wolves against wyrms. The entire continent bristles against one nation.

Draskora disregards them all. Even the conflict with Silaise is a secondary concern. The only game that matters is

wyrms against wraiths.

Marek grins viciously, and Loska's bloodlust hums in his mind. White-hot dragonfire lances forward, entwined with lightning.

With a grating shriek, the wraith darts higher. Smoke trails from the edge of one tattered wing. But the wound smoothes over with shadow, and the wraith dives again. Bellowing a gleeful challenge, Loska pivots away from the wraith's cold fire.

Marek sharpens the sky into his arsenal, spears of lightning piercing from every angle. Power pours through him. Controlling and conserving his strength is the most difficult part. Blasting the wraith until it retreats should be easy.

Except something's wrong. They clash again and again. The wraith's form shudders, pieces sloughing off like broken ash. This is usually the part where the wraith would turn around, and Marek would chase it back into the northern fog.

But the wraith keeps driving forward. Not always to attack.

"It's trying to get past us," Marek shouts. His words vanish beneath another unnatural shriek, but Loska hears the thoughts beneath.

There's another problem, Loska says, driving the wraith back with a bellow of fire. Sei is moving away.

"He's what? How do you know?"

I've been able to sense him ever since our magic linked through you. Such nice magic.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

I didn't want you to throw a tantrum. Like this. Loska pulls up in midair, pausing as the wraith circles in front of them. *He's going south.*

Marek doesn't have to say anything. His worry spikes through the dragonbond. There's no reason Sei should be moving from where Marek left him.

Marek shouldn't have left him in the first place.

We can detour to fetch your mate, Loska proposes. Then finish this snack.

“No,” Marek decides in an instant.

Loska’s confusion is understandable. Marek is about to propose something they’ve never done before. Something tremendously reckless.

“Drop me off on that hilltop.” Marek starts loosening the less essential straps around his arms and waist. “I’ll hold the wraith off while you get Sei.”

Surprise rushes through the dragonbond, but affirmation follows.

Loska dives at breakneck speed towards the nearest rocky hilltop. Marek flings himself down against Loska’s neck, arms straining to hold himself in place. The harness bites viciously into his thighs, the leg straps taking more of Marek’s weight than they’re supposed to.

But the harness holds. Loska skids to a landing in a thunderclap of wings, and Marek is already pulling himself from the saddle when Loska comes to a halt. Another crack echoes through the sky. Marek slides down Loska’s side in a graceless dive. He barely rolls away before Loska launches back up.

Dragon and wraith collide in gold and silver flame. Marek’s ears ring with Loska’s delighted roar.

Or maybe the ringing is a side effect of the half-crashed landing.

Staggering to his feet, Marek dazedly regrets not wearing a jacket. His bare arms sting with rockburn and shards of gravel. Sweat and blood trickle through the grime. His shoulder hurts too. Just abrasions and a deep bruise, he’s pretty sure. But even if it’s more serious, it doesn’t fucking matter.

He has a fight to take over.

Dire magic leaps to Marek’s bidding. Lightning punches through the wraith’s skull, shattering bone and shadow. Its agonized shriek echoes for miles.

Loska takes advantage of the wraith's distress to wheel south. The shattered skull hardly stops the wraith. Already reforming, it attempts to follow.

Marek slams another lightning bolt through the wraith's throat. This time, he gets its attention.

"Hey, fuckface!" Marek shouts. "I'm your opponent."

The wraith pivots to face him. Marek wonders if it's confused at all. Can wraiths even feel emotions like confusion? The wraith has likely never faced a human without a dragon before, alone on the ground with only their own magic as sword and shield.

Few humans would be this fucking stupid.

Marek doesn't worry as the wraith hurtles towards him. He can't devote any energy to worrying, not about himself and not about Sei. Marek needs all his concentration to shove the wraith northwards. To fend off cold fire with every spark of storm he has.

Because Marek might be strong enough to hold off a wraith by himself. At least for an hour or two. But far to the east, another watchfire flares to life.

A second wraith is coming.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sei

Sei thinks he's imagining the wingbeats at first. Between distant thunder and crackling branches, the forest is noisy. Except the wingbeats draw nearer. Hope leaps in Sei's heart as Radovan whirls around.

"Be quiet!" Radovan hisses. "Run for—"

Blazing heat drives them back. Fire sears the trees in front of them into ash, and Sei scrambles backwards. Either Sei's survival instincts override the control collar, or they coincide with Radovan's own retreat.

They don't get far before Loska lands directly atop the smoldering trees. A violent flap of wings extinguishes the flames before they spread, leaving only swirls of ash and smoke.

Sei staggers against another tree, gasping for breath. Radovan swears and lifts a glowing token—

Blue scales and white fangs blur through the air. Not five feet from Sei's disbelieving eyes, Loska's jaws snap shut around Radovan's head and shoulders.

Radovan's severed arms hit the ground first. Blood geysers from each flopping limb. Then Radovan's torso separates around the middle of his ribcage. Everything below slumps down, and everything above dangles from Loska's maw. Charred segments of lung and stomach and unidentifiable viscera spill to the forest floor.

Loska grinds his jaws with a horrible crunch. When he swallows, a slight lump descends the length of his serpentine throat. Jaws dripping blood, he turns his reptilian head towards Sei.

Are you all right?

“I guess?” Sei squeaks out.

Loska’s head tilts. Blood patters on the forest floor. *Wait. I probably should have asked first. He was abducting you, right?*

Sei slumps back against the tree. “Yes. He was abducting me.”

Oh, good. Well, not good. You know what I mean. Loska shifts in place like a child caught stealing dessert. *Please don’t tell Marek I ate him.*

“I think I have to tell Marek you ate him.” Sei fumbles with the collar. To his relief, it unbuckles easily. The orders must have died with Radovan. Sei wants to fling it away. Maybe ask Loska to burn it. Instead, Sei tucks it into his jacket. “How did you know I was... Wait. Where is Marek?”

Fighting the wraith.

“By himself?”

Loska retracts his head, glancing skyward. *Yes. We need to help him. I’ll carry you in my forelimbs.*

Loska’s worry jolts Sei’s thoughts into motion again. He can hyperventilate about being abducted and watching Loska eat a man later. If Loska is worried, Marek must be in true danger.

“Will carrying me like that slow you down?”

Only a little.

“Then I’ll use the harness,” Sei decides.

Loska responds by crouching down. His wings sweep back to leave an easy path up his side. Sei takes a steadying breath, then begins climbing up the dragon.

He tries not to think about Radovan or wraiths. He needs to remember how Marek usually fastens the harness pieces. Figure out how he fits in the saddle without Marek behind him.

Even in his hurry, Sei grabs the helmet from the side-bag first. He can't help Marek if he splits his head open before Loska even takes off.

I won't be able to hear you as we fly, Loska notes, lowering his head. Alarming crunching noises fill the ashen clearing. *You will have to listen to me instead.*

Right. They aren't bonded, and Loska can't hear Sei's thoughts. Sei would have to shout over the wind.

"We need to stop at the valley where you and Marek left us." Sei slides his feet into the shielded stirrups, then starts tightening the leg-straps. "Destroy the devices Radovan set up. They're summoning the wraith."

Loska swallows again. *Easily done. Then I will take you to Marek. If I land, dismount quickly. If I can't land...*

Sei fastens the waist-belt. "Tell Marek to take my magic."

He might not listen. My bonded is stubborn.

"Tell him anyway." Sei leaves the arm-straps looser than Marek usually does, because he may have to dismount by himself. "Ready."

We will see about that, Loska says, and takes off. Sei falls back in the straps, hoping he did everything right.

He must have done well enough. The harness holds as they rush through the sky.

Sei can't talk to Loska. Not mentally, because they aren't bonded. And not out loud, because his throat chokes too tightly. Flying is far scarier without Marek's reassuring presence behind him. Sei feels far too exposed, far too vulnerable, alone on Loska's back.

Loska, however, keeps up a running commentary. The dragon never stops talking, not even as he swoops through the valley to knock down the wraith-summoning devices.

Lean back in the harness.

Lean forward.

Relax, this is hardly anything.

Brace yourself—diving now.

Time for a loop! Just kidding. You would definitely fall off in a loop.

So that's where Yavran is!

Sei squints through the surrounding gray. He's getting used to the flight, but he still doesn't dare lean back enough to see past Loska's broad shoulder.

I thought Yavran was slacking on patrol, Loska explains. But she and Kamil are fighting another wraith farther north. Are you still up there? Good. You're much smaller than Marek. It feels like flying with an empty harness.

Sei would never point it out, and he's sure Loska would never admit it. But Loska's nerves are clear through the chatter. That worries Sei more than anything else—even more than the sky darkening around them. The shrieks piercing the rolling thunder.

Wyrmsht, Loska swears suddenly. Definitely no time for a dismount. There's a second wraith. Hold on!

Loska dives into a dry storm—or it engulfs them. Darkness shrouds Sei's eyes, except when electricity crackles around them. Loska weaves between lightning strikes with jarring precision, rattling Sei with every hairpin turn. Then silver fire streaks past Loska's hasty evasion.

Cold blasts against Sei's hands and throat, even though he's far out of range of the icy flames. Silver light illuminates the nightmarish form of a wraith staring them down.

Far below, another wraith darts towards the ground. Lightning drives it back for only a moment. Even with one wing half-shattered, it circles into another assault.

Sei can't see Marek from this far away. He can't do anything to help, except hold on for dear life as Loska circles with the nearby wraith.

Loska's mental voice rings out. *Marek Helra Idiot Dire, if you don't take your mate's magic, I will eat you.*

There's a moment of nothingness. Of empty, waiting terror.

Then Marek's soul embraces Sei's, and power awakens inside him. Giddy relief surges with each pulse of magic. Like a downpour finally released upon the drought-parched earth.

It's unlike every other time a mage has taken his magic. Sei thought practicing with Marek felt good. He even found some small delight in their mid-flight accident—the proof of their compatibility.

But Marek always touched Sei's magic with such restraint before. Now, their union is desperate. It's necessary. Marek needs what only Sei can give him, and Sei has so much power to give.

The sky explodes in glorious light.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Marek

The second wraith shrieks in pain. Veering sharply north, it races half-melting into the fog. The first wraith is simply gone. Marek and Sei's combined magic overcomes the wraith's inherent power, erasing it from the sky.

Sinking to his knees, Marek severs his grasp on Sei's magic. His own strength exhausted, the storm above begins to unravel.

For once, Marek isn't worried about burning Sei out. Sei's magic isn't a well—it's a vast ocean inside him. Killing the wraith barely touched the surface of it. Marek would need to *try* to even come close to depleting Sei.

He would never be able to burn Sei out by accident.

Marek shudders as his own magic settles behind his ribs. Every part of him aches, the pain strange and euphoric with adrenaline. Blood congeals where he scraped against rocks, and his shirt sticks uncomfortably to his back with blood, sweat, and grime. He lost his helmet at some point in the scuffle, and his hair is soaked with sweat.

Could have been worse. Lighting and cold fire left black scars on the hilltop surrounding him.

Marek would like to nap for about a week. Instead, he forces himself to his feet, driven by the urgent need to reunite with the other pieces of his soul.

Loska circles aloft, a reassuring shadow in the brightening sky. *All good down there? You look like an ant. A tiny baby ant.*

"I'm good," Marek says, too tired to project through thought alone. "How is Sei?"

How is Sei? I see how it is. No concern for your beloved Loska.

Marek laughs—which hurts his ribs. He needs a blood healer at some point. “You would be insulted if I asked if you were okay.”

Of course I would. You are supposed to ask anyway. Loska circles lower, still watching the northern horizon. Loska and Sei are both just fine.

Loska doesn't touch down on the hilltop until he decides the wraith is really gone. Sei has only freed his arms by the time Marek climbs up the harness. Sitting backwards in front of the saddle, Marek grabs his claim in a desperate kiss.

Sei kisses back with equal fervor, yanking against the remaining straps in his need to get closer. Marek can't stop touching Sei, hands wandering from Sei's face to his arms, from his waist to his shoulders. Every touch is proof they're alive.

Marek tugs the straps around Sei's thighs, but he's too clumsy to unbuckle them. Sei's helmet presses uncomfortably against Marek's forehead. He doesn't care, until Sei manages to unclasp it. The helmet tumbles down Loska's side and clatters down the hill.

“Need to replace that,” Marek mumbles against Sei's lips. “Impact ruins the shock absorption.”

“Sorry.” Sei kisses the corner of Marek's mouth. Then his cheek. “Really sorry. Marek, I was so worried about you.”

Marek laughs breathlessly, trying not to strain his ribs. “Can't believe you fucking flew here.”

“I had to get to you.”

“You're so fucking brave.” Marek kisses Sei again, then sits back so he can get a better look at him.

Sei's face is streaked with dirt, his hair matted and sticking up at odd angles. His dark brown eyes have never been so intense. “When I saw those two monsters circling above you...” Sei shudders. “Do you fight those things all the time?”

“Yeah.” Marek gives a lopsided grin. “Don’t judge by today, but usually I’m pretty good at it.”

“They’re terrifying.” Sei takes a deep breath. “I want in.”

Marek would give his soul for the stubborn light in Sei’s eyes. But he can’t, because he already has. “What do you mean?”

“I want to help protect everyone too,” Sei says. “Whether or not you want to use my power again. I know you only needed me today because Loska left you to fetch me.”

Marek exhales. “Today taught me something I’m not happy knowing. It would be difficult to burn out a grail by accident.”

Sei grimaces. “I tried to tell you.”

Maybe it’s possible. Maybe past dragon corps grails really were burned out by accident. But Marek has a feeling the danger to dragon corps grails has always been intentional ruthlessness, not earnest mistakes.

Marek won’t permit that under his command. He doesn’t intend to recruit more grails—but he can design a safer framework just in case.

That’s a question for another day. Right now, only one grail needs Marek’s attention.

“I’m sorry,” Marek says. “I listened to my own fear instead of listening to you. I was wrong. Even if I wasn’t wrong, I owed you a conversation first.”

“Thank you.” Sei twists his fingers in the hem of Marek’s shirt. “But please don’t agree with me out of guilt or something. I came into this arrangement with a lot of expectations. It wasn’t fair to expect you to just go along with everything.”

“I’m not agreeing out of guilt.” Marek covers Sei’s fingers. “We’re going to practice. A lot. But if you want to fight? I’d be honored to share the sky with you.”

Sei flings himself into another kiss. Marek catches him gladly, and this time manages to unbuckle the rest of the

harness. The tether around Sei's waist, the straps around his thighs. Sei lies back against the saddle, and Marek's ribs barely hurt as he follows. His lips skate Sei's jaw.

Throwing a leg around Marek's hip, Sei grinds them closer. Marek's blood surges as if fueled by Sei's magic. He nearly loses himself in arousal—

Loska rumbles his amusement beneath them.

Marek freezes. The interruption reminds him of the other question he needs to ask. "Wait. What happened to you?" Marek forces himself to sit up. "Loska sensed you moving away from the valley."

Sei looks utterly debauched, sprawled atop the saddle and harness, thighs spread wide for balance. Blinking slowly, he props himself up with his hands on Loska's scales.

"Don't panic," Sei begins. The reassurance injects fresh anxiety into Marek's veins. "I'm completely fine, and there's no need to worry."

"What happened?" Marek growls.

"No need to worry," Sei repeats. "Radovan was worried the king would kill him for some experiment. He wanted to disappear, so he summoned the wraiths as a distraction."

I broke the summoning devices, by the way, Loska adds. You're welcome.

Sei continues. "Radovan wanted more power to hide himself. So, after you left, he abducted me."

As the calm, rational explanation marches on, pure rage whitens Marek's vision. Darkness pulses through the sky. "Where is he?"

Loska shifts beneath them. Pebbles scatter from the sweep of his tail. *Like your mate said. No need to worry about him.*

Marek scowls at his dragon. "I'll be the judge of that. Where is Radovan?"

Sei pats Marek's knee. "Loska sort of..." Sei pauses, then responds to whatever Loska says privately. "No, I think we

have to tell him.”

Pleasedon'tbemad, Loska says in a rush.

Marek pinches the bridge of his nose. All his aches and pains rush back, along with a sense of dread. “I’ll decide what I’m mad about too. Just tell me.”

Sei pats Loska’s side between the harness straps. “Loska ate him.” Sei winces. “It was rather unpleasant.”

Marek stares at Sei, who looks green. Then he turns to stare at Loska, who peers innocently at the sky. Cold wind pricks at Marek’s various injuries. He’s smeared blood on Sei’s face and jacket. They both desperately need a bath.

“Well,” Marek says eventually. “I guess we’re covering up the death of Radovan Ark.”

“Do you think that’s best?” Sei asks.

“Everyone else in my family has stupid secrets.” Marek shrugs. “Why shouldn’t we cover up one extremely justified murder?”

See, I knew you would be fine with it! Loska chimes in, though his relief is audible.

“Why shouldn’t we,” Sei repeats, then bursts into watery laughter. He falls into Marek’s arms.

When Marek holds Sei close, the cold disappears. Especially when Sei rises up on one knee, looking down into Marek’s eyes.

“I don’t need another year.” Slim hands cradling Marek’s face, Sei asks, “Marek Helra Dire, will you marry me again?”



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sei

“A real wedding this time,” Sei says, heart pounding. This seemed like a good idea when he started talking—but he’s asking for so much. “Not a pageant for everyone else. I want to marry you for myself, beneath the open sky.”

Marek’s face softens beneath the blood and grime. “You want a Helran wedding?”

Sei nods. “With Osric and Loska there.”

“You’re so fucking perfect.” Marek grins. “Yes, Sei. I’ll marry you again. I’ll marry you a hundred times.”

“What if a hundred isn’t enough?” Sei asks, giddy and breathless. “What if I want more?”

Marek’s hands slide up Sei’s thighs. “I’ll marry you as many times as you want. I wish I’d had the chance to claim you on my own terms. But now that I have you, I don’t want to let go. Are you free next week?”

Joy lifts Sei up, stronger than any magic. He flings his arms around Marek’s neck—but with a pained groan, Marek holds him back.

“Sorry,” Marek grits out, pale under the dirt and blood. “I think I broke a few ribs.”

“Were you going to mention that?” Sei demands. Now that the adrenaline is fading—yes, Marek looks very sexy and masculine, all disheveled like this. *However*. Sei’s husband obviously needs a healer. “Wedding planning can wait until we... can you even fly back to Talorna like this?”

Yavran swung by a few minutes ago, while you were occupied. I told her to fetch a blood-healer from the fortress. Loska’s voice turns wistful. Yavran is so beautiful. Perhaps

she really is my soulmate. But Liliana is so charmingly violent too...

“Perfect.” Marek’s massive hands encircle Sei’s waist. “I’ll get patched up, then you two take me to the scene of Radovan’s...”

“Mysterious disappearance?” Sei supplies.

“Right. We can cover up any evidence of Radovan’s mysterious disappearance.”

I can clean up any leftovers while you wait for the healer, Loska offers. If my bonded thinks he can climb down.

Moving slowly and carefully, Marek manages to reach the ground. Sei follows, forcing himself not to rush. He’s far calmer than he expected given everything. The abduction. The solo flight. The wraiths.

Marek seizing his magic, combining them into something far more powerful than either of them on their own. Maybe that elation is carrying Sei through the stress.

Loska takes off, and Sei leans gingerly into Marek’s embrace. As dust and ash swirl around them, Marek’s hand pauses at the side of Sei’s jacket.

“What’s this?” Marek asks.

Only when Sei draws the item from his pocket does he remember the control collar. Simple black leather engraved with elaborate sigils. Fastening the collar would complete the sigil split between the two pieces of the buckle.

The collar trembles, as if the inert enchantment is somehow vibrating. Except it isn’t. The trembling is from Sei’s hands.

“This is how Radovan took me,” Sei says. “It’s a control collar.”

Marek makes a low, rough sound. His fury is barely contained. “He’s lucky Loska ate him.”

Sei’s stomach twists. His veneer of calm cracks, and all the hateful orders echo in his head. *Don’t scream or speak. Don’t*

run away. Stay quiet. If Radovan took Sei's magic, forget stopping when Sei told him to. Sei wouldn't have had the chance to refuse.

But Sei is safe now. He doesn't have to keep calm and figure out how to escape. He doesn't have to be brave and race to Marek's side. He's already here, Marek's hands gentle around Sei's shoulders despite his rage. It's safe to admit...

"I was scared," Sei whispers.

Marek hugs Sei, hard. If Marek's ribs hurt, he doesn't make a sound. Just buries his face in Sei's hair and holds him tight.

"I didn't truly believe your warnings," Sei admits, cheek pressed against Marek's chest through the ragged shirt. "Or Kazia's warnings. I understood intellectually, but I didn't believe it. Radovan took me right under your nose, just because I'm a grail."

Marek strokes Sei's back with slow, soothing pressure. "Nobody will hurt you again."

That isn't true. Sei doesn't even want it to be true. He wants to ride dragons and fight wraiths and *live*, with all the peril that living entails. But right now, Sei is happy to sink into Marek's protective embrace. "I want to learn how to use the knife Deline gave me."

"Pick any weapon you like, and the dragon corps has a trainer for you." Marek's voice warms. "But I'll train you in hand-to-hand myself."

"I also want to learn to ride a horse."

"I'll buy you a whole herd of horses for the solstice."

"And I still want a tattoo."

"Sure, if you're sober for it. What do you want a tattoo of?"

Sei hasn't decided yet. He leans back, creating just enough space between them that he can look up and savor the indulgence in Marek's expression. "Maybe a drawing of your face. Right in the middle of my chest."

Marek's indulgent expression freezes. Then furrows into a frown. "Call me a controlling asshole, but no. Absolutely not. As your prince, wing-marshal, and husband, I forbid you from getting a tattoo of my face."

Sei sighs. "You're so cruel to me."

Marek seizes his hands. Lifts one to his lips. "Cry all you want, teacup."

Disobediently, Sei laughs instead.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Marek

Marek is overdue for a day of desk work. Recruit assessments, support farm harvests, and border scout reports. Parchment slopes across Marek's desk like snowdrifts, matching the remnants of the year's first snow piled on Talorna's ramparts. The heavy desk puts Marek's back to the solid western wall, letting him face the fireplace in the opposite wall. An array of wide windows welcomes light from the south, illuminating the spacious room.

Other riders grimace and extend their sympathies when Marek takes a desk day. But he enjoys it more than they assume. All the disparate pieces of information coalesce into the full shape of Marek's dragon corps. The strength of their support farms is just as important as the number of new recruits.

The dragon corps is the largest and strongest it's ever been. Royal support is unwaveringly lucrative. Marek has a feeling about what that means, but his job isn't to react out of turn. Simply to prepare.

Besides, spending a day inside is even better with company. Osric lounges by the crackling fire, occasionally floating treats from the bowl on the mantle into his waiting jaws.

A light hand knocks from the antechamber. Marek stoppers his ink and moves the inkwell and pen safely to their drawer. "Come in."

Sei walks through the door, and Marek changes his mind. Desk work is excruciatingly boring when Marek could be looking at his new adjutant instead.

On most people, the bright pink wyrmskin would be overpowering. Sei, however, is far more vibrant than the jacket. Not just his new hair—which he’s letting grow out a bit. Right now, the right half is solid blue, and the left half an even more shocking pink.

Far more captivating is Sei’s growing confidence stalking the halls of Talorna. Authority suits him.

Sei has his own rank and salary in the dragon corps now. As Marek’s direct subordinate, he doesn’t answer to anyone else. He even manages his own guards when he leaves Talorna without Marek at his side. Marek and Sei are still figuring out the right balance of freedom and protection. But every week has been better than the last.

Marek, meanwhile, never knew how nice leaning on someone else could be. How much he needed an adjutant he can trust with everything.

Osric stretches to his feet and nuzzles against Sei’s hip, leaving crimson fur bright against his dark purple trousers. Sei scratches vigorously behind Osric’s ear, only worsening the debris from the fellcat’s plush winter pelt.

“None of your business,” Sei mutters to Osric.

If the fellcat replies, it’s to Sei alone. Osric bumps his head against Sei one more time, then slinks out the door.

Sei brushes the fur from his trousers with limited success. “Are you free, Wing-Marshal?”

“I’m always free for you, Adjutant,” Marek says, because the new title still thrills Sei. “Report.”

Sei closes the door and approaches the desk. “I have four items to bring to your attention. First, ground and sky patrols have once again failed to locate Lord Radovan.”

Marek leans back in his comfortable chair. “That’s a shame. Let’s redouble our efforts for a week, before we shift to winter routines.”

Concealing the death has proven simple enough. All the clues in Ostomar point to Radovan’s intentional

disappearance. Gossip says Queen Aliza's tantrum has been legendary, and King Imrik has ordered Radovan to be captured alive—with or without his eyeballs.

Marek still doesn't know what Radovan was working on. But he knows who to ask next time he's in Ostomar.

“More good news.” Sei has two scrolls in his hand. He absently taps them on the surface of the desk. “Miklan and Ludvik have bonded.”

Irenka Miraz's dragon and former adjutant. Marek had hoped stationing Ludvik in the dragon roosts would inspire a bond, since he was already familiar with Miklan.

“That's good. Miklan needed a rider.” Marek points. “What are the letters?”

Sei presents the first. “To you from Prince Vana.”

The parchment seems to burn the tips of Marek's fingers. He hasn't spoken to Vana since dropping him off in the southern forests. As much as Marek shares with Sei, he still needs to read this alone. So he tucks the scroll away in a desk drawer.

“Three out of four items reported,” Marek says. “Why is this one last?”

“Because it's not addressed to you.” Sei hands over the scroll, its seal already broken. “Kazia sent it to me.”

Sei sits on the arm of Marek's chair as Marek reads the letter. Sei's hand rests on Marek's shoulder for balance, and Marek has to read the letter three times through his distraction.

“Kazia says he's giving me one-third stake in an estate called Sabora,” Sei summarizes helpfully. He twirls a lock of Marek's hair. “He says it's a wedding gift. What is he scheming?”

“I don't think he's scheming.” Marek frowns. “At least, not in a bad way. He's giving you a source of income completely separate from me and the dragon corps.”

Sei pats Marek's hair down. “Oh. Huh.”

“I’d suspect him of currying favor, but Kazia never curries favor with anyone besides our parents.” Marek rolls up the scroll and sets it aside. “You should accept the gift.”

“I will.” Sei’s hand wanders to the back of Marek’s neck, tracing his hairline. “What do you mean about Kazia currying favor with the king and queen? I thought they favored him already.”

“He acts differently with them. Pretends to be sweet.” Marek looks up. “Why do you ask?”

Sei frowns. The afternoon light glows brighter through the pink half of his hair. “I don’t know. I just think something isn’t quite right with him.”

Months ago, Marek might have laughed off the suggestion. Something *isn’t* quite right with Kazia—his poisonous attitude. Literally poisonous, considering the scorpion moth incident.

But Marek trusts Sei’s judgment.

“We’ll talk to him when we’re in Ostomar for the solstice,” Marek says. “Though I doubt he’ll talk to me. Try to get him alone. He likes you better.”

“Understandable. I’m very likable.” Sei looks down, his gaze contemplative.

Marek’s skin tingles with the welcome attention. “Anything else, Adjutant?”

Sei hops down from the chair arm and squeezes between Marek and the desk. Leaning close, he traces light fingers through Marek’s short beard. “Our wing-marshal has been working in his office since dawn. He’s long overdue for a recess.”

“Since noon,” Marek corrects, to no avail. He reaches for the first button at Sei’s throat. Slowly unfastens it, as Sei’s pulse thrums beneath the fabric. “But I could use a break. Maybe a nap.”

Sei leans closer and breathes against Marek’s lips. “The only way you’re getting a nap is if you wear me out first.”

“I can do that.” Marek pushes his chair back—and stops Sei from following with a hand on his chest. “Is the door locked?”

“No.” Sei’s eyes sparkle. “Anyone could walk in.”

Nobody will walk in. If they do, it’s their own damn fault for barging in without knocking. Marek enjoys Sei’s exhibitionist streak, though. The way Sei isn’t shy about showing the rest of the world Marek belongs to him.

Because Marek feels the same way about Sei belonging to him.

Marek slides his hand down Sei’s stomach—then pulls away before reaching his belt. He leans back in his chair. “You look good in that jacket. But I think you’d look better out of it.”

“I love how subtle you are,” Sei teases, making quick work of his buttons. “I never know where I stand with you.”

Marek winks broadly. “You won’t be standing at all by the time I’m done with you today.”

“Promises, promises.” Sei shrugs off his jacket.

Marek drapes the jacket over the back of the chair. Then he clears the most important books and papers from his desk. He learned his lesson several husband-enforced work breaks ago.

Maneuvering around Sei is difficult with the way Sei keeps interrupting him for kisses. Marek only clears off half the desk before Sei sits up on it, completely shirtless. His belt is unbuckled, and his trousers unfastened but still around his hips. Sei presses one booted foot against Marek’s thigh and says sweetly, “Would you kindly help me with my boots?”

Illuminated by the southern sky and backlit by the golden fireplace, Sei is glorious. Every sleek muscle outlined in soft light and shadow. Marek’s heart thuds, and he fits between Sei’s spread thighs without noticing himself move.

Sei’s magic is a constant presence when they’re this close. Now that Marek isn’t trying so hard to avoid it, he knows how

to walk around the metaphorical edges. He isn't afraid of falling in.

“I'll help you with your boots on one condition,” Marek says. “Sei Marek Dire, will you marry me?”

A gorgeous grin spreads across Sei's face. “You haven't even married me the second time yet, boulder.”

Marek caresses Sei's calves through the smooth leather boots. “We can still plan the third wedding in advance. I want to marry you again and again. Though, before we do that...”

Sei leans back on his hands, stretching out in front of Marek. He tilts his head, colorful hair swishing over his bare shoulder. “What?”

Marek hooks his fingers into Sei's boot laces. The simple pressure makes Sei shiver with want—which Marek finds as powerful a rush as diving through a storm. “We should practice the consummation.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sei

“You’re so diligent.” Sei’s entire body hums with the steady tugs of Marek unlacing his boots. “I agree. The consummation was my favorite part of our last wedding, but I’m sure we can surpass ourselves with sufficient practice.”

Nuzzling against Sei’s neck, Marek slides one boot away. “We’ll practice until you can’t fit that many syllables in a sentence.”

Sei laughs and catches Marek in a kiss. “Then hurry up and fuck me stupid, husband.”

Marek removes Sei’s second boot *much* more quickly.

Sei shimmies his trousers and underclothes away, then hops back on the desk. He doesn’t have time to feel any chill, between the warmth of the fire and the strong hands wandering every inch of him. Marek never seems to tire of exploring him, as if discovering him anew every time.

Sei leans into the touch. How did he live so many years without this? Marek treats Sei like he’s precious. Just like Sei always wanted. Except Marek doesn’t just think Sei is precious for his magic. Marek values more parts of Sei than Sei ever knew existed.

When Marek pulls away, Sei clutches his shoulders to hold him close. Until Marek says, “I thought you liked me with my shirt off.”

Sei has never let go of his husband so quickly. “I suppose I’ll permit that.”

Marek is glorious in any state of dress, but Sei particularly enjoys him in *less*. No inconvenient fabric obscuring the

sturdy bulk of him. Everything—solid muscles and scars and wild blue hair—for Sei’s touch alone.

A few weeks ago, Sei asked to confirm whether they were exclusive. He knew what he wanted, but they’d never actually discussed it. Marek had looked at Sei like he’d gotten that terrible tattoo after all. “We can argue about what you want, if we need to. But I haven’t looked at anyone else since I first laid eyes on you.”

No argument needed.

Now, before Marek can strip anything else off, Sei pulls him closer. Marek follows easily, spreading Sei’s thighs farther apart. He lets Sei explore him in between messy kisses, simply watching with ravenous heat.

Marek is far more patient than Sei imagined the first day they met. He’s so careful with Sei and Sei’s magic. Then there’s his political caution. Marek Stormrider maneuvers so subtly, nobody would realize how carefully he avoids the throne. His very brashness obscures his secrets.

Sei is honored to be trusted with them.

Everything has changed since Sei arrived on Draskoran shores, lost and confused after his journey across the Jaws. He never thought he would feel more comfortable on a dragon than on a ship. He never thought he would have rank and authority of his own.

Sei always hoped he would grow to love his mage. But he never knew what that truly meant.

All right—one thing hasn’t changed. Sei still likes following plans. Just sometimes, Sei likes making the plans himself.

“So, Marek.” Sei traces a leisurely line through his husband’s chest hair. “I’ve been thinking about your magic.”

Marek catches Sei’s hand, completely engulfing him. “What about my magic?”

“You know. Your unorthodox use of lightning.”

Marek chuckles. “Do you want to watch me shock myself? Or do you want me to try it on you?”

“Try it on me,” Sei says immediately. “Watching you will be hotter if I know what it feels like.”

“You *have* been thinking about this.” Marek strokes the insides of Sei’s thighs, each teasing touch already electric without any magic at all. “Are you sure?”

Sei squirms. “It’s only sensible. As part of our collaborative magic training.”

“Only sensible. You insatiable little minx.”

“Now who’s using too many syllables?” Beaming, Sei draws Marek into a kiss.

Marek devours him, each press of lips and tongue erasing another thought from Sei’s mind. A gentle bite tugs Sei’s lower lip—then Marek pushes him back on the desk.

“Going to calibrate on myself first.” Marek’s breath isn’t quite steady as he surveys Sei spread out before him. He presses his thumb and forefinger to the inside of his forearm.

The magic isn’t visible. There’s no crackle or sting, and Marek skin appears untouched. The only sign that anything happens is the flutter of Marek’s eyelashes and the tightening of his fist.

Bracing himself up on his elbows, Sei tilts his head. “I expected something a little flashier.”

“Trust me, you don’t want this to be flashy.” Marek taps Sei’s lips. “Lie back down. I’ll try your arm first.”

Sei stretches out again. The desk is very solid beneath him. The edge bites uncomfortably into his ass until he hooks his legs around Marek’s hips. Much better. Sei’s cock leaks steadily against his stomach, his arousal enjoyable but not yet urgent. He has enough patience to feed his curiosity.

“Does it hurt?” Sei asks—again out of curiosity, not fear.

“It doesn’t hurt.” Marek strokes a broad hand over Sei’s stomach, then holds him down by the hip. Marek’s thumb rests

an inch too far away from Sei's cock. "It should feel pleasant, but strange at first. Tell me if it's too strange."

Sei nods. A good kind of nervousness flutters through him.

Marek's fingertips press inside Sei's bicep. Before Sei's nervousness can build, magic *tingles* through muscle and skin.

Shock is the wrong word for it. Sei never knew Marek's magic could be so beautifully subtle. The same power that rends the sky, focused and softened to pulse through Sei's body.

It's gone the next instant, leaving only an echo in Sei's memory.

"How was that?" Marek asks.

"Strange." Sei licks his lips. "Do it again."

Electricity tingles lower on Sei's arm this time. Sei squirms as much with the heat of Marek's gaze as the sensation itself. This time, the magic lingers inside him for a moment.

"Good strange or bad strange?" Marek asks, cutting off the magic.

"Very good strange. Try it somewhere else?" Sei arches up deliberately. "Somewhere more interesting than my arm."

"Your arm is extremely interesting." Marek presses a kiss against the tingling spot on Sei's bicep. His fingertips skate down to Sei's navel. "This is interesting too, though."

The sensation hums mere inches from Sei's aching cock. Stronger this time—either stronger magic, or Sei's growing arousal feeding off of it. He rocks up, tossing his head back, as Marek paints electricity from his stomach to his waist. His arm again, up to his shoulder. Sensation echoes after the magic stops.

Sei is more aware of his body than he's ever been before. No meditation or balance training ever brought him so physically into himself.

Marek pinches Sei's nipple between gentle fingers. "Does this count as interesting?"

Sei's breath hitches. "Do it."

"Tell me if it's too much," Marek says contemplatively. Almost smug with anticipation. "But I have a feeling you're going to like this."

Like is far too weak a word for the sensation arcing through Sei. Sensitive flesh tingles, nerves stimulated from the inside out. The magic remains focused on that one small spot, but Sei's own body does the rest of the work, carrying the heat to his every extremity. He bucks up involuntarily, managing to rub his cock on Marek leaning over him.

"Fuck, you're so gorgeous," Marek says, pinching Sei's other nipple. "Losing control like this."

Sei nearly passes out from how good the next pulse feels. "Oh, fuck, Marek. I could come just from this."

"Do you want to try?" Marek asks, strained.

Sei almost says yes—then takes sympathy on Marek's cock, still trapped by his trousers. Peeling himself from the desk with superhuman effort, Sei drapes himself over Marek in a heated kiss. "Another day, yes. Today, I'd rather come on your beautiful cock."

"I'm lucky to have such a merciful husband." Marek delves deep into Sei's mouth, then pecks his cheek. He pulls away to fumble with his belt.

Feeling truly merciful, Sei fetches the half-empty jar of salve from Marek's desk drawer. Fingering himself is a cursory endeavor, Sei's attention stolen by faint lightning mapped across his arms. From his navel to his chest.

When Marek grasps his nipple again, Sei gives up on preparation. "Now, Marek, please. Don't make me wait."

"You always say that." Marek dips his fingers in the salve, then closes the jar and sets it on the edge of the desk. "When have I ever actually made you wait in bed?"

“I’m waiting right now,” Sei complains. “You’re still not inside—ah!”

The desk rattles. The salve clunks to the floor and rolls away. Marek surges into Sei’s body like he belongs there.

Sex with Marek will never stop overwhelming Sei. Not just the sheer physicality, so much touch after a lifetime of so little. Marek himself is so captivating. The way his entire body strains towards Sei. The way Marek never looks away, even for a moment, because he’s clearly just as enthralled as Sei.

All right. The physical aspect is overwhelming too. Sei’s legs tighten around Marek’s hips, and he breathes through his body’s adjustment.

Marek braces himself on the desk, which shoves him even deeper inside. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Sei says dazedly. “Could you move now?”

“In a minute. There’s something else I think you’ll like.” Marek reaches between them. He toys with Sei’s cock along the way, then presses heavy fingertips behind Sei’s balls.

Anticipation thrills through Sei. “Yes,” he begs, before Marek can even ask.

Marek grins, and magic jolts into Sei’s body.

Ecstasy consumes Sei. He cries out in shocked delight, each clench of his body only heightening the sensation. Precome pulses from his cock. The magic vanishes the next moment, but Sei’s nerves ripple with its aftershocks. Every part of him tingles with new heights of sensitivity.

Only then does Marek begin to move.

Sei forgets everything about duty and usefulness. Just like he knows Marek is forgetting everything about strategy and politics. When they’re alone together, all that matters is the moment. Each other.

Clawing into Marek’s shoulders, Sei arches off the desk. Marek is here touching him, filling him, driving him mad with

lust, because he wants Sei's entire being. Body, magic, mind, and soul.

Sei is here because Marek has given him everything in return. The guild never told Sei that his mage might serve him too. That Sei might have a prince of Draskora entirely in his possession.

And they'll have as many weddings and promises as they want.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Two Letters

From Vana Kaiskara Dire to Marek Helra Dire, Prince and Wing-Marshal of Draskora:

Dear Marek,

Thank you for writing. You don't know how glad I was to hear from you.

Considering our circumstances, I can't answer most of your questions. Daromir and I are doing well on Tavoc. My dreamhawk enjoys lazing in the warm weather, and the duchess has been leading Daromir through her poetry collection.

I'm sorry for stranding you in the betrothal intended for me. I would send a proper apology with a wedding gift, but this letter is enough of a risk.

Your brother,

Vana

P.S. Though perhaps my apology is unwarranted. According to Bellamy, Julien says marriage is working quite well for you. Did you really fuck your new husband over the altar?

From Marek Helra Dire to Vana Kaiskara Dire, whatever your title is now:

Dear Vana,

Don't listen to Silaisan lies! I didn't fuck my new husband over the altar. Technically speaking, Sei wasn't my husband yet at the time.

Otherwise, Julien is right—no apology necessary. Stranding me with Sei is the nicest thing you've ever done for me. If you're ever less wanted for treason, I'll invite you to one of our weddings. We intend to have as many as Sei wants.

By the way, Osric the fellcat says you and Daromir are together. Were you ever going to mention that?

Your brother,

Marek

P.S. I have a plan to make sending letters much easier. Wait for a mysterious package sent through about fifteen intermediaries.



EPILOGUE

Before Song Solstice

Marek contemplates the new addition to Kazia's parlor. The glass-and-grate cages have been extended until they span an entire wall. Lavender-spotted white rats scurry between levels. Others snuggle together in nests of wood shavings. A small table next to the cages holds a bowl of tiny treats.

Sei sips tea on Kazia's couch. Kazia hadn't offered the tea, of course. Sei had suggested they have a cup together, shamelessly usurping the role of host in Kazia's parlor.

Kazia lounges on a chair, his leg thrown over the arm. Seemingly comfortable, but with a wary edge to his gaze. He's dressed in too many leather belts and buckles, as usual, his hair held in a messy braid. Faint shadows circle beneath his eyes.

Bringing Sei along for this reunion was the right idea. This way, Marek might actually manage a conversation with his younger brother. Kazia clearly has a soft spot for Sei—not that Kazia would ever admit it.

Less than three months have passed since Marek and Sei were last in Ostomar. The time feels like both years and an instant. They have an hour before they're to meet the king and queen for lunch. Hopefully today's private family meal will be less eventful than the last one.

"Did you take anything besides the rats from Radovan's laboratory?" Marek asks, joining Sei on the couch.

"Anything I could get my hands on." Kazia bounces his heel in the air. "Which wasn't much."

Marek accepts a cup of tea from Sei. They fall into silence until Sei sets his own tea down and straightens up. Marek and Sei planned this in advance—they'll get more information if

Sei leads the conversation. Sei will be sweet and tactful, luring Kazia into revealing more than he wants to.

“Tell me, Kazia,” Sei says. “Did you convince Radovan to abduct me?”

Marek chokes on his tea. What happened to sweet and tactful?

Kazia swings around to sit properly in his chair. “I wasn’t sure he would, but I was aware it was an option. Such a grasping man. He’d reached the top of his ladder in Ostomar.”

Anger flares hot through Marek. Only Sei’s hand on his leg keeps him in place—just like Marek kept Sei from helping General Gabra at the banquet.

“Why didn’t you warn me?” Sei asks, much calmer than Marek. “I thought we were becoming friends.”

“Friends?” Kazia sneers. “How appalling.”

Sei waits.

After a moment of toying with his hair, Kazia jumps to his feet. He refills his tea, stirs in too much sugar, and walks around his chair before settling back in. He crosses his legs, then uncrosses them.

As Kazia fidgets, Sei remains silent and still, leaning against Marek’s arm.

“I let everything happen because I assumed you would kill Radovan,” Kazia says eventually, looking straight at Marek. “Not let him escape.”

“Radovan didn’t escape,” Marek says.

Kazia’s eyes widen. “Oh. That’s good, then.”

Sei pushes his empty teacup into Marek’s hand. While Marek refills it for him, Sei leans forward. “You wanted Radovan dead because you knew what he was working on. What was it?”

The room falls quiet. This is the question they’re really here for. What breakthrough frightened Radovan into

abandoning everything? What knowledge is so dangerous Imrik and Aliza might have killed him for it?

Kazia sets down his tea. His face is unusually serious. “It’s not important now, and it’s better you don’t know. But we’re all much, much safer now that the project is over.”

“Kazia,” Marek snaps, despite Sei’s hand on his leg. He stands up, crossing his arms. “You nearly got Sei killed. You owe him an explanation.”

“I don’t owe either of you anything. But you can try beating it out of me.” Kazia smirks—his brief cooperation is decidedly over. “That will go so well for you.”

“All right, you two.” Sei moves between the brothers. “We’re going to be late to lunch. This castle is too big.”

“Perfect. Get out of my fucking parlor.” Kazia waves at the tea tray. “Or stay and tidy up. Save my servants the effort.”

Shit. Marek has one more thing to say, if he hasn’t ruined everything by snapping. He reaches for Kazia’s arm. “Wait a minute—”

Kazia whips away from Marek’s grasp. His eyes are pure, pale poison as he hisses, “Never touch me.”

A stone sinks through Marek’s gut. Kazia isn’t supposed to look so vulnerable. And Marek is suddenly, uncomfortably aware that beneath the poison, Kazia is smaller and far more fragile than Sei.

“What are you hiding, Kazia?” Marek asks quietly.

“My disgust,” Kazia says. “Wait, no. I’m not hiding it.”

Pushing for more won’t work. Kazia doesn’t trust him—which is fair, because Marek doesn’t trust Kazia either. Not yet. They hardly know each other. Marek wants to change that, though.

So, Marek doesn’t push. He just sets a small wooden box next to the tea set. “I have a gift for you. Do you remember Radovan’s message boxes?”

Kazia’s scowl doesn’t fade, but he doesn’t run either.

Marek continues. “Put a letter inside, close the lid, and the letter will teleport to the counterpart enchantment. This box has two chambers. The side with red sigils will send a letter to Vana. The side with blue sigils will send a letter to me.”

Sei slides an arm around Marek’s waist. Together, they savor the sight of Kazia’s jaw dropping.

“Writing to Vana would be treason,” Kazia says.

Marek shrugs. “Give the box to Father if you want. Vana’s too smart to send either of us anything important.”

That’s not quite true. Because the information they might send doesn’t matter. The important part is the mere existence of the message boxes. The new connection between the three Dire princes.

Schemes and circumstances have kept them apart. This gesture may end in disaster, but Marek wants to try forging a better family with his brothers.

Kazia doesn’t say anything. But he tucks the message box in a cupboard below the rat cages before stalking from the room.

“That went well,” Sei says brightly.

Marek laughs, finally relaxing. “You know, I think it did.”

“Welcome to House Dire, Sei.” Imrik raises his glass in toast. “I’m proud to have another son in the dragon corps.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Sei replies, and dread weighs down Marek’s lungs.

Sei and Kazia both transformed as they reached Imrik’s dining room. Marek had barely stifled his laughter. Sei stopped plastering himself to Marek’s side, as if afraid to be caught out by his husband’s parents. Kazia became a sweet, docile young man, permitting Aliza to fix his hair into a neater braid.

As the servants clear the dishes away, Marek's laughter is gone.

He can't decide what tips him off. Perhaps Imrik is too cheerful. Perhaps Aliza is simply too quiet, waiting instead of steering the conversation.

Gathering power. Bonding more dragons. Trading half a ton of scalestone for a Fellrian grail. A show of diplomacy to soften House Sandry's guard. Today has been inevitable since the first dragon crossed into Silaise.

When the servants leave, Imrik raises his glass again. "I want the family to hear this before the official announcement."

Aliza smiles. She must already know, of course. Imrik includes his queen in all his decisions.

Kazia turns pale.

"Silaise has broken ground on a second base for their renegade Skyguard." Imrik's every word strikes like metal on bone. "Draskora can no longer ignore their blatant provocation. When the solstice ends and the year begins, we will declare war on Silaise."

Marek rests his hand on Sei's shoulder. "Where do you want the dragon corps?"

Sei's tension eases beneath Marek's touch.

"We don't want to obliterate our reclaimed territory," Imrik says. "A wing or two to support the Silaisan border. Otherwise, defend the north and south. I'll entrust the specifics to you."

"Yes, Father."

Anticipation gleams in Imrik's eyes. "I will lead the assault on Silaise myself." Imrik rises to his feet. "Dismissed, everyone. Marek, we'll meet with Navlin tomorrow. Begin your preparations."

House Dire sat down in peace but rises from the table at war.

A million tasks race through Marek's mind. He needs to alert his wing-captains. Begin deploying wings before the official declaration. Silaisan intelligence has improved in recent years. The dragon corps won't have much lead time before conflict breaks.

In the dark stone hallway, Sei seizes Marek by the collar. He drags Marek into a tender, devouring kiss.

Marek's fingers tangle in Sei's hair, and only one thought remains.

He and Sei will likely remain in the north. Their combined magic is the best deterrence against wraiths Draskora has seen in centuries. Marek doesn't want to take his brave, beautiful husband to war.

But if Marek has to fly to the front with Loska? Leaving Sei behind would be even worse.

"I'm sorry," Marek murmurs. "The dragon corps is about to get very exciting."

"I'm not surprised." Sei drops onto his heels. His eyes are bright—not distressed like Marek expected. "This is why I'm here with you, isn't it? This is why Imrik wanted a grail."

"He wanted power. As much as he could get." Marek strokes the back of Sei's neck. "If I tried relieving you of your duty for your own safety, you would be very angry, wouldn't you?"

"Furious." Sei's eyes curve with his smile. "I can't take care of you from the ground."

Marek could lean on Sei's smile alone for reassurance. But he allows himself to ask for just a bit more. "This isn't even your homeland."

Sei indulges him with another lingering kiss. "My homeland isn't a place, Marek. It's you."

That's when Marek knows, deep in his bones, everything will be all right. Because Marek and Sei are far more alike than Marek could have imagined. Neither of them was born to

gather dust on a shelf—and neither of them was born to fight alone. Whatever comes, Marek and Sei will face it together.

They'll shelter each other through every storm.

Perilous Courts continues in Prince of Agony—the story of the tormented Kazia Dire and enemy dragonrider Lucien Vaire. [Preorder now for February 2024](#), or read along weekly at Patreon.com/TaviaLark.

Plus, ease the painful wait with some heartwarming fluff—a bonus story with Julien, Whisper, and fellcats, [available here through Tavia's newsletter](#).

Hello From Tavia Lark

Thank you for joining me on the Perilous Courts journey so far. I'm thrilled to have you with me, and I can't wait for the final book in the Dire Princes' story.

But first, shout-out to Marek and Sei for being delightful characters to write. I've been itching for a proper arranged marriage plot ever since the decidedly improper arranged marriage plot in Prince and Pawn. Marek and Sei let me explore all that, plus grailhood and size difference and dragonriding too!

For updates about Perilous Courts and future books, join my newsletter at TaviaLark.com/List. You'll get a free short story as thanks for signing up.

My deepest gratitude to my Fellicats— AmperSand, Ana Mercado, Danielle, Hrairoojen, Ivanova, Jodi, Kathalena, Makayla, Marty, Paula, Rose D., Sariah_Mazz, Snow Devil, Tammara Fort, Tessa, Trout, and whimsicalmeerkat—and the rest of my friends at Patreon. Your support and encouragement helped make Prince and Betrothed possible.

If you're also interested in extra stories about your favorite characters, weekly WIP chapters, and behind the scenes content, you can learn more at Patreon.com/TaviaLark.

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