



THE  
WYVERN'S  
REDEMPTION

THE LOST LINES SERIES

MERRI BRIGHT

THE WYVERN'S  
REDEMPTION



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*This one is for my Mischief Makers. Thank you for loving my knotty fantasy stories, my angel smut, and my one-sausage specials.*

*If you keep reading? I'll keep writing.*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE



*The Wyvern's Redemption* is the second half of Wren's story, begun in *The Leviathan's Debt*. It is a steamy why choose Omegaverse romance.

If you are unfamiliar with Omegaverse books, the Alphas and Omegas included do have distinct biological and sexual traits. (Hope that's \*knot\* a problem.)

Alphas in this series are aggressive, physically larger men, Betas are "normal" humans of all genders, and Omegas are a mystery, as they have been presumed extinct for centuries. Dragon mates are even more rare.

*This book is intended for adult readers and contains violence, profanity, explicit, steamy scenes with multiple partners, references to past sexual trauma and assault, thoughts of self-harm (not the heroine), scars, life-changing injury, tentacles, and discussions of infertility. Please take care of yourself when choosing to read.*



# CHARACTERS



The following characters appear in *The Leviathan's Debt* and *The Wyvern's Redemption*.

WREN - OMEGA. Also known as the *Ankelsang*, the Angel of Blood, who protects the vulnerable and punishes the wicked. Seamstress, proficient in poisons and weapons, currently married to Talon, and mated to Leviathan and Kir. She bears scars on her arms and shoulders from attacks by her husband and his best friend on her wedding night. Her childhood best friend was Icarus, younger brother to Talon.

LEVIATHAN - KRAKEN. The Emperor of the Deep Waters, youngest of seven surviving brothers. He is close to immortal, though his line was cursed by the Goddess to feel unending hunger and bear no young, until they are "remade in fire." He was awakened by the scent of Wren's blood in the ocean forty years ago, and saved her in return for her promise to someday give him her heart.

TALON - WYVERN. King of the island nation of Wyngel. Human in form but with draconic wings, he attacked Wren on their wedding night. Forty years later, he flew to Verdan to find her and earn his redemption. He lost one eye to an attack by a kraken decades before, and has a faint mating scar on his neck from his wedding night.

ODD - PUPPY. Talon's one-eared friend, not fully housebroken.

KIR - SELKIE. King of the remaining selkies, best friend and mate to Wren. Shares a brotherly bond with Leviathan. As her best friend, Kir wants nothing more than to excise Talon from Wren's life. Preferably with a very sharp blade.

WULFRAM - WARLORD OF ALL STARLAK. Father of Cyndil and Kavin, friend of King Talon, and prospective Alpha to Wren. Abducted Ratter to pay a life debt—a *liefhald*—to the dragon Zebulun and his brothers. During his recent absence while he hunted for an Omega to pay the *liefhald*, his home, Wargate Hall, was seized by traitorous warriors.

RATTER - APPRENTICE TO WREN, learning the arts of poisons and sewing. In Verdan on her tour of the continent, she must master the skills necessary to become a Master Spy. Charming, mischievous, and morally gray.

GORAN - WULFRAM'S WARRIOR, who was spared by the Emperor and now owes him a life debt. Deeply infatuated with Ratter.

ZEBULUN - LIFELONG DRAGON friend of Wulfram. One of three dragons to whom the warlord's family owes a *liefhald*.

## WREN



*F*rigid air bit through the fabric of my borrowed shirt and trousers, wild currents of wind snarling my bright red hair around my face. My cloak had come loose in the wind, and my boots slipped off my feet to plummet to the distant ground. My thoughts were every bit as scattered, my mind howling with anguish.

I had been stolen, fresh from my warm mating bed, in clothing meant for a fire-warmed hall. Now, the only heat left to me was the small, whimpering lump that I held tightly to my chest. I tucked my face into the wide neck of the linen shirt that still smelled of my new mates, and only slightly of puppy urine, and murmured to Odd that everything would be well.

But fear bit deeper and more savagely than the cold. The dragon who had taken me—plucked me from the top of the Queen’s Parapet at Wargate Hall, only a few feet from my weapons, poisons, and the assortment of males who had sworn to protect me—had spoken his threat very clearly. *Fear not, little Omega. You will meet your new mates soon.*

New mates? Anger kindled a small fire inside my chest, and I welcomed the scrap of heat. I had plenty of mates. Good ones, bad ones, and potential ones. I needed new men in my life like I needed new blisters. Or warts. Or a rash on my—  
“Wha—!”

The dragon’s teeth clicked as he explained, “Sorry, little Omega, air currents are tricky as we go north, and this wind is unusually strong. But we’ll be there soon.”

“Be where?” I screamed over the wind. In my mind, I shouted curses.

“Your new home,” he replied in accented Starlakian. I was distracted for a moment, wondering where a dragon would have learned the language, or how he could speak it with such a gigantic mouth full of teeth...

I shivered. Wulfram, the Warlord of All Starlak, had told me about a dragon named Zebulun, one he spoke with from time to time. One his great-grandfather had made a deal with: a blood pact, protection for the kingdom of Starlak in exchange for an Omega.

This dragon apparently thought I was the trade.

“Your home?”

“Yes. Never fear; it is fit for a human as well as my kind.”

“Are you Zebulun?” I shouted. The one-eared puppy in my shirt whimpered, and I patted him, trying not to shift my weight. The dragon’s claws weren’t poking me, but they looked razor sharp, and if I wriggled too much, I could be skewered inadvertently.

On the other hand, my blood would make a decent trail to follow on all the snow and frosted grasses beneath us. I had spilled it often enough in the past to save others, and if my mates could use it now to track me... My heart panged. They had to be following already. I knew that in my soul.

“I am, Omega. My brothers Fyrian and Baltor await us.”

“There are *three* of you?” The puppy whimpered at my scream.

“Yes, though the others are... Well, I will tell you all when we reach our destination.”

I forced myself to watch the ground that moved below me faster than any human should travel, marking the rivers, hills, and tundra that we passed, so that when I freed myself, I would know how to return to my loved ones.

*Love.* I did love them, both Levi, my monstrously powerful leviathan mate and one of the seven remaining Emperors of

the Deep Waters, and Kir. Sweet, dark-eyed, compassionate Kir. Selkie king, new mate, and my best friend for the past ten years.

What I felt for Wulfram—the warlord who’d dragged me into this mess by abducting my apprentice, Ratter—wasn’t love, though. It was anger, frustration, curiosity, and a healthy dose of lust. I squeezed my eyes closed, remembering his Alpha roar after I’d staggered out of the ancient Queen’s nest in his castle. He’d been almost feral with the need to get to me, to rut me. For a moment, I’d been terrified, thrown back forty years to the assault that had changed my life.

I ran one hand over my bicep, feeling the ragged edges of the scars that were a souvenir of that night. Of the beastly Rabbas, and my own husband, who’d proved to be every bit as dishonorable as his friend. Of when he’d returned and accused me of seducing not only Rabbas, but Icarus, his own little brother.

I’d hated Talon for so many years, but now, what I felt wasn’t hate. My heart was too heavy, my mind too weighed down by the mistakes I had made over the years.

His actions had led me to Levi and Kir, to the mainland and my new home in Verdan, where I’d saved countless women, girls, and Omegas from fates worse than mine had been. I couldn’t hate the results of his betrayal.

No, my past had the hand of the Goddess Herself in it. A cruel hand, perhaps. But seeing Talon again, watching his gentleness with the puppy Odd, his humility when my mates laughed at his failings... I wouldn’t hold on to hate.

What good would it do me, anyway? When I was a foolish young bride, I’d marked him as my mate, bitten him on our one night together, though he had not returned the mark. I’d claimed him forever as my own, and our fates were intertwined. Our lives and even our health, dependent on each other.

At the least, I would not seek vengeance. At best, I would allow him to be a friend.

In a few decades, perhaps. I wasn't *that* forgiving.

I rubbed the golden nautilus at the base of my throat, the mating mark placed there by Levi when he'd joined our souls and made me his Empress of the Deep Waters.

Apparently, I would live forever now. There would be time for forgiveness. For anything.

My hysterical laugh was snatched by the wind and lost somewhere on the tundra that stretched, unchanging, below us. The morning sun was at our backs, so I knew we were flying northwest. But at this speed, estimating the distance I'd need to walk back to Wargate Hall, or ride... To calculate my return journey, I needed to know how fast we were traveling now.

"You're flying so quickly, almost as fast as a horse can gallop!" I shouted. The wind fluttered my eyelashes for me.

"A horse?" The dragon let loose a snort of flame in what might have been a fit of rage, or laughter. "Many times as fast as a horse, Omega. You have much to learn about the ways of dragons. I cannot wait to teach you."

I pressed my lips closed and began to count the seconds as we flew, keeping my thoughts to myself.

This dragon had much to learn in the ways of Empresses. I couldn't wait to teach him what a deadly mistake he had made.

# WULFRAM



Shame burned along my limbs, moved through my blood, and festered in my gut, more painful than any stab wound or broken bone I'd weathered in my four decades. If my own father were alive to see me now, he would renounce me. I had failed in almost every way a warrior could.

My daughter Cyndil had been taken while I was away from my homeland. My own castle had been infiltrated, and though I had vanquished them with the help of the Emperor of the Deep Waters and the king of the wyverns, the scent of Starlakian traitors on the air still rankled.

But these lesser failures could be corrected.

I would find my daughter and rescue her from the unknown dragon who had somehow convinced her to leave with him.

I would scour the blood of my enemies from Wargate Hall, and flush any conspirators from the country before I was done. Well, unless the shame that devoured me now killed me first.

I had lost control of my Alpha nature, and sought to claim a woman who had not consented to be my mate.

Thank the Goddess one of my own young warriors had been able to stop me from reaching her. But then, only a moment after she had vanished behind the upper door, and I'd regained my senses... I'd lost her as well.

The icy wind slapped my face as I stood at the top of the Queen's Parapet. "Wren." I spoke her name into the air as she vanished over the horizon, carried by a dragon I once would

have called friend. Behind me, I sensed the selkie king, Kir, and the Leviathan, who whispered to the sky in some ancient tongue. We were all stunned, holding still as we watched Wren vanish.

Which made it easier to hear the young woman at the bottom of the stairs inside the keep, who was cursing fluently in every language I'd ever heard, and some I hadn't.

"That motherfucking scaly lizard took Mistress Wren? And you useless, sagging cockbags didn't even throw a single blade at it?" She rattled off a few more insults targeted at our ancestors and our assholes, then ended with, "Goran, you call yourself a warrior? One sword, aimed correctly, could have taken it down."

"Aimed where, my sharp-tongued queen? I have never fought a dragon, and do not know their weaknesses. And had I been successful, the *Ankelsang* might have fallen." Goran's voice went hard. "But I will not fail you. I will find out what weaknesses the beast has. I will slay the dragon, rescue your mistress, and regain your favor, if it takes every breath, every moment, every—*oof!*"

"Save the poetry. I'll rescue my own boss, thank you very much. Let's go."

A strong burst of wind almost knocked me off my feet, and I turned back to the doorway. "No!" My feet were already moving, and I pushed aside the other men as I raced back down the circular staircase. In the room below, the dark-haired, devil-girl Ratter—who was in her own way as deadly as any warrior I'd ever met—stood with a knife at the throat of Goran, the strongest warrior left alive in Wargate Hall, now that I'd had my enemies beheaded.

Or the ones I knew about, at least. There were more, perhaps not in the castle itself, but nearby. If I left now, they would feast on the remnants of my warriors and their families.

Still, I had to go. Not only to restore my honor... but because I had somehow fallen under the spell of the Omega the dragon had taken.

Ratter's knife was pointed at me now as I approached, the solution to my problem springing to mind. I paid the small blade no attention, though it was most likely tipped with some lethal poison. We had no time to waste.

"What do you mean no, you hairy, oversized thief? I'd like to see you try and stop me from—"

I fell to my knees in front of her. "I ask you for a *liefhald*, young Ratter."

At her side, Goran made a choking sound. "Sire?"

Ratter's pale face creased with an expression I had not yet seen. A genuine smile. "A life debt, Warlord Wulfram? What could you possibly want from me?"

"I ask that you allow me to recover your mistress, while you stay here as protection for the warrior I will place on my throne in my absence." I went on quickly, as she was already shaking her head. "I know the countryside, and where the dragon Zebulun will have taken her. We must leave now, though. A dragon flies faster than any horse can run, and Drakonspear, the keep where they live, will take many days to reach."

"We?" She spat the word out. "Who will you take?"

"Her bonded mates." The selkie king spoke as he approached. Kir glowed with health, courtesy of his recent mating, and the lavender and caramel scent of Wren still clung to his dark hair and sun-bronzed skin. I forced back a jealous growl when he nodded to me. "We would appreciate your company, Warlord, as we retrieve our queen."

Then the Leviathan was there, with a fist pulled back, his eyes whirlpools of rage. "My *Empress*, you sniveling fool. The Omega you sold to the fucking dragon—" I lifted my chin for the deserved blow, but Kir placed a hand on his arm.

"Brother," he murmured. "We can punish him later. There's no time."

*Brother?* The young selkie's kin claim was a surprise, but the Emperor accepted it. Their mate bond to her must have created a brotherly one between them.

I shook off a sudden longing to be one of their number, and not only for the chance to be close to the bright-haired, fearless Omega. These would make worthy war-brothers.

I spoke quickly. “You are right. We have no time. But we must prepare for the battle ahead, lest we lose it by our haste.” And lose the fortress we would need to return to, once we’d found Wren and retrieved her. I turned my face back to the young girl. “Ratter, apprentice to Wren, the *Ankelsang*, I ask that you stay at Wargate Hall and protect it and its inhabitants from all dangers, alongside the warrior Goran, who will be Warlord of All in my absence.”

Goran went a sickly shade of pale at that, looking as if he might topple over. Ratter punched him in the kidney, and he began breathing again. Well, wheezing, at least.

“I have no doubt that you will be attacked. Goran, I will leave you the keys to the armories and will instruct my loyal warriors to follow you as they would me. But expect treachery.” He nodded. “Ratter, if you do this, I will owe you the life debt. You may ask anything of me—”

“I’d do it without the *liefhald*, Wulfie,” Ratter said, rolling her eyes. “She’s my friend. More than friend... She’s like a sister.”

I could not smile at the wobble in Ratter’s voice. I felt her pain. “The *liefhald* is yours in any case, young assassin. I dishonored myself when I took you from Wren. I betrayed what it means to be an Alpha when I exposed you both to danger, and when I allowed my loss of control to result in Wren being taken. Call on me, whenever you have a great need, and I will answer.” I nodded gravely to Goran. “As will my heirs.”

“Heir?” Goran rasped. “Warlord, you can’t. I’m...” He was an orphan, from a lesser family. It made no difference to me; he’d proven himself a great warrior more than once.

“My son is a king of a different land now. My daughter has been taken. If I fall—”

“She wasn’t taken,” Ratter interrupted. “If you mean Cyndil. I spoke to one of the cooks who was there when the dragon landed and changed to a man. She went willingly. She kissed him, I hear.”

I blinked. “She would never—”

Ratter groaned. “You don’t know her very well, do you? Your daughter is almost as smart as me. I read her diary while Wren was swapping fluids with those two.” The Emperor of the Deep Waters let out a huff. Ratter ignored him. “I think we’d get along, me and Cyndil. She’s bloodthirsty.”

I fought to control my impatience. “Why would you think she wasn’t taken, Ratter?”

She sighed dramatically. “She’s an Omega, and your daughter, which means she’s a warrior.”

“What?” She had my full attention now. “She is no such thing.”

Her strange gray eyes moved over me for a moment before she answered. “Well, she has seven swords under her bed, so if she’s not a warrior, she’s a hoarder.”

“What? She doesn’t have... *Seven swords?*” What was she talking about?

Ratter shrugged, resting a hand on top of a golden pommel at her waist. “Six now, but yeah, she still has most of her collection. Some fine weapons.” She tilted her face to the sword at her waist and stroked her hand down the hilt gently, like she was petting a kitten.

I refused to wonder where my daughter would have procured weapons, or why. Ratter had misunderstood my protest. “Swords or not, Cyndil is not an Omega!”

Ratter’s gaze held scorn and pity. “You’ve been gone a long while, eh? She’s what, eighteen? That’s when it happens for Omegas. Girls become women, and a precious, unfortunate few of ’em become something even juicier.”

“You’re seventeen now, my sharp-petaled blossom,” Goran murmured, laying a hand on her shoulder. “I cannot wait to

watch you flower.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” she snapped, stabbing his hand with what looked like a jeweled brooch that I knew had been locked in the family treasury.

“How did you—” I began, then stopped. I didn’t care if Ratter raided the keep. I had to know. “She truly is an Omega? My Cyndil?”

Ratter nodded, her gaze clouded. “It took her and your whole castle by surprise. Might be why the Alphas went feral and took over. Trying to get to her, I’d guess. Cook says Cyndil spent hours at the top of her own tower after she perfumed, letting her new scent dissipate on the wind. Locked away from your men. From what she wrote in that diary, she was planning to give herself to the dragon your great-grandfather had promised the *liefhald* to.”

“That’s not who she lured.” My heart raced at the thought of my daughter in the clutches of strange beasts. I had no idea where to begin looking for them.

But I knew exactly where Zebulun would be, and he would know. All I had to do was find a way to force him to give up Wren, join with me and the others, and help us carry out the rescue mission.

I beat back the wave of despair that threatened to swamp me.

Kir moved past me. “We should leave. Wren wasn’t dressed for this weather; she’ll be cold.” He was almost humming with power. In fact, his skin seemed to glow, slightly golden. Who knew what miracles the Omega had wrought behind that closed door in her heat?

“Does anyone know where the cockroach ran away to?” the Emperor snarled as he followed.

Ratter’s voice, somehow ahead of us all, called back, “I’m hoping that waste of space Talon is gone for good. I was worried I’d have to use valuable poison on him. I’ve never put a wyvern king into a coma, so I probably would’ve used too much.”

Goran murmured as we walked, “How will you free Wren from the dragons?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted. All I knew was I needed to make my sins right, or I would never deserve the chance to woo her.

I had to make myself worthy.

# WREN



To my shock and dismay, I fell asleep in the dragon's clutches for an untold number of hours, only waking when my stomach lurched as he backwinged toward a spire of boulders that looked as if it might fall into the gray, churning —

“The ocean?” I gasped. How far had we come?

My limbs were numb with cold, my bladder close to bursting, and my stomach raw with hunger. Odd was whimpering constantly, but seemed to be asleep, even as we drew close to the rocky beach below, and the wind rose to a near-shriek.

“The Northern Sea. And this is Drakonspear, one of the original fortresses of my kind since history began,” Zebulun roared over the wind and the pounding of the surf to the right of us. He set his empty foot down, then released me and the puppy gently, rolling us onto the smooth rocks below.

“It looks like you haven't repaired the place since history began,” I spat back, my teeth chattering as I stood unsteadily, though the air here was far warmer. “Are you sure it won't fall down around your ears?”

Not that he had noticeable ears. He had flaming red eyes, horns that spiraled around his angular head, and a jaw that opened wide to reveal that great bundle of razor-sharp teeth inside. Stepping back from him, I realized he was at least as tall as four grown men, and his scales glittered like green gemstones in the misty air of the beach.

“Drakonspear, huh? Never heard of it.” The Starlakians probably thought it had fallen into the sea long before now. The castle leaned over the water, as if it were trying to fling itself into the waves. But at the base of the structure, a cave with an entrance at least thirty feet high yawned at the pounding surf.

The puppy poked his head out of my shirt and yawned as well, then whimpered. Once the dragon had moved far enough away that I could feel sure he wouldn't inadvertently step on Odd, I set the pup on the ground, and he immediately ran to a piece of driftwood and lifted a leg.

Goddess, I wished I could do the same thing. Luckily, Zebulun busied himself with gathering driftwood—for a fire inside the castle, he muttered before he began collecting logs in his jaws—and I was able to take a private moment behind a boulder. I saw a few plants I recognized growing closer to the cliffs beside the castle and gathered them quickly, stuffing them in my trouser pockets. One in particular would come in handy; it was the plant that went into making veninspire, one of the hardest poisons to source.

Before I left this place, I'd need to collect as much of it as I could.

Drakonspear was built into the sheer cliffs that dropped vertically to the beach, and while the dragon moved about in the cave—I saw a blast of fire some ways inside the enormous entrance at one point—I tried to look for a way out. There was nothing. Perhaps I could get my bearings higher up in the fortress. But later, once I'd eaten and rested. If I couldn't find a way to escape, I'd need to either talk my way out, or somehow kill my captors.

If dragons *could* be killed.

“Is there something for the puppy to eat in there?” I asked a few minutes later as the dragon called me to enter the cave. He had lit a strange, barrel-shaped iron basket filled with wood, high up on one wall, about fifty feet inside. The firelight played over the ceiling and walls, revealing embedded pearls, coral, and gemstones.

Zebulun set another mouthful of driftwood down to answer. “There is, and food for an Omega as well, little queen. I will climb the wall and prepare the fire. You may take the stairs.” He caught up a piece of wood in his claws and blew a small flame onto the tip, lighting the dry end, then handed me the torch.

I tucked Odd back into my shirt, but hesitated, curious. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll run away? You know I’m not staying here. I will not mate you. I have mates of my own, who I love.”

He blinked those enormous slitted eyes slowly, which I had a feeling was his version of a smile. Or an eye roll. “Unless you can swim across the Northern Sea, or fly over the cliffs, there’s nowhere to run. Come, let’s have a meal together, and I can introduce you to my brothers. Perhaps when you have heard our story, you will change your mind.”

He walked in front of me to the end of the cave, where a doorway led to a tall tower that enclosed a winding, gray stone stairway. I was exhausted, but still had the energy to laugh when the dragon began climbing up the outside of the tower like an oversized lizard. I started up the stairs inside, my thighs aching from the strain before long, and the puppy whimpering almost as loud as my labored breathing.

True to the dragon’s word, by the time I reached the top, there was the scent of roasted meat. I rushed into a vast dining hall, where a long walnut table was set with two places, a roaring fire in the vast hearth at the head of the room. There were no hangings on the walls, or rushes on the floor. Soot was all the decoration I could find, besides the ancient velvet cushions on the dozens of chairs pushed up against the walls, and the two tucked under the table, one at each of the place settings.

There was dust on all the chairs and the tabletop, but the porcelain dishes were clean, and the cutlery, when I picked up a spoon to examine it, was pure gold. A graceful, blown-glass carafe of water sat in the center of the table, and I immediately poured a goblet for myself and placed another on the floor for Odd, who lapped at it greedily.

The dragon was nowhere to be found, but a tall, densely muscled man—dressed in a pair of leather trousers and nothing else—stepped through the doorway opposite the stairs and grinned as he held up a platter of roasted meat. “Plenty for one Omega and one puppy,” he announced.

I wondered where the meal had come from. Servants, perhaps? “A cook lives here?”

“Ah, no,” he said, without elaborating.

I held still as he approached and used an enormous fork to lift a slab of meat onto my plate. His skin shimmered in the flickering light, as if tiny emeralds were embedded underneath the upper layer. It was beautiful, in a terrifying way.

We ate and drank in silence, though Zebulun watched me with an increasingly curious expression as the meal progressed, his nostrils flared wide. Scenting me.

Except, judging by the odd, worried expression on his face, he didn't seem pleased with my scent.

We both broke the silence at the same moment. “You said you were mated,” he began, as I blurted out, “You have two other brothers?”

He waited for me to continue, but when I didn't, he nodded. “Fyrian and Baltor, both from my clutch.”

“A clutch?” I asked, my mind racing. “Dragons are born from eggs then?”

He closed his eyes for a long moment. “*Were* born. No dragons have been hatched since my clutch, some three hundred and fifty years ago. We are the youngest of all the dragons left alive.”

I refused to let myself feel sympathy. “How many of you are there?”

The fire crackled as he considered my question. “Seven, or so I believe. Our clutch and one other, not far from here. There could be some others who flew across to the Svellvollr long before the plagues began, but nothing in our histories indicates that to be true.”

“The other clutch of four. It’s in Starlak?”

“They live in the Svellvollr, just across the Northern Sea.”

“Are they friends of yours?” His laughter was humorless, and I cursed softly. “The warlord’s daughter, Cyndil, gave herself up in payment of the *liefhald* only a few weeks ago. That debt has been paid. I was not some sort of sacrificial Omega, set on the Queen’s Parapet for you to abscond with. You must return me to my mates.”

He shook his head. “I am sorry for Wulfram’s daughter, but the *liefhald* was pledged to my clutch, not theirs. And the terms were plain. We were to be given an Omega from the warlord’s home. I know Wulfram well; he would never have left a treasure such as you unguarded if you were not the sacrifice. Though you may not have understood your role, *mate*.” He leaned on the last word, his slitted eyes going cold.

“My name is Wren, and I am not your mate.” I took a deep swallow of water, trying to hold onto my temper. “I would know about mates. I have two that I love, and one that I hate.” I winced internally at the lie. I had hated Talon, but now I felt something closer to pity for him.

I’d need to tell him I pitied him if I ever saw him again. That would drive him mad.

“Three mates? Well, then, adding three more shouldn’t disturb you,” he began, but I cut him off.

“You *abducted* me. You are attempting to compel me to bond with you and your brothers, wherever they are. I don’t tell you this to be cruel, Zebulun, but you must know that Omegas choose their mates. The Goddess has protected us from all males who would try to force us to bond with them.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “You would have done better to *ask* to court me.”

Though something in me knew I would not have welcomed his attentions. I didn’t choose mates lightly. Kir had been my best friend for a decade, so loving him was easy. Levi had saved me, and won me with his patience and protection.

Talon... I had been Talon's sky bond, and loved him from my own childhood. I'd never had a chance of escaping him.

"You speak of your biology. How your body will only open to a worthy mate," Zebulun said softly. "We will earn your respect, Wren. I promise we will. There is room in your heart for more mates."

"You might earn my forgiveness and respect, and I might one day accept more Alphas into my bed," I replied after another sip of water, Wulfram's rugged face flashing in my mind. "But I can feel it. Or more to the point, I can feel the lack of that connection. You and I, we will never—"

"Don't say it." He stood, clearly agitated, and bright red flames swirled in his eyes. Fire and... pain?

No. Desperation. I'd seen that emotion in the gaze of feral Alphas on the verge of losing their humanity. But Zebulun wasn't anywhere like those maddened, incoherent males. Was he?

"Zebulun. We're not mates. We're not meant to be."

"You *must* be," he half shouted, emerald scales rippling across his exposed skin, his form growing until I worried that he might shift right in the hall, and crush both Odd and me. "If you aren't, we are doomed."

"Explain, please," I said, eating calmly, though I wanted nothing more than to run from the hall, away from danger. My stomach lurched as I filled it, and I cut small pieces of meat on a side plate and set it on the floor for the puppy, who yapped joyfully, breaking the tension.

The sound seemed to spark a return to sanity for Zebulun, and he strode to the hearth, staring at the flames while I ate. He didn't speak, but once I had eaten all I could, he turned and bowed, holding out a hand. "You asked for an explanation. I cannot tell you why we need you so desperately. I can only show you."

Intrigued, and no longer terrified, I took his hand. He led me through the doorway to an enormous kitchen that was empty of cooks, though there were the remains of a side of

beef on the vast granite table in the center of the room. Had Zebulun cooked this meal? No, he would not have had time. Then who?

We went through the room and out another door, back into the cold wind, though the breeze here wasn't as forceful as the winds had been while flying. Odd hadn't followed, so I shut the door behind us to keep him safe.

The gardens that greeted us outside the kitchens took my breath away. They were unkempt, but I could tell they had been a marvel at some point. There were grapevines running the length of stone walls that bordered each side of an area that had to be a hundred paces square. Rows of what should have been vegetables and herbs took up half the space, though the raised beds were overrun with weeds. I could still see long beans and some variety of lettuce sprouting here and there, and the bright red of small strawberries peeking out from underneath dark green leaves.

The other half of the space was an orchard with everything from pecan to apple to apricot trees. I wandered closer, marveling that some of the trees were fruiting, out of season. "How?" I breathed, noting more and more herbs and vegetables that had no business growing this far north. "In this climate, this should be impossible." I leaned over and plucked a dark berry from a bramble that was overtaking the path, popping it in my mouth. "It's magical."

"It is precisely that," Zebulun replied as he gestured for me to approach what looked like the opening to a potato cellar. "Our mother, long ago, was an Omega like you." He let out a laugh as he pulled the door open, revealing a long, winding stairwell that led into the earth. "Well, not like you. She was a true dragon mate. Not only an Omega, but one of the line the Goddess created for our kind."

I sucked in a breath and followed him down the stairs as he descended. "I've never heard of such."

"No, you wouldn't have. The line has been gone for longer than any of the others. Our mother was the last of her kind, and she only lived a few years after our hatching." I wanted to

ask more, but he went on. “Mother loved her gardens, and chose to put a large portion of her magic into it. Dragons are born tied to either the earth or the sky, and when my brothers and I all showed an affinity to the earth... Well, she told me near the end that she knew she was dying, but the magic she gifted to the land here would never fade. It would feed us as we grew, and give us the chance to make it to adulthood.”

“How old were you when she died?” I asked quietly.

“We were but ten years old,” he answered as he came to another door, stopping with his back to me.

“You were children. I’m so sorry, Zebulun.”

“We were infants, in the lifetimes of dragons. Mother hid us here, close to the sea, where no other dragons could find us. She did it to keep us safe, but it also kept us isolated and ignorant of many things that...” He sighed. “Well, if we had known, my brothers would not be in the predicament we are now. Follow me?”

He opened the door, and I followed, leaving it propped open. It wasn’t dark, for some reason—whether from the sliver of sky visible above us, or the strange glow from the stone walls around us—but I didn’t want to be locked away in the earth, no matter if the dragon who had abducted me seemed to be an honorable sort.

Though, who knew, with dragons?

I walked into the darkness, but stopped at a soft, “Omega? Hold. I’ll light a fire so you may see my brothers.”

A great burst of flame licked the darkness, and I waited for a moment as my eyes adjusted. There were odd sparkles everywhere, and I blinked as I stepped further into the cellar.

No, the *cave*.

“Goddess above,” I breathed, wondering at the room I was in. The walls and ceiling—even the floor—were all studded with gemstones, larger than any I’d ever seen in my life. Emeralds the size of my fists, polished and faceted, had been embedded in the walls next to massive rubies, sapphires, topazes, and diamonds. Great veins of pure gold shone like

rivers running through the landscape of gems, making great shapes—claws, perhaps—on the dark rock beneath.

“It’s glorious,” I managed to say at last, my gaze falling on Zebulun. “But... where are your brothers?”

“There.” He pointed to the far wall, where only a few gems shone. Four gems, to be exact. Two bright amber spheres, bisected with dark fire. And across from those, two cold, shining diamonds. Which blinked slowly, and began to move toward us.

“Thisssss issss the Omega from Sssstarlak?” The sibilant question had every hair on my neck standing on end. “Or is it sssssupper, Zebulun-zel?”

Zebulun didn’t answer. Before I could take another step forward, or back, an enormous set of teeth—each one as long as my forearm—flashed in front of me, yawning wide.

“Sssssupper it is.”

I’d survived being attacked on my wedding night and cast out by my husband. I’d lived through a shipwreck, then a bargain with an ancient leviathan. I’d soldiered on for four decades, facing down feral Alphas, corrupt kings, and monsters who preyed on children and the vulnerable.

None of that mattered to me.

At this moment, I was a child once more, in the dark, facing a monster who I knew was a thousand times more powerful and terrifying than me.

I was facing my death.

It didn’t matter that I was tied to two strong males, and that my leviathan mate had granted me some sort of immortality. I was almost certain whatever longevity he’d shared with me would not survive the digestive tract of a dragon.

I’d never once fainted in distress, like some kind of maiden. But now, I felt gratitude as darkness spun through my mind, taking me with it.

Gratitude and, in the very last second before I lost consciousness, regret.

I'd left so much unfinished. *What a waste.*

# WREN



Someone was speaking in a language I did not recognize, each syllable beating on my eardrums like hard-soled boots marching on my skull. There was something soft underneath my head, which was a blessing.

And I still had a head apparently, one attached to my body. That was also a relief.

And a surprise.

I held as still as possible, listening as footsteps scuffed near me. I was on the floor, or the ground.

“Speak in human language, brother. I promise, it helps.”

“Nothing helpsss anymore. I hate ssspeaking in their tongue,” a dark voice replied, but in Starlakian. “It’s sso limited.”

A grunt of agreement, then a third voice noted, “She is too small. She cannot be a dragon mate. We would break her.”

“She is not a dragon mate. She is of another line. But she is an Omega,” Zebulun replied. “She smells—”

“Foul. Of ssseaweed and brine.”

“No, she smells of storms. There is also something sweet and floral. Almost sickly. She cannot be our mate.”

Zebulun cursed. “The prophecy said the last dragon mate would be an Omega given voluntarily from the Warlord of the North. We secured the *liefhald* three generations back for this

very purpose. He brought her there, and she was on the tower, waiting. It *has* to be her.”

“The prophecy said—”

“Fuck the prophecy. Ssssmell her, brother. Can you tell me you’d mate with that? She is sstinking up my hoard. You should not have brought her here. I’ll have to flame it clean.”

The third voice rasped, “She’s too small and thin. Needs feeding, even if her scent reminds me of our great enemy.” They all went quiet at that.

*Oh, shit.* The great enemies of dragonkind—at least the only ones I knew of—were the krakens. There were only seven of them left in the world, and I wasn’t sure exactly what had caused the conflict all those centuries ago. There had been betrayal on both sides, I suspected. But if they found out I was mated to one of their enemies...

I fought to keep my breathing steady, though my heart raced. I could not let them know about Levi.

“She’s waking,” Zebulun murmured. “Wren? Are you hurt?”

I let my eyes open and just stared for a moment. Zebulun hovered over me, his forehead wrinkled with concern. Behind him were two men who could only be his brothers. They had the same facial structure and hair, though one was taller, with sharp, almost cruel features and clear, diamond eyes. The other was so thin as to be skeletal, with slitted amber eyes and scars on one cheek. Both men had scales on the surface of their skin, as if they could not take on human form entirely.

I scrambled to sit up. “You’re Zebulun’s brothers?”

The too-thin brother nodded. “I am Fyrian.” I nodded back to him. “You are truly an Omega?”

“Or what’sss left of the breed,” sneered the third one—Baltor, I assumed. His tongue flickered out, and I noted it was still forked.

“I am,” I replied to Fyrian, who seemed close to falling over. Zebulun rushed over and supported him. Fyrian’s skin

flickered with blue scales, but they were a sickly shade of dusty blue, not a clear emerald like Zebulun's. "I'm a healer as well. You appear to be ill, dragon. Is there something I can do to help?"

"You see," Zebulun hissed at Baltor. "She offers help. It is the prophecy."

"I am far past any help you might give, my lady," Fyrian said, his amber eyes going dull. "But I am grateful for your kindness."

"Let us go up into the keep and have our meal," Zebulun suggested. Without waiting, he assisted his brother to the door. I followed, feeling Baltor's angry gaze on my back as we ascended. Fyrian's progress was slow and painful to watch.

"He needs healing."

"He needsss a mate," Baltor spat. "And that'sss not you."

"I know," I replied as calmly as I could manage.

"Maybe you're clossse enough. Maybe we can learn to live with the ssstench, if it meanss we live." He began muttering in that draconic tongue again, and something about the tone of his voice had a chill far colder than the breeze racing through me once more. I had been around feral Alphas enough times to recognize his madness.

Baltor might appear physically healthier, but his mind was every bit as broken as Fyrian's body.

"Come here, Omega. Let me tassste you."

*Taste me?* I wasn't certain what he meant by that, but I wasn't going to find out. "We can talk inside," I replied without looking back. Without meaning to, I began walking faster, and as we crossed the kitchen garden, I was almost in a run.

It was a mistake. Dark laughter was all the warning I had before my arms were held in an iron grip and I was forced to turn. I stared up into his face, shocked at the way pewter scales appeared and disappeared, like his true form swam right

beneath the surface of his human skin. His hands were hot on my arms, almost burning me, as he lowered his face to mine.

I'd barely drawn a breath to scream when his mouth covered mine in a horrible, harsh kiss. He tasted of ash and flame, and his saliva was heated, almost acidic. It was nothing like the claiming, pleasurable kisses from my mates. This was an attack, an assault by a creature I had no hope of fending off.

"Stop!" I screamed as he drew back, his forked tongue flickering out like a snake's.

He laughed again. "Clossse enough," he replied. "Clossse enough to ssave my ssoft-hearted brothersss." He grabbed my hair, exposing the side of my neck. His teeth were sharp, his eyes hard, and I had a feeling that if he tried to mark me as his mate, he would end up tearing out my throat instead.

I screamed again as his head descended.

# TALON



*A*re you certain he flew this way? I spoke the question into my own soul and listened as my wyvern half growled his assent. I sent him a rush of gratitude for answering.

He stayed quiet. I wasn't surprised.

For decades after I'd driven off our true mate, his sky bond, he'd all but abandoned me to my misery. The feeling of being torn in half had made me the monster Wren had seen in truth. I'd grown colder as the years passed, until the day months ago when I'd smelled her lavender and caramel on a gown in the hands of another woman.

I inhaled, catching the tiniest hint of that scent on the frigid winds, though I knew it was probably my imagination. I'd had to leave the Hall when Wren had taken her two other mates into the ancient Queen's nest. Her scent had driven Wulfram to the edge of madness, and Ratter and Goran had had their hands full keeping him from chopping his way through the door to her.

I'd known I would fall into a rutting haze as well if I didn't leave the keep, so I had flown a few miles northward, praying that the harsh wind would scrape her glorious, ripe scent from my lungs.

Her mates detested me, and I wouldn't be allowed into her nest beside them. They called me asshole, and cockroach, but I knew better than to deny them their petty insults. I deserved them and worse. Every time I slept, I saw the scars on my

petite mate's shoulders and arms, the long trenches in her flesh that I'd put there in my rage, thinking she had betrayed me.

What a fool I was. I was the betrayer. I was the unworthy one. And as I sat alone on the barren land, I'd prayed that the Goddess would give me the chance to redeem myself. But how could I? Wren needed nothing from me. She had two mates besides me, and one of those was a creature so powerful he could protect her from any force on land or sea.

She didn't need me.

But I needed her.

Perhaps I could be her servant. I had a feeling I would have company in that role. The Warlord of All Starlak, my friend Wulfram, had betrayed her in a much less significant way, by abducting her apprentice. Ratter was fine, and Wulfram had apologized, but he'd need to do more than grovel to earn his way into her good graces.

Three days after she'd gone into the nest, I'd been staring at the sky when my prayer for a chance at redemption was answered, but in the most horrific way.

A dragon, its scales dark green but with bright golden wings, had appeared in the sky high above. I'd watched it, marveling, wondering if I dared fly up and approach it. I'd dreamed of seeing a dragon my entire life, though even my parents had told me they were extinct. They were the progenitors of my race, and I'd drawn pictures of them in the margins of many of my books when I was a boy.

But then I'd seen a ribbon of burgundy red trailing from the beast's claws, and smelled the distinct hint of burned caramel.

Wren, afraid. *Taken.*

I'd shot into the sky without hesitation. I wasn't sure what had happened, whether Wulfram had gone through with what he'd intended—though he was probably dead at the hands of the Emperor by now if he had—but I knew Wren needed my help.

When I finally spied the castle jutting out of the horizon by the sea, I wasn't certain how long I'd flown, how many miles of frozen tundra and stark mountains had passed underneath me since I'd first spotted her. Blood flowed sluggishly from the opened wounds at my wing joints, and my lungs burned from exertion. But her scent was stronger now, which gave me energy.

Was she in the castle? No. She had to be outside. There, in the distance, were two forms, a larger man, and a smaller figure with flaming red hair that whipped in the wind. She was running from him, and I flew faster, my exhaustion vanishing in the need to save her.

As I approached, the man pulled her head back, exposing her neck, and angled his head as if to claim her.

Or to kill her. I wasn't certain.

"I don't fucking think so," I growled, folding my wings into a sharp dive and racing toward the man's face. I hit him with one fist, knocking him away from Wren. "Fuck!" My fist exploded into pain, and I tumbled onto the ground, going head over heels in a full forward roll. What the hell was this creature's face made of, granite?

"Talon!" Wren shouted as I stood and swung back around to see if my blow had taken care of the brute.

It had not. The man was fine.

Except that he wasn't a man, or at least, not entirely. As I watched, dumbfounded, the man began to expand, and glitter with pewter-hued scales, becoming... "That's the *dragon*?"

"One of them," Wren yelled, grabbing my arm. "What are you doing here?"

There was no time to talk. The man had almost completely transformed, and Wren and I were tripping over vegetables and bushes as we tried not to get crushed beneath its silver-gray claws.

"*Run!*" I yelled as the creature pulled back its head, inhaling deeply. I knew what was coming; I'd seen this very

distinct posture in more than one illustration in my family's libraries.

It was going to flame us, both of us.

My thoughts flickered as fast as lightning in the split second before the fire erupted. I knew I could survive the flames, or I thought I might. At least, wyvern flame was no danger to me. My wings, especially, could withstand immense heat. But dragon fire? It would be far more potent. Damaging, or even lethal at such close range. I might not live, and Wren was tied to me.

Even if I could survive the flames, Wren could not. She was fragile, with skin easily scarred. I had to protect her. It was my duty. No. It was my *privilege*.

And possibly, my redemption.

I hated that she might feel the pain, through our mating bond, of what was about to occur. But at least I could protect her.

I extended my wings and pulled her beneath me, crouching over her, covering her entirely and pressing her down to the soft earth below. She blinked up at me, uncomprehending.

“Close your eyes,” I commanded, and she did.

Her lungs were still vulnerable, I realized at the last second as the fire started to pour over my back. She might inhale the fire, or the too-hot air. So I covered her mouth with mine and wrapped her even more tightly in my wings, forming a seal from over our heads to the ground, leaving only my own legs and back unprotected.

The burning began.

It was the highest of the Goddess's heaven and the lowest of all the hells. Paradise on one side of my body, excruciating agony on the other.

Her lips were soft and yielded to mine as my wyvern roared to life, ascending as we protected her from the blast. As I'd feared, the dragon fire was far hotter than normal fire, more intense than wyvern flame, but my dual nature gave me

protection. This wouldn't kill me. It would just make me wish I were dead. I could deal with pain.

*Pain.* Wren stiffened in my arms, whimpering into my mouth as I blew a gentle breath into her lungs. She wasn't the one being hurt, but my pain had been echoing through her fragile body for four decades, since our wedding night, and it was moving through the bond to her now.

I had never been there to stop it before, and I wasn't certain I could do anything now. But, if there were some way to *dampen* the mate bond between us, to protect her from the agony, I would take all of the pain and count it a victory.

I could begin to redeem myself.

*Can we...?* I began, my own voice a soft whisper in our shared mind, though the agony made it hard to think at all.

My wyvern half echoed my caution to him from only days before. *If we fall ill, so does she. If we are injured, she is hurt.*

*Yes. We are connected through her mating claim. She feels what we do. Is there any way to limit the connection?*

I knew how the bond between his soul and mine felt, like a poorly braided rope. Once, it had been strong. We'd shared every thought, every moment of our young life, two flames held in one form. The bond between us now was tattered and frayed, threads of fire rather than a strong bond. That was my fault. When I'd spurned her, driven her away, he had struck back, then withdrawn.

Back then, he'd almost closed the bond, somehow. I hadn't been able to sense him deeply for many of the intervening years. It had felt like an amputation, and his return had been the beginning of a healing in my very soul.

I didn't deserve his aid now, but she did. *Our little Wren. Can you help me keep her safe?*

My mind was flooded with a memory of the first time we'd heard her voice.

*"Shoo, birds!" The girl's voice was high and sweet, sailing like birdsong over the crash of the surf on the pebbled beach.*

*She was surrounded by seabirds, terns and gulls, all pecking at a small cloth piled with biscuits, grapes, and wooden cups of wine. I smiled as I flew closer, knowing what this was: a traditional offering to the waves, a prayer for safety for our sailors and warriors.*

*I had returned to Wyngel hours before and was looking for my young brother, whose harassed tutor had complained of him running amuck with the young girl, a fosterling from a small island nation to our south.*

*I could see my brother Icarus's dark head bobbing out on the waves, noted the dolphins that swam beside him.*

*"Boys are dumb!" the girl shouted, waving her arms overhead, but as I landed, the birds fled.*

*For some reason, the beast that shared my soul had gone completely still, fascinated in a way that I'd never noted before. I found myself lost for what to say, so I answered her statement as if she'd asked me. "Well, yes, mostly. What has my little brother done now?"*

*The girl held a hand up to her face against the sunlight, gazing at me fearlessly as I approached. Her hair shone as brightly as a flame, and her cheeks grew rosy as she recognized me. But her strange gray-green eyes were locked on my face.*

*"Are you King Talon?" she asked baldly.*

*"I am. And who are you, young lady?" My wyvern had gone into some sort of trance. It was disconcerting, to say the least. Was this red-haired child some sort of sea witch? She was far too self-assured, her eyes too wise, to be a normal child. "Is this an offering to the waves?"*

*Finally, her eyes fell to the beach, and she shuffled her feet like the young girl she appeared to be. "It was supposed to be the traditional offering, with apples and honey. But Cook wouldn't let me use the good crystal, and the apples... fell off the plate before I got it set up." Her eyes flitted to the waves, to my brother.*

*I smiled ruefully. “Fell into Icarus’s stomach, hm? I hope he makes it up to you.”*

*“Makes it up?” Her gaze speared me again, and I kneeled, feeling as if this moment was far more important than a king meeting a subject. More significant than a chance encounter with my brother’s little friend on a beach.*

*Somehow, it felt like she was a queen.*

*I met her gaze and let my wyvern rise slightly, seeing her through my eyes. He trilled softly, a chirruping melody like a draconic lullaby. “Yes, little one. When a man, or boy, does something wrong, even something small like stealing those apples? He should repay that debt to you twice over. If he doesn’t, his honor will be lost.”*

*Repayment. Twice over. My wyvern’s thoughts, his memories of that long-ago moment flickered in my mind now.*

*Blowing soft breath into our mate’s lungs, I sent the question into our shared soul again. Can we close off her connection somehow, to save her from this pain?*

*Our mind was still for a long moment. I wasn’t sure why a wave of grief poured through me, but before I could send another thought to ask, I felt his soft, agonized reply.*

*Yes.*

*He did something then, that pinched the faint, frail anchor point she’d placed there with her mating bite all those years ago. Pinched it and then...*

*No!*

*There was a snapping in my soul, like a branch breaking underfoot.*

*This time, he didn’t lessen the connection between his soul and mine. He broke it off. Erased it. It was as if he didn’t exist, had never existed. As if I’d dreamed of my life with him.*

*What have you done? I shouted into the place where my dual nature had been entwined, where the other half of my soul had resided since my birth.*

Nothing answered.

The physical pain on my back vanished entirely, though I still felt warmth from without, and softness underneath me. The mating mark on my neck pulsed with a soft ecstasy, stronger than I'd ever felt it. As if before, I had shared the connection to Wren with my wyvern soul, and now only I could experience the glory of it.

As if he was dead.

Panic swamped me. Wren struggled beneath me, aware somehow of the change. Her hands moved to my cheeks, the soft touch all that kept me from despair.

He couldn't be dead. My mind wouldn't accept it. My wyvern had walled his soul off somehow. He had taken all the pain into himself and cut the binding between us, rather than allow our mate to suffer. But he *had* to be alive. My mouth filled with bile as I lied to myself.

I choked on grief, and regret, my mind flipping through all the bad decisions I had made.

I should have returned her bite on our wedding night and claimed her. I should never have spent one day, one hour away from her. I should have listened to my better half and spurned Rabbas, the betrayer who had stolen my mate from me.

I wasn't bleeding inside, but it felt as if I should be. As if my soul itself were shredded. I would never be whole again.

If I thought of it, I would scream. Wren moved even more restlessly beneath me, and I forced my mind to turn from the horrors of what had just happened—what was *still* happening as my wings began to burn away—and take the kiss our mate was offering.

I focused my thoughts on the feeling of her mouth, her small tongue that moved hesitantly against mine, the perfect warmth and softness of her petal-smooth skin, and the wave of caramel and lavender scent that filled the enclosed space I'd made for her inside my wings.

My wings that were almost gone.

I tasted salt, and knew that I was crying.  
We both were.

## KIR



The horse beneath me rocked quickly, reminding me of the sea's surface when a faraway storm would quicken the waves, leaving whitecaps on the leading edges. All I could see was the tundra that lay ahead of us, and the back of Wulfram's warhorse that thundered without needing to rest.

I was almost never cold, but right now, the only warmth I felt was in my neck—at the small bite where my queen had claimed me—and at my waist, where I'd tied my selkie pelt. I placed my hands on the soft sealskin and sent thoughts to Wren. *We're coming. I'm on my way to you. I will find you and save you and never, ever let you go again.*

Guilt swamped me. I hadn't protected her. I had been distracted by the warlord's feral turn, and in my effort to protect her from him, I'd left her to be taken by an even more dangerous foe.

"Calm yourself, little brother. She is well. She must be well." Levi's voice as he rode up behind me was soothing, which was a shock on its own. Only a few days before, I'd been his vassal, as all of the denizens of the seas were to the Emperors of the Deep Waters. But when we'd bound ourselves to our beautiful mate, and she'd returned the claims, that had changed. He'd adopted me into his family. It was an honor and a gift I'd never once dreamed I'd be given.

"I know that," I yelled over the wind. "But I let her walk into danger. A dragon. A fucking *dragon*, Levi!"

We rode in silence, following the warlord. His shame was an invisible whip at his flanks, and he deserved to wear its marks more than we did.

“I want to kill him,” I admitted to Levi, and myself.

“We need him to show us the way to the dragon’s lair.” Levi sighed heavily. “And he did not mean to lose control. Her scent, her heat, would break any Alpha. Wulfram was taken by surprise when we opened the door to the nest, and the rush of her perfume assailed him. I believe he has honor. He will make amends.”

I knew that was true, but I still snarled at the warlord’s back. “I hope Wren wreaks her bloody vengeance on him.”

I could feel Levi’s satisfaction at the thought in the new bond that hummed between us. That bond—and the one that hummed between me and my moonsong—was all that was keeping me from weeping aloud.

“I wonder if the cockroach has found her,” Levi mused, tearing me away from thoughts of Wren.

“The arserag? I’m sure he has by now. It’s been... six days? Seven? He’s like a bad goldani; there’s no getting rid of him.”

“Agreed.”

My gut churned at the thought of Talon being the one to find Wren first. Wulfram might have honor, but Talon had long ago proved he had none. “How long have we been riding?”

“Seven days now, young brother. See those mountains? On the other side of them is the sea. I can *feel* it. I grow stronger by the minute.”

“Strong enough to fight a dragon?”

“It won’t be one dragon we face, Kir,” he said, his tone raw. “They are born in clutches and live together for their entire lives, increasing in strength and intelligence. However many were born in his clutch will be the number of dragons we need to defeat.”

“How large is a normal clutch?”

Silence. Then, “I do not know now. My grandfather changed things, in his dealings with them. They committed atrocities against my kind, but he... His response was not commensurate. Once, the dragons flew in pods of a dozen or more. After he took his revenge on their line, the numbers fell.”

That didn’t sound so bad to me. But Levi’s expression was filled with shame.

“It will be my fault, my kind’s fault, if Wren suffers any damage. If they discover my mark on her...”

“She’s almost immortal now,” I pointed out. “You gave her your longevity.”

He sighed. “Longevity, yes. But no one can survive dragon fire except another dragon. And they will use it if they scent me on her. If they recognize my mark.”

For some reason, a memory of Talon a few days before, staring at Wren with longing and despair, and what might have been love, flashed through my mind. “Could a wyvern survive those flames?”

Levi’s answer came after a long pause. “I am not certain. Their kind is descended from the great dragons.”

“We can hope.”

We rode on. Eventually, he added, “Yes. Let us hope the cockroach finds her before they sense my presence in her blood.”



THAT NIGHT, we camped at the base of a relatively short mountain range, made up of jagged, near-horizontal peaks. Wulfram had led us each night to decent places to rest the horses, and camping spots that were out of the wind, more or less. Twice, he had lit a fire on a cairn, and we’d found new mounts waiting at the next stop, with a Starlakian rider giving

us fresh provisions as well, obviously stunned to see their Warlord of All riding this way.

The trip had been grueling; we hadn't stayed in one spot for more than a handful of hours, and the jerky and flatbread we'd brought from Wargate Hall had been eaten on the run. If it weren't for the renewed energy my recent mating had given me, and the sad fact that Wren had left without taking my pelt, I would most likely have collapsed days ago. Spending this amount of time away from the sea was not healthy for any selkie, but my pelt, as well as my bonds to Wren and Leviathan, gave me the energy to persevere.

The place Wulfram had led us to tonight was close to an oasis, if one could be found in this harsh landscape. There was a cave cut into the base of the mountain, with a thick wooden door as tall as Wulfram, and two narrow windows only big enough for a crossbolt. The horses had a shelter in a stand of brushy evergreens, and a trickle of meltwater flowed from a small stream a few dozen feet away.

Levi went to care for the horses while I gathered water and firewood, and Wulfram prepared the cave, lighting a small oil lantern with his flint. "We'll start the climb tomorrow after we eat and rest," he told me as he laid the firewood in the hearth. "It will take us days, and the horses will not fit through the tunnels my ancestors cut into the rock." I didn't ask about the tunnels, waiting instead for Levi to return.

The fire began blazing in the small hearth, and a thin trickle of smoke quickly rose up and out a hidden crevice. I unpacked the food in the small area that served as a kitchen, intent on making something more substantial for this meal.

"Eat, rest, and share the details about this dragon of yours," I said, putting dried meat to soak in an iron pot with a few root vegetables.

Wulfram went still, his anger palpable in the small room. "He is... He *was* my friend. I thought so, in any case. After my wife Anna died sixteen years ago, Zebulun flew to Wargate Hall for his annual visit, and he—"

I interrupted. "Annual visit?"

Wulfram settled onto a low stool by the fire, staring into it. “It was Zeb my great-grandfather contracted to protect our keep long ago. He returned every year on the first day of autumn—*shit*, how could I have forgotten? Of course he thought Wren was an offering. The fucking first day of autumn!” He stood and began pacing in the room, his head bent so as not to scrape the roof of the cave. “I’m an *idiot*.”

“Yes,” Levi agreed from the doorway, his dark mahogany skin reflecting the fire, his oceanic eyes turbulent. “But there is something of the Goddess in the timing of all this. Far too many coincidences. Too many pieces of old prophecies moving into place.”

“What do you mean?” Wulfram demanded. “What prophecies?”

“Tell us your tale first, warrior, and then I will give you mine.”

Wulfram sucked in a breath, but settled back onto his stool. “Zeb came once a year to my grandfather, then my father, then me. From what he told me, he never held any love for the ones before me. He disliked my grandfather, and never showed his human form to my father at all.”

“He would not,” Leviathan mused aloud. “My kind and his are much weaker in this form. We have to separate ourselves from almost all of our power to remain small.” He sneered, and I fought back a chuckle. Leviathan may consider himself small, but he was still almost seven feet tall, almost as tall as Wulfram. “What changed that he would show such trust?”

One corner of Wulfram’s mouth turned up. “I offered him the use of my library. My grandfather was obsessed with finding the remaining books on Omegas, though most were destroyed long before he was born. They were like treasure to Zebulun, and he would spend hour after hour poring over the tomes, looking for clues.”

“Clues?”

Wulfram’s expression grew bleak. “As to whether there might be Omegas still living. He once said he’d been looking

for Omegas his entire life. Which must mean he was born after the plagues? Or not long before.”

“He is a very young dragon then,” Leviathan murmured. “Good. He and his clutch will be far easier to kill. And they live by the sea. I have a chance.”

I sighed. “Levi, Zebulun is Wulfram’s friend.”

Wulfram hunched over by the fire. “He will not be any longer if he has hurt a single hair on the *Ankelsang*’s head. It is my hope that when we reach his home, he will take my life instead of keeping her. I am the one who owes the *liefhald*, the life debt. It is my life that is forfeit.” His breathing stuttered. “Mine, and my daughter’s—curse the ones who took her.”

We all went quiet, pondering the fate of a young Omega, taken by strange beasts to an unknown country, or across a sea.

I stirred the stew, then tasted it. The room was filled with the rich aroma as I ladled the simple meal into three shallow bowls and served the others. After we had eaten a few bites, I asked Wulfram, “You believe your dragon wouldn’t harm Wren? Wouldn’t attempt to force her to accept him and his clutch as mates?”

Wulfram shook his head slowly. “I’m not certain. Zebulun would not. He spoke of his brothers, though not often. I believe he only has two, but one is sickly, and the other Zebulun refused to discuss.”

“Only three? Better and better.” Leviathan rubbed a hand over his face in thought. “I have no doubt I can vanquish three young dragons.”

“There are almost none left in the world, Levi,” I said softly. “We might be able to talk to them. Reason with them.”

He sighed deeply. “Not if they scent me in her blood. Dragons do not see the need for honor when they deal with my kind; I know this from my own experience.” I nodded, remembering the story he’d shared.

Wulfram hummed thoughtfully. “You said you came on land to treat with dragons long ago, and they ambushed you.

Almost killed you?”

“Yes,” Levi replied after a long moment. “Before he went to sand, my uncle reached out to the dragons to see if we could somehow cease the war between our kinds. It was a moment of weakness. He sent me to represent the Court of the Deep Waters. As the youngest, and one of only ten left in the world at that time, I was seen as less threatening than my kin. We were to meet at the shore, but when I changed forms, the dragons who met me on land insisted we travel inland on the dry, to their fortress.”

He shuddered. “It was so far from the deep waters, and I was not nearly as strong back then. Away from my source of power, I grew weak, and they waited for the right moment to attack. There were four clutches, from four to twelve dragons in each, and they fell upon me with their claws and teeth.”

“Not their flames?” Wulfram asked curiously.

“They breathed their fire around me, yes, but to corral me. To keep me within reach of their claws. I believe if they had directed their dragon fire at me, especially so many at once, I would have perished.”

“Why would they not use their fire on you?”

“I do not know.”

“The prophecy?” I suggested. “My people kept the lore.”

Levi shrugged. “It is possible. When my great-great-grandfather betrayed the Goddess and killed Her first Alpha human mate, She cursed my line to live alone in the waters, never finding our mates, never bearing young. We had no hope, and almost all of my line died that way: alone, hungry, with no chance at redemption. But the selkies sing that before She walked into the skies with Her other consorts, the Goddess promised that someday, Her first consort’s line would be remade in fire.”

“Remade in fire,” I mused aloud, serving the remains of the stew to the others. “Perhaps the dragons believed it would strengthen you somehow?”

Wulfram stroked his silvered beard. “What happened to cause the enmity between your kinds? The dragons showed treachery, but what led them to it? Zebulun acted with honor in all our dealings. With compassion.” He stared into the fire. “After Anna died, I raged across Starlak. My two children had been in the room where she was attacked by marauders from a neighboring tribe. I returned in time to save our children, thank the Goddess. But someone had opened the gates of the Hall to them, and I knew if I left to seek out the ones who had escaped, they might return for my children.”

“They sought to end your family’s line by killing innocent children. I hope you were successful in slaughtering every one of them.” Leviathan reached out with one hand, pressing it to Wulfram’s shoulder. I swallowed hard, shocked at the gesture.

Wulfram blinked, equally amazed. “Yes, I took great pleasure in painting the landscape with their blood. The crows feasted for weeks. But I could not have pursued them if Zebulun hadn’t agreed to stay at the keep and guard my children. He thwarted four more attempts on their lives that month.” His eyes went cold, though a smile crept across his face as he remembered. “Zebulun didn’t kill those men. He kept them alive for me to take care of when I returned. It was extremely thoughtful.”

“Indeed,” Leviathan replied. “But it still remains to be seen if the dragons will hold to that honor when they realize who Wren is to me. That she is my Empress.”

Wulfram shook his head. “I still don’t understand why the dragons would betray you. What was the cause of the dispute between you?”

We sat quietly, the fire’s crackle and the wind’s faint howl outside all that broke the stillness, until Leviathan spoke again. “I never knew for certain. I heard them talking about it, when they thought I was dead, as they danced around my broken, human-shaped body. They believed that the krakens were responsible for the deaths of their dragon queens.”

I stared at Leviathan, then at Wulfram. The silence grew so heavy, it was oppressive. When Levi spoke again, the words

dropped like boulders into a deep sea of dread.

“And they were right.”

# LEVIATHAN



I had lived alone with the shame of this story for so long, that telling it felt like debriding my soul. It hurt to even speak the words aloud, but I knew there was no other way to finally rid myself of the injury it had done to me.

“When I was young, my father told the story of our line’s curse far differently than I related it to you and my *cora mar*, young brother. He shared the truth of it, that our ancestor had betrayed his own mate, the Goddess, out of jealousy.

“But even my father and his brothers held fast to another falsehood. That the dragons were the ones who had committed an even graver offense, that of murdering Omegas. Theirs, and others.” Shame filled me as I remembered the day I’d discovered the perfidy of my kind.

The day I’d learned that the Goddess had been right to disown us.

I closed my eyes, recalling the moment over a thousand years before, when I knew my family had betrayed me. And for the first time in my long life, I shared the true story of my greatest shame with my friends, reliving my bleakest moment from so long ago.

*For the first time in centuries, I woke to a sensation far greater than the hunger I had always known, the curse of my line. But the pain had subsided.*

*Where was I? Memories surfaced as I rose from my deep, healing slumber, and I fought to hold onto them. I’d been on the dry, almost dead. Attacked. I’d found a stream, and lived in*

*salt mud and shallow water for months, moving in tiny increments for the longest time. I'd still been close to the keep of the dragons who had attacked me, when a minstrel had seen me, and he and his band had pulled me free of the muck. Somehow, I'd managed to pretend I was a human long enough to reach the sea.*

*Yes. The sea. I was home.*

*I felt the coolness of deep water around me, soothing my tentacles. Then vibrations. Sounds.*

*Was someone else there? Moving even as much as an eyelid threatened to send me back into the hibernation of healing. So I kept my thoughts from seeking out others, kept my body and mind still, and was rewarded with the song of my family, not far from where I lay.*

*A quiet song, as if the messages were shameful. Or not meant to be heard.*

*"You allowed him to go to the dragons? Sent him as an emissary? Did you intend for him to perish, brother?" My uncle's voice was harsh, as always. He'd been injured by a dragon years before when I was a child.*

*I should have seen his scars as the portent they were.*

*My father's tone was somber. "He was the one who decided to go deep into the dry. He wanted to parley, and I thought perhaps it had been long enough that they would receive him. You know the prophecy. We need them to work with us to break our curse."*

*My uncle's bass notes resonated with disbelief. "They will never forgive our father's crimes."*

*"I know. But you know Leviathan, his calm nature."*

*"His weakness. He is too compassionate. It's not natural."*

*My father did not defend me. I didn't expect him to. As was the custom of our kind, he'd forced me out of his empire less than two centuries after my emergence from the sea floor. I had not spent more than a handful of years in his presence since then.*

*“He was the most likely of us all to bring some hope of ending our curse. I thought...”*

*Waves moved over me, and then my uncle finished for him. “You thought keeping him ignorant of the truth would save him? It did not save me.”*

*“That was so long ago, brother.”*

*“My scars still burn, fool. Our father lied to us all. He had his servants poison the dragon queens. He left their entire breed with no one to bear their young but human Omegas. You think they would forgive us because some time has passed? We may have subdued the rumors within our own seas, but our stories only travel through the waves. You know the dragons keep their lore pure. They passed down the truth.”*

*I held still, fighting to understand. I remembered when the first dragon queens had died of illness. The stories of their wasting sicknesses had carried to the deepest trenches. My Empire in the South had sent mourning gifts, which had been refused, the servants who carried them slaughtered and fed in pieces to the waves. I had assumed grief and madness was the reason for the dragons’ actions.*

*You know the dragons keep their lore pure. What had my grandfather done?*

*I fought to open my eyes. I had to learn the truth.*

*I felt the gaze of the others on me as I recalled waking to demand the story. It had been the last time I’d spoken to my father, who had gone to silt in his shame when he saw the ruin of my body. A few centuries later, I’d heard my uncle followed him into the final sleep.*

*I ran a hand absently over the scars that lay buried beneath this form’s skin. When I was in my true form, they showed, dark red gouges marring my carapace. It had taken me a thousand years to recover as much as I had.*

*“There had been bad blood between our kinds since the Goddess took her second mate, the dragon Alpha. I knew of that, but not of what had come after. I thought the dragons my father sent me to treat with wanted to parley in good faith. I*

was a fool, and followed them far from the seat of my power.” I sighed. “I didn’t know until afterward that they were luring me into the dry to kill me. That I was the only one of my kind who didn’t know the truth of the chasm between us.

“I traveled to the last living sea witches to learn what my family had done. After the Goddess left the world, and the unending curse of hunger began for the surviving kraken, my grandfather tried to court the most powerful dragon queen. Tried to join her harem, and was rejected. He held a grudge. He had the sea witches create poisons that would taint the queens and their eggs. It took centuries to perfect, and when it was done, the dragons were caught unaware.”

“They poisoned the dragons’ females?” Kir asked softly. None of the other denizens of the deep waters knew this tale. My kind had kept the truth carefully hidden, and the sea witches were all but wiped from the world.

I nodded. “Many of their queens died. The ones who survived bore fewer eggs in each clutch, and almost entirely males. In a handful of years, they had precious few females to mate with. So they turned to human Omegas, mated, and created hybrids.”

“The wyverns,” Kir whispered.

I nodded. “The wyverns, like Wren’s first mate, King Talon. They were impossibly weak, and most died in the shell. The male wyverns who survived were more prone to the Alpha madness. The dragons preferred to mate with female wyverns over human Omegas, but those wyverns were not dragons. Not only were they unable to shift, they were born with a true soul mate, a sky bond. Usually a dragon, but sometimes another wyvern. The males rebelled against the thought of sharing their sky bond with a clutch, as all dragons do, and even fought their greater cousins to keep their sky bonded away from their stronger kin.

“Eventually, the dragons drove their little, broken kin away from the North. The ones who survived the journey across the mainland settled on the island nations, and became royalty.”

Kir sighed. “Please don’t make me feel sorry for that asshole.”

“I won’t,” I reassured him. “He’ll always be a cockroach, no matter what happens.”

Wulfram stood, facing me down, his hands trembling with rage. “Your kind killed off their females? Is this what happened to the human Omegas, Emperor? Are your kind responsible for the Omega Plagues?”

“Indirectly, perhaps.”

“How can poisoning be indirect?” he demanded, stepping close. His fingers moved to the catches on his leather vambraces that concealed dozens of small blades. They wouldn’t hurt me, but I could not allow him to attack me without showing him the consequences of such disrespect.

“We are not enemies, Warlord,” I cautioned. “Do not make a mistake you will regret for the rest of your very short life.”

“If your kind was the cause of the Omega Plagues, and the Alpha madness, if you are the reason I had to order our Starlakian Alpha boys to be *chained* by their own fathers when they reach maturity—” His voice broke, and a tear slid down his stony face. “When my son Kavin turned eighteen and entered his first rut, I had to listen to his screams for a week as he raged. I didn’t know until the final day if he would turn feral like half of our boys do. And if he did, it would be my hand that drew the blade across his throat.”

He began pacing in the small room. “Do you know how many warriors have taken their own lives after they had to end their sons’?” He stopped. “Our women were once great warriors as well. But when the plagues took all the Omegas, the Alphas went mad. Raging, attacking the women, killing their own children...” His voice broke off. “Our men began to keep their women locked away. We closed ourselves in. Every fortress in Starlak once had bards and poets, libraries that we added to for generations, gifts for our children.

“We weren’t always forced to live as warriors. But when our Omegas began dying, we became the brutes the rest of the

world saw us as. Holding on to our existence as a people with our bleeding nails, fighting our own natures to keep from turning into wolves.” His eyes glinted with cold fire as he turned on me, a blade in his hand, and the vambrace glinting like barracuda teeth. “Was it *your kind* who forced us to kill half our sons, and imprison our daughters, to keep Starlak from crumbling?”

Kir clucked his tongue against his teeth, drawing our attention. He sat by the small table, his eyes on his work. “Sheathe your blade, Warlord. You know better. As a young selkie, I learned about the terrible crimes your Starlakians of old perpetrated against their Omegas.” Wulfram’s entire frame seemed to shrink as Kir went on, quietly putting away the dishes and scouring the cookpot as he flayed the Starlakian with his truths. “Even the children of my kind are taught of the Slaughter of the Seven Hundred. When, in the earliest days of the plagues, the Starlakians abducted every unmated Omega in their own lands—and many of those who lived across the borders—imprisoning them to keep as breeding stock.”

Wulfram returned his knife to his belt and slumped onto a stool, cradling his head in his hands. “They were not my line. Those were the Chieftains of the Eastern Reaches. And they weren’t imprisoning them. They were trying to keep them safe from the sickness. They were housed in a great castle, with everything they could need. Food, water, books, wood for—”

“Everything but mates, you mean. And Omegas *must* have mates when they go into heat. No, they imprisoned and tortured them, Wulfram. Merely listening as the women cried out for relief, when they sent letters pleading to be let go so they might live. And then, when marauders from Pict came to Eastern Starlak, they killed the warriors who were meant to be ‘keeping the Omegas safe.’ The Picts emptied the vaults, but left the women locked inside the impenetrable keep to die slowly.”

I wanted to remark on the similarities between Kir’s tale and the way the Starlakians kept their women weak and subjugated now, but I refrained. It was not my place to judge; my kind had done far worse.

“They didn’t know,” Wulfram insisted. “No one knew that they needed mates, that untended heats could kill them.” He stared into the dying fire. “The Eastern Chieftains hid their crimes. They ordered all the books, every scrap of song or children’s tale, anything that even mentioned Omegas to be burned. Not only in Starlak, but in all the lands.”

“But your line disobeyed,” I said gently. “You knew this story. You’ve read it.”

“Yes, my grandfather told me once that our line owed it to the Goddess to keep the truth alive. But I didn’t know that anyone else had shared the tale of what happened there.”

Kir rubbed the dishes dry with a small cloth. “The Story of the Seven Hundred was recorded in the songs of the selkies.

“They threw a net around their mates, the stone pool was too shallow,

the stagnant stench washed o’er the dry, Her human line went fallow.

Abandoned and bereft, the young Omegas wept in pain,

their dying cries came to the seas washed down by sorrow’s rain.”

He let out a deep breath. “Young selkie royalty had to memorize all eighty-four verses of the ballad, as a way of teaching us not to trust humans. If they would do this to their own females, what would they not do to us? And then, of course, our own queens began to perish. That was the beginning of the schism between the peoples of the waters and the inhabitants of the dry.

“Seven hundred girls and women—more than half the surviving Omegas after the initial plagues—died because your leaders decided that you knew better than the Goddess what Omegas needed to live. Our elders made sure we knew of your folly.”

I cleared my throat. “There is enough blame to go around, Warlord. And I believe my kind did let loose the possibility for the evils that came afterward. Once our witches had unearthed

the knowledge of how to taint the Goddess's lines, that knowledge fell into the grip of more sinister forces.”

“The past is littered with dishonorable acts, and unforgivable errors on all sides,” Kir said gently. “All we can do now is to let the past be past.”

The fire's crackle was the only sound in the silence that fell. Though somehow, it sounded like a coda to the tale.

Or an answer.

# WREN



*I* had to be dreaming, or having a nightmare.  
Or both.

Talon, my mate, the man I'd fallen in love with during my first stirrings of adolescence long ago, was kissing me as if I was the only thing that could keep him alive.

Baltor's fire still poured over us, a brilliance that I could see even with my eyes closed. I dared not open them, or even breathe, as the air inside the small fortress Talon had made for us with his wings was quickly becoming too hot to bear.

Then his kiss turned into a breath, as he exhaled into my mouth, giving me air.

It felt more intimate than anything I had ever done. I could taste his sorrow, his affection, his resolve to make amends. That small act, sending air into my lungs while he held me close, while he bore the attack that would have killed me, spoke louder than words ever would.

*My life is yours, it said. My very breath belongs to you. I live for you.* But I knew what was happening might be exactly the opposite.

Then suddenly, it ended. The heat and light faded in the same heartbeat, though Talon's wings stayed wrapped around us, and the dirt that my legs and feet were pressed into was still steaming. I heard shouts—Zebulun and Fyrian—and Baltor's roar in response. I ignored them.

Talon pulled away gently, only a few inches, and peered down into my face. “Wren. You’re...”

“I’m safe. You saved me.” I pressed one hand to his face, feeling the tears running down and into his short beard. My own eyes were just as damp.

“Pain?” he rasped. He was obviously suffering, but for the first time, I didn’t catch even a tremor of it through our mating bond.

I cradled both his cheeks in my hands, wondering. “I don’t feel anything. How?”

He didn’t answer, but his expression pulsed with an agony I had known for years. The feeling that something irreplaceable had been taken from you. That you would never be the same.

I took a deeper breath to demand he tell me what he’d done, what had changed—and wanted to vomit from the stench of cooking flesh. “Talon!” I moved my hands to his upper arms as tears rolled down his face. “You’re hurt. Can you... Can you open your wings?”

“I can try,” he rasped. He took a breath and then, with a sound like cloth tearing, wrenched his wings apart.

Or what was left of them.

I scrambled to my feet to support his weight as he teetered, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out when he twisted to one side, and I saw what had become of his wings. They were gone, nothing but charred bones and ragged black scraps of flesh.

His eyes rolled back in his head, and he listed backward as I fought to hold his arms.

Suddenly, Fyrian was there, lifting him up. “Oh, little cousin, what did he do to you?” he breathed. In the distance, I heard the sounds of a battle, and registered two dragons throwing themselves at one another.

They could kill each other for all I cared.

“Take him inside,” I demanded. “I can heal him.”

I wasn't certain if what I was saying was true. I knew Talon had leached strength and power from me over the years, though he wasn't doing so now. I'd been so weak only a month before that I thought I would die.

But Levi had bonded to me, sharing his immortality. And I had made both him and Kir invincible, at least for a time, when we'd mated. The three of us had shared our strength, and I had to believe I could call on that now. It had to work.

"No one can heal this, my lady," Fyrian said softly. "Death would be a kindness. The Goddess is calling him home even now."

Talon's chest heaved, then stopped for a long moment before he took another gasping breath.

"If you don't take this man into that castle *right now* and let me fucking heal him, you'll wish the Goddess was calling *you*, you useless, scaly piece of shit. Go, *now!*"

Within a minute, we were in the kitchen, with Talon lying on his stomach across the vast granite table. I took a moment to vomit into a convenient pail, then found the sharpest knife I could. A fish knife. It was appropriate, given my new nature.

"What do you mean to do, Omega?" Fyrian grabbed hold of my wrists, holding them in an iron grip. "Let him die in peace."

"He won't have to die at all. He might even heal!"

"It's not possible. You are human." Those slitted amber eyes narrowed as he sniffed. "Aren't you?"

"You idiot dragon! Yes, I'm human. Mostly. And I'm not planning to cut him. I'm cutting myself."

"Don't let her do it," Zebulun gasped from the doorway. "She's the only one who can save us. She cannot be allowed to —"

I cut him off with a vicious curse. "You idiotic fuck! This wyvern is my mate. I'm his sky bond. We're connected; if he dies, I will too."

At least, I thought so. I wasn't at all certain what Talon had done to keep me from feeling his pain, from healing him through our bond, but I knew it had to be something awful.

"There may be a way I can heal your brothers as well. I've brought feral Alphas back from the brink a hundred times. But not if you don't let me heal my mate first!"

"You're mated to one of our line?" Fyrian let go, shocked, but didn't interfere. Zebulun vanished from the doorway; I hoped he'd gone to smack his brother Baltor around some more. Or at least keep him occupied.

I didn't answer Fyrian, but sent up a quick prayer to the Goddess, hoping the new strength I'd found when I mated Levi would give my blood the power it needed to heal Talon, or at least keep him from dying.

"This doesn't mean I forgive you," I whispered, as I ran the razor-sharp edge of the fish knife along my forearm, then switched hands and repeated the motion on the other arm. My blood—a strange mixture of red and bright gold, like braided, liquid threads—ran down my arms, spilling from my elbows and falling onto Talon's back, onto the ruins of his wings. Most of his trousers had been burned away as well, and the flesh on his lower legs, where he had been unable to cover them, was so hideously burned that I dared not look at it.

My blood hissed from the heat of his flesh when it landed on him. I flexed my hands into fists and kept the flow going moving up and down on his back and legs, concentrating on his wings, praying the entire time.

I watched as small patches of new, pink skin began to appear in some places, underneath the blackened surfaces on his legs and back. But his wings... There wasn't enough of the leathery golden-brown skin left to heal, only small spurs of now-brittle bone.

"Turn him over, please," I rasped, ignoring the stars that spun in my vision as I straightened. I had given a lot of blood already. Fyrian did so, carefully maneuvering my husband so he was face up on the granite. "I need to get some blood inside him."

“You’ve healed, my lady,” he said softly, handing me the fish knife.

“Thank you.” My hand was slippery with blood as I made a fresh cut on my left arm, before cupping my hand and letting it fill with blood. I held the gathered liquid up to Talon’s lax mouth. He swallowed reflexively, then shuddered, his entire body trembling.

“He’ll need to drink it,” I said absently, swallowing as the stench of his burned flesh threatened to overwhelm me. “Try to catch any that falls?”

Fyrian pressed a cloth to the blood that had already pooled on the table and wrung it out over a cup, his expression somber. “He’s waking, poor soul.”

I gasped when I looked up and saw Talon’s amber eye fixed on my face. It was bloodshot and filled with unimaginable pain. Almost no sound came out when he tried to speak, but I read his lips. “No... pain?” I knew immediately what he was asking. “None. You took every bit of the blast, Talon. All of the pain.”

“*Good.*” He lapsed back into unconsciousness, and for a moment, stopped breathing again.

I closed my eyes and leaned as close as I could over his body, murmuring into his ear. “Talon, you great lump of an idiot. I’m not sure what you’ve done to keep me from feeling you, but I am grateful for it. Now let me heal you.” I pressed my bleeding arm to his lips and flexed my fist to make the blood flow directly into his mouth, then massaged his throat to force him to swallow.

Time stretched as I kept it up, working my blood into him. I’d never given any one soul this much blood, but he kept taking more, healing slowly.

*Fucking dragon fire.*

“What can I do to assist you, my lady?” Fyrian asked, holding the puppy in his arms. Odd whimpered, staring down at Talon.

“Nothing, thank you,” I managed to say. He’d already brought a high-backed, cushioned stool for me to rest on while I worked, and a pillow for my arm on the table. “Feed the pup?”

“Of course. Do you need sustenance as well?”

“Yes,” I rasped. “Wine fortified with strengthening herbs, if you have them. For the next few days, I’ll need red meat or fish, and dark, leafy greens.”

He nodded, and asked which herbs I needed. I was pleasantly surprised when he disappeared with the puppy and returned a few moments later with the exact herbs I’d requested. “I left your pet in the garden. It should be safe.”

“It’s not mine,” I said automatically. “It’s his.”

“My little cousin has a dog,” Fyrian mused aloud. “He must be a good wyvern.”

I didn’t answer, not sure what to say. Instead, I stared down at Talon. His face had some color in it now, and his shallow breathing was regular. Maybe he *was* a good wyvern.

Maybe he had changed over the years. I found myself unable to hold onto the anger I’d kept close for so long, in the face of his current state. His sacrifice.

Fyrian carried a goblet of wine to my side, staring down at Talon, then at me, with wonder. “My mother was a healer, like you. Although she did not use her blood to heal. I’ve never seen anything like this. Who are you? *What* are you?”

“It’s not my blood that’s healing him.” I pressed a cloth over the sluggishly bleeding cut and accepted the wine.

“Then how...?”

The goblet was heavy in my hand, causing me to splash wine down my front. Unthinkingly, I unfastened the top button of my shirt to wipe myself clean with the linen Fyrian handed me.

“A woman needs a few mysteries,” I replied, but when I lifted my gaze, his was fixed on my exposed neck.

At the nautilus-shaped mating mark I realized must be visible.

Fyrian loosed a low, deadly growl. I stood suddenly, wondering if I could make a run for it. Knowing I had to try.

But I'd moved too fast, and lost too much blood. Stars spun in my vision, darkness enveloping me as I fell. I was only conscious long enough to realize I never hit the floor.

# TALON



I woke to a dream. It had to be that, since the sound filling my ears was that of my beautiful, lost mate. The one I had thrown away, long ago, who would never sing to me after what I had done.

But I'd never imagined my dream lover would sing a bawdy song about a sailor's wife while she wiped down my limbs with what felt like soft, damp wool.

"...a hospitable wife, and she gave her mate's crew a soft bed, and when they had washed off the salt of their journey, she gen'rously gave them all heeeeeaaad! Yes, she cooked them a nice mutton head."

*Mutton head? Those aren't the lyrics.* I knew this song from my early days commanding a crew on my first ship, back when my father was still alive. I wanted to interrupt and sing the original, far more risqué verses, and see if Wren still blushed when she was shy, but I couldn't get my lips to open. Or my eyes.

"Juicy and thick and creamy and slick, she took her time making the memory stick... Her head was the best head, they said..." As she held the note, a tiny puppy howl joined her.

*Odd.* I tried to say his name, but my mouth was bone dry.

She moved away, closing the door. Letting the pup out? I hoped she wasn't leaving.

I tried to speak again, but swallowing proved impossible. As did moving any part of my body. I was on my stomach, but held down somehow.

Panic replaced the amusement I'd felt as I realized I was bound.

Bound, and the space inside me, where my soul had always burned with wyvern fire, was cold and empty. At that moment, I remembered what had happened. How my wyvern soul had sacrificed himself for our little mate. My wings... Were they bound as well? I had no idea.

I couldn't feel them at all. They were gone.

A tear gathered at the corner of my eye, before rolling down my face. The damp wool was there again to catch it, and I felt soft hands on my brow.

She hadn't left.

"He's crying again," Wren murmured. "Check the bindings on his legs, please?"

A voice I didn't recognize came from near my feet. "He's not having a nightmare this time. He's waking."

A new panic filled me. At best, Wren was alone with a stranger, and I was incapacitated. At worst, the speaker was one of the dragons, and she was in danger.

But then the voice said, "I will leave you with your mate. Please tell my little cousin, when you can, that my heart sings and weeps at his arrival in our home. And the one who did this to him has been locked away in the earth, and can do no more harm."

A door opened and closed, then a gentle hand rested on my brow again, pushing my hair back. "Are you waking, husband?" Wren's voice was as gentle as her touch, and the fear and pain subsided for a moment at that one word. She'd only ever called me husband once, on our wedding night. Something cool pressed against my parched lips. "Can you take some water?"

Somehow, I managed to open my mouth and take a small sip of water, then another. *If only I could open my— There.* Something gentle and damp moved on my eyelid, and suddenly, I was able to blink.

I blinked furiously, hoping tears would wash the gritty particles that seemed to fill my sight. I needed to be able to see her, make certain she was all right. A blurry arm lifted the cup to my lips again, and I drank, focusing at last on her face.

She looked as beautiful as ever, as young as always, but something in Wren's expression had changed. The few times she'd looked at me since I'd flown to the mainland to find her, her gaze had been hard. Filled with scorn and anger, justifiably. But she'd also seemed entirely closed off.

Now, there was compassion and curiosity. She wasn't the same innocent, guileless girl I'd married, but she also wasn't the woman who'd hated me. I swallowed the tiny bubble of hope that tried to surface, and croaked the only question that mattered. "You're not hurt?"

She shook her head slowly, a few strands of her bright hair freed from the low bun at her nape catching the light as she moved. "You covered me entirely. You took all of the fire. Talon..." Her voice broke, but she jutted out her jaw and went on. "Your wings. They're... I tried to save them, but they were—" She pressed her fist to her mouth. "I had to make a choice. To save your legs, or your wings. And I wasn't certain that anything I did would save either." A soft sob escaped. "I did my best."

I turned my face away. "I know." In the same way that I'd felt the absence of my left eye, those long years ago, I could sense that my wings were gone entirely, fully destroyed. "It doesn't matter. I don't matter." I forced myself to face her again, hoping she could see the truth in my gaze, hear it in my voice. "Only you. My life, my wings, my soul... If all I can do for the remainder of my time in this world is protect you? Then I may begin to repay the debt I owe. But I will never finish, never be worthy to stand at your side, not until the Goddess Herself tells me I've earned the right to do so."

The corners of her lips turned up as she started to untie the long strips of cloth that held my arms to the long wooden slats on the sides of the bed. "The Goddess Herself, hm? You think She's going to—what? Send an avatar and have her pat you on

the back?” She moved down to my feet and nimbly untied the cloth bindings there.

“I have heard rumors of an avatar in Rimholt. A living child, who speaks with Her voice,” I mused, watching as she wound the cloth into tidy balls and began crushing some concoction of herbs in a small mortar.

“Hmm. Well, if She does forgive you, then any debts between us are squared.” She muttered something about it taking a miracle like that to keep her other mates from tormenting me. The room filled with a woody, herbal scent as she worked, and I drew in a breath, tasting the slightest hint of her lavender and caramel aroma.

*Other* mates. Husband. My mind spun every time she spoke of us so casually. I wanted to keep her talking, so I murmured, “Miracles do happen. Omegas have been springing up all over the land, like flowers growing from stones.” I started to go on, telling Wren that her talking to me, helping me, was all the miracle I needed, but her laughter spilled through the room like invisible sunlight.

She stood and moved across the space that had obviously been converted into a sickroom for however many days I’d been lying here. She mixed the herbs into a cup of water and gave it to me to drink, teasing me when I made a face at the bitter liquid. “Miracles. Flowers from stones. You were always so damned dramatic, Talon. Or was that your wyvern?”

“He was every bit as dramatic as me,” I admitted, fighting for control of my emotions.

Wren froze. “Was?” Suddenly, she was at my side again, her hands on my upper arms, her face staring into mine. Her eyes flashed with an odd fire. “What do you mean he *was*?”

I forced the words out, one by one. “He is gone. At least, I cannot feel him.”

She caught my chin in her hand when I would have dropped my gaze to hide my anguish, and tsked. “He’s there. If he’d died, you would’ve, too. And I might’ve gone with you both.”

I nodded toward the base of her throat, where the collar of her shirt had opened to expose a golden, nautilus-shaped mark. “You’re mated to a leviathan, little bird. You’ll live as long as he does.”

“Perhaps.” She traced the mark gently, a soft smile crossing her face.

“It’s beautiful,” I said truthfully. “He makes you happy?” It was hard to think of the kraken with anything but dread. He was the reason I’d lost my eye, and the way his tentacles had broken my ship into splinters that night long ago still gave me nightmares.

She fidgeted with the sheet beside me, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles. “He does. He also terrifies me a bit. He’s as close to immortal as any creature can be.” One eyebrow arched. “Which means, for all we know, since you wear my mark, you are as well. You should thank him.”

“I will.”

She nodded. “But yes, he makes me happy as well. As does Kir.”

“I’m glad you have them,” I told her, surprised when I realized I meant it.

Wren’s jaw dropped slightly. “I can’t believe you would say that. I never would’ve thought you could...” Her voice trailed off as we both remembered my jealous rage.

“I was taught so many things from an early age. Swordcraft, statesmanship, the rules and expectations for royalty from every land. I learned to sail a ship, to command an army. I read every book I could lay hands on, but I never read about Omegas. Their histories were expunged completely from the world, or so I thought. I wish I’d had access to the Starlakian libraries, like Wulfram.”

I stared into her stunned face. “I was taught that if I ever met my sky bond—though such meetings are rare, as my own kind was nearly as extinct as Omegas—she would be the only one for me. And I assumed she would only have me in her life.” Wren’s brow wrinkled when I went on. “I was jealous of

my little brother. You were so comfortable with him. Never afraid, never hesitant to speak your mind. Though I liked the way you stammered and went pink—from your cheeks to your toes—whenever you mustered up the courage to speak to me.”

“I wasn’t afraid of you,” she said, still smoothing the sheets. “I was lusting after you, and nervous that you could sense it.”

*Lusting after me.* Her calm admission had my cock stirring. “I thought you had a crush on Icarus until that evening, when you perfumed on the dance floor.”

“I never once thought of him the way I did you.” Her voice trembled. “I never looked at him like I looked at you. It broke me in a way that has never healed that you could believe such a lie.”

I wrapped one hand gently around her shaking fingers, stilling them. “I was taught many things, my queen. But I was never taught how to love. I was cruel and greedy. I don’t dream of being allowed to love you again, or that you might love me. Just... allow me to serve you and earn your forgiveness.”

We were quiet for a long while, and I felt sleep pulling me under. When my eye closed, she waited a moment. “Talon?”

I could hear her, but my lips felt immovable again, and I couldn’t answer.

“Talon, you beautiful idiot,” she whispered, and I wondered if she thought I was asleep. “I’ll forgive you someday. How could I not? You gave up your wings, and maybe part of your soul, to save me. But if I let myself love you again... it will destroy me more completely than dragon fire ever could.”

Then she stood and crossed the room, speaking a few quiet words to someone outside before she slipped away.

## WREN



Fyrian met me in the hall outside Talon's door. Until today, he'd been avoiding me almost the entire week that I'd been nursing Talon back to... well, as much health as an Alpha wyvern could have, when so much of him was burned. Burned, and the parts that would never heal cut away... I blanched at the memory, then tried to push the thought from my mind as I faced Fyrian.

I knew he'd seen Levi's mark. I just didn't know what he planned to do about it.

Zebulun had been the one to help me move Talon, providing food and drink for me as I bled and fought to keep my mate alive. As it turned out, Fyrian had been the one cooking the spectacularly fresh, deceptively complicated meals each day. The simple fare had been dressed with herbs and spices that had medicinal properties as well as complex flavors, and I'd eaten more than I had in years.

Though when I'd casually asked for a recipe, Zebulun had warned me not to repeat the request in front of his brother. Recipes were Fyrian's "particular treasure," according to Zebulun, though I wasn't certain what that meant at all. But he explained that every dragon had a hoard of some kind. Zebulun's was rare books, and Baltor's was the more traditional gemstones.

I hadn't seen Baltor again, thank the Goddess. According to Zebulun, Baltor had returned to the cave underground, or been forced back down. I wasn't sure and didn't care. I was just glad I didn't have to face him in the castle.

I didn't know how to ask about Baltor's attack. Was it akin to human Alpha madness? Were the others similarly afflicted, if less so? His brothers seemed perfectly sane, though Fyrian was physically weak.

The healer in me itched to know more. How had Fyrian gotten so thin? Was he ill? I wasn't even certain if one should ask a dragon about such things. Perhaps Zebulun had a book of dragon etiquette for me; he'd been bringing me slim books of poetry to read in Talon's sickroom all week.

"How is my little cousin today?" Fyrian inquired softly, his eyes resting on the top button of my shirt, then skimming to my wrists. I held them up.

"I didn't even give blood at all. The skin is healed, and he was awake. Though I'll keep putting it in his water and wine for another week. That should have him on his feet."

"His feet were almost as badly burned as his wings," Fyrian protested. "His legs were..." A shudder went through him.

"I know." I took the arm he offered, surprised at the gesture, and walked with him toward the dining hall. "I had to make a choice. When I saw the wings could not be healed, not even with a large amount of my blood, I changed my focus. I used a salve made of concentrated blood and healing herbs on his lower extremities. It was more effective than I'd hoped."

"He has much to heal for," Fyrian said, his tone hushed. "A wyvern would do anything for his sky bond. When did you form the mate bond with him?"

"Forty years ago," I murmured. "I met him when I was a child, on the island he ruled as king, Wyngel. We married when I was just eighteen. I hadn't seen him again until this year, when he flew across a sea to find me." I snorted. "I'd more or less hoped never to see him again. I'm sure he feels that way now himself."

Fyrian made a noncommittal grunt and led me down a hallway in the opposite direction to the kitchen. When he opened the door to a library, I was pleasantly surprised to find

Zebulun waiting inside, a book on his lap. I took a seat in the comfortable cushioned chair next to him and waited for him to speak.

He took a long moment, but when he did, his words shocked me. “I’m not sure what to do now. The prophecy that came from the Dragon Mother as she lay dying is clear. The female who would save us, the dragon mate who would keep my kind from extinction, was to be given freely to us by the Warlord of All Starlak’s own line. But even if Wulfram had intended you for us, we could not take you. You are the sky bond—the Goddess-sent soulmate—of our cousin, Talon. We would never interfere in that sacred bond.”

“What he means is, we can’t.” Fyrian prowled along the shelves, his gaze on me. “Your bond with him makes you a relative. A sister, of sorts.”

“A sister?”

Zebulun wrinkled his nose. “Not precisely, but you are family. Not a potential mate.”

I wanted to scream. This could all have been avoided. “I could have told you that before you abducted me, back at Wargate Hall.”

“I don’t know how it wasn’t clear,” Zebulun said, opening the book. “You’re mated to him, and he bears some of your scent, but you are... Your scent was strange. Flowers and sugary sweets—not a dragon mate sort of smell, to be fair. But beggars can’t be—” I hissed slightly, and he grimaced. “Apologies. But you had a foul smell as well.”

“A foul smell?”

“I assumed it was due to a lack of bathing. The Starlakian women are as fierce to the nose as their warriors are to their enemies.”

“You thought I had *body odor*?”

He leaned in, speaking earnestly. “You have it still. I am almost certain you have a digestive illness. I have researched \_\_\_”

“That’s not what it is, brother,” Fyrian drawled. “At least, her illness is not one she will recover from.”

I ignored him, as Zebulun had set the book aside and was now kneeling at my feet. “Dearest sister, I have no idea how I didn’t scent Talon on you. It may be that not even a sky bond can break through the unfortunate stench you bear—”

I buried my head in my hands. I knew why I didn’t carry his scent. He’d given me a wedding ring, but not a claiming bite. “I do not stink. I bathed this morning.” Zebulun muttered something about rotten oysters, and I stood. “I will remove myself from your presence if it so offends you.”

Fyrian tsked. “Not until you explain your marks.”

I turned. He was blocking the door, his gaze judgmental and severe. “What marks do you mean?”

The air hummed between us. Did he know what the golden nautilus meant? Did he suspect I was mated to his kind’s greatest enemy?

“The ones you bear that no sky bond should,” he said quietly. “Your wyvern mate lies weak, almost destroyed in his heroic saving of his *mate*.” He spat the last word out like a curse. “A mate who abandoned him—an already wounded wyvern male, with only one eye—and then took others into her bed? My brother says we owe you a debt, but I am not sure a debt can be owed to a woman with no honor.”

“You bastard,” I muttered, staring into his face as I rolled down my cuffed sleeves and began unbuttoning my shirt. “You want to see my marks, hm? You think you know my story?”

His brother made a sound of protest as I pulled my shirt off, revealing only the thin sleeveless chemise I’d taken to wearing underneath in the drafty castle. I held the balled-up shirt over the nautilus mark, but they both fell silent when I pushed my long red hair away from my shoulders and neck.

“Yes, I have mating marks. One from each of my two most recent mates. But I do not bear one from my wyvern mate. He never marked me—oh, wait.” I ran my fingers over the deep gashes that lay along my upper arms and shoulders. “I forgot

these. Yes, I marked him, and my life is bound to him. But this is all he ever gave me, until your brother tried to kill me.” I glared directly into Fyrian’s shocked face. “Still think I have no honor, not saving myself for him alone?”

“I would think dragons would know that Omegas cannot have one mate and live,” a raspy voice at the door announced.

“Talon!” He was holding himself up with one hand on the doorframe, the other gripping the sheet that covered him. Neither dragon rushed to his aid, and when I finally had Talon seated in my chair, the sheet wrapped around his narrow hips, I sneered at them.

They were no longer angry. Their faces were an odd mixture of anger, pity, and... guilt? For some reason, I didn’t want to move far from Talon’s side—possibly because Fyrian’s expression was still more angry than anything else—so I perched on the wooden arm next to him. It was all I could do not to shiver when I felt his hand press into my lower back. He knew I was sensitive there... if he remembered.

“I remember,” he said quietly, almost as if he could read my mind. But then he went on. “I remember you marking me. But I had no memories of the damage I did to you, after my betrayer convinced me you had been unfaithful. It was as if I were completely feral.” He turned his face away. “I loved you more than anything in this world. But my love was a savage thing, filled with fear that I could not keep you all to myself. I would have locked you away for your entire life. I’m... I’m glad you escaped me. You didn’t deserve the limits I would have placed on you. The cage of my desire.” He gave a deep sigh. “My love would have ruined you, cut you more deeply than my claws did.”

“She was your hoard,” Fyrian breathed, almost to himself.

“Hoard?”

“The wyverns were bred to save our line. What we needed were females, to take the place of the dragon mates who died of the plagues,” Fyrian answered. “But the hatchlings were almost always males.”

Zebulun continued. “Males who went feral, especially when they found their sky bonds. The drive all dragons have, to find and guard their hoards, became an obsession with their other half. They didn’t seek out a physical hoard. They found it, in their mate.”

Fyrian had stopped pacing and was staring at Talon. “Our little cousins were born afflicted. Their jealousy at seeing their sky bonds in the company of other males drove them to terrible acts. Almost all of the wyverns had to be...”

Talon finished for him. “Killed, to keep them from slaughtering every male who looked at his sky bond for too long. I never knew it was a hoarding instinct, but it sounds right.”

“You don’t feel that way now?” I managed to keep my voice level, wondering why that thought ached.

“I did, at least in some measure, until the dragon fire...” His eyes flickered to the two others in the room. “My wyvern did something to protect us. He and I are no longer connected.”

Zebulun wiped his face with one hand and picked up the book he’d dropped. “If you will allow me to read, I think you will both understand... everything.” He opened it to the page he’d marked, removed the thin strip of leather, and began to read. “The Last Words of the Great Dragon Mother, faithfully transcribed by her son Malthus in the fifteenth century after the Flight of the Goddess. As she lay dying from the plague that had been inflicted on our kind by the sea witches at the command of the cursed Emperors of the Deep Waters...”

Zebulun read for an hour, and at the end of the tale, all of us were moved to silence. Or tears.

## WREN



Later that afternoon, Zebulun insisted on a formal meeting in the great hall. Talon's torso was still bound, and the new skin on his feet and legs too sensitive for anything but the softest cloth. But with Fyrian's help, he'd fashioned a sort of draping robe with a soft white sheet, and I'd sewn some cloth slippers for his feet. With his thick, dark hair, he looked like a minstrel playing the part of an unfamiliar deity.

He was almost unbearably handsome, even if his tanned skin was pale, and his eye still creased with pain.

"You look ravishing, my... Wren," Talon said when he saw me. I glanced down at the dress I'd found in the armoire in my room. Zebulun had given me free reign of their mother's old clothing. Though much of it had been ravaged by moths, one cedar chest had protected its contents, and the dress I wore now was old-fashioned, but clean and finely made. On the bodice, golden threads had been embroidered in the shapes of flying dragons, and small gemstones served as buttons.

"Thank you, Talon," I replied evenly. "You look well this evening." I'd stitched him a new eye patch using black silk, which I thought made him look like a beautiful pirate, not that I'd told him that. I refused to glance at his back, to the wrapped cloth there. I had cried for too many hours this week already.

"Do you know what this meeting is about?" Talon murmured, as Odd joined us, dragging a long woolen stocking behind him like a trophy from a hunt, and growling as if we might take it from him. Talon stopped and tugged at the sock

for a moment, though the movement had to pain him. Odd danced in circles before Talon straightened and offered me his arm, gently folding his fingers around mine.

“I was hoping for dinner,” I said, trying not to betray how the touch of his hand on my forearm affected me. “But it’s too early.”

He hummed in response, gripping my arm more tightly as we rounded the corner. The large hardwood doors to the great hall were open, and the two dragons sat on thrones at the far end of the space, a narrow table in front of them, with a stack of rolled-up parchments and a large chest on its surface. Their expressions were almost grim, and when Zebulun spoke, I understood why.

“Talon, your welcome to Drakonspear was a wretched one, and my brothers and I must do more than apologize for our behavior. Dragon law states that an unprecipitated, unmerited attack on one of our own kin requires reparation.” He opened the chest, revealing an enormous assortment of polished gemstones, some the size of my fist or larger.

I blinked quickly. “Those are for Talon?” I was a rich woman, but this was a fortune that could buy whole countries.

Zebulun shook his head, holding out the parchment scrolls. “These are the deeds to the coastline of most of Northwestern Starlak, and some of the interior. They are the traditional lands of our particular lineage. Our brother Baltor took your wings from you, Talon. We can never give you back what was lost. But we can give you what we have.”

My mind spun as he unrolled the maps and sketched out an enormous swath of the continent. They were giving Talon... a country? Or half of one, at least.

Talon merely nodded and thanked them, as if this were expected. “The jewels are for Wren?”

“I’m not kin,” I argued. “Give them to Talon.”

Fyrian shook his head. “But you are. As sky bond to our small cousin, you are part of the dragon line, a relative. You

will be treated as one of our own. You and any of your kin are now connected to ours.”

I swallowed hard, my thoughts buzzing. This could be what saved us all. I ran my fingers through the gemstones, feeling their cool, hard surfaces on my skin. “Does Baltor know you’re giving me these? I don’t want him coming for me again. If this is his hoard—”

“It is a large part of it, but he is the one who gives them to you.”

“That must have been... hard for him.”

Zebulun snorted. “Our kind are tied either to earth or air. My brothers have an affinity for earth, Baltor especially. No sooner had he given these to us to share with you, than he begged me to release him from his cave to gather more.”

“You didn’t,” Fyrian groaned.

Zebulun shrugged. “I believe the danger has passed. He promised not to return while Wren and Talon are in residence. He left to travel through the earth to the nearby mountains to mine more gems to replace them.”

“Through the earth?”

“Yes, there are dozens of underground passageways throughout our lands. He’s heading toward Starlak.”

“South?”

Fyrian stiffened, his alarmed gaze swinging toward his brother, who went on. “I asked him to look for your other mates and let us know if he senses them.”

“He’ll attack,” Talon murmured.

“No, he promised not to confront them, merely to report back to me, and I’ll fly—”

“He will definitely attack.” Fyrian raced for the door.

Zebulun gawked. “Brother?”

“Trust me, Zeb. Baltor will try to kill her mate! Honor will drive him to attempt it, at least,” Fyrian shouted over his

shoulder, tearing his clothes off even before he was fully outside, his blue scaled skin sparkling as he began to shift. “Stay with our kin. Her mates should still be on the other side of the mountains, and I can get to them first if I fly. I must reach them before they enter the tunnels. Before Baltor scents them.” His voice was filled with desperation.

My heart pounded as I realized what he was saying. If Baltor caught Levi’s scent, he would know who and what he was. And if Levi hadn’t kept the strength he’d regained during our mating, it would be no hard task for an enraged dragon to defeat him.

Even kill him.

We all ran after Fyrian, but he had leaped into the air, his wings beating hard enough to blow swirls of dirt and dust into our faces.

“Why would he attack your mates?” Zebulun asked in the silence that remained. I pressed one hand to my neck and let Talon fold the other one in his, as I pondered the wisdom of revealing who exactly I was mated to.

“So, no matter what I do, or say, you can’t harm me? It would be the worst sort of dishonor. Is that correct, Zebulun?”

“Right,” he said slowly, his eyes flickering red as he stared down at me.

“And anyone I’m mated to is also your kin. So you can’t hurt them either?”

He nodded once, his gaze suspicious. As it should be.

“That’s good.” I fought my dread as Odd raced out the door, barking toward the mountains as if he, too, sensed the danger. “Let’s hope Fyrian catches up with Baltor quickly. While he is gone, I will tell you about my mates.” And hope that a dragon’s honor was stronger than their lifelong enmity for the Emperors of the Deep Waters.

# WULFRAM



The tunnels we followed deep beneath the Trellan mountains were narrow to begin with, the carved floors slick with condensation and meltwater. As we walked, single file, with only a torch for light, they grew narrower and drier, and I fought to control the feeling that the rock above our heads would fall at any moment.

Of course, it might. I had been in these tunnels only once before, when I ascended to the position of Warlord of All Starlak and performed the traditional journey to all the larger holdings in the country, using them to cut through to the Northern Straits. I had no idea how extensive these tunnels were, but I'd heard of an entire village who had taken refuge in a similar system closer to the Mirrenese border.

“How far do these go?” Kir wondered aloud, his voice soft behind me. Leviathan had taken up the rear position, though I was worried it was to hide his increasing exhaustion. “And who carved them?”

Talking helped ease our nerves, and for the past few hours, Kir and I had been sharing everything from stories of our childhoods to our first experiences with women. Or selkie females, in his case. I wasn't sure I believed all his stories—I had never been able to give a woman twenty-eight orgasms in one night, and to do so nightly, for an entire cycle of the moon seemed like a nice way to die of exhaustion—but my disbelief had made him laugh.

We needed laughter on this journey.

“This one was the work of many generations of Starlakian prisoners of war. It took a hundred years to complete. It leads through what would otherwise be a short but impassable ridge of mountain peaks, straight to the coast a few miles from the Northern Straits.” I stopped for a moment, and held my torch up to the wall, pointing to a line of writing on the stone surface. “See there? That’s a bit of Starlakian poetry. The walls are marked like that where the tunnelers died.” I read aloud, “In the mountain’s heart—dreams of light—cut deeper than the pick—and memories bleed—far longer—in the dark.”

“Cheerful,” Kir muttered. “Don’t tell me they buried them down here.”

“Would you rather I told you they needed the meat?” Kir punched me in the back lightly, and I chuckled. “I’m jesting. We’ve passed a few of the burial sites on side tunnels. I can point it out the next time I see one.”

He laughed nervously. “I’ll pass. Maybe don’t read the dead people’s poetry while we’re stuck in the world’s creepiest tomb.”

I found myself smiling. “Are you afraid of dark spaces?”

He scoffed. “The ocean can be every bit as dark. But this place is so...”

“Yes. So close yet so far from the sea,” Leviathan said, his hand moving to Kir’s shoulder. “The mountains keep us from even a hint of the sea air. It feels as if I am being buried in this rock.” His breath was short and labored, and my smile fell away.

“Are you ill, Emperor?” I asked quietly. He sounded more than tired.

“Just weak,” he admitted. “But this will make for a thrilling tale.” He wheezed, then went on. “Someday, when this is all over, I will tell the story of my travels into the deepest heart of the dry. My children will hide in my tentacles as I recount how there was no water in these deeps. Only stone and sand.”

“Children?” Kir asked, keeping his tone light as we began walking again. “You believe the curse on your line will end?”

“How could it not, with my *cora mar*, our miracle, sent by the Goddess to save us a—” His last word cut off, replaced by the unmistakable sound of him falling to the stone floor of the tunnel.

“Sire!” Kir was there in a flash, lifting the Emperor to his feet.

I held the torch closer and swore aloud. The Emperor’s usually rich mahogany face was ashen, almost as gray as the stone walls around us, his dark hair falling lank around his shoulders. I didn’t ask if he was all right; he looked as close to dying as he had been days before, when he’d used almost all of his power to help me retake Wargate Hall.

“Let me carry you, Sire,” Kir said, his grip all that kept the other man on his feet.

“You’re my brother, Kir, not my vassal,” Leviathan rasped angrily. “And I’m too big for you to carry.” He wasn’t wrong. Kir was lean and strong, but smaller than Levi, and almost a foot shorter than me.

“Let me help you, brother,” Kir insisted.

While the two of them argued, I set down the torch and lifted the leather sack filled with our water and rations over my head. “Kir, take this,” I said calmly. “Leviathan? May I have the honor of carrying you through my mountains?” They both stared at me for a moment. “Or are we going to argue and waste time getting to your mate?”

That spurred them both to action. Kir took up the torch and bag and walked ahead, while I followed, Leviathan’s legs wrapped around my waist and his arms around my neck.

“Never tell of this, Warlord,” he warned.

“What, I’m not allowed to entertain my future grandchildren with tales of carrying one of the Emperors of the Deep Waters like a toddler riding piggyback?” I laughed over his curses. “Come now, you can leave this part out of the stories you tell your spawn, but you can’t expect me to do the

same.” I jogged a bit faster to catch up with Kir, making whinnying sounds.

The Emperor choked off what I suspected was a laugh. “If I had my tentacles in this form, I’d slap one over your mouth, Warlord.”

“Then you wouldn’t hear the story of how my wife Anna tricked her father into allowing her to marry me,” I teased.

“Let me hear it then,” he grouched. I grinned into the darkness, and began to spin all the remaining stories I could of my own family.

An hour passed, perhaps two, and Leviathan’s grip loosened around my neck. I grabbed his forearms tightly, holding him on. “We’re in the very center of the mountains now, Levi. Just keep breathing, and I’ll get you through.”

Ahead, Kir began to sing in an odd whistling voice that reminded me of the sound the ocean breeze made as it swept ashore, and the call of faraway gulls. I quickened my pace, though my limbs felt like lead, and my lungs ached as I tried to draw in enough air to keep the pace. The Emperor was dead weight now, my grip all that held him to me, and his breathing unnoticeable. But I wasn’t certain what might happen if I stopped long enough to check.

So I panted out encouragement instead, Kir’s bobbing torch giving me a goal. “Not long now. Stay with us, Levi. She’s... waiting... for you.” I felt him draw a breath, as if the reminder of his mate was giving him the strength to go on. I stumbled and ran, and murmured her name as if it were some sort of magic spell that could give us both energy.

When I could no longer run, I walked rapidly, and gasped out all the stories of the *Ankelsang* I could remember. The legends of how she had saved so many women and children, all over the continent. I wasn’t sure how many of them were true, but I’d learned not to doubt the magnificence of that woman. If there was ever a woman who deserved twenty-eight orgasms a night, it was that one.

I prayed I would be able to bring her mates to her alive, and get her free of her captors.

At last, we were past the inner narrows and moving into one of the wider halls. A cavern, almost. Kir came to take Leviathan, feeding him a handful of salt and a few swallows of water, which seemed to revive the Emperor somewhat.

“We’re almost done. Another hour or so at most, and we’ll come out onto the coastline.”

“I can smell the salt,” Kir agreed, lifting his face to the tunnel. I sniffed, smelling nothing, but Leviathan also turned his head toward the distant exit.

“As I can. Once I reach the sea, immerse myself, I will be whole again. Thank you, Warlord.” His voice was a wisp. “I owe you a debt.”

“Enough of debts. I would prefer your friendship.”

He nodded somberly. “You have it. But I will speak in your favor when we rescue my *cora mar*, and help soften her heart for you.”

“For me?” I blinked, uncomprehending.

“You want her as your mate as well, Alpha. Kir and I are not idiots like the cockroach. We know an Omega takes as many mates as the Goddess wills, all of them worthy. If she desires you, I will speak for you. You would make a fine brother.”

I fought to control my racing heart, and the upwelling of hope. “You know I’m most likely going to have to sacrifice myself to the dragons. I owe them a debt as well.”

“No dragon will lay a talon on you, my friend. They have taken too much from us already—” He stopped speaking, his head swiveling toward one side of the cavern. His lips drew back from his teeth, and he began speaking in a strange language, one I had never heard, like the clicking of shells on a beach and the low susurrations of waves on sand.

Then I smelled a familiar, smoky scent, one I thought I knew. I stood, one hand on my sword hilt, and faced the

yawning darkness. “Zebulun? It is I, your friend, Wulfram. Come out and speak to us.”

“Come out and return our mate to us,” Kir growled, stepping in front of Leviathan. “If you are a friend at all.” He had knives in his hands, not that they would do any good against dragonhide.

The voice that answered was not Zebulun’s, and my blood went cold as a man even taller and broader than me, with scaled skin that flickered silver in the dim torchlight, appeared to step out of the stone wall. Dark-slitted eyes with no color, like glass or diamonds, shone with feral intensity.

“How could I be friend to sssuch ass you, when you are the friend of my greatsst foe?”

## WREN



“*Y*ou’re mated to a Goddess-cursed Emperor of the Deep Waters?” Zebulun’s face flickered with a flurry of emotions—confusion, disbelief, rage, betrayal, and disgust—as he stared at the exposed golden nautilus on my neck, trying to take in what I’d just shared.

He spun on one heel and began to pace alongside the empty bed where Talon had spent the past week. I was glad I’d chosen to give him this news in Talon’s room. I wanted him to be reminded of what his brother had done... and the size of the room would keep him from shifting to his dragon form.

I patted Odd, who rolled over for belly rubs. “I already told you that, Zebulun. Yes, I am mated to a kraken.” I cut my eyes to Talon, who was standing beside me, one hand wrapped around my upper arm, his stance obviously ready to protect me. Zebulun was now radiating a strange, fiery heat that grew warmer the longer he was silent.

“She is also mated to me, *cousin*,” Talon said just loud enough to be heard over Zebulun’s harsh breathing. “And since she is your relative, her mates—all of them, including a selkie king and an Emperor—are your kin now as well, by your own admission.”

Zebulun froze, staring at us both. “Fyrian knew,” he breathed. “That’s why he flew after them. To keep Baltor from killing them.”

I shrugged. “Seems plausible.”

“Shit.” Zebulun cursed for the first time since I’d met him. “He won’t be able to stop him alone. Fyrian’s far weaker than I am. And Wulfram will have traveled far faster than any other man. He knows every cut-through and goat path in the country. They may already be inside the tunnels.”

“Why is Fyrian so weak?” I wondered aloud.

Zebulun shook his head. “There’s no time. I have to go into the tunnels,” he said over his shoulder. “You’re right. Your... mates... no matter who or what they are, are linked to you both. If Baltor kills them—and he *will* try when he comes across them—then we will lose far more than some land and jewels.” He hesitated, staring at my hands. I looked down, only now realizing they were trembling. “Though I am uncertain if Baltor can defeat an Emperor of the Deep Waters. They are fearsomely strong, from all accounts.”

“He’s not as strong away from his home,” I replied, my own mouth going dry at the thought of Levi suffering dragon fire while in a weakened state.

“Then we must hope he is strong enough to withstand Baltor’s fire until I reach them.” He sketched a bow and spoke to Talon. “Take care of our castle, little cousin. I will return with your kin.”

In less than a minute, we heard a great rush of wind from just outside the castle, and a roar as Zebulun changed and began flying to the south.

Odd barked into the silence that remained, and I set him down to chase a moth in the corner of the room. Talon’s gaze moved over me like a caress. He sat on the edge of the bed, too quiet. Was he thinking, or was something more wrong?

“Are you still in pain?” I asked, worried. “Lie down.” I walked close to him, reaching for the bowl and knife that sat on the small table beside him.

“No, I’m not in pain, Wren. You are.” His eyes moved over me, seeing deeper than I liked, and when I halted in front of him, he reached out to take my hands. They were still shaking.

“You’re exhausted. You’re worried about your mates. You’ve done nothing but take care of me for a week. Let me do that for you now?”

I stared at him, my jaw wide. “I... You want to take care of me?”

“That’s all I want to do from now on,” he said smoothly. “Fill all your needs. Please, allow me to serve you?” Before I knew what was happening, I was the one seated on the bed, and he was beside me, handing me a cup of water. “Drink. Then rest.” It felt like a great weight was crashing down on me, the mattress beneath me going soft, luring me in.

“Just for a moment,” I agreed, my head already drifting toward the pillow. I fell asleep almost instantly, my lungs drawing in the pleasant scent of myrrh and woodsmoke that permeated his linens, a warm hand moving gently over my hair.

I dreamed of dragons with wings made of gems and gold, and of krakens rising up from the sea floor, but not to battle. Instead, they danced together in a ring made of fire and water, singing in great voices until the moon sent sparkles down to wreath their heads like crowns.

When I woke, the sun was low, and Talon sat at my bedside wearing a loose-fitting linen shirt and trousers, his eyes gleaming in the candlelight. *Wait, candlelight?*

I sat up, taking in the changes in the room. A small table next to the bed was groaning with food: gleaming red grapes, a hunk of soft white bread, a creamy cheese with a pepper rind, a few salted fish, and a goblet of red wine.

Candles glowed along the window ledge, and the shelves that had held herbs and bandages were lined instead with glass vials of scented oils. A deep copper tub sat in one corner of the room, whorls of steam rising above its surface, with a stack of drying cloths beside it.

It was sumptuous, and elaborately seductive.

“You’ve been busy. What do you imagine will happen next?” My voice was raspy. Talon smiled as he handed me the

wine, and my scent rose up to join the floral ones from the bath. “Are you planning to seduce me?”

“No,” he said softly, holding a grape up to my mouth. “I told you, I plan to serve you, Wren.”

I knew better than to trust the man I’d married all those years ago. But the one kneeling beside the bed was not that man, though he still had the same amber-gold shining from his eye, the same broad shoulders and chest, the same hands that had once shown me what pleasure could be found in hours spent doing nothing but touching. Tasting.

Tempting.

I knew better. But I opened my mouth and allowed him to feed me, and he smiled like I’d given him a great treasure. I suppose I was doing just that, though he may not have known the intention that was crystallizing in my mind.

While the candles flickered, Talon fed me small pieces of bread and cheese, sips of wine, and fruit. “The bath?” I asked, my voice even rougher than before. He bowed his head, taking a step toward the door as if to leave. “You mean to tell me I’ll need to wash myself? Some servant you are.”

“Little bird?” His gaze dropped to the gown I wore as I slowly loosened the laces and buttons, and pulled it over my head. In the candlelight, the scars on my arms were less noticeable, and my nipples were deeper hued. “Sweet Goddess,” he whispered as I removed the thin chemise and the old-fashioned underclothing, and stood naked in front of him. I would have laughed at the incredulous expression on his face, if not for the heat in his gaze.

The water had flower petals floating on the surface, and was still steaming as I stepped into it, but my skin felt every bit as hot as the bath. My own scent grew thicker, lavender and caramel heavy in the air.

For a long moment, Talon stood still. Then, with a strange sound like a muffled whimper, he kneeled at the side of the tub, dipped one of the cloths into the water, and began using it to wet my arms and shoulders.

His movements were slow, deliberate, as if he was memorizing every inch of my skin. Every place he touched flamed to life, like my body remembered him, knew his touch.

I closed my eyes, and realized my breath was ragged and uneven. Talon's was too even as he gently moved the slim bar of soap over the scars he had given me, almost a meditation.

No. Not a meditation. Penance.

He worked silently, lifting my legs from the water and cleaning them thoroughly, his breathing growing raspy as he moved the cloth to my thighs. His hand slowed and moved away, leaving the place that ached the most untouched. My center clenched, and I felt a trickle of my own slick seep into the fragrant bathwater, making it even more floral.

Talon's breathing hitched, and I opened my eyes, taking in his flushed face. His shirt was damp, clinging to his chest, his nostrils flared as he drew my scent into his lungs. A wild need rose up that demanded I take control.

"Take your shirt off," I demanded and lifted my hips up, the red curls nearly breaking the water's surface, "and keep going."

"Wren?" His voice was wild, unstrung as he stared at my exposed mound.

I felt a wicked smile curve my lips. "What kind of servant would leave a job undone? Take off your shirt so it doesn't get wet, and bathe me. Thoroughly."

"Yes, my lo—"

"Mistress," I supplied. "Call me Mistress."

"Yes, Mistress," he echoed, humor lacing the word, as well as heat. "As you say, Mistress." He shucked off his shirt, throwing it carelessly to the floor. I took in his strong, corded arms, the hairless expanse of his muscled chest interrupted only by a few faint scars and his dark nipples, and the white cloth looped around his shoulders. He no longer bled, but the wounds where his wings had been were still tender.

For a moment, the heat subsided as I remembered what he had lost, and why.

“May I, Mistress?” he asked, his attention on my face. Unable to speak past the lump in my throat, I nodded. He dipped one arm into the water and used that hand to lift my hips. With the cloth in his other hand, moving slowly, he began stroking along my inner thighs.

I hadn’t known linen and hot water could burn, but every small circle of the damp cloth added fuel to the fire he’d stoked in my core. He lifted my mound above the surface and dipped the cloth between my legs, soaking up the clear slick that was flowing from me. He gathered his fingers around the cloth to wring it out, but I shook my head.

“Suck it clean.”

His shocked gaze met mine. I lifted one eyebrow, wondering how I wasn’t stammering the words. I wasn’t normally this bold, but some long-buried, mischievous devil inside me wanted to show Talon I wasn’t the blushing young girl he’d married.

Even if I knew I *was* blushing.

“Lick it,” I demanded. “Suck it clean, and keep going. Don’t waste a drop.”

“Yes, Mistress,” he whispered, putting the cloth to his mouth and obeying my instructions, his attention on my face.

Eagerly, he returned the cloth to me, using two fabric-covered fingers to draw small circles around my clit, then spreading my lips to soak up my juices before sucking them from the cloth.

I kept my eyes open, not wanting to miss a moment of this, but something inside me began to hiss as he lavished the cloth with his tongue. I was jealous of the fucking cloth.

“Suck *me* clean,” I ordered, lifting my hips and draping my legs over the edges of the bath.

“I don’t deserve—” he began.

“You may not. But I do.”

“Yes. You deserve any pleasure I can give you. You deserve everything, my little bird.” He moved to the end of the tub and centered himself between my legs, moving both arms into the water until he had the globes of my ass gripped tightly, then pulled me toward him. I grasped the lip of the tub as he dipped his tongue into my core, his beard rasping my thighs.

I wasn't sure what he said, but he groaned into my core as he focused on making me come. He lapped and nibbled, sucked and soothed, devouring me as if I were a meal he'd been denied for his entire life.

I rode the spirals of pleasure up and into a climax, my gasps and cries echoing in the room, and thought he would be done... but he kept his head firmly planted between my thighs, gentling me down from the first orgasm with his tongue inside me. Then he began all over again.

I was very, very clean when the second climax shook me, but the images that filled my mind were filthy. Flashes of Talon buried in me, while Kir fed me his cock, and Levi splashed his release on my chest... Kir and Talon both inside me as Levi slowly stretched my back entrance... All three of them surrounding me, touching me with only their tongues while Wulfram held me still, murmuring filthy suggestions in my ear... The four of them in a sumptuous nest, all naked for their queen, all desiring me, touching me, biting and licking and sucking...

“Talon!” I cried out again as another climax almost had me slipping beneath the water.

“I've got you, my Wren,” he soothed, lifting me from the tub entirely. His hands felt almost cold on my bare skin as he wrapped me in a large drying cloth and carried me to the bed. I was almost exhausted from coming so many times, but the ache inside me insisted I needed more.

I needed him inside me. “I want you,” I breathed, as he ran the drying cloth over my skin.

He smiled, but shook his head. “This night is for you, Mistress. All the pleasure is yours.”

Uncertainty filled me. “All of it? You don’t—you aren’t...”

He straightened, one eyebrow arching as he ran a hand down the front of his trousers, showing his erection and the thick swelling at the base. “Oh, I do, and I am. But I do not deserve to be inside you. I haven’t earned the honor.”

He wasn’t wrong. And I wasn’t altogether certain how Levi and Kir would feel about me letting Talon knot me.

“Let me see you, then,” I demanded petulantly. “Take off your trousers.”

He removed them so slowly, his gaze never leaving my face, laughing when I unconsciously licked my lips. His cock was long, curving upward in a graceful arc, supported at the base by a thick knot, the smooth head gleaming with a few drops of wetness already. I swallowed hard, remembering his taste.

“Come closer.” When he didn’t obey, I snapped my fingers. “Now.”

“Yes, Mistress,” he whispered, humor in his tone.

He was moving too slowly. “Let me taste you. Now.”

“Wren, no. You don’t need to—”

I cut him off, need riding me. “You owe me this. You owe me *everything* I ask of you. You swore to serve me. Well, I’m hungry, and what I want is to see if you taste as good as I rememb—” I wasn’t even done saying the words, when his cock was there in front of my face, the head close enough to lick. I reached around to grip his ass with one hand and circled the base of him, above the knot, with the other. “You tasted like spices before. Mysterious, and forbidden.”

I lapped at the head of his cock, and the rich, complicated flavors had me groaning and sucking at the head, sliding across the damp sheets to fit more of him in my mouth.

“Wren, be careful,” he murmured, trying to push away from the bed. I held tighter to his ass and glared up at him before I turned back to his delicious length. “Little bird, I

mean it. If you keep doing that, I won't be able to—oh, *shit*.” Just like that, his cock thickened, and he began to spill into my mouth, filling my mouth with liquid, syrupy warmth.

It was exactly as I remembered. Molasses and myrrh, an unusual combination that felt spicy-hot in my throat as I drank him down. I sucked until he was soft—though his knot stayed slightly swollen—and he was half-collapsed on the edge of the bed, his knees weak.

I patted the mattress, licked my lips, and scooted over. “Get in before you fall on your ass.”

“Yes, Mistress,” he teased, lying down next to me on his side. After a moment, I realized his body was shaking.

“Are you crying?” I asked, fairly certain he was laughing.

“I should be. I haven't spent that fast since I was a lad.”

I giggled. “I thought it was just my incredible mouth.”

His hands came up and lightly traced my lips as he grinned ruefully at me. “It is exceptional, but I like to think if it hadn't been four decades since the last time I'd been touched, I'd be able to keep going a little longer.” He pushed damp strands of hair back from my forehead as I blinked, stunned.

“Four decades?” He hummed, blowing cool air over my neck. I stared at his bare throat, at the tiny, silvered scar there, the mating mark I'd left on him on our wedding night. “You really haven't touched a woman in all these years?” I tried not to think of all the lovers Talon had been with before our wedding night. He'd built a reputation as a playboy prince, and half the women in the castle had been with him before me.

“No. My wyvern”—he winced but went on—“wouldn't allow it. And to be honest, after you, no woman ever appealed to me.” He sat up and began finger combing my hair, gently working out the tangles and arranging my hair to dry across the pillow. We fell into an easy silence then, both of us naked, but strangely at ease.

I hadn't felt this way all those years ago. I'd been so nervous on our wedding night, and I told him so.

He laughed out loud. “You think you were nervous? I was *petrified*. There I was, vastly older than my bride, the young girl who had been my little brother’s playmate. I felt like the most depraved Alpha in existence, and when my courtiers saw me panting after you, more than one chastised me for my ‘inappropriate lust.’ Not that they were wrong! I tried so hard to stay away from you. For weeks, I could smell you *everywhere*, even in my locked room, on my damned pillows. I thought I was going mad.”

I grinned. “You never had a chance. I was friends with the laundry maids, and they let me help them fold your sheets. I rubbed them all over before the maids took them to your room.”

“You minx,” he whispered, tickling me. As I squirmed, the touches became lighter, sending shivers throughout my body. I let my own hands move up to his face, tracing the brow over his eye patch.

“I’m sorry Levi took your eye,” I said after a while.

“I would do the same to anyone who hurt you. I would give my other eye if it meant you were safe.”

I cupped his chin. “You gave your wings. And I am so grateful, and so sad. I tried to heal them. I would give them back to you if I could.”

He didn’t answer, but a tear fell from his eye. I caught it on my finger and tasted it. The salt reminded me of Levi.

“Do you think they’ll be all right?”

“I think the Goddess has Her hand on you and yours, little *Ankelsang*. I have to think She will bring them safely to your side.” He tapped the end of my nose. “But if they find me naked with you, I’ll lose a lot more than my wings.”

He slid out of the bed and began cleaning the room, shushing me when I offered to help. I watched the candlelight on his bronzed skin, trying not to look at the bandages where his wings had been.

Odd scratched at the door, and Talon let him in before bringing us both more food—rare roast beef slices and bread.

We ate, and talked, and patted the one-eared puppy until the candle burned down. Talon shocked me into laughter a dozen times with stories from his childhood and his years as a young captain. I realized we'd gotten married so fast, and I'd been so obsessed with winning him, that we'd never really gotten to know each other.

It felt like the honeymoon I had never been given. A treasure I hadn't known to wish for. A second chance to love my husband.

And somewhere in the night, before I tumbled into a dream, I did the one thing I never imagined I would do.

I forgave him.

# LEVIATHAN



I had only ever been this helpless once before in my long life. When the dragons had surrounded me with flames and torn into me, a dozen of them or more at the same time, wreaking their vengeance on me in place of my grandfather.

But back then, I had been alone. Now, I had a brother in Kir, and a friend in Wulfram. A strong, honorable friend, who had carried me for miles.

For nothing.

“How could I be friend to sssuch ass you, when you are the friend of my greatsst foe?”

I lay on the cavern floor where Wulfram had placed me when we first heard the sibilant voice, staring up as a dragon in human form—or mostly so—strode out of a narrow tunnel on one wall, speaking to Wulfram. I didn’t think he had noticed me yet. His pewter scales glinted as brightly as any knife, and I knew they were every bit as sharp.

Sword in hand, Wulfram stepped back, dropping his cloak over my body as he moved in an attempt to hide me. “You’re not Zebulun.”

I smelled the next dragon before he spoke, a peculiar mixture of old paper and ash. “No, Wulfram. I am here.” Another dragon stepped clear of the tunnel, slightly less imposing in his human form, though his eyes gleamed red. But the small, quick smile he shot toward Wulfram was what gave

me the glimmer of relief I hadn't dared hope for. "I am glad to see you again, though in such company..."

"Zeb," Wulfram greeted him, sheathing his blade. "Is this your brother?"

"I am Baltor," the first creature said disdainfully, sniffing the air. He turned away from Wulfram, dismissing him, and addressed Kir. "I felt your presence in my mountains, and came to extinguish you like the vermin you are. But my brother tells me two of you are mates with my new kinswoman." Kir, who had knives in both hands, kept his face turned toward Baltor as he paced around us in ever smaller circles, still scenting the air.

*Kinswoman?*

Wulfram shifted slightly. "Is this kinswoman a beauty with red hair? The *Ankelsang*."

The dragon stopped pacing. "The Angel of Blood? I have not heard that title. She is an Omega, not of the noble line. She is a small, weak thing, with an awful scent, and I did not know who she was when I flamed her."

"*You flamed Wren?*" Kir snarled and moved closer to the dragon, anger and fear overcoming his common sense.

Baltor didn't seem to move, but in the next breath, he had Kir dangling from one clawed hand, the selkie's knives bouncing harmlessly off his scales. "She's fine. My newfound cousin, the one-eyed wyvern..." He stopped, and something flickered over his face. Remorse? Anguish, even. Then he blinked it away and went on. "Is it you who smell of my kin?" Baltor ignored Kir's shouts and ineffectual blows as he scented him. He drew a huge breath, letting it out on a sneeze. "Yes. Her stink carries yours. I will not kill you, kinsman."

Kir cursed as Baltor dropped him on the ground, but when he turned in my direction, the selkie sprang to his feet, untying his pelt from his waist for some reason. I ignored him, as my mortal enemy growled at Wulfram. "You are not her mate. You, I can kill."

Zebulun cleared his throat. “He is my friend, Baltor. The one I told you of. The father of Cyndil, and the Warlord of All Starlak.”

Baltor huffed a breath. “All Ssstarlak, eh? You might want to rewrite your mapss. Ssstarlak is a bit sssmaller now that my brother Fyrian gave the Northwestern quadrant to our new cousin, in reparation. Not that the land iss worth half as much as the jewelsss I gave.”

“What injury did you cause?” Wulfram demanded, his sword drawn once more. “Did you harm my *svichka*? What is this, Zebulun? I believed the dragons to have honor.”

Baltor’s smile was a humorless thing. “Ssshe is unharmed. And I was not myssself. I have been told you know of the Alpha madnsss in humankind, Warlord. You kill your own young to sstop its sspread. My brothersss and I, we are on the tooth’s edge of madnsss, and have been for many yearsss. My wyvern cousin was the one I injured in my... fugue.” He stepped closer to Wulfram, sniffing and peering over at me.

“You injured my friend Talon?” Wulfram’s voice still rang with anger. “What did you do to him?” Baltor’s gaze dropped to the ground, as if ashamed, but he didn’t speak. Instead, he kept pacing.

Zebulun said softly to all of us, “Great harm, though he lives. Baltor gave his hoard to pay the blood debt to Talon. And now, brother, remember this: no matter who the little Omega’s third mate may be, you are honor bound not to harm him. Remember that she is tied to him by magic and blood, and—” Before Zebulun could finish the sentence, Baltor was hissing.

He had scented me. Recognized what I was.

“Thissss is not *possssible!*” His tongue flickered out, tasting the air, as he lifted Wulfram with one arm and threw him aside to get to me.

Kir was moving up behind him, but I kept my gaze on the dragon. On the danger.

“Rise and fight me, Emperor,” he demanded, already changing shape, his words garbled as his head stretched into a long snout with great horns. Suddenly, the large cavern seemed far too small. “Rise!”

“I cannot, kinsman,” I said, praying that whatever honor this dragon might have left would hear that word and acknowledge it. “I am as weak as a human child here in your mountain, after so long away from my home. I came to rescue my Empress, the one you know as Wren, mate to Talon, the wyvern king. Mate also to Kir, the selkie king. We are all brothers...”

He pulled his head back, and I could see his throat working as he gathered dragon fire to immolate me, stepping back to angle his flame. At the last second, Kir darted between the dragon’s clawed feet and threw his pelt—not at me, but at the creature’s legs.

I had never seen a selkie’s pelt used as a weapon of war. I had never once heard of such a thing, in all my years as Emperor. But it seemed the selkies had kept some of their magics secret. The pelt wrapped around the dragon’s legs and—whether by chance, or by design—caught on the scaled limbs, like a net. The dragon stumbled, the expression on its scaly face utterly confused as it swallowed the flame and began to fall.

“Oh, shit,” Wulfram muttered, grabbing me and wrapping his body around me so that we both rolled across the floor together. We ended the roll in a tangle of arms and legs and a cloud of dust, as the dragon thumped onto the ground next to us.

Its eyes were mere inches from mine. I still had almost no strength, but I managed to lift myself up onto my elbows and speak. “We are kin.”

“It... means... nothing.” His voice was like gravel, and he smelled slightly of charred meat. Had he burned his own throat, swallowing the fire? “Your kind... has no honor.”

“You’re the one who just tried to attack a helpless kinsman,” Kir hissed, stepping up to the dragon’s side. I noted

he did not disentangle the pelt yet.

Baltor blinked and began to change back into human form. Within seconds, the only signs of his true self were the slitted pupils in his eyes, and the pewter scales that still decorated his skin.

The selkie pelt had shifted as well, still trapping his legs. Baltor snarled at it, obviously surprised. “His kind are the reason the dragons are all but gone. The reason I have no mate. The reason my brother Fyrian starves, and Zebulun makes fool’s bargains with humans, in the hopes of fulfilling a prophecy—”

“The Dragon Mother’s prophecy. That our line will be remade with an Omega given freely by Wulfram’s family—”

Baltor’s voice cracked. “We cannot mate our little cousin’s sssky bond. The prophecy is *broken*.”

Wulfram cleared his throat. “It... may not be her in the prophecy. I have heard of another Omega. One of my own.” His voice grew hard when Zebulun and Baltor both started shouting demands. “You would have to swear a vow to help me secure her release from those who have taken her.”

Zebulun roared in the warlord’s face. “Try to stop us. Who is this Omega?”

But Wulfram stood his ground. “I will not tell you more until I see that Wren is safe, with my own eyes. Until her mates are taken to her side, alive and unhurt.”

“You want us to take you three to our home?” Zebulun asked. “You want us to escort our greatest enemy into the very heart of our clutch?”

“Exactly that,” Kir said firmly, and Wulfram nodded. I waited silently. I knew how difficult this must be. They had no reason to trust me, or any of my line.

Baltor let out a shout of frustration, but Zebulun soothed him, and answered, “We will. If you tell us where we can find the Omega of which you speak, we will give up everything.” He breathed heavily. “What little we have left to give, that is.”

“I will,” Wulfram said heavily, gathering the satchels from the floor and helping me to rise. “Let’s go.”

There was a lightness to the young dragon’s step as he began walking into one of the tunnels. “Let us show you a shorter way to Wren, and her mate.” He was practically running by the end of his sentence, hope in every line of his form.

“If they call that arserag her mate one more time...” Kir muttered as he took hold of my arm to help me walk.

“Who knows?” I replied. “She may have forgiven the cockroach by now.”

We both laughed as we left the cavern.

That would never happen.

# WREN



When Odd began barking at the kitchen door, I thought he needed to pee. When I followed him out into the garden and saw who had arrived, I felt my own bowels turn to water.

Dragons were in the sky.

As I watched, Baltor landed on the edge of the cliffs, with Wulfram on his back. Fyrian came arrowing in from the south, low on the horizon. Zebulun still circled high above, the sun directly behind him, and I couldn't see if Kir and Levi were with him.

Then, when he flew lower, I saw them both. Kir was sitting upright, but Levi...

I ran for the cliffs just as Zebulun tipped over to one side, dumping both my mates off and into the pounding surf.

"You dishonorable scum!" I shouted into the sky, terror and anger warring for dominance. I couldn't get to Zebulun, but I snatched up a shovel from the mulch pile and ran at Baltor, who was backing up as fast as his scaly feet could move. "If you've hurt a single hair on their heads—" I began and smacked the shovel into his foot, which was changing from dragon to man, making the flesh there slightly vulnerable.

"Desssist, woman!" Baltor hissed, still scrambling backward. His wings were smaller than they had been, as he was in mid-shift, and he didn't seem to be able to use them effectively.

*Good.* That meant he couldn't get away from the beating he so richly deserved.

“First, you take my husband's wings, and now you and your traitorous brother try to kill my other mates? I'll murder you both, I will!”

Wulfram was shouting something, and he tried to pluck the shovel from my grasp, but I got one more good swing in, whacking Baltor on the nose with the shovel's edge.

Dark draconic blood sprayed in the air, and Baltor cried out in pain and disbelief, slipping on the cliff edge. His expression was almost comical as he fell, his clawed fingers scrabbling on the sheer granite, wings still half-formed.

He fell down the sheer wall—plummeting straight toward the jagged rocks.

I felt a pang of regret as I realized I may have inadvertently discovered how to kill a dragon. The anguish in Baltor's diamond eyes told me he feared that as well. A surge of remorse filled me as I heard Zebulun roaring in shock.

And then a wave of awe followed it, as an enormous cluster of tentacles shot upward out of the water, catching the beast before he could hit the sharp granite.

The water boiled and churned as Baltor rose, his expression stunned. And horrified.

He was in the clutches of a kraken.

Wulfram held me tightly as we gawked at the sight of my mate, the Emperor of the Deep Waters, rising from the waves. I had only seen this form twice before. The first time, I'd been young and dying, my eyes burning from salt and sun. The second, in the harbor at Verdun City, he'd been far smaller.

Of course, I knew he could choose what size to appear in human form, but I'd assumed the twenty-foot-tall specimen I'd encountered earlier in the year was the upper limit of his size. But his tentacles now were each the diameter of the largest tree trunk I'd ever seen. His thick red carapace rose above the waves, at least half as tall as the cliffs themselves, and for all I knew, there was more of him under the water.

As he lifted the dragon out of the waves and set him gently on the rocky beach near the cave entrance to the castle stairway, Zebulun plunged into a sharp dive to the beach and landed next to Baltor, sheltering him with his wings.

“Leviathan,” I breathed, awestruck, as Talon came running, taking up position on my right and taking my hand in his. “Look at him. He’s enormous. Majestic.”

Talon made a soft growling sound. “He’s an oversized squid.”

“Squids don’t have hard shells,” I mumbled. “And they don’t get that big.”

Goddess, he was stunning. Levi cavorted in the waves, doing the sorts of leaps and dives I’d once seen great whales perform when they were playing. Or perhaps he was showing off; the waves he made were splashing both the dragons on the beach.

Wulfram snorted. “Well, he’s a grower, not a shower, that’s for sure. But I find it’s what you do with the tentacle that matters.”

Talon and I stared at the warlord for a moment, before the two men started laughing, nearly falling to the ground. I rolled my eyes, focusing on my tentacled mate’s antics instead. He really was giving the dragons a soaking.

Talon began to tease Wulfram about the size of his “tentacle,” and I forced myself not to smile at their crude humor. I was glad Wulfram was here, not only because my heart beat a little faster in his presence, but also because Talon needed his friend. Now more than ever.

I ignored them both as their tentacle jokes grew even more coarse, waving as Levi winked at me with one large, dark whirlpool of an eye, then sank beneath the waves. When I dared one more peek over the cliff, I saw Baltor had taken human form again and was talking to my selkie.

“Kir!” I called, almost slipping. Talon’s arm was suddenly around my waist, keeping me from falling, and I murmured my thanks.

“Limpet!” Kir shouted back. “Are you well?”

I grinned. “I am now. Come up the stairs and meet me in the great hall.” I blew him a kiss.

He didn’t return the gesture. Kir’s eyes had gone hard as he stared up at me, and I realized I had my arm wrapped around Talon. Quickly, I moved away, my face hot, and began the walk back to the castle.

Thankfully, Talon stayed at the cliff’s edge while Wulfram strode next to me. After a few yards, he spoke. “So it’s like that, then? Talon’s back in your good graces?”

“Not exactly,” I muttered. “But he’s working on it.”

Wulfram’s next words were only loud enough to travel to me. “His wings, *svichka*. What happened?”

I swallowed hard, then gave a quick summation of Talon’s sacrifice.

“Fuck.” Wulfram opened the door into the castle’s kitchen for me. “His wyvern left him? Is he... dead?”

I hesitated at the door. “No. At least, I don’t think so. I believe the wyvern part of his soul took the pain, not only from Talon, but from me as well, and has shut itself away. Some sort of penance, I think.” As we gathered food and drink and carried it into the hall, I tried to explain what had happened. “He protected me. I know I shouldn’t trust him; I should know better than to believe a man can change.” I laughed nervously. “I’m sure Kir and Levi will think I’ve lost my mind, gone soft—”

Wulfram stopped my nervous chatter with a gentle hand on my elbow. “You are possibly the wisest, most impressive woman I have ever met. If you trust him, *svichka*, you need not explain to anyone your reasoning.” His other hand caught my chin, rough fingertips moving over my soft skin. “And I hope you believe a man can change. I hope for my sake, you’ll stay soft, and forgive me for the wrong I did you and young Ratter.”

I stared into his ice-blue eyes, mesmerized by the earnest plea I saw in them. “Ratter is well?”

His smile was filled with an odd, endearing pride. “Well and running my kingdom.” I gaped as he went on. “I granted her a *liefhald* and appointed her as temporary Warqueen at Goran’s side.”

“Warqueen? *Ratter*?”

Wulfram sighed. “Well, I didn’t tell her that was her title. But it’s the only one that exists in Starlak for a woman who stands at the Warlord of All’s side.”

Laughter spilled out from between my fingers, and I fanned my face. “Did she demand the keys to the treasury? Free run of the fortress?”

He flinched. “She didn’t need the keys. Apparently, she’d already rummaged through my vaults and taken the pieces she fancied. I’m not sure there’s a lock she can’t pick.”

“True,” I mused, missing *Ratter* fiercely. “She’d make the perfect Warqueen.” I was arranging the food on the table when I felt warm hands on my shoulders, and a whisper in my ear. His beard rasped along my neck, and I pressed my thighs together at the sudden ache there.

“Not as perfect as you, *svichka*. If I could have one wish in this life, it would be to see you at my side. Fighting, ruling, loving. I would wish to deserve a woman like you. And I would do everything in my power, for the rest of my days, to be worthy of that honor. I would make love to you every night, worshiping your exquisite body and your brilliant soul. Your cries in the darkness would be the song I would hum to my last day.” He blew softly on my neck, raising chill bumps there. “If I were worthy, that is.”

I held still for a moment, shivering slightly, wondering what it was about hearing strong men profess their unworthiness that just did it for me. “Starlakian warriors are indeed prone to fits of eloquence,” I teased, repeating his own words from weeks before. “Where are the others?” I tried to suppress the quaver in my voice, though nothing could hide the wash of floral perfume that now surrounded us both.

Wulfram drew in a long breath, letting it out on a shuddering sigh. “Already here, I’m afraid.”

“I’m right behind you, limpet. Let me see you.” Kir’s voice had me ducking out of Wulfram’s hold and racing to the door. Before another breath, he was kissing me, and I was drowning in his coconut and salt smell, relishing the way his hands moved over me as if he needed to feel each part of me to be certain I was whole. “You are unhurt?” He mumbled the words into my mouth, and I smiled into the kiss.

“I am. I was cold on the flight here, but I’ve been treated well since.” I hesitated. “By Zebulun, at least.”

“Baltor attacked you. He has some variant of the Alpha madness. We must get you away from this place.”

“Yes, Talon and I—” Kir’s muttered curse stopped me. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said, pulling away slightly. His nose wrinkled, and he stuck his face in my neck, sniffing deeply. He drew back, his expression shocked. “You... and the cockroach? You let him touch you?” He growled. “Or did he force his attentions on you? Did he trick you somehow?”

“What?” I felt my cheeks blazing, and stepped back. “Trick me?”

Kir’s lip curled. “The only way the mate I know would let that unworthy cur close enough to leave his scent this deeply embedded in your pores is by some sort of trick, or dark magic. He’s the one who did this to you.” He grabbed me, his fingers fitting into the grooved scars beneath my sleeves. “He *broke* you, limpet. Scarred you and threw you away. Don’t tell me you let him into your bed.”

“And what if I did?”

He shuddered as if he’d been shocked. “How needy are you, Omega? You can’t be that desperate.”

Before I knew what I was doing, I’d slapped his face, hard.

I’d never struck him in anger. But the pain I felt pulsing in his mate bond on my breast was a distant second to the rage

that roared in my heart.

“How is that your concern? If I let every Alpha into my bed that I meet from now until the end of time, what does that mean to us, Kir? If I need or want a dozen more Alphas, how would that change the friendship and love we share?” I threw a hand toward Wulfram, who was edging toward the door. “What about Wulfram? What if I decide I need another Alpha mate, or even just want to fuck him? Will I need your permission?”

Kir sputtered a negative. Wulfram murmured, “You have my permission, if that matters.”

I bared my teeth at him, then turned back to Kir. “Are you going to turn into Talon now, feeling as if you own me? That I’m your broken Omega toy, who must be protected at all costs?” I advanced on him, and he backed away as if I were dangerous. I fucking was. “You know me better, Kir. You know how strong I am.”

His eyes flared. “You’re strong when it comes to every other damned thing in your life. But you *always* had a weakness for him. He makes you weak.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from saying the harsh words that threatened to emerge. The silence spun invisible threads of anger and hurt between us. Then Kir’s eyes flew to the space behind me. I smelled myrrh and smoke, and knew who was there.

My selkie mate’s face transformed into a sneer as he addressed Talon. “How?” he ground out. “How did you trick her into—”

I knew the moment Talon turned around to show his back, even without looking.

Kir’s face went two shades paler. “What... What did you...”

I moved to Talon’s side and pulled the shirt he’d dropped to his waist over his shoulders again, doing the buttons carefully. “He didn’t only protect me from the dragon fire, Kir. He protected you and Levi as well. I would have died.”

Talon raised an eyebrow. “You have an immortal mate, little bird. You might have been fine.”

“No,” Kir rasped out, moving closer. “Levi was as weak as a human child on the dry. Vulnerable. You’re right, moonsong. We would all have died with you. Still... I can’t. I *can’t*.” He didn’t say anything more, but I knew what he meant.

The silence grew brittle and sharp, as if breaking it would send invisible shards into us all.

Wulfram was the one who broke it. “What does a warlord have to do to get a meal around here, give up a limb?” Kir and I stopped glaring at each other to frown at Wulfram instead, who had an arm flung around Talon’s shoulder. “What, too soon?”

“Yes.” Talon punched Wulfram in the side with one perfectly strong fist, making the warlord wheeze in surprise, though I had a feeling he was faking any pain. “Far too soon, friend.”

# WREN



The meal that Fyrian prepared for us that night was one of the most uncomfortable of my life. It was storming outside, and the winds wailed around the stone walls, occasional gusts moving through the cracks and sills, the surf hard enough to feel the vibrations of it against the base of the tower all the way to the top.

The storm that raged at the table, over platters of succulent beef stew, casseroles full of butter-drenched squash, and steaming mounds of red potatoes, was silent but just as worrying.

If it hadn't been for Wulfram and Zebulun, and their constant friendly banter, we may not have all made it to dessert alive. Wulfram regaled the table with tales of his voyage to the island of Havira, where he first met Talon, and where his son was now living with his Omega bride, Roya.

I couldn't focus on his stories. I was too vexed at my selkie, and at Levi's absence.

After my disastrous reunion with Kir, I had excused myself to my room, unable to deal with his fuming, while Talon had taken Wulfram into his room to catch up on all the details, promising to share with everyone at the meal. Levi had sent a message with Talon, that he needed to gather strength in the water, but would join us as soon as he'd recovered.

Zebulun sat at the head of the table, with Baltor on his left and me on his right. Next to me, Kir stewed. On the other side of the table, Talon was seated next to Wulfram and Fyrian,

with the warlord carefully placed between him and the other end of the table, where Levi's chair sat empty. We'd had to put Odd in another room, as he kept trying to bite Baltor's leg.

We were all keeping an eye on Baltor, though his brothers assured us he was better humored than usual. He seemed subdued to me, though still foul-tempered.

I fought to swallow the beef stew that did not seem to want to go down. "Is Levi coming soon?" I asked Zebulun when he'd stopped nattering on about Starlakian lines of succession with Wulfram.

Baltor cursed down at his plate. "If any of our kin knew we were allied with one of hisss kind—"

"I thought none of your kind were left alive?" Wulfram cut in. He had been every bit as chilly to Baltor as my mates. "Why worry about what others would think? The Emperor has been a good friend to my line. He showed honor and bravery, both in my keep when it was overrun with traitors and here in your own castle."

"Showed honor here?" Baltor sneered. "How sso?"

"By not crushing this tiny ruin in my tentacles and sucking the owners of it out like tasty marrow," stated a deep voice, as loud as thunder and accompanied by a crack of it from outside.

"Levi?" I shouted and jumped up, throwing myself into his arms. He was dressed in something odd: a length of woolen cloth, folded and tucked around his waist, looping up over one shoulder, in a tartan pattern. And nothing else. His skin, still flecked with saltwater, was warm on mine, and energy swarmed over all my limbs, as if invisible tentacles were greeting me as well.

I giggled into his shoulder, deciding to ignore the others in the room. "Tickles."

"Ah, *cora mar*, I missed you so. Did any of these cretins hurt you?" His eyes met mine, and I fell into those whirlpools that seemed to slow time. One of his hands moved to my cheek as he examined me thoughtfully. "Your heart is bruised;

I can see your pain. And you've been weeping. Who shall I kill first? Who made you cry?"

"Don't kill Kir, Levi," I whispered into his ear as he pulled me in for another embrace.

"Kir did this? What did my brother say, little flame? Tell me while I feed you." He lifted me off the floor and cradled me in front of him like a baby. I fussed for him to put me down, but he only carried me to the empty chair and settled me on his lap. It was ridiculous, and Fyrian's eyebrows shot to his hairline as Levi began choosing the choicest morsels from the nearby platters, lifting them to my lips on the tines of a gold fork.

It was embarrassing and sensual, and I let him do it, though I could feel the eyes of all the others at the table—save the dragons—on my lips as I licked them clean. Every few bites, Levi was the one licking my lips. Kir was grinding his teeth in frustration, Wulfram was shifting in his chair as if he'd been seated on a cactus, and Talon was staring down at his own plate.

Baltor made a rude sound when Levi stuffed a miniature potato into my mouth with his fingers. "No mannerssss at all, not that I expected a fish to have any."

Levi hummed. "I think the lizard is jealous, *cora mar*. Though he should pay close attention to how we treat you. If he hopes to have his own mate, and keep her, he will need to learn to overcome his beastly nature."

Baltor stood quickly, his chair falling behind him. "Do you mock usss? Your kind is the *reason* we have no matesss. Why our mother *died* when we had only just hatched. The dragonss are gone because of you, and there are no more matesss for usss!" His scales were growing darker, and his arms seemed to expand, then contract, as if he were losing control of his form.

His brothers exchanged glances that worried me. Something was very wrong.

Zebulun broke in, his voice shaking slightly. "Wulfram? You promised us a mate. Where is this Omega from Starlak?"

We need her here, now.”

“There’s an Omega in Starlak?” For a moment, I was worried he meant Ratter. She hadn’t begun perfuming, but I had a feeling she might.

But then Wulfram answered. “Apparently, there’s been one there for eighteen years.”

The dragons began cursing, and Baltor threw down his fork. His form was definitely slipping now, and his clothes ripped as he grew close to ten feet tall, before Fyrian stood and grabbed his arm, whispering something in their draconic language. Baltor’s tail had half-formed, and he was twitching it restlessly, the scales making a racket on the floor.

Levi watched the dragon very carefully, pulling me closer. I knew I was safe if Baltor lost control. But was everyone else?

Wulfram raised his voice over the din. “You remember my daughter, Cyndil?”

“The baby?” Zebulun hissed at his brothers, and they went silent, Baltor’s tail stopping mid-swing. “She had only taken her first steps the last time I saw her. You can’t mean... No. I would have known. I would have *sensed* it.”

“You knew, and kept her from us?” Fyrian asked, his voice a cracking whip. Baltor was making an odd growling sound, like rocks tumbling together in his throat.

“He didn’t know. He couldn’t,” Talon said, loud enough to carry. “Until they reach their maturity, girls who become Omegas are children like any others.”

Wulfram nodded to him. “Cyndil is eighteen—no, nineteen, now. While I was away, looking for Wren—”

“Looking to abduct me,” I inserted, though Levi was standing slowly, lifting me with him, moving carefully away from Baltor.

Wulfram’s lips twisted into a wry smile, though his eyes stayed on the dragon and his hands gripped the arms of his chair in readiness. “Yes, well. I didn’t succeed.”

“Instead, you abducted Wren’s apprentice,” Kir interrupted, drawing attention his way, while Levi slowly shifted me to his side, where I assumed it would be easier to shield me. “Don’t be coy about your criminal acts now, Warlord.”

“Shut it, seal,” Wulfram drawled. Kir stood, ostensibly to pour more wine, and circled the table until he was beside us. “While I was away abducting the *Ankelsang*’s cursed assassin-apprentice, Ratter, Cyndil started perfuming. Ratter, at least, believes Cyndil became an Omega.”

“Believelss?” Baltor hissed.

Wulfram shrugged. “Ratter read her diary, and it seemed like a peculiar sort of awakening.”

“How so?” I asked, shocked at this revelation.

Wulfram frowned, but casually stood, carrying a small dish of candied fruit and setting it near Talon. Wulfram reached down and grasped Talon’s hand, which was trembling. Talon nodded wordlessly, as if they had made some decision. Then Talon stood, walking directly toward me as Wulfram spoke.

“The cook said they thought she had stayed too long by the hearth, or that she’d been burning something in her rooms, until the Alpha guards began to react. She had a strange scent, of smoke and earth—”

Baltor hissed, a trail of smoke emerging from his mouth. His throat was glowing now, his tail thrashing again. “Sssmoke?”

“Your daughter is more than an Omega. She is a dragon mate,” Fyrian breathed.

“Where isss she now? Take me to her. Tell me where my mate isss *now!*” Baltor tore away from Zebulun and moved jerkily toward us, his shirt exploding into scraps of cloth as his wings extended, his tail lengthening with each stride. The room wasn’t going to be big enough for us all, if he changed fully.

Wulfram’s eyes narrowed, and his lips formed a circle as he said one word. “No.”

The fiery glow in Baltor's throat lit the room as he drew a breath. Before I could draw one of my own to scream, Levi had wrapped Kir and me in a mass of tentacles and thrust us into the hallway. I could barely see what was happening, but a great burst of flame moved across the room toward where Wulfram had been.

Except he wasn't there now. He was under the table, wrapped in even more tentacles than I was, though Zebulun and Fyrian were standing in front of them, protecting them from the blast. And Talon... Talon had flung himself across the room to stand in the doorway, blocking the way between me and Baltor.

*Again.*

I could only just make out what was happening. The dragons protecting Wulfram had partially shifted. They looked like wyverns, with human shapes and great wings spread out behind them, overlapping, catching every bit of the flame that poured from the feral dragon's mouth as he paced and spat fire, trying to get to the warlord.

"Baltor!" Zebulun shouted at his brother, but the flames kept coming, until Fyrian stumbled and fell. His shirt had burned away, and his leather trousers and boots were charred, but I didn't think the fire was what ailed him. He looked skeletal, suddenly. Close to death.

"Baltor, no," he rasped, his head slumping to the floor.

The flames cut off abruptly. "Fyr?" Baltor blinked, as if he had just woken from a nightmare. "Fyr... what have I done?" With a cry of anguish, Baltor ran from the hall.

Zebulun started after him, then hesitated, turning toward Fyrian. "I'll help Fyr," I told him, pulling against Levi's hold.

Zebulun murmured his thanks and ran after Baltor.

"*Let me go.*" I glared at Levi when he kept me from approaching the fallen dragon. "I am a healer before anything else. Let me *help* him."

Reluctantly, Levi pulled back his tentacles, letting us all go. Wulfram crawled out from under the table, and we all

surveyed the wreckage of the room. The table had scorch marks, the remaining food was immolated, and two of the chairs were still smoldering.

But Fyrian was awake, and had heard me. “You cannot help me, little healer, any more than we can save our brother. The only way... The only way we will live is if we find our mate.” His eyes dimmed. “Though Baltor may be beyond saving now.”

# WREN



We retired to the library, a much more somber group, and sat in silence while we waited for Zebulun to rejoin us. I sat on a chaise with Levi while Talon lowered himself to the floor by my side, which seemed to rouse Levi from his dark thoughts, almost eliciting a smile. Fyrian slumped in a velvet armchair beside a bookshelf, eyes closed, plainly exhausted.

Kir sat across the room, in turns glaring at Talon and staring at me with something like hurt in his expression. I really needed to find time to talk to my selkie.

Levi stroked my hair back, his touch infinitely gentle. “*Cora mar*, are you all right? You weren’t singed?”

I stared down at Talon’s dark hair, my fingers itching to comb the tousled strands. “Thanks to you... and Talon. He gave his wings to save me, Levi. And tried to do so again just now. Twice, he’s put himself between me and dragon fire.”

Talon shook his head. “I did what any mate would. What any man should, to protect you, little bird.”

“What a predicament,” Levi whispered. “It’s going to be a lot harder to hate him now.”

“No, it’s not,” Kir said plainly.

I was about to confront my selkie when Zebulun returned. “Baltor is chained. Permanently,” he announced.

Fyrian let out a soft, “No, brother.”

“We cannot loose a feral dragon on this world,” Zebulun told him firmly.

“I might give him my blood,” I suggested, but Levi hissed at me, Kir and Talon both making matching sounds of denial.

Zebulun smiled weakly. “It would not be enough. At this point, there is only the slightest chance he could recover, come back to us. If he had a true dragon mate.” His gaze went to Wulfram and hardened. “If we had known she was in your castle, if you had suspected earlier, our brother might not be lost to us.”

“Sit down before you fall down, Zebulun,” Wulfram snapped. “As I told you, I didn’t know. And she was *taken*. Stolen, only days before Zebulun took Wren.” He described the dragon who took Cyndil.

Zebulun groaned. “Fuck. Agnivo.” I wasn’t certain what that meant, but both dragons started arguing. “Of course that scurrilous clutch would have taken her, knowing that she was promised to us.”

“They may have mated her already, forced her to bond with them.”

“We don’t know that they’re dishonorable—”

“They *attacked* us, brother! They’ve shown their scales.”

Zebulun cursed. “A true dragon mate, and she was almost ours.”

I was missing something. “Dragon mates are not the same as Omegas? What is the difference between her kind and mine?”

Fyrian and Zebulun began speaking at the same time. “Like the sun to a reflection on muddy water—”

“—as vastly different as brackish water and the finest of vintages—”

“—the weakest, pale imitation of—”

I burst out laughing, though all my mates were bristling. “Physically, then? There are physical differences?”

Zebulun ducked his head. “Apologies, Wren. Yes, the dragon mates were all far more... substantial than you. Taller, broader, fit for a dragon’s nest. They were said to glow with a fire from within. Their hair was like the sun, and their faces round as the moon.”

“Their eyes as deep and blue as the lakes of the Svellvollr,” Fyrian breathed. “And their breasts as plump and succulent as—*oof!*” He stopped talking as Wulfram kicked his chair.

“By now, she will be bonded to Agnivo.”

“Only if she chooses to be,” I interjected. “She’s an Omega, so she cannot be bonded against her will. The Goddess prevents it.”

Fyrian fretted aloud. “They could torture her. They would. Those brothers have proved in the past they have no concern for any others.”

“Truly? They are that cruel?”

Zebulun nodded. “They live not far from here, just a six-hour flight across the Straits, in the Svellvollr. I flew to ask them for help years ago, when Fyrian began to waste away and Baltor showed signs of madness. We’d hoped Agnivo and his brothers would join us in our search for the Starlakian Omega. Instead, they rejected our plea and drove me back across the Straits. Agnivo promised to kill any dragon from our clutch who returned.”

“Any dragon at all,” Fyrian corrected. “But brother, we can’t be sure Agnivo took her. There could be other dragons.”

“They said this one had ebony wings with a black and scarlet body, and when he landed, his human form had silver hair, and scarlet eyes.”

Fyrian’s expression went bleak. “That’s him.”

Kir spoke at last. “If it helps, the servants reported that she went willingly. She, um, kissed him.” Wulfram cursed, shaking his head.

The dragons both recoiled, and Zebulun began pacing. “Kissed him? A foul-tempered dragon like that? Why would a sensible girl go with one of those cowards? Crusty, hidebound, isolationist—”

*Cowards?* “Who are they?”

Fyrian sighed. “They are old, almost ancient. Proud, arrogant, boastful. They left the mainland long ago, claiming they wanted no ties with the ‘dying line’ of dragons.” His eyes cut to Levi. “They are very strong. Far stronger than us, but perhaps not you, squid—”

Levi seemed to grow, the chaise creaking beneath the sudden increase in weight. “Call me squid again, and I will show you a dying line of dragons, lizard.”

Fyrian snorted, but apologized. “Well, what is your real name? Levi cannot be it.”

“I am He Who Calls the Storm and Calms the Depths, also called Leviathan, Emperor of the Deep Waters.” Levi seemed pleased at the stunned expressions on their faces. “You’ve heard of me.”

Zebulun nodded dumbly. Fyrian’s jaw hung open.

Levi’s smile was smug. “Well, how many dragons are there? And do they nest close to the sea? I was weak when we met, but I am much restored. The form I took earlier was but half my possible size, and with more time to regenerate in the ocean, I would be capable of destruction you cannot imagine. I could reach into a cliffside dragon’s nest and pluck them out like pearls from a great oyster, sucking their innards from inside their scaled husks—”

“That’s enough, sweetheart,” I said, patting his leg. Fyrian’s eyes were bulging out of his head now, and Zebulun had turned a peculiar shade of purple.

“F-four,” Zebulun stammered at last. “There are four brothers, what remains of a clutch that was hatched long ago. Over two thousand years, at least. They lived in Starlak then, but left after...” His eyes gleamed in the remaining torchlight.

“It is recorded that they were a part of an attack on an Emperor who came to parley.” He swallowed. “That was you.”

Levi went still next to me, like the eye of a hurricane. “It was.”

Zebulun whispered the rest. “Near the Eastern Hall when the Warchief Mikal and his Warqueen Valta reigned. Three dozen dragons fell on the messenger from the Deep Waters, circling him with flames, then tearing the young kraken apart with fangs and claws. They left him for dead, but when they returned to take trophies of his carcass, he had slipped away.”

Levi’s voice was soft, mourning. “There was a stream with a tiny spring that led down to the very bedrock of the earth, and connected to a distant inland sea. I had not yet learned of the perfidy of my own kind, of our part in your line’s demise. I came in the hopes that I would mend the rift between our peoples. I believed I would treat in good faith with the dragons, that they were mistaken in their assumptions about the curse that had taken their dragon mates. I was wrong. I was betrayed by both sides.”

The room went still, until Talon unfolded his long legs and crossed to the decanter of port wine, pouring a good-sized glass for each of the men. Kir knocked his out of Talon’s hand to the floor, and when I hissed at him, he crossed to the wall of books, standing with his back to us.

Talon calmly poured another glass, bringing it over to me. “Wren?” he asked quietly, glancing at Kir. “Should I leave?”

“No, Talon. Stay with me,” I said firmly. Beckoning him closer, I whispered just loud enough for him to hear, “And what did I tell you to call me?”

His breathing hitched next to my ear as he exhaled, almost soundlessly, “Yes, Mistress.”

Zebulun made a choking noise. Fyrian spat his port so far, it hit Wulfram in the face. And next to me, Levi began shaking, like an earthquake was starting inside him. I fanned my burning face and peeked at my kraken mate. Perhaps I hadn’t been quiet enough.

Levi was laughing, but clearly trying not to. Finally, he set his glass down and let his amusement loose. “Mistress? Oh, this has possibilities, cockro—Talon.”

“Fuck this,” Kir muttered, walking out of the room, which lapsed into silence again as soon as the door closed behind him.

“Well, I don’t think we’ll get much more done tonight,” Wulfram said carefully. “It’s late, tempers are high, and we need rest after our journey. Tomorrow, we’ll go and retrieve my daughter. Then we can see what her presence might do for your brother, Baltor.”

“We must go *now*,” Fyrian demanded. “Who knows what they’re doing to your daughter? They stole her from your own keep, our brother waits in chains for the madness to take him to the final death, and you’re just... stopping to take a nap? We can fly all night and be there in—”

Levi’s voice was deep and loud, even over the wind that had picked up again outside. “Wulfram’s daughter will not be harmed. Who would dare to do such a thing to one of the world’s most priceless treasures?”

“A feral dragon,” Talon said softly, and I shuddered. He wasn’t wrong.

Wulfram surprised us all by shaking his head. “She’s an Omega from a long line of Starlak’s Warlords of All. And apparently, a warrior woman of some kind on her own, or at least a swordswoman. She went with them willingly.”

A thought occurred to me. “Have you considered that she may not even know she was abducted, that Agnivo was not your friend, Wulfram? I would imagine she thought she was fulfilling the *liefhald*.”

“The *liefhald* you still owe us, Wulfram,” Fyrian said. “You lose more than your honor if you do not fulfill your family’s obligation.”

“You must be joking,” I murmured.

Zebulun would not meet the warlord’s eyes. “A debt is a debt, Omega.”

“A debt?” Wulfram grunted. “You think I need convincing to save my daughter? I made you promise to help me get her back, you ass.”

“When we do, you will leave her with us.”

“If she chooses,” Wulfram spat. “I will not force her.”

Fyrian’s voice was hard. “Then your life is forfeit, if the story you told at dinner was true. You have encountered two Omegas now—your son’s bride and Wren. The bargain was that you would bring us the first Omega you encountered. Your daughter-in-law, I believe.” The temperature in the room seemed to drop suddenly, and the wind howled louder. “But we will be lenient. You will help us rescue Cyndil, give us your daughter in place of the other, and we will forgive your failure.”

Wulfram took a breath to answer, but Levi stood, pulling me to my feet beside him. “Agreed. The warlord and I will go with you once we have made a plan and gathered our strength. At dawn, we will plan for battle. Tonight? We rest.”

“Rest?” I murmured in his ear. “Are you tired, old man?”

“Not too tired to knot my Empress.” With that, he pinched my ass and scooped me up in his arms, carrying me out the door before any more could be said.

## WREN



Once we were alone in my room, Levi's humor faded, to be replaced by a far more disturbing emotion. Shame.

He knelt on the floor, gaze downcast, as I stood near the bed. "*Cora mar*, I may never forgive myself for letting you be taken from me. I have lived thousands of years, but I died as many times when I saw you dangling in the sky. Will you ever forgive me?"

I stroked his dark hair, unsure what to say or do. "It was not your fault, Levi. I never blamed you, so how can I forgive?"

His turquoise eyes were turbulent as he examined my face, as if he were trying to see inside me, and was concerned about what he found. "You are too forgiving, *cora mar*. And not only of my failures."

He meant Talon.

"Maybe. But I held onto my anger for forty years. After he saved me from Baltor, it felt so good to set it down. As if I'd been carrying a weight on my soul." I traced the lines of Levi's face as he struggled to understand. "I don't trust him fully, not yet. Perhaps not ever. But I've learned a lot about wyverns since I arrived here, from reading and talking with the dragons while Talon recovered. About why he went mad... It doesn't excuse his actions, but it's helped me to comprehend them, a bit."

"I understand," he said gently, and I wondered if he really did, or if he was saying that, knowing how Kir's behavior had

bothered me. He stood and perched on the edge of the bed, pulling me over with him so that I sat on his lap again. “Too forgiving, my love. But it’s a part of your perfection.” He lifted a pillow to his face and sniffed. “It smells of your slick, little flame, and of him. Did you let him knot you?”

“Levi!” I pulled it away from his face. “No. He’s...” I covered my face with both hands.

“He called you Mistress. You played some sort of game with him,” Levi mused, standing and stripping off his woolen garment. “I find myself extremely curious. And even more aroused.”

In seconds, he stood naked, his mahogany skin shining, his cock swollen and proud, a bead of wetness already gathering on the tip. I scooted to the edge of the bed, plucking my own clothes away and kneeling slightly to taste him.

“Goddess, you’re delicious,” I murmured, licking him from base to tip and taking him into my mouth. He tasted of salt and wind and power, so different from Talon, but even more addictive. “I want to do this every day, every night.”

His hands tangled in my long hair, moving my head over him so that he was gently fucking my mouth. Then he pulled me away, too soon, and pushed me back onto the bed, his hands caressing my breasts, tightening my nipples, while invisible tentacles wrapped around my thighs, tiny beads of suction lighting up all my nerves.

His smile was dark as he rumbled promises between gentle nips. “We will have countless days and nights of lovemaking. We will do everything you have ever dreamed, and more. Your wildest imaginings, your darkest, most depraved fantasies.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, remembering the fantasy of taking him and Kir in my pussy at the same time, and Talon in my ass. I wasn’t sure it was even physically possible, but my body wanted to find out. I squeezed my legs together to keep from flooding the bed.

“What was that thought, wicked little siren?” Levi asked. When I didn’t answer, he parted my thighs, hovering over me.

My clit ached, and he lowered his head to suck it gently, then harder. “Is this what you want? Me worshiping you?”

I whimpered, my skin heating again, sweat beading and pooling on the sheet beneath me, mingling with the slick that was gushing from me as he worked his tongue.

“It’s not all you want, is it? You’re an Omega, and your needs are great. You need more than one cock, don’t you?” I tried to say no, but he moved his hand to circle my neck, his thumb skating over our mating mark. “No lies, my mate. I can sense your need. You were left alone, your heat unfinished. Shall I call in Kir?”

“No,” I said immediately, anger racing through me. It dissipated as he tsked and returned to my clit, taking me up to the very edge of climax before he stopped.

“Stupid selkie, hm? He’ll need to learn to share with more than me. Maybe we’ll tie him up, make him watch you take your pleasure as an Empress should.”

“And how is that?” I managed to say past the pressure on my throat.

“In any way you like, of course.” His fingers took the place of his tongue as he circled slowly. “Not Kir?”

“Not Kir. I’m too angry.”

He nodded slowly. “But someone. Will you let me meet your needs, Empress? Will you allow me to call your servants in to worship you?” I was already shaking my head when he added, his tone wicked, “Or perhaps only to watch? Yes. Let’s demonstrate how an Empress is served best, *cora mar*. Let them watch and learn from an ancient kraken.”

My heart raced, and I felt an orgasm begin to unfurl inside me at the mere thought of Wulfram and Talon watching Levi take me. But it was too soon for that.

“Not all of them,” I whispered. “Maybe one?”

“Naughty girl,” Levi teased as he set his lips to my clit and helped me crest the first wave of pleasure.

A tsunami of need lay beyond that first taste, though. And when he asked again if he should call another Alpha into the room, I nodded. But I had no idea which one would come.

Which one he would allow to join us.

# LEVIATHAN



*I*t was torture to leave my *cora mar* even for a moment, but I knew she needed to see that at least one of her mates could share. And though it pained me to do it, I knew which one it had to be, if not Kir.

The one whose scent was layered on her skin, and in her bed. The one who had given his wings to save her when the rest of us were too far away to intervene.

I hesitated at the door, remembering when I'd seen his altered form, hours before.

*The water here was deep, trenches running for miles along the seafloor mere yards off the coast, the wind cold and crisp along the surface, and the salt soothing on my dried-out skin. I'd flung myself off the back of the dragon as soon as he'd pointed out his castle, and the moment I felt the water on my form, my weakness had dropped away like molting an old carapace.*

*I was free, and whole, and in my element. All I needed now was my Empress to join me. I would teach her how to use all the gifts she'd received in our mating. How she could live in my realm, and all the beauty she could imagine. I would take her around the world, under the water, as soon as I was back to my full strength, show her the stunning corals of the Southern waters after we'd seen the Northern Sea.*

*I expanded and surfaced just in time to see the dragon whose mind was twisted... By the Moon, he was falling! Plummeting from a cliff, with my mate standing at the edge.*

*He was in mid-shift, the most vulnerable state for any beast, and I could see immediately that he would be dashed upon the rocks when he landed below. Perhaps not killed, but gravely wounded.*

*Had she pushed him? I felt a burst of concern, and pride. Perhaps she had inherited some of my predatory instincts. She would make a fine hunter in the ocean.*

*But no. I saw instantly that she was afraid, heard her voice. And so I flung my tentacles upward, catching the beast. Saving him.*

*Oh. I had to rub this in.*

*“I just saved you,” I said in the draconic tongue. An ugly language, but I was fluent in it. “Caught you like a fledgling sparrow falling from its nest. A poor baby birdling. Give voice to your gratitude now, little lizard.”*

*“Fucking let go of me, fish,” he muttered in thanks.*

*“Gladly.” I dropped him on the beach, where his brother joined him, then winked at my mate and submerged to rinse the stench of lizard from my tentacles.*

*When I reemerged, she had gone with the warlord into the keep. Only the wyvern remained, staring down at me. But not for long.*

*I drew upon my power and forced the waves to swell beneath me, lifting me to face him at the very top of the cliff. He backed up a few steps. I had expected him to attempt to fly away—any creature with healthy instincts of self-preservation would—but he didn’t.*

*No. He couldn’t.*

*“Cockroach?” I rasped. “Where are your wings?”*

*He faced me, the patch over his left eye reminding me of the mistake I had made in trying to kill him before, unknowingly hurting my cora mar in the process. I let the wave that had lifted me go and used my tentacles to hold onto the cliffside, taking in the bandages that wrapped around his shoulders.*

*“Who did this?” I asked, though I knew. “Baltor.” I cursed as he nodded. “I should have let him fall to the rocks.” A shock of fear coursed through me. “Did she suffer with you? Is she injured?”*

*“No,” the wyvern king answered, an odd pride shining in that one amber eye. “She felt none of it.”*

*I pressed a tentacle to the mating mark she had given me, staring at the tiny crescent scar on his neck. He wasn't lying; I would have carried at least some of the pain, and if it had happened while I was so weakened... I might have died. “How? She is tied to us both.”*

*“My wyvern is gone,” he said quietly, his words almost inaudible over the pounding surf below. “Dead, maybe. Or at least, separate from me. I'm not sure how, but he chose to make right our crimes against her by sacrificing himself.”*

*I felt my brow furrow. “You speak of your own soul as if it were two separate parts, cockroach.” He winced at the name, and I found I regretted using it now. “Your wyvern, as you say, is you. A part of you, not its own entity. All of the great lines are made thus.”*

*“Is it? I have recently learned my entire line is a failed experiment, an effort by the dragons to create young when their clutches died. Broken inside. Perhaps dragons have one soul, but I have always felt the separation. The longing to be whole. An ache that would never stop, a...”*

*“A hunger,” we both said at the same time.*

*“I had not known that your line was cursed.”*

*He merely shrugged. “I thought, when I found Wren all those years ago, that she was what would complete me. She was my hoard, or so the dragons tell me.”*

*I wanted to ask about the hoards, but did not. “And when your hoard, your sky bond, was threatened...” I murmured, understanding at once.*

*“I went mad, and woke to discover I had driven away my reason for living.” He stared directly at me. “I lied to myself for years, unable to face the truth: that I was the only one*

*who'd acted without honor. Giving up my wings was only the beginning of the restitution I would pay to have Wren look at me again with love. To have her trust."*

*"She's forgiving, but I am not certain if even her heart can soften to include you. To trust you," I said slowly. "But for my part, I thank you for keeping her safe while I was on the dry. I owe you a debt. What would you ask of me?"*

*His eyes flew wide, and I wondered what he would say. A smile creased the corner of his eye as he answered. "One thing. You have to stop calling me cockroach."*

*My laughter joined his before he bowed. As he turned, I made a promise. "There is a sunken chest at the bottom of the deepest trench in the Western Sea. Empty, and so there is room for you, wyvern, if you ever hurt her again. I will find a sea witch to enchant that chest to keep you alive, then lock you inside for the rest of time, if you ever repeat your mistake." I waited for his answer, wondering if I was making a colossal error in giving him the chance to be near her. Possibly injure her.*

*His answer was clear, even in the whistling wind. "I will go gladly if I do."*

*It was the right one.*

"Talon," I called softly into the next hallway, where the dragons had given us all rooms. His door opened, but so did two others. Wulfram and Kir stood silently as I waited for Talon to appear. "Join me in my mate's bed," I said, as he stepped cautiously into the passageway.

"You have to be fucking *kidding* me. Let me talk to her," Kir spat, surging forward, only to stop when I held my hand out, hitting his chest.

"It's her decision, Kir. I asked to invite you in, but your jealousy has not served you well. Do not make your situation worse now."

His eyes were wild. "I'm her mate, not him!"

I frowned. Normally, I would agree with him. He was her mate as fully as I, and we had shared her truncated heat cycle

in the fortress not two weeks before. But she had not asked for him. “You’ve not acted like a mate since we arrived. What’s happening, brother?”

“She truly doesn’t want me?” Kir whispered, almost to himself.

“Not tonight. She’s too angry.”

“I need a fucking drink.” He pushed himself away and stormed down the corridor past the others.

A part of me wanted to follow him, but Wulfram held up a hand. “I’ll talk to Kir, or at least be his drinking companion.”

I hadn’t planned to invite Wulfram in, for my own reasons, but I had to ask. “You don’t wish to assist me with the Omega?”

His pained groan had me smiling. “More than anything. But I’m not her mate. I’m just the Alpha who landed her in this predicament. I won’t make love to her until I know she wants me.” He jogged off after Kir.

“I won’t either, Emperor,” Talon said quietly. “I haven’t earned that honor.”

I grabbed his arm. “You’re right about that. You won’t even be touching her. Turns out, our little mate likes a spot of torture in the bedchamber. And you’re going to be her willing victim.”

He gulped, but allowed me to drag him into the room. The scent of her—honeyed caramel and flowers—slapped us both right in the cocks as we entered.

“By the Goddess,” Talon breathed, taking in Wren’s naked body on the bed. She’d risen up on her elbows on the white sheets, and her red hair was arrayed around her like some ancient deity’s bright crown. Her breasts were flushed, and her legs slightly open, revealing the pink center of her, shining with her release. The blush moved to her cheeks, and Talon dropped his head, breathing heavily. “What do you want me to do, my queen?”

Her green-gray eyes darkened. “I want you to suffer a little bit.”

“Every moment that I am not in your presence is agony,” he said, still gazing downward. “There is no way I can suffer when you’re this near.”

Her laughter was wicked as I joined her on the bed. “We’ll see about that.” But then she moved her lips close to my ear. “Is this too cruel? What if he can’t watch... He could go mad again.”

“I am close to my full strength, *cora mar*. You are safe, and perhaps this could be a way to see if he has truly overcome his affliction. If he can resist the madness now, we might grow to trust him in your company. Someday.” She was still chewing at her lip, so I suggested, “Perhaps a bit of rope? Just to ease your concerns.”

“I’ll fetch some,” Talon offered, obviously hearing every word we’d whispered. While he was out of the room, I used all my considerable skills to rekindle my mate’s lust. She was panting and on the brink of another orgasm when the wyvern returned, holding a skein of fine, silken rope.

“Sit in the chair, Talon,” I ordered, and began tying him in knots that were as beautiful as they were firm, careful on his shoulders not to put pressure on the bandaged areas. “Don’t move or speak. But keep your gaze on Wren. No matter what, do not look away.” He nodded stiffly, and I tapped the end of his nose. “Good boy.”

A blush crept over his cheeks, but I didn’t tease him about it now. I had work to do.

“Well, little siren,” I purred to Wren, who was practically vibrating with tension. “Are you ready to show Talon just how many times an Omega can come?” I slid over on the mattress, moving her body effortlessly onto my lap, her back to my chest. I hooked my feet around her calves to spread her wide and tucked her arms gently between us, securing her wrists with one hand so her breasts jutted out on display.

Talon's amber eye was fixed on her, and his breathing was short and uneven already, but in control. *Good.*

That gave me time to concentrate on my little mate's pleasure. "Suck." I pressed my fingers against her lips, and she obediently opened her mouth, allowing me to gather moisture. As he watched, I moved my dampened fingertips in patterns down her throat and body, spelling out ancient love songs written before the first seas had cooled.

"Teasing me," she complained, writhing in my grip.

I held tighter. "And him, beloved. Let me show him what I can do."

Wren's body jolted when the invisible tendrils of my power began to wrap around her limbs, contracting and loosening in even pulses. I sent one final tendril of my power to her clit and set up a rhythm there, a pulsating suction. In less than a minute, she was screaming in ecstasy.

Talon's jaw had dropped. In awe of my prowess, as he should be.

"How does the saying go? 'Look, wyvern. No hands.'"

He choked off a laugh, and I doubled the time of my pattern on Wren's clit, sending her into another climax on top of the last one. "You're not even touching her," he murmured, shifting in the chair uncomfortably. "How?"

"She is my Empress. We are connected by the deepest magics in the world. I can make her come with a thought. With a breath." I took a deep breath and blew across her still-damp nipples, asking the current of air to spin harder, faster, then sending more breath down to her cunt, which was spilling slick onto the sheets below. The air entered her, filling her with small bursts of pressure, and she came again.

"Levi? What are you do—*ohhh!*" She screamed, and I placed my hand over her mouth as the air playfully swirled around her back entrance, gently pressing there.

"Shh, darling, don't wake the dragons." She whimpered and tossed her head back, already spiraling higher, into another wave of bliss. "I have power over wind and water,

wyvern.” I lifted Wren up, holding her so she hovered above my cock. Then, inch by inch, I lowered her shuddering body until I was fully seated inside her, her slick coating my length. “I missed you so, little siren,” I moaned against her neck, nibbling her soft skin gently. “Never leave me again.”

“Never,” she agreed, her voice breaking as I began to move inside her, as relentless as the surf, as inexorable as the tides.

“She’s so small, so tight, Talon.” I moved one hand to her throat, putting the slightest pressure on the sides of her neck. “I have to go slowly so as not to hurt her.”

“I like it,” she gasped out around the pressure on her throat. “Harder, Levi.”

“As you wish.” I began moving her forcefully onto me. She crested again and again, her skin beautifully rosy, tears falling from her eyes as I drew her down into a whirlpool of pleasure. “Should I make him come when I do, precious pearl?” I murmured, watching Talon’s hooded eyes go wide at the suggestion. “Should I blow him a kiss, too?”

Her laughter was as wicked as the siren I called her. “Would you like that, husband? Would you like to spill in your trousers, watching, unable to touch?”

“Yes, Mistress,” he said unsteadily. “Anything you desire.”

I was shocked at the way my own darkness roiled in pleasure at his answer. I would have eternity with my *cora mar*, and if this man did somehow earn his way back into her bed, then we would have many, many years to explore just how deeply his desires might run. And in which channels.

“Blow him a kiss, Levi,” Wren panted, moving her own fingers against her clit as I fucked up into her, my cock thickening.

“As you wish,” I repeated, and sent a tendril of breath to him, the air stroking and swirling around him, all for her. He cried out only a moment before I lost control of my own climax. Watching, Wren came one more time, a long shuddering wave of bliss... and then we all rested, trembling.

Or, in Talon's case, laughing silently.

"What?" I asked once I could form words again.

He took a breath. "Just amused that the second time I came in the presence of a woman in over forty years, it was in my pants."

"Where was the first time?" I asked, plucking at Wren's perfect, still-tight nipple.

"In our mate's mouth," he replied smoothly. "She drank me like wine."

"Talon!" She sat up, pushing me away. I let her, mulling over the fact that the wyvern seemed perfectly fine. He'd exhibited no signs of distress at watching me take his wife, his sky bond.

*Hmm.*

"Our mate, you said," I murmured as I went to untie him, while Wren grabbed water from the side table. "You weren't jealous at all, were you?"

"I spent over half my life longing for her, knowing I would never have her in my arms again. The pain of seeing her in your bed doesn't compare in the slightest to that of not having her. And knowing what I did to drive her away."

Wren slipped out of the room to run to the toilet, muttering something about there not being "enough undergarments in the world for an Omega with degenerate mates."

I finished untying Talon, and he stood holding his trousers away from his body. "She's forgiven you," I murmured.

He grimaced, shaking his head. "She hasn't, but she might someday. And if she ever does," he went on, his eye twinkling, "I'll get the chance to show you how many times a wyvern mate can make her climax. You set the bar fairly high, but I have a few tricks of my own."

"Get some rest, Talon." I nudged him out the door with my foot perhaps a little harder than necessary, since he fell to the floor.

“Did you just kick Talon out of the room?” Wren asked, shocked. Her hair was damp, and from the smell of her, that wasn’t the only part that was wet.

“He’s tired, siren. Let him rest while we play, hm? Or are you tired as well?”

“I’ll show *you* tired,” she muttered as we returned to the bedroom, where she did exactly that.

She was asleep and snoring lightly in minutes.

## WREN



“*I*’m a complete degenerate,” I muttered while scrambling eggs the next morning. Well, it wasn’t exactly morning. I’d woken up while it was still dark, next to Levi. I’d convinced him to keep resting, though he hadn’t allowed me to go so far as the kitchen without an escort he trusted.

“We’re in enemy territory, *cora mar*,” he’d said. “And one of these dragons already tried to kill you. They’re family, but not so closely related that I wouldn’t wear their hides as a cloak if they hurt you.”

He’d woken Wulfram, since Kir was swimming in the sea—most likely sulking—and Talon was sleeping so deeply he couldn’t be roused. I couldn’t feel Talon’s exhaustion, which made me fear that his wyvern half was indeed gone. But I could feel Kir’s seething anger in our bond, and that was what had woken me.

Wulfram had accompanied me past the garden to a chicken coop I’d overlooked until this morning, and shown, in his words, “how a true warrior faces down an angry cock.” I’d laughed the whole time we were gathering the eggs, and Wulfram’s attempts to soothe my ill temper continued as I made our meal.

“A deep need for more than one mate is a trait I never appreciated fully in a woman until now,” he said, polishing an apple on his sleeve and taking a bite. “In Starlak, women are expected to stay faithful to one man, their husband, and to remain virgins until their weddings.”

“Ridiculous standard to hold in a country where the men fuck everything that doesn’t move off the goat path fast enough,” I grumbled, pouring the eggs into the hot skillet.

“I agree. Starlak was a far stronger nation long ago when we had Warqueens as well as Warchiefs. When women rode into battle alongside their mates. When Omegas gave our Alphas something to hope for, to live for.” He crunched the apple again. “I’ve read tales of the orgies after battles, warriors celebrating their victories with pleasure while their enemies died all around them. Those were the days.”

I curled my lip. “Charming. Get some plates.”

“Where are the dragons?” As he set the plates out, Odd was circling his legs, so he picked him up. I almost laughed; the pup was almost the same size as Wulfram’s hand. I stared at his long, battle-scarred fingers as he stroked the puppy’s short, soft coat, flapping his one satiny ear and saying ridiculous things in baby talk to the creature. “Who is the fiercest of all the puppies in the land?” he grumbled, letting Odd chew on the tip of his thumb. “Who can rend and rip with his sharp little nibblers? It is you, Mighty Odd the One-Eared!”

It was so cute, my ovaries ached slightly, and my perfume filled the room like a hidden ingredient in the breakfast.

“Smells good,” Wulfram said with a smirk at my apron. “I could eat that all damned day.”

I gritted my teeth. “Eat the damned eggs.”

“Yes, Mistress,” he teased, and I turned away to hide my blush. We ate in silence for a while, until Wulfram put down his fork. “I can never apologize enough for my behavior in Wargate Hall, *svichka*.”

I kept on eating, but said, “Starlakian warriors don’t apologize, from what I remember.”

“Not usually. Starlakian apologies are taken with knives. But I’m trying to change things in my country. Change how the women are treated. Rewrite the laws, and dismantle the customs that they all seem to think are our traditions, but have

only been so for the past two hundred years. A blink in the history of our culture!” He sighed deeply. “I understand why the traitors tried to overthrow me as Warlord, though they did it in a most cowardly way. They are tired of killing their sons to keep the Alpha madness at bay. We are tired, as a nation, of acting strong, but knowing how frail we are, how close to the edge of madness...”

His voice broke. “I have ordered the deaths of young boys who were no more feral than I became when I smelled you in your heat, Wren. I gave the title of Warlord of All to Goran, and told him it was temporary. But to be truthful, he deserves it far more than I. He deserves to sit on that throne and rule, more than a warrior who lost control—and worse, lost you.”

“Wulfram, you can’t blame yourself.” I stood and circled the table, placing my hand on his arm. My fingers were small and pale on his tanned, rough skin. Even seated, he was taller than me.

I liked it. Liked feeling small next to this proud warlord, liked teasing him, taunting him, though he could overpower me... Well, as long as I didn’t have my knives. I made a mental note to find new weapons, though I would mourn my perfectly balanced ones.

“That look of sadness, and frustration,” Wulfram said, tipping my chin up with one finger. “You know I’m right to blame myself.”

I stifled a smile. “I wasn’t thinking that at all.” His raised eyebrow had me telling the truth. “I was missing my knives.”

He grinned, and for a moment, the silver in his hair and the lines around his eyes vanished, and he became a small boy with a secret. “Well then, perhaps I can offer you a Starlakian apology after all.” He jogged to the corner of the room, then carried a leather satchel to the table and reached in, bringing out—

“My knives!” I danced on my stool.

“Not just your knives,” he crowed, handing me the satchel, listing the contents as I began pawing through it. “Your

primary knives, your secondary knives, what Ratter explained was your ‘everyday poison kit’ and then your ‘special poisons’—she packed that in twelve layers of linen, leather, and sealskin that Goran loaned her, though she mentioned you may want to source a different material with your current harem as it stands.” He wiggled his thick eyebrows. “Could be a family member for all we know.” I punched him in the side with the hilt of the knife.

Not the blade. I was too happy with my gift.

When I reached the bandolier with all my throwing knives, I put down my treasures and threw myself into Wulfram’s arms, hugging him. “I don’t have the words to tell you what this means.”

“Who needs words?” he asked, his voice a rasp, as he ran his bearded chin along my throat. I went still, heat pooling in my center as he purred against my neck. My hands tangled in his long, silver hair, as if he might pull away, and I pressed a kiss to his cheek, then turned his face to mine.

This kiss was unexpectedly sweet and soft at the beginning, his beard brushing my lips as we began to kindle the fire that had sparked between us since our first meeting. I gripped his hair in my hands and pulled him closer, needing more, tasting him and humming in appreciation. Our scents mingled as we touched, lavender and brandy warring for dominance. He lifted me up onto the stone-topped table and stepped closer, parting my legs with his strong thighs.

His hands moved to my waist, one descending slowly to press on the front of my skirts, to the aching spot that pooled with heat between my legs. I tilted my pelvis up, rocking against him in a steady rhythm as he purred and kissed the bare skin of my neck. I moaned, and he laughed lightly, pressing slightly harder on my mound, one of his fingers doing something that sent tiny shocks of ecstasy to my clit even through the fabric.

“All those mates, and none of them set their teeth to this gorgeous neck?” he murmured, and bit playfully at the skin just beneath my ear. “How I would love to be the one to claim

this place, to show the world that I was worthy of the Goddess's greatest treasure." He reached beneath the skirt, his arm gripping my thigh until he reached his goal.

Then that finger circled my clit again, in perfect circles, as his other hand moved to my hair, grasping it at the base of my scalp. He kept the building rhythm below, his teeth pressing even harder at my neck, as he licked and sucked, murmuring filthy praise and dark promises too quietly for me to hear.

"Wulfram!" I came apart as his teeth scraped me, not hard enough to pierce my skin, but close.

I wanted more.

"Harder," I begged. "Bite me." I wanted his mark on my flesh, his claim on my soul.

"I will someday, *svichka*," he murmured into my neck, his fingers gentling me down from the sharp edge of the orgasm, still purring. "I will put my mark here, and beg for your little teeth to push into me as I fuck you senseless, to show the world that you have claimed me as well."

"I want... I want..." I babbled as he pressed gentle kisses along my hairline. The knives on the table clanked as I lost my balance, and I blinked up into Wulfram's amused, flushed face.

"Feel better, *svichka*?" He tucked a damp lock of hair behind my ear.

"My underthings are soaked," I said without thinking. He roared with laughter, and moved so I could see the massive length that now filled his trousers.

"Mine almost were as well, little *varl*."

I grabbed his hand and bit softly at the end of his finger, reveling in the way he shuddered, as if I'd done something far more intimate. "Little snake again, hm? I'm not sure I like that one."

"It's perfect for you. You're dangerous and beautiful, and I meant what I said." His hand moved to my neck, collaring me in a way that showed just how dominant Wulfram would be in

bed. “I’ll mark you right *here*.” He moved his thumb over the spot, and I felt a smaller climax thrum through me, weakening my legs as he pressed on that spot, his smile turning smug. “Yes, and every time I touch you there, I’ll make you come. Your body will know whose little *varl* you are.”

He released my neck, and I caught myself on the kitchen table, panting for a moment while Wulfram walked to the sink, adjusting himself as he hummed a Starlakian drinking song.

After a long moment, I shook myself out of the haze of sex, and turned back to the leather satchel and the last few things inside. “Oh, good! More herbs, not that I need them,” I muttered, pulling out a packet of the mixture I’d been taking to forestall my heat cycle. Setting them aside, I pulled out a small packet of dried spearmint, rosehips, and lemon verbena. Wulfram watched me make the tea, staying quiet until I was sipping it.

“My Anna took herbs after Cyndil was born. The birth was hard on her, and we didn’t want to take chances.” He didn’t ask the question I could hear in his tone.

“I always wanted children,” I said after a long moment. “I had more or less given up hope after I turned forty. And then Levi shared the curse on his line.” I peeked up. “You know the story?”

He nodded. “We had time to talk on our journey here. Not a lot, but he asked about my daughter, and I asked if he had children.”

“None of his line can engender young. Six older brothers, and him, and until the prophecy is fulfilled—in fire, somehow—the curse will keep them from ever having children.” I shrugged, trying not to show that it still bothered me. “He shared his blood with me when I was eighteen. Until the curse is gone, until the first Emperor’s crimes against the Goddess are expunged, there won’t be any children for me.”

“You would make an exceptional mother, Wren. And your life will be very long. I pray the Goddess blesses you with as many as you desire.”

I cleared my throat, needing to dispel the somber mood. “The Goddess has blessed me with Ratter. She may be all the children I can withstand.” I grinned into my tea. “Is she truly the Warqueen of All Starlak?”

“Eh, more or less. She’s Goran’s right-hand woman. Knowing that warrior, he’s probably abdicated to her by now, and is serving as her footstool.”

“Every woman needs a good footstool,” I muttered.

“Did you call, little bird?” Talon’s teasing voice from the doorway had me sloshing tea on my wrist, and before I could blink, Wulfram was there with a wet cloth, soothing the warmth away. Goddess, his hands were huge! He could hold both my wrists in one of them with room to spare.

The scent of rich brandy and fall fruit had my lips, wrists, and quite a few other parts much lower, tingling in response.

“Sorry, Wren.” Talon stopped at my side and cast an assessing look at Wulfram. “May I join you?”

“Please do.” The two of them began dishing up more food, chatting about the best way to sail in the Northern Sea at this time of year. I was drowning in talk of currents and prevailing winds when Levi walked in. He kissed me thoroughly, then sat and reminded the others that prevailing winds didn’t matter when you had a kraken-sized secret weapon.

“Ah, yes.” Talon’s cheeks took on a deeper hue. “You control the winds. How could I forget?”

Levi chuckled wickedly, while Wulfram stared between the two of them with humor and suspicion, then shook his head. With a wink, Talon refilled my plate before serving Levi a fresh cup of tea.

I couldn’t believe this was the same arrogant king I’d known all those years ago. The three of them almost got along like brothers, though I could see a hint of reserve in Levi’s bearing, and Talon pressed a hand to his eye patch from time to time.

At last, Fyrian and Zebulun joined us, and only Kir was missing from the group. When Wulfram asked Levi about him,

my kraken mate's mouth went tight. "I'll fish him out of the sea later. If he wanted to help plan the girl's rescue, he would be here."

My heart ached at his absence, but I set the pain and anger aside for the moment. Kir and I had been friends far longer than we had been mates. We knew how to fight and make up.

Though he'd be the one doing the apologizing, and he'd better start *soon*.

Zebulun unrolled a map on the table, putting smooth glass stones—that I suspected were polished gemstones of some kind—on the corners. "This is where we are now, on the Northwestern edge of the continent. The clutch who has your daughter, Warlord, is believed to dwell in these mountains—the Vinlar range that prevents humans from entering the Svellvollr."

Fyrian scoffed. "The ground is made of ice, and every few feet, there are hidden cracks that run for miles. Common sense and fear of death prevent humans from entering that desolate waste. There's nothing in the Svellvollr but ice, snow, rock, and despair."

"And dragons," I muttered. "I would imagine that clutch keeps anyone out, if they settle on the coastline."

Zebulun nodded. "They warned us off. It wouldn't surprise me if they killed anyone who tried to approach."

"Why did they go there again? Northern Starlak isn't a tropical paradise, but it has trees and wildlife, and abundant resources."

Fyrian shrugged. "They left after the... incident with the Emperor, many centuries ago. Perhaps they were exiled?"

Zebulun shook his head. "There are no records that indicate anything like that. They chose to go, according to our histories. The holding they settled in is marked as Kazna za Sram on the maps, though no one knows where the name originated. Our mother wrote in her journals that clutches from the continent traveled there long before our attempt. They wanted to see if any dragon mates had been found, thinking

perhaps Agnivo's clutch had discovered females there. Those four drove them all away, as they did me years later, promising any others who returned would be killed and fed to the Northern Sea. He didn't give me time to tell him no others exist."

"What an ass," Wulfram growled. "We need to get Cyndil back *now*." The dragons agreed.

"Kazna za Sram," Levi said softly, rolling the words on his tongue as he regarded the map. "Punishment for our shame." He pointed to the Northern Straits. "I know this stretch of water; it's only a hundred or so miles away. Treacherous, fast currents, enormous waves, almost impossible for ships to sail. One of my brothers once lived there, but abandoned it to move into calmer waters." He sighed. "It is difficult to go to sand when the currents scour even the deepest beds."

"I sailed the Straits," Wulfram said. "On a dare, when I was younger. Sank a ship doing it, and broke my arm in two places." Levi raised an eyebrow, and Wulfram shrugged. "I never claimed to be the smartest Warlord of All Starlak. Just the best."

The men joked and planned, deciding at last that the best route was to swim or fly along the mainland's coastline for the first few dozen miles, then cross the Straits when the sun was at their backs and the tides with them, the next morning.

I was shocked that Wulfram did not protest the wait, but he kept his eyes on the map. There was an inactive volcano in the center of the straits, a barren outcropping of rocks, where we could stop to do reconnaissance on the Svellvollr, just to be certain their nest was still where it had been before.

Fyrian tapped the map. "If we fly over their territory, they have the right to attack us with lethal intent."

"If they notice us," Zebulun said quietly. "Your weak signature may be a blessing in this. I'll stay just outside their territory and distract them while you sneak in."

"Weak signature?" I asked.

Zebulun winced. “Dragons sense one another. The older the dragon, the greater the power signature.”

“The stronger the dragon, you mean.” Pain was evident in Fyrian’s voice.

“Your signature will return when we have our mate, Fyrian,” Zebulun murmured. “Your strength isn’t lost forever.”

“They could come in force to kill you, Zeb. Four against one is not good odds.”

“If he stays over the water, they can *try* to kill him. But they will be over my territory at that point, and when my form is in contact with the deeps, I am invincible,” Levi declared. “Let them try.”

I interrupted their posturing. “Would they really attempt to kill you, even though you’re the only other dragons left in the world?”

“They may not know that,” was Zebulun’s answer. “But the Emperor will need to stay hidden. They will definitely take his presence as a threat.”

“They would indeed. Dragons do not trust those of my kind. Or cooperate with them.” Levi’s invisible tentacles were stroking my hair gently. I could tell he was attempting to appear unthreatening, but from the way Fyrian and Zebulun were staring at him—like he might send the wind to tear their heads off at any moment—I could tell he wasn’t succeeding.

It was only now occurring to me how young these dragons were, and how alone. Even Baltor’s behavior could be understood when I realized he was barely into adulthood, and unable to fully control his emotions.

“You rode on Zebulun’s back to get here,” I murmured to Levi. “That was unexpected. And brave.” I didn’t specify who had shown the bravery, but his answer was equally diplomatic.

“Young Zebulun was very kind to offer his help. I believe that was the first time an Emperor of the Deep Waters has ever ridden dragonback. It is a moment that should be recorded: a new age in the relations between our kinds.” He smiled at Zebulun. “Your name will be remembered by my line until the

last of us has gone to sand, and then the seabed itself will hum of your kindness and bravery.”

As the dragon stammered his thanks, I glanced at Talon, who was still quietly making plans with Wulfram, sketching possible nesting sites in the Svellvollr, in case they weren't at the first one.

“They get along well, the wyvern and your warlord,” Levi whispered.

“He's not my warlord yet,” I replied, but Levi's words had me examining Wulfram more thoughtfully.

He'd never hidden his lust for me, or his respect, not even when I'd held a knife at his throat. Not even when I'd begged for his bite in the kitchen, lost in a haze of pleasure.

He was worthy. He could be mine, a mate I would have chosen independent of any extenuating circumstances. Brought into my life merely because I wanted him.

I smiled wistfully. My mating to Talon had been fated, even if I hadn't known it. My bond to Levi was otherworldly. And my relationship with Kir... “That asshole,” I muttered.

Levi set me on my feet. “I will go and have a word with him. What would you have me say?”

“Tell him he owes me a few things.”

“What specifically do you require, *cora mar*?”

“I want his Goddess-damned pelt back.”

As Levi left, I heard Fyrian whisper to Wulfram, “She doesn't mean to skin him, does she?”

Wulfram just shrugged. “You can never tell with Omegas,” he replied casually. “I've met two now, and from what I've seen, they're bloodthirsty creatures, filled with power and rage, skilled in killing and torture.” He winked at me when I frowned in his direction. “Pretty much perfect, if you ask me.”

“I'd let her take her anger out on me any day,” Talon agreed. The dragons wisely kept their thoughts to themselves,

but I was still flustered by the scorching looks coming from the other side of the table.

Odd whimpered at my feet, and I took the excuse to get away from all the masculine energy and out into the bracing wind.

## KIR



The North Sea was cold, but not cold enough to soothe the burning in my heart, or in my mating mark. I stayed in my sealskin, but even that itched, as if it no longer fit my body.

As if it were no longer mine.

I'd been swimming for hours, through the night and into the next day, far into the deep waters, fleeing the self-loathing and hatred that swam through my thoughts, when it dawned on me that my skin *wasn't* mine.

It was hers.

She'd accepted my mark, but she hadn't touched the pelt that was hers by selkie tradition and law, since her short heat. It hardly smelled of her at all now, and that knowledge had bile rising in my gullet and my mind clearing.

She was my queen, my other half. What was I doing swimming away from her?

I tried to turn, but the memory of *him* touching her on the cliffside, and her allowing it, resurfaced. And the more painful one of my own brother-mate calling for another to join them... and passing me over. Inviting *him* to make love to our mate.

She didn't want me, but she would accept him? It was inconceivable.

I wanted to kill him. I'd always wanted that. I'd dreamed of it for years, before she knew of my affections. I'd imagined finding him, somehow magically disentangling her from his

evil hold on her soul, and bringing his one remaining eye to her as a keepsake.

Not that she would have liked such a thing. She was soft, for all that she'd been forced to act as if she had no feelings. She was as generous, kind, and thoughtful as any woman ever born. And so fucking forgiving. Too forgiving. She'd made love to him, to the man who'd thrown her away.

I swam as fast as I could to the surface, and screamed wordlessly to the sky.

The sky answered. "What the fuck are you doing out here, selkie?"

I spun in the water and gawked up at the enormous kraken that had somehow managed to sneak up on me. I couldn't see how he'd concealed his passage through the waters; he was twice as broad as the largest whale that existed, and towered up to the clouds. Gulls swooped and sailed over his head, like sparkling gems on an invisible crown. As I stared, one of his tentacles wrapped around me and lifted me out of the water.

"What are you doing?" I barked in the language of my kind.

"Taking you back to our mate," Levi answered in the same tongue, though his words were oddly accented. They were probably what the language had been in its earliest form. For all I knew, Levi could take the form of a selkie as well.

"Does she want me?"

He stopped moving in the water and lifted me up to one of his enormous, turquoise green eyes. "Have you lost your mind? Yes, your queen, your mate, your Empress asks for you to join her. What I want to know is why you're not already at her side."

Anger and shame fought for dominance. Anger won. "I'm in no hurry to share her bed with the cockroach. I can't believe you did."

Levi hummed. "She would have chosen you, I think, if you had not been such an arserag to her earlier."

“Don’t call me arserag. That’s his name.”

He blinked slowly. “But you’re acting as he did—jealous, grasping. Kir, you had to know that this day might come. She gave him a mate mark. The Goddess chose her as his sky bond. Yes, he has a long way to go before she will allow him to live inside her heart, where she has taken you and me. Many, many years before she will look at him and not feel at least some fear. But he protected her when we could not, and she has chosen to begin to forgive him. Who are we to dictate what her heart desires?”

“We’re her *mates!*” I shouted. “She should consider us! She shouldn’t be fucking that betrayer!”

The enormous blue-green eye went bloody red. “She is my Empress, and your queen. She rules us both, and we serve her. She can fuck *every* Alpha in this cursed world if that is what she needs to soothe her Omega nature.” He flung me back into the water. When I surfaced, he went on. “You should thank the Goddess every day Wren even looks at you, and weep with gratitude that she would touch you even once.”

I swam in silence for a moment, until the words that had festered in my heart for long years defied my attempts to keep them inside. “She doesn’t need me, Levi.”

“What do you mean? How could you believe that?”

“Look at you,” I said, unable to do so myself. “You’re the most powerful creature in existence. He’s her Goddess-fated sky bond. What am I? I’m not as strong as either of you, or even the warlord. I’m not as skilled with weapons. What will I do for the rest of our immortal lives, darn her socks? Cook her morning porridge?”

Levi’s words dripped with disgust. “Obviously not. Wulfram did that for her today. Talon cleared up the dishes, then helped plan with the dragons how to recover the young Omega, Cyndil.”

I laughed bitterly. “I would not have been able to eat at the same table as that wyvern. And you didn’t need me anyway, did you?”

He muttered something in his own language that may have been a curse, and the winds whipping around us began to churn the water into a turbulent froth. “I didn’t come here to parry words with a fool.”

“Then what did you come for?”

“She asked for her pelt back.”

“*What?*” My bark was sharp and high as a tentacle wrapped around my tail.

“Give me the pelt, Kir.” The command had me changing instantly in his grasp, and when he dropped me back in the water, in my naked human form, I kicked hard to keep the waves from sinking me.

I called out to his retreating back, “Wait! You’re not going to leave me here, Levi? It will take all day to swim back!”

“Good. It may take that long for you to pull your head out of your ass. You made her cry, you stupid seal.” He slapped the water in front of me with a tentacle. “I hope when you reach the castle, you can remember that she is more important than your pride. That there is no place for jealousy in her bed. And that while the Goddess chose him for her? Out of all the souls in the world, Wren chose you.”

“She was dying. She did it to save her life.”

“Foolish selkie. You hold a position no other being will ever be able to usurp. You are her best friend in this entire world, and she chose you for that role with no mystical bond, only her own desires. And then she chose you again, as her lover. Act like you know what that means.”

My mind was still stuck on the image of Wren crying. *Fuck*. I was a fool.

I took a deep breath, ducked under the water, and began swimming back to my mate, my best friend, hoping she would forgive me as easily as she had the arserag.

## WREN



“*W*hat do you mean, you left him in the straits?” I held the dripping pelt away from my clean dress. It still smelled of salt water and slightly of coconuts, but I didn’t let myself bury my face in it.

I was still mad at Kir, but now I was worried as well.

“Well, I did as you asked. I retrieved the pelt. Then I left him in the straits to swim back. He needs some time to consider his actions.”

“He could *drown*, Levi!” I wanted to pull my hair out. Carrying the pelt over to the small fire, I laid it carefully on the hearth. “Go get him.”

“I regret that I cannot. I’ve promised Fyrian and Zebulun I’d map the coastline of the Svellvollr before lunch, and look for any trace of the dragons. And Kir won’t drown. He’s a creature of the water.”

“He could still drown,” I groused, though I knew he was right. I would ask one of the dragons to fly out and bring him to the castle later, if Levi’s anger hadn’t faded.

“He’s only eight hours away, in his human form.” He snorted. “If I calm the waves a bit, he’ll be here in four.”

Frustrated with males, I headed back to the open trunk where I’d been searching for better clothing. Zebulun had brought me more of his mother’s old dresses, but I’d asked for trousers as well. Unfortunately, the ones he’d showed me had been made for a woman substantially larger than me, and at least a foot taller. Perhaps two.

This chest he'd shown me instead was full of what must have been his or his brothers' childhood clothing. Most of the trousers would still be too long on me, but I had enough time to alter them to fit before the mission to rescue Cyndil.

I held up a pair of leather trousers and nodded, then went to find the sewing shears. The men were still gathered around the table by the maps, cementing their plans.

“What are you doing, *svichka*?” Wulfram called.

“You don't think I can wear a dress on a rescue mission, do you?” I pulled the shears out of the dragon matriarch's dusty sewing basket, settling by the fire with the trousers on my lap.

The room went still, and too quiet, save the sound of the shears and the crackling fire. “*Cora mar...*” Leviathan began at the same time as Fyrian said, “Young healer...” and Talon murmured, “Little bird...”

I held up the shears, watching as they glinted in the firelight. “I know *none* of you are going to even suggest that I will not be a part of this rescue.” When one of them cleared his throat, I went on. “If any of you think for one moment that what's required to be a warrior is a cock and a set of balls, I can assure you I will help you discover in the most significant, *permanent* way, that you do not need those to fight.” I snapped the scissors on air, and all of the men gasped.

Wulfram laughed. “Personally, I believe you're more deadly than any of the rest of us, *svichka*. You're smaller and meaner, more devious. Like a *varl* snake, all bright colors and gleaming on the outside.”

“And venom with no antidote on the inside, hm?” I winked at him. “Stop flattering me, Wulfie. It'll go to my head.”

“I'd like you to go to my—*oof!*” Talon's fist in his gut stopped the lewd comment before he could complete the suggestion.

“You brought my knives. You're already ahead, Warlord.” I glared at the others, who all dropped their gazes, except Zebulun.

“Wren, you can’t,” he said firmly. “You’re the only irreplaceable member of this group. If the dragons tried to hurt you—”

I didn’t even bother to point out that I was magically connected to two of the others in the room, and that connection meant they were every bit as irreplaceable. “Have you set Baltor free?”

Fyrian winced. “Of course not. He’s descended into the Alpha madness. He doesn’t even respond to us now.”

“Is there no hope?”

“He has hours, perhaps a day, before he will be lost to us forever.”

I fought back a wave of sympathy. “Then we have no time to waste.”

“Omega,” Fyrian said soothingly, but I cut him off.

“*Listen*. The only dragon who has tried to hurt me will be locked away. I will go with you, Zebulun, and all my mates”—my heart constricted, missing Kir, *needing* him—“all together, to save Cyndil.” I could see that I hadn’t convinced them.

“*Svichka*, you are deadly. But your skills are not what is needed in this fight.”

“Why would you say that?”

Wulfram puffed up his chest. “We have a perfect plan. Zebulun will fly to the volcanic island, which is only a mile from the shore. Leviathan will swim there on the seafloor, gathering strength so he can withstand any draconic fire. We hope he will not be needed, but if Zeb requires his assistance, your kraken will keep him safe. While Zeb is distracting the clutch, Fyrian will fly low from the south to the nest, carrying me. I will sneak in, rescue Cyndil, and be gone before they realize we’re there.”

“She won’t be afraid to go with our dragons, if she sees you riding one,” I agreed. “But if she’s sick or injured in some way, she may need my skills.”

Fyrian shook his head. “They will not have poisoned her. She is far too valuable.”

“As are you. *Svichka*, I know it is very difficult to be left behind. But putting yourself in the line of dragon fire... I’m afraid the distraction of keeping you safe may complicate my daughter’s rescue.”

I sighed, trying to control the sudden urge to slip deadly poisons into their tea. “Do you all feel that way?” I asked, perhaps a bit waspishly. I fluttered my eyelashes at Wulfram. “You would leave me here, unprotected?”

He flinched and moved a few paces away, possibly less stupid than he’d been acting. “Excuse me, *svichka*. Nature calls.” He bowed and left the room.

“Full of shit is right,” I sneered at his back. At the table, both dragons began coughing.

“I will be staying here as well, little bird,” Talon said gently, kneeling and taking my hands in his. When I arched an eyebrow, he shrugged. “I have no wings of my own to add to the effort. Any danger to this place would come only from Starlak, if at all. Fyrian assures me they have closed off the passages through the mountain. If anyone makes it over the mountains, I still have some skill with a sword.”

“As do I,” I said through clenched teeth. Then it dawned on me. “They trust you to guard me—Levi and the others. They’ve... forgiven you?”

“Not Kir.” Talon tilted his head toward the hearth. “But Wulfram and I fought together to save his son and daughter-in-law. And Levi... Well, he demonstrated exactly what I have to fight for.” He blushed slightly, and for a moment, I was back in the bedroom, with him watching me and my kraken mate make love. I shook the thought away before my scent betrayed me, casting my gaze around the room.

*What in the hells?* While I’d been speaking with Talon, Levi and the dragons had left the room.

Outside, an enormous splash broke the quiet.

I sat up, as if shot, pulling my hands from Talon's. "They're going now, aren't they?"

Talon didn't answer, but wingbeats from outside were all I needed to hear. I ran as fast as I could to the door and flung it wide, my skirts tripping me as I struggled down the cliff to see a kraken, a warlord, and two dragons heading as fast as they could toward the horizon, over a glassy, calm sea.

They'd left me behind.



EVERY WOMAN HAD something that calmed her when she was riding the murderous edge. For some, it was cooking or gardening. For Ratter, it was poisons and practice with her knife. I loved those as well, but right now, I was too close to killing whatever male I could reach, so I turned to my other love: sewing.

The first hour, I ransacked chests full of ribbons, silks and satins, taking everything I could find that appealed to my seamstress heart. Then I cut a pattern on paper, the forms taking shape in my mind faster than ever, fueled by my rage. In only a few hours, I had the fabric pieces stitched together and taking shape as a gown on a dressmaker's form that I'd found in a dusty servant's chamber.

"Silver and gold?" Talon queried, bravely—or perhaps foolishly—poking his head into the doorway of the spare bedchamber I'd appropriated for a sewing room. He had a tray of bread, soft white cheese, and spring vegetables, though, so I didn't throw the pincushion at his head. A woman had to have fuel to keep the rage fires burning. "Is this a dress for yourself?"

"Yes," I replied, stepping back. "I'm tired of wearing fashions from three centuries ago. And I don't have anyone else's measurements." Though now that I thought of it, I had Ratter's measurements more or less memorized, even if she'd never allowed me to dress her in anything feminine. Not that I blamed her.

Still, I could sew her a gown once I finished mine.

“Being a woman is shit,” I growled, gnawing at the bread and cheese. “I’m the fucking *Ankelsang* for crying out loud, and you fuckwits don’t think I can handle a battle against a few dragons? A little subterfuge? I’ve been saving lost Omegas for *decades*. That bunch of amateurs is going to land in the shit; I can feel it.” I sat, elbows on knees, weary to the depths of my soul of casual chauvinism.

“It’s not that they—that we—don’t think you can handle the battle,” Talon murmured. “It’s that we can’t handle seeing you in danger. If any of us had to choose between keeping you safe and rescuing that Omega, with the exception of Wulfram, we would all choose you.”

“I wouldn’t want you to make that choice.”

His hands landed on my shoulders, gently kneading the tension here. “And that’s why they left you behind. So their focus would be on Cyndil alone. They’ll be back by nightfall.”

He massaged harder, and I moaned out loud. “That feels amazing.” Slowly, the tension seeped out of my shoulders, leaving a different tension behind, lower. A coiling need in my abdomen, that ached and pulsed in time with his movements.

Too soon, he moved away, gently lifting a piece of the delicate silvered lace. “You wore red for our wedding,” he said quietly. “You were like a living flame, walking toward me in the hall that day. I couldn’t breathe with how beautiful you were.”

“You didn’t blink,” I murmured, remembering. “Not until I stood right beside you. I was trembling so hard, the petals fell from the frangipani in my hair.” I closed my eyes. “You took my hands, and that’s when I realized you were shaking, too.”

“I wasn’t afraid, though I should’ve been. I was in awe. You were so beautiful. You still are.”

I laughed. “That’s what happens when a near-immortal sea monster stops you aging with his blood.” I stood and returned to the dress, pinning a few more pieces to the form, then taking them down to stitch them. “I don’t regret it now, you

know. I wasn't bragging about saving those Omegas. I used the power in my blood to do a lot of good."

"I would love nothing more than to hear your story, little bird." Talon settled in front of the fire, whittling a small knob of oak and throwing the wood shavings into the flames while he listened.

I spoke for an hour or two, telling him stories of all my journeys and adventures. He laughed, and swore aloud, and gasped more than once at all my exploits. It felt oddly peaceful, though I knew my other mates were facing danger far away.

"Let me go start dinner, little bird. They should be there by now, and will come back hungry." Talon had just opened the door when a flare of agony moved through the golden nautilus at my throat.

"Levi!" I fell to the floor screaming, invisible fire burning me.

What was happening?

Talon struggled to move me, demanding to know what was wrong, but I couldn't speak, terror a great ball in my throat. The ends of my fingers and toes felt as if they were being sliced into ribbons, my arms and legs searing away.

The pain wasn't what terrified me the most, though. It was the knowledge that Levi was hurt, seriously injured, and I couldn't get to him. Couldn't *help* him.

Not two seconds after my knees hit the floor, another voice joined mine, this one roaring in anger. "Get off her, wyvern! I'll kill you, I swear I will—" Suddenly, Kir was there, naked and wild-eyed, tearing Talon away.

I was in too much agony to stop them from fighting, to explain, but I managed to press a hand to Kir's mating mark on my breast, and—somehow, I wasn't certain what I'd done—push some small part of the pain coming from Levi's mark into Kir's.

Kir screamed, falling to the floor. Talon stood in front of him, trembling with anger, his breath heaving, blood streaming

from his nose and a deep cut on his lip. “You stupid seal,” he shouted. “Can’t you see she’s hurt? Look at her—she’s getting weaker.” He raced to my side and lifted me off the floor, carrying me to the bed. Every movement sent scalding pain along all my limbs, as if I were chained with invisible, razor-sharp wires.

“Kir,” I managed to say. “It’s Levi. He’s trapped. Hurt.” I wouldn’t say dying. My eyes flew to Talon. “I have to go to him.”

Talon shook his head. “We don’t know what’s happened, or where he is. But if he’s dying, he’ll take us all with him.” His gaze cut to Kir. “The bond between Wren and me is severed. My wyvern did it to keep her from feeling the pain of losing my wings. I can’t take on any of the pain that way.”

“If you cut off the bond with Levi—” Kir began, but I cursed him to silence. I might be all that was keeping Levi alive. Almost immortal didn’t mean truly immortal, and the power and strength I’d given both him and Kir in my heat had long faded.

I gritted my teeth against the agony, forcing myself to deal with it the way I always had. With slow breaths, steady focus, and the knowledge that I would do anything for the ones I cared for, whether that meant young Omegas, or very old sea monsters.

“That was not what I was suggesting, Kir,” Talon said calmly. “Only that Wren can’t bear the weight of Levi’s pain right now. But if you can channel your strength into her—”

“Of course.” Instantly, my selkie mate was at my side, pressing his lips to my forehead. “Forgive me for being an idiot, my love. Let me help you.” He began unbuttoning my shirt and pressed his lips to Levi’s mating mark, his hand against the one he’d made on my breast.

“I’m still... going to... kick your ass... later,” I managed to say, before I felt a flood of energy moving from Kir to me. It was like droplets of water in a desert, instantly vanishing into the whirlpool of need that was siphoning my magic at my

neck. “Need more,” I whispered. I glanced at Talon, who was already shaking his head.

“I can’t feel him inside me anymore, love.”

“Your wyvern’s not dead,” I insisted, the pain subsiding to manageable levels.

“He may as well be. I can’t give you his energy, though I would. You know I would.”

“I can take yours,” I whispered, hoping he understood.

He did. “You want me to give you a mating mark?” Talon’s voice was rough with... disappointment? “If you ask it of me, I will. My wyvern may be gone, but if my human Alpha energy can serve you, you may have it.” He stared at me silently, a world of hurt in his amber eye.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’d imagined that the first time I made love with you, after so long, it would be because I’d earned a place at your side. That I’d proven myself.”

“You don’t want the bond?” My heart constricted.

“I want it more than anything else in this world, besides your happiness. But...”

The story of our whole relationship lay there in his gaze. How we’d fallen in love so quickly, and carelessly. The great betrayals that came before we’d had the time to learn each other. How he’d broken me, and how I’d spurned him these long years later. All we’d lost that could never be recovered, and the few hopeful steps we’d taken toward gaining a new connection.

And now, how that reunion would be marred by necessity, when soft, sweet moments were what we needed to blend our souls once more.

“No. No, not like this. No more saving us worthless males when we haven’t earned it,” Kir gasped, snatching his pelt up from the hearth. “You deserve to bond for love, and nothing else. You’re not a solution to a crisis. You’re a fucking treasure.”

“She is indeed,” Talon agreed. “What do you suggest, selkie?”

“Mates are always stronger when they are closer together. We need to get closer to Levi. I’ll take you, Wren.”

“And Talon,” I said, staring at him, ignoring the thrum of agony that still cut into my soul. “Mates *are* stronger closer together, and he is mine, even if you wish it weren’t so.”

Kir’s eyes welled with tears, and his coconut scent grew bitter. “You may have forgiven him, but I cannot. I can’t forget the years where I held you while you cried. The nights when you lived through the nightmare—the memory of his betrayal—again and again, and only quieted when I hummed the songs of my people to you. The wounds you still bear...”

“They are *mine* to bear, not yours.”

He shook his head, as if I didn’t understand. “I am not only your mate. I am—I *was*—your best friend. You shared just how deeply he hurt you for more than a decade, limpet. I challenge you to find any friend who would easily forgive the harm he did you.” His dark eyes flashed toward Talon. “I will always want you to die horribly, wyvern. I will never look at you and wish you well. But I will learn to hide my feelings if she forgives you.”

He paced toward Talon, naked but gleaming with threat. “Though if you ever stop trying to do what is right for her, to heal the wounds you tore in her spirit as well as her body, I will be there waiting, with more torment to inflict on you than you can imagine. I will leave your body whole; I would never hurt my moonsong. But I will give you the nightmares you gave her. I will make you live in terror, and dread closing your remaining eye, if you ever hurt her again.”

Talon nodded warily at my selkie. “How will we get closer to Levi?”

Kir swung his pelt over one shoulder. “I am far stronger in my selkie form, and faster than you can imagine. I will swim you there. Perhaps your kind’s familial relationship to dragons will give them pause, and keep them from flaming us.”

I frowned. “What about me?”

I didn't expect the smile that creased Kir's handsome face. “Haven't you heard? You're an Empress of the Deep Waters. I think you'll find you don't need any help at all, my love.”

## WREN



*W*e were halfway down the hall when Talon groaned.

“What is it?” Kir asked impatiently.

“Odd. He’ll need food and water while we’re gone.” When Kir looked like he might argue, Talon just shook his head, whistling for Odd. Kir didn’t say what we were thinking, with Levi’s pain still thrumming in our veins and bones.

We might not come back. We might all perish.

Kir grumbled, “I’ll set food up for him in the kitchen. He can do his mess inside.”

“Could he stay in the garden?”

“It’s not safe for such a small pup. A hawk could take him.”

Talon nodded. “I just need to grab a bag to take with us. A moment.” Kir ran off toward the kitchen, and I quickly followed Talon into his room.

I could tell the pup had been sleeping there from the loose hair and the... *Wait*. Something on the pillow caught my eye. When I picked it up, I saw it was a small wooden seal with a gnawed-on tail. “Have you been whittling chew toys for Odd?”

Talon cleared his throat, pushing what might have been a kraken-shaped one under the bed. “Now, what sort of Alpha would do that?”

Not the sort I had imagined my wyvern mate to be, frankly. But all I said was, “These are darling, Talon. And very thoughtful.”

Talon just whistled for Odd again, who scrambled out from under the bed. Another wave of pain hit me, and I was grateful for Talon’s strong arm holding me as we made our way to the kitchen, got Odd settled, then hurried down the long stairs to the beach.

Kir was already there, hauling a small sailboat closer to shore. When I stepped into the water, for a moment it felt odd—like it was greeting me—but then the pain came roaring back into my limbs, and I almost fell.

“Sorry, limpet,” Kir said for some reason, turning away. He was trembling, and I had a feeling I knew why. Somehow, he was funneling more of the pain through his bond with Levi. I just wasn’t sure how much.

“Thank you,” I murmured, and he nodded without turning. “I wish there was more I could do,” I whispered to myself.

Talon shrugged. “You’re an Empress of the Deep Waters with untold powers, or so I’ve heard. Maybe you can... do something magical.”

“You think I can, what? Make the water move the boat?”

“Or the wind,” Talon suggested. “You’re mated to He Who Calls the Storm and Calms the Depths. I believe in you. And I believe, if you’re in the water with him, that kraken will do whatever he must to keep you safe.” He waded out to the boat and loaded the very heavy bag into it.

“What did you bring?”

“Food. Fresh water. A few clothes and some bandages. We don’t know what we’re facing, and preparation is key.”

I shivered at the sheer *competence* of him.

“What?” Kir asked, bumping me out of my lustful haze.

“Nothing, just discovering new kinks,” I replied. “Do you think I can help?”

“Can you breathe underwater?” Kir asked, already dragging me into the surf.

To Kir’s and my dismay, I could not breathe water, though I’d sucked down a good lungful of the stuff by the time I gave up trying. I did seem to have a greater hardiness to the cold, and the water felt softer than usual, as if it were a silk blanket on my limbs.

When I finished coughing, I gratefully climbed into the boat with Talon and handed Kir the end of the rope. “I never thought I’d see the king of the selkies pulling a sailboat.”

“If you ever tell anyone,” Kir mock-threatened, then half pulled me over the side of the boat to take my mouth in a long, almost punishing kiss. “My love, my heart, I am so sorry I wasted these days. I would live at the end of your leash for all time, if you forgive me for being an idiot.”

Some of the pain I was carrying eased, and I kissed him back. “I knew you were an idiot when I mated you. Now get to work, selkie. We need to rescue our kraken.”



It took six hours to come within sight of the Svellvollr coastline, and with every mile, our dread grew. “I see the island,” Talon yelled finally, taking in the sail.

But it wasn’t an island. It was a volcano, and no matter what Zebulun and Fyrian had said, it was by no means inactive.

The sky was dark and heavy, and filled with ash, though with the mid-afternoon sun, it was hard to see if there was any glowing lava from this distance. Hard to see at all, as the wind had blown ash in our faces until I’d had to cover my face with an extra shirt Talon had brought.

Talon was the only one of us able to function normally, but even he was having trouble breathing.

After the first hour, Kir hadn't been needed for much more than the occasional tug, as the wind was with us, and Talon's skills as a sailor were more than up to the task. But the waves had grown tall in the past few minutes, and the wind seemed to come from all directions at once. Now I was huddled low in the hull, while Kir swam listlessly alongside. I suspected he was drawing more of Levi's pain from me than he could safely handle.

The pain that I did feel was excruciating, and not knowing what was causing it was driving me insane. I pressed my hand over my kraken's mating mark, trying to sense where he was, but all I got were razor-sharp edges of agony, a sensation of burning, and a growing sadness.

Was he giving up? Dying?

Talon leaned close so I could make out what he was shouting. "Look at the island! Look at the crater." He lifted me so I could see when the next wave crested, and I gasped.

The barren, black rock island jutted straight out of the water, spewing ash. This close, I could see the faint orange of lava dripping from the edges of the lip, and a glow reflecting on the waves. I knew, the moment I saw it, that it was where Levi was as well. He was trapped somehow, inside the cone of molten rock.

When the next wave crested, carrying us high enough to see, wind blew the ash cloud just enough that I saw something more. A massive tentacle, holding onto the edge of the crater.

*Oh, dear Goddess, how did he fall into the volcano?*

"Dragons!" Talon shouted, pointing to the sky over the island. Sure enough, there were five dragons swooping over the volcano, dipping low, though I couldn't tell what they were doing. One of them was Zebulun, though, with his golden wings and green scales. Two others were a pale, snowy gray, and a larger one pure black and scarlet, though I didn't recognize them.

If they were the reason my mate was trapped, I would kill them all. Somehow, if it took every last bit of strength I had, I would make them pay. A powerful rage began to build inside me, and the winds around us gained speed.

A light gray dragon dove low, and a spurt of glowing red lava caught his snow-white wings, sending him barreling to the ocean before he shook it off and ascended. The lava had burned him, it seemed, but he had some resistance. Then, to my shock, Zebulun dove next, suffering the same outcome.

They were taking turns and working together, all of them trying to get to Levi, which softened my rage somewhat. But not even a dragon could withstand an active volcano.

“I’m coming!” I yelled uselessly to Levi, as the tentacle I could see began to slip. Then I thought—Kir could swim to him, perhaps carry me up the volcano. “We’re coming!” I pulled away from Talon, standing with one hand on the small mast, balancing against the swell of the waves. “Kir!” I screamed into the wind.

There was no answer, but I immediately saw why, as the phantom sensation of knives cutting into my extremities and fire roasting my limbs returned full force.

My selkie was floating, glassy-eyed and still, on the surface of the waves, and as agony roared through me, I knew he had exhausted all his power protecting me from this feeling. I fell back into the boat, wondering if I was dying. Almost wishing I could, if it meant this pain would cease.

Above me, a narrow crescent moon glittered like a pale knife in the sky through a small break in the ashy clouds, then vanished.

# LEVIATHAN



I had never felt like a coward before, but sneaking away from my Empress made me wonder if I might have taken the coward's way out this time. Facing her anger was worse than confronting an entire clutch of dragons, and I knew she would be angry when I returned.

Still, this was better than drawing her into the battle. The only thing I feared more than her ire, was her coming to harm. Intent on returning to her side as quickly as possible, I sped through the deep waters, following the path Zebulun had laid out to the island in the center of the straits.

*Island, hmm.* In my memory, the Straits had been a channel of swiftly moving water and bare rock, with no islands at all and very little volcanic activity. Of course, there may have been a fissure of some sort, hidden amongst the trenches, that had erupted sometime in the past thousand years. And the volcano could have died in that time.

I wasn't worried; as I swam, the waters this deep were every bit as cold as they had ever been, and fast-moving. But when I was no more than a mile away from the island, the waters changed. I felt a warmth that told me the small island was indeed active.

I swam around it, wondering if it was safe to hide here. Zebulun intended to land on the island and wait there, calling the other clutch out to speak with him. I mulled the haphazard plan we'd thrown together, seeing the flaws, but knowing that my presence made even the worst plan salvageable.

*“We’ve never gone back since that first time, so they won’t be expecting us,” he said, his voice crackling with excitement.*

*Ah, the confidence of youth.*

*“You cannot know that. They could sense you. They may not all come out of the nest.”*

*“They did the last time, and they have even more reason to fight now. We know there are four of them. If they don’t all come out, then you show yourself. They’ll definitely respond to that.”*

*“And kill you, for working with their enemy?” He went slightly paler at that, and I sighed. There were so many ways this could go wrong, but the only thing that concerned me was that my cora mar might be hurt, if she were close to the fighting. A bad plan that kept her safe was better than a good one that exposed her to injury.*

*The dragons had said it took six hours to fly. It only took two, when you controlled the winds as I did. I would be back by her side in no time.*

*“Let’s go,” Zebulun whispered, as Wren spoke softly to Talon. Her scent blossomed slightly, and suddenly, I wanted nothing more than to create a nest for her with my body, the rest of the world be damned.*

Instead, I’d nodded my assent to the eager dragon, silently slipping out into the hallway behind the rest of our ill-conceived but well-intentioned rescue party.

I suppose thoughts of his mate had thrown caution out of Zebulun’s planning. He had been right to put his faith in me as reinforcements. When I was in contact with the deep waters, as I was now, my powers were nearly limitless. At the dinner table, I’d been able to protect my deep heart and her other mates with mere physical tentacles. Here, I could reach up into the sky and enfold Zebulun in a web of my power, keeping him safe from dragon fire or claw.

I put on another burst of speed, and had just begun to rise to the surface to speak with Zebulun, when I heard him roar in

the sky. Had the other dragons noticed him already? Had they begun an attack?

I surfaced, scanning the sky. The volcano had blossomed with a great cloud of ash, and Zebulun was banking around it. Had he been burned? I rose above the surface, trying to ascertain if he was wounded, but he seemed fine, though distraught.

Then I saw them. Three dragons, arrowing toward him as fast as I had imagined those beasts could fly, and Zebulun was almost directly over the volcano.

I used the winds to blow them back, and for a while, it worked. They had caught sight of me by then, and my presence had more than startled them. I blew harder, sending them off course, though it made Zebulun struggle to keep his own course steady.

Then, somehow, the trio created a formation, their wings so close they were nearly overlapping, gliding instead of flapping, necks almost touching. In this way, they were able to slice through the punishing wind, straight toward Zebulun.

For a moment, I admired their ingenuity; the ancient dragons had never fought with such insight. But I had to protect my little friend. I pushed higher, halfway out of the water, to be close to him if he needed me.

The three unfamiliar dragons all roared, blowing bursts of fire my way in warning, and as my tentacles touched the surface of the rocky island, I almost didn't see what was happening to Zebulun.

He had flown off course and was now directly over the center of the island, where the volcano was erupting. A huge burst of smoke and gleaming lava began to move up into the ash-gray sky, in the shape of an enormous mushroom. Like a reaching hand, straight toward the dragon. Like it was trying to grasp him, to pull him back down into the caldera.

I wasn't sure he'd seen the lava, or perhaps the heat currents had caught him. His attention was on the other dragons, or on staying aloft, not on the danger from below.

I saw it all as if it had already happened. Zebulun sinking into the lava and dying. His brother Fyrian, mad with grief. The young brothers had already lost one of their clutch to madness, or would soon. These younglings had been through so much, lost so much.

There were only seven of them left alive in the world. Seven dragons, just as there were only seven of me and my kind. We were balanced, but I had a sudden premonition that the balance would shift if they died, and something would be lost in the world that could never be regained.

A quiet, golden note rang through the depths, calling me to action. A whisper: *Now*.

There was no time to plan or to hesitate. The red-hot rock was reaching for the young dragonling. I could not ignore Her call.

*Oh, Goddess. This will hurt.*

I called on all of my strength, and leaped into the air as high as I could, placing myself between the lava and Zebulun. I felt the drop in my power the instant my form lost contact with the water, but there was no time to reach down to it. I called on the wind to lift me higher, and it answered, though it drank my power down as it did.

I pushed Zebulun away with another burst of wind, and he went somersaulting across the gray sky. At the last second, as I began to fall, I turned so the hot rock would hit my carapace, rather than my more sensitive tentacles. If it made any difference, it wasn't much. The burning started immediately, my carapace scorching as I descended into the caldera, gripping onto the edges of the volcano with my tentacles.

I could hear and see the dragons warbling and roaring above me, but none of them dove at me, at least. I couldn't tell if they were trying to help me or watch me burn, but they circled for an eternity as I fought gravity and pain and exhaustion.

The glassy rock was sharper than razor clams on my softer tentacles, and blood poured out of me onto the rocks, filling

the air with a hideous smell of burned flesh, making the rocks grow too slippery to hold.

As time passed, I slid slightly deeper into the volcano, feeling my carapace baking into a harder shell. Becoming rock? The lava was lapping at me from beneath, like a patient predator. The agony of each lick was worse than anything I had ever felt, even in the heart of the mountain. The irony of it—that I was only yards from the sea, yet had no access to it—made the pain even sharper.

I slipped again, and focused all my thoughts on holding on, hoping that somehow, help would come. Though if I, one of the strongest creatures in the world, could not help myself, who could?

I felt a tremor in my neck, at the place where my deep heart had set her teeth and her claim on me, and felt her pain as a feather brushing against my soul.

*No. I will not let her feel this.*

I tried to cut off our connection, and was almost certain I had succeeded, but soon, all I could do was focus on the pain, and on not dying. Above my head, seagulls and dragons circled. I closed my eyes, praying harder than I had in my long, cursed life.

The only answer I felt was a surge of regret.

That I had tied my Empress to me, that I would be the cause of her ending. That I could not somehow loosen the binding between us, and leave her to her other worthy mates.

*I give her to You, Goddess. Please take her for me so that she may live with her mates. Take my life, but let her live. Let them live.*

There was no answer.

Then, all I knew was fire.

# WULFRAM



“*I*s that the nest?” I shouted into the wind, hoping Fyrian would hear me, yet not willing to let go of my iron grip on his leg to climb up and get closer to his ear. Or earhole, or whatever he had up there.

I didn’t even know the *parts* of a dragon. What the fuck was I doing, riding a dragon’s leg across the Northern Straits? I hadn’t been this foolhardy since I was a lad.

Or this frightened. I wasn’t certain how Wren had managed not to piss herself in fear, being carried by Zebulun across half of Starlak. The only thing keeping me from doing so now was knowing Wren would hear of it, and tease me for the rest of time. That, and the knowledge that my daughter could be in danger, with no one to save her.

I had failed to save her mother over sixteen years before. I knew I would ride a dozen dragons if it meant not failing my family again.

“I see a cave. The nest?”

Fyrian didn’t answer me, but he began angling down toward a mountainside that had an entrance high on one side, with a sheer cliff face.

We’d gone the long way around, adding an extra two hours onto our trip to keep anyone from seeing our approach around the southwestern side of the mountain. From this direction, we weren’t able to see the island where Zebulun would already be harassing the dragons.

Though one part of the plan was already fucked. The island was sending a plume of smoke high into the air that we could see, blanketing the sky even over the smaller crags that obscured our view. But we could see a few dragons circling high, and had to trust that Zebulun had lured them as planned.

When Fyrian landed, and I was able to tear my grip from his leg, he changed into his human form. “You stink of fear, Warlord,” he commented, his narrow face wreathed with amusement. “Did you think I would drop you?”

I would have punched him for taunting me, but he was naked after his shift, and I could count his ribs through his skin. One good punch from me could break a bone, dragon or not. He was pale and shaking, as if flying had exhausted him. Or perhaps...

“Does changing make you weaker?”

He blinked, surprised by my question, and answered with unexpected bluntness. “Now it does. I don’t shift often, anymore. In fact...” His eyes went to the cave entrance, about two hundred paces above us and on the left. “I don’t know if I can shift back. But if I flew straight into the entrance, they would have flamed us both. I may have to stay here.” He tried to take a step and half crumpled to the ground.

“Let me help you, Fyrian.”

He batted my hand away. “Leave me. She is all that matters.”

I was already shaking my head as I caught him. I’d have to carry him. If he was sitting out here alone, another dragon would see him and know what was up. But I couldn’t tell him that.

“I’ll need you in there. Your draconic expertise, if you will. And you may not have your strength, but you’re still fireproof, right?” He nodded. “Then you’ll make a good shield if one of those fuckers tries to fry me.” He laughed weakly, and I took off my shirt, wrapping it around his waist while I moved my sword to the side and adjusted my weapons so I could reach them in this new configuration. “If you promise

not to let anyone know I was pants-pissing scared up there, I'll carry you and not say a word. But I'm not carrying you naked."

"Not naked," he agreed, wrapping his arms around my neck and his legs around my waist. I toed off my boots and started climbing up the cliff barefoot, so I could feel the rock underfoot.

"You know," I said softly, though the wind was strong enough that any sound was whisked away the moment I spoke, "I carried the Emperor just like this through the mountain. Perhaps I should start a service. I'll be a courier for legendary creatures."

"A courier? I thought... you reminded me... of a donkey," Fyrian huffed. His grip grew tighter as my hand slipped on the rock face. We traveled quietly after that, and when we reached the entrance, I slipped Fyrian off my back, pleased to see he was able to stand.

We stared across at the island, fear gripping us as we saw what was happening out at sea. Zebulun and three other dragons—possibly four, though it was almost impossible to see them in the gray cloud to be sure—were flying around the volcano. Diving down into it, for some reason.

Fyrian tapped me on my shoulder. "No time to wait. Enter behind me," he whispered, then slipped along the side of the wall into the nest.

At first, the walls were bare rock, the light from the outside hardly enough to see to walk. But then the way before us grew lighter, as if there were a fire ahead. The scent of cooking meat and woodsmoke made it clear there was someone inside. I walked as silently as I could, Fyrian slowing and waving me to stop. Just to our left, I could make out a narrow tunnel, a good stopping place. If we needed, we could duck into it.

A voice called out from ahead. "If you take one step closer, Rivin, I will throw *you* on the cookfire instead. You're going to ruin the dinner, you overgrown iguana, and I'll tell all the others it was your fault this time!"

My heart raced. It was my daughter.

“How could I ruin it any more than you have already, servant? You’ve charred the venison until no self-respecting dragon would have it.”

“Good thing none of you assholes are self-respecting, isn’t it? Not respected by anyone, bunch of isolationist lizards, hiding in a cave like the world isn’t going on out there...” Her voice trailed off.

I frowned, not sure what to do. Cyndil didn’t sound like a captive.

“Something stinks,” the dragon said sharply.

“Stop insulting me! If you don’t like how I cook, then don’t eat—where are you going?”

“I *smell* something.” The voice was far too close, and I didn’t want to give us away, but Fyrian had already slid into the narrow tunnel, so I slipped in with him. He threw a small rock down the way we had just come, toward the cave entrance. A split second later, a dark-haired dragon—in a human form taller than me—zipped past faster than I’d ever seen a man run.

We both held our breath, but it seemed he hadn’t detected our presence. Exhausted, Fyrian gestured for me to go on. I waited for the count of ten, then raced to where we’d heard Cyndil.

She sat by a cookfire in an enormous cave that was as far from Zebulun’s castle as you could get. There were no gemstones here, only a few crude pieces of furniture. The room, such as it was, was littered with bones and hides, though it looked as if some of them had been cleaned up. Or piled up, at least. A few torches sputtered on the walls, throwing eerie shadows across the space.

“Psst!”

“Dad!” Cyndil’s bright blue eyes were huge. Her mouth was open wide as I ran silently to her side and pulled her to her feet. Her golden hair was wild around her face, a few

strands of it charred. She had on the most peculiar shoes, tall red boots with golden laces, and she was wearing...

“What in the hells is *that*?” I whispered, pointing to her dress. It was the sort of thing I’d expect to see on a doxy at an expensive inn. Red satin with a black corset that pushed her breasts up, her waist in, and made her look like a grown woman.

She hissed, “Dad, get the hells out of here. Rivin will fry you!”

“You’re coming with me,” I growled. “You are in so much trouble, young lady.” I grabbed her and began dragging her across the floor of the cave, stepping around a fire where a haunch of venison was being slowly burned, as it was set too close to the fire.

“I can’t. I paid the *liefhald*!” she argued, struggling against me.

I turned to face her. “These dragons are not the ones I owed the debt to, Cyndil.”

“What?!” Her voice sounded odd. Shrill.

And false.

“They didn’t tell you that?” I muttered.

Her eyes shifted down. “I didn’t know at first. I thought I was helping.”

“I still owe that debt, daughter. And... I have promised my friend Zebulun that I will pay it. That *you* will pay it.”

When her horrified gaze met mine, I held still, meeting her tear-filled eyes. “Cyndil, I will not force you. But Zebulun came to Starlak after you’d gone, and took another innocent woman instead, another Omega.” I went on, ignoring her growing shock and fear. “And I’ll be damned if I lose the two women I love most in this world to scaly beasts with no honor.”

Cyndil made a small squeaking sound, her eyes huge. I went quiet, feeling an odd warmth on my back, and slowly reached for the hilt of my sword.

“Get down, Cyndil.”

“D-Dad?” Cyndil grabbed my arms and in a quick move, reversed our positions, putting me behind her back. She held my wrists, preventing me from drawing my sword. Not that it would have done me any good. “I should introduce you to someone. This is Rivin.”

A giant, black-scaled dragon stood in front of us now, holding Fyrian in one clawed hand. The beast was at least three times my height, his horns curling around a skull that had an almost feline shape, and bright orange eyes.

“Not just someone,” the dragon snarled through teeth as long as short swords. “Your future mate.”

“Her future footwear perhaps,” I gritted out, prying Cyndil’s fingers loose and grabbing for my sword again. “Or some future furniture.”

Cyndil grabbed my wrist again, intent on keeping me from slicing into the brute. “Mate, ha! If I make that decision—which I will *not* if you don’t put that man down—it means this is your future father-in-law, so you can’t kill him. He’ll be kin,” she shot back. “Now, put him down!”

The dragon did just that, his blazing orange eyes never moving from me. Fyrian fell to the ground. I heard what sounded like a bone breaking, followed by a muffled groan.

“What have you done?” Cyndil gasped, running to Fyrian. When she touched his face, she stiffened, and I smelled a huge gust of rather sweet smoke. “Not another one,” she grumbled, turning Fyrian over. “Dragon?”

He gazed up at her, stunned, as she moved her hands over his mostly-naked form. “Dragon mate?”

“Who are you?” she breathed, a blush rising in her cheeks as his body reacted. I grabbed a deer hide and threw it over him before his damned dick could grow any harder. The black dragon’s head followed me, and I had a strong feeling that he still wanted to burn me to a crisp.

“This is Zebulun’s brother, Fyrian, one of the dragons I *do* owe a *liefhald* to.” I glared at the new dragon. “One of the

seven dragons left alive in the entire world, Cyndil.”

“There are only seven?” Cyndil whispered.

“This youngling has brothers?” Smoke emerged from between Rivin’s teeth as he changed to human form. I threw another hide at him. If I never saw another dragon’s double-knotted dick in the presence of my daughter again, it would be too soon. “Two more? Where are they?”

“Baltor is back at the castle where they took my Omega,” I told him. “He’s too far gone to the Alpha madness, though.”

“Feral?” Rivin asked quietly.

“His brother Zebulun believes he has hours left before he’s beyond saving. Zeb, my friend, was distracting the others so we could rescue my daughter—” I began, when a great tremor shook the ground.

Rivin whirled for the entrance, shouting, “Stay here.”

He was gone for a moment, while Cyndil fussed over Fyrian, and I grabbed a pair of trousers drying by the fire for him. I didn’t want my daughter that close to a naked dragon, even a sickly one.

In less than a minute, Rivin had returned. “There’s a kraken on the island. Cyndil, promise me you will stay here. I must go and help them!”

“He’s a friend. He’s kin!” Fyrian shouted back. “Don’t attack him.”

“We would *never*,” Rivin said, whirling back, his eyes wide. “Is it true? You’re kin to an Emperor of the Deep Waters?”

But Fyrian couldn’t answer. He had fallen back to the floor, groaning. Cyndil was fussing over him, so I answered. “Yes, the mate of the wyvern, King Talon—your cousin, if I’m correct—is also mated to He Who Calls the Storm and Calms the Depths. He won’t hurt you if you don’t hurt him.”

“We already have,” Rivin hissed, his eye flashing orange fire around the dark slitted pupils. “But he may remember us. I must go to my brothers.” I ran after him, almost running into

him when he stepped at the cliff edge. “What have they done?” he gasped, and I looked where he was facing.

There was the volcano we’d flown past, and dragons were circling it, flying high. The dragons were calling, bugling and roaring, still diving down at the caldera as if they were taunting it...

“The kraken. We must save him,” Rivin snarled, and immediately began to change. I squinted at the volcano, trying to see what he meant, and swearing when I made out the edges of what might have been tentacles wrapped around the top lip of the volcano. As I watched, they slipped.

“How can any creature survive that?” I wondered aloud as Rivin’s wings grew over my head. His change was much slower now. I suspected it took an incredible amount of energy to change forms so many times in a row, but I didn’t ask, still focused on the island.

He was almost large enough to take flight when I saw something approaching the island. A whale? A boat? I blinked away ash, rubbing my eyes to clear them. The volcano began to quake, as if something were inside it, tearing it apart.

Was Leviathan doing this? It had to be.

Lava began to spill out of the sides of the cone, great fissures opening up along all the sides. It was apparent the whole thing would explode, and soon, taking Leviathan with it.

All the dragons moved higher, away from the island. Bearing witness, perhaps, and keeping themselves from becoming ensnared in the molten rock that was hurtling out in giant, glowing boulders from the cone.

Toward the water. And the object I was certain was a small boat. To my dismay, I saw a figure inside the boat—no, two figures. It was Talon and someone else.

*Oh, Goddess, please let it not be her. Not Wren.*

I squinted harder. It was a seal. Kir. She had to be with them, perhaps in the bottom of the boat.

“Rivin!” I shouted, grabbing onto his leg as he gathered strength to launch himself into the sky. “There! The wyvern is there with his mates. They’ll be burned alive!”

“Hold on,” the dragon ordered, and I latched on as tightly as I could. Sharp claws curved under my bare feet as Rivin dove straight down the side of the cliff... then swooped up, skimming along the surface of the choppy sea. If my flight with Fyrian had been harrowing, this was a nightmare brought to life. My stomach churned, my heart beating so fast I felt it might burst, with death hurtling toward us every few seconds.

Rivin dodged huge boulders of fire, banking sharply left and right, flying above the ash clouds, then below. I would have complimented him on his abilities if my tongue hadn’t frozen with terror. I had a feeling only the Goddess was responsible for us reaching the small boat unscathed.

But when we got there, and flew above it, Wren wasn’t in the small craft. My stomach lurched, looking for her in the waves.

“Wulfram!” Talon shouted. “Take Kir!” He half lifted the selkie off the boat, and I yelled for Rivin to take him.

When the dragon balked, I shouted over the waves, wind, and the sound of crashing rock, “He’s the fucking selkie king, you idiot, and Talon’s co-mate. *Do it!*”

Rivin’s flame-orange eye narrowed, but he took the unresponsive selkie in one claw, hovering over the boat, watching for more flaming lava. I held out my arm for Talon to hold on to, so that he could swing himself onto the dragon’s foot.

But Talon shook his head, throwing a leather satchel up to me. “I have to go.”

“You’ll die! What are you doing?” I grabbed for his arm, but missed as a hot gust of wind lifted Rivin.

The dragon hissed at me. “There’s no time! The volcano will take us all.”

Talon shouted, “She’s down there alone, Wulfram. I have to go. Please help Kir.” My heart skipped one beat, then two,

as he dove gracefully off the edge of the boat and vanished.

“*Fuck!*” I yelled, staring at Talon. I wanted to follow him to Wren’s side, but I couldn’t leave her selkie mate.

Then the decision was made for me. Rivin had me dangling from his grasp as an enormous, house-sized boulder came tumbling toward us, and all I could do was hold on and pray.

“Goddess, if You take her from me before I’ve had the chance to tell her I love her, if You take her from the mates who would give everything for her, and *have...*” I choked off a sob as Rivin put on another great burst of speed, his wings a blur. Behind us, I could see the volcano breaking into pieces, lava glowing as it hissed like an angry snake.

I couldn’t see Leviathan, or Talon, or Wren. But I knew nothing could survive that.

“No!” I screamed, as the volcano slumped into the sea, vanishing in clouds of steam and ash, and we left them all behind.

## WREN



The Northern Sea chewed at the sides of the boat, as if the waves wanted to steal my selkie mate from me while he was unconscious and helpless, and devour him. Exhausted not only from swimming and pulling us for hours, but from carrying the lion's share of the pain that Levi had been inadvertently sending through our shared bonds, Kir couldn't resist the pull of the waves.

"Kir!" I screamed, diving over the side of the boat to pull him close to the edge. The water immediately made my clothing heavy, and I kicked off my boots, then my socks, as I swam to him, the waves doing their best to drag him away.

Cursing, Talon pulled out the oar and paddled closer to us, reaching over the side and pulling at the rope that was still hooked on Kir's neck, bringing us both to the hull.

"Is he...?" I pulled off my remaining clothing, letting the sea take it.

Talon shook his head, but said nothing as he ran a hand along Kir's side.

"What do we do?" I asked desperately, kicking my feet against the strong currents. This close to the island, the waves were lifting and lowering the boat, sloshing water over the sides, and I worried for Kir and Talon's lives if they stayed here.

"It's safer to swim, I think," Talon said.

"We'll drown!" I sputtered.

Talon leaned over and grabbed my hand, squeezing it. “Remember who you are, little bird.” His gaze held nothing but belief and pride. “You’re the *Ankelsang*. The savior of the weak, the queen of Wyngel and of the selkies. The Empress of the Deep Waters. One of the Goddess’s chosen Omegas, brought into this world to rebuild Her lines. Reach inside and find your power, love.”

“How do you know I have power?”

“I’ve always known. But, little bird, you’re glowing with it now.”

I glanced down and saw he was right. My skin was pulsing with a hidden light. Like a shimmer of gold, just under the surface.

When had that started?

I blinked against the salt spray, though it did not sting my eyes. In fact, it felt good. I let go of Kir, pressing a kiss to his side, and let go of Talon’s hand. “Get to safety. Away from here. Take Kir,” I shouted as the waves lifted us. I had to save Levi.

Talon’s brow furrowed. “Wait, where are you going?”

I had no idea, and my next words came from somewhere outside of me. “I’m going to take my throne.”

It wasn’t as hard as I’d imagined, letting myself sink and take that first breath of water into my lungs. Even though it hadn’t worked when I’d tried with Kir, something about the proximity to Levi, or how deeply I was submerged when I opened my mouth, made it seem natural.

Or perhaps it was just desperation that made me determined to succeed. So I did.

It felt easier than breathing air, and the water pushed pure power into my lungs. After the first few lungfuls of saltwater, I swam fast, a new current pulling at my legs, drawing me deep, to the very base of the volcano. The pressure pushed against my ears, and they ached, until suddenly the soft water snaked into them as well, displacing the air, and the discomfort was gone.

Well, *that* discomfort. The agony in my limbs was every bit as horrific as before, though the cold water helped numb it slightly. I swam harder, knowing every second could be my beloved kraken's last.

Long tarpon swam close, surrounding me as I sank, dancing in a strange formation around me. Larger beasts, squids and sharks, darted past, peering at me before they swam in their own pattern. Soon, I couldn't see them as there was no light, save the reddish glow from the surface where lava met the sea, and my own faint golden sheen.

The current pushed me to the very sea floor, and I blinked as a new world opened up before me. I had thought it would be dark, but the floor was alive with luminous plants and creatures. The current was almost unnoticeable down here, and I took a deep breath of water, drawing the heavy liquid into my lungs as I surveyed the seascape.

A strange creature, a fish with a lamp hanging from its head, swam up to me and nudged my hand, leading me. I followed it, swimming faster than I ever had before, and realized where it had taken me. The island's base was dark rock beside the lighter rock of the seabed, and heat radiated out from it.

That was where I stopped. There was nowhere to go.

My body burned with pain, and my mind was crowded with gruesome images of my mate, hurt and close to death. Surrounded by molten rock, cut off from the sea. I tried to focus on finding an answer.

If only the volcano could be thrust into his domain, where he held the power. Somehow, I needed to get the deepest of the waters in the world to him, through the volcano itself. They were cold enough to quench the fire, and I knew if he connected with this source of power, he would survive. But how?

As if I'd asked the question aloud, the lantern fish bumped against me once more, leading me to a place in the sea floor where the surface darkened, changed. No, not changed. The sea floor was *missing*, a narrow trench leading up and under

the volcano. The lantern fish darted inside quickly, as if time were running out. Which I was sure it was, given the blossoming agony in my nautilus mark.

I swam into the channel. The water here wasn't cool. In fact, it was almost too hot to bear, and I worried for my little guide. But soon enough, the channel widened, and I came out into a submerged cavern of some sort, the roof at least three times my height. Behind me, dozens more lantern fish filled the space until it was so illuminated that I could see clearly.

*Goddess.* It wasn't a cavern. It was a hall of some kind. The floors were parquet, decorated with black and white pearl chevrons, flecked with gold. I peered around and realized the walls of the room were decorated with enormous mosaic frescoes, depicting the Goddess and Her seven consorts.

She was by far the smallest of the figures represented, but She had been outlined in pearls and gold, and shone so brightly, even by the faint luminescence of the fish, that it hurt my eyes to gaze at her.

Beside her was a dragon with pure black scales, and on her other side, a human Alpha with long silver hair that reminded me of Wulfram so much that my heart stuttered. Then, there was a tall creature made of what could have been branches, another with broad golden wings and a shimmering crown, a being made of flames, and another of shadows. The only one missing was the kraken, but when I peered around the cavern, I saw him.

He had been created with bright red and black stone and almost seemed to be bleeding into the water around him. Separate from the others, he was reaching for the Goddess with his tentacles, weeping tears made of pearls from his great red eyes, and his carapace was black and rough next to the red stones of his claws. His expression was agonized. Tortured, even.

I swam closer, the heat intensifying as I did, and realized the red wasn't stones. It was molten rock, somehow held in place.

It was the base of the volcano. The kraken was made of the volcano, and it was what separated the deep waters from the interior of it.

*Remade in fire.* I heard the words in my mind, or my memory, and though I didn't understand, I knew this had something to do with the curse the Goddess had placed.

*Help me know what to do,* I prayed. *Help me save—* Before I could finish the prayer, one of the lantern fish had swum to one of the red stones. The others had gathered around something on the cavern floor.

It was a tool of some kind. A walking stick, or staff, with a top piece in the shape of a crescent moon. Or a sickle blade. I heard wordless singing as I swam to it, and when I picked it up, I felt a new strength fill me.

Knowledge poured through me, facts and memories that stretched from the beginning of time. For a moment, I was in the sky, looking down at the world below. Lonely, so terribly alone. And then I was being carried by shadows and light down to the world, swimming through the waters, delighting in the life around me. Creating life everywhere.

I saw my kraken mate, fell in love, and swam with him.

And then the shadows and light led me to the water's surface, and I discovered a great dragon flying above. So I sprouted wings and flew along with him.

In the back of my mind, I knew these weren't my memories, or stories, whichever. They were Hers. I had no time to wonder at the miracle that stretched my mind, only to ride along and see where Her story would lead.

The scenes came faster and faster, the glory of loving my seven mates, the pain of being tormented by the humans until my Alpha fought valiantly for me. The devastation when that Alpha was struck down by my kraken. The sadness threatened to stop my heart.

No, it did stop. This grief was too intense for my body, even close to immortal, to bear.

*Goddess, too much,* I cried, wrapping my hands tightly around the staff. It was a part of one of Her mates, I knew. I wasn't sure which one, but I *knew* it, as I also knew what I had to do. It had been left here for this purpose, just as I had been sent.

I gathered my strength, hoping I had enough left. My mating mark had begun to bleed into the water around me; Levi was almost gone.

I felt a soft whisper of comfort coming from the wood, and knew what to do. Dragging it across the cavern, I set the crescent-shaped piece against the largest of the red stones, the heat blistering my face even in the water. I prayed as I lifted it above my head, then swung it down as hard as I could.

The water that came jetting from the split in the rock I made pushed me back and bruised me, like a great fist had punched me in the center of my torso. I felt fish swimming frantically around me as molten rock began oozing into the water, the volcano emptying out into the sea, onto the cave floor, filling the cavern.

*I have to get out of here!* I dropped the staff and started to swim with my ineffectual human hands and feet, cursing as the turbulent currents kept me from making any headway.

Within seconds, I was turned around, unable to see the way out. The only relief was that Levi's mating mark had stopped hurting. I hoped that was because he was in the water, healing, but the fear that it meant he had died swam alongside my hope.

*I am invincible in the deeps.* His words echoed in my head, as I scrambled along the sea floor, trying to outpace the rock that was rushing toward me. If it caught my legs, if I didn't outswim it, it would trap me here, cementing me to the sea floor.

Levi might be invincible down here, but I wasn't certain that extended to me. I could breathe water, but I hadn't grown tentacles or developed super strength. And I was growing very, very tired.

In the end, it wasn't the lava that caught me. It was a falling rock that landed on my ankle as I kicked, pinning me against the cavern floor. My body slammed against the seabed, my ribs cracking like dry branches. I coughed, and my blood spilled out into the water.

I scrambled with frantic hands to move the fallen rock away, but exhaustion had already caught me in its claws. My energy was gone, whatever magic had filled me at the surface, and whatever my mates had shared with me. Levi wasn't able to send me more, and Kir...

My sweet selkie. He'd taken on more of Levi's pain than he could bear. I could feel in our bond that he was closer to death than I.

If Talon had given me his mark, I could have pulled on him... but I was almost glad he hadn't now. If I died, he might still live.

Memories of Icarus and our childhood playing on the sandy beaches of Wyngel flashed through my mind, and I closed my eyes.

*"Icarus, get out! I'm not even dressed!" I held my wedding gown up to my chest. I'd been admiring the deep red fabric, wishing the maids would come early to help me put it on. I didn't want Talon to wait.*

*No, I didn't want to wait another minute to be Talon's wife.*

*Icarus ignored my protests and flung himself across the long chaise. "I don't care; you know that." I did know that. Icarus and I had never been attracted to one another, although we'd kissed once, when I was eleven.*

*We'd both felt ill afterward, gargled with vinegar, and sworn never to do it again.*

*He let out a huge sigh. "I don't want you to marry Talon. It'll ruin everything. You'll turn into one of those fancy ladies, who sit in solariums and giggle. In a year, you'll probably be too stuck up to even go to the beach with me."*

*"I'll never give up the beach, Ick. Or you." I grabbed my robe and belted it on. "The only thing that'll change is that*

*instead of just feeling like I am, I'll actually be your sister."*

*"You say that now. But what if you decide to give up?"*

*"Give up what?" I was almost mad. "Ick, are you trying to ruin my wedding day?"*

*"No. I just don't want you to give up what makes you you."*

*Rolling my eyes, I went back to folding the edges of my blankets on the bed. I'd been obsessed with getting them arranged just right, though I didn't know why. "What makes me me, silly boy?"*

*"You're the strongest, most stubborn, biggest-hearted girl who ever lived, Wrennie. You feed the birds, and make sure the servant children have enough to eat, too. When you see someone weaker being hurt, you step in, even when it costs you." He lifted an eyebrow, both of us remembering the week before, when Icarus had only just saved me from being arrested for murder.*

*"Those boys were tormenting that poor heron," I grumbled. "Someone had to step in."*

*"And you're always the one who steps in. Don't forget, all right? No matter what happens, no matter how many people bow to you, remember who you are. A fighter, a protector... and my best friend."*

I'd promised him never to give up on myself.

And that promise still held now. I would not die. I couldn't give up. I had too much to live for. Too many mates tied to me. I had to live to see Icarus again, and play with Odd. To teach Ratter how to be a strong woman in a world that tried to keep us weak and subservient. I had dresses to make, and more Omegas to save; I could feel it. I just had to hang on and...

*Wait.*

I felt something in my mating mark. A pulsing. A seeking.

Levi was looking for me. I sensed movement in the water by my face and felt relief. Levi was the master of these seas, and he could save me. He could carry me out of here, heal me.

I was going to live. I opened my eyes, searching for him.  
But it wasn't Levi who had found me.

# TALON



I knew jumping into the wild waves to save my mate was an idiotic thing to do. But it wasn't the dumbest thing I'd ever done.

Believing she had been unfaithful had been far worse. Hurting her. Chasing her and my brother away, stewing in my injured pride for all those decades. Then, not falling on my knees the instant I found her again, to beg her forgiveness. Yes, I'd done a lot more boneheaded things than fling myself into the Northern Sea.

I half expected to drown trying to get to her. But the moment I hit the water, the small, crescent-shaped mating mark she'd impressed on my neck long ago flared to life.

And I breathed.

I breathed water as if it were air, and felt the connection between us snap into place. I marveled at the sensation while I tore my clothes away and swam down, pressure finally pulling me toward the only place she would be: the epicenter of the trouble.

She'd always been in the center. Of my life, of the Goddess's plans, and now, of the volcano. Of course that's where she would be now.

The water was thick with silt and rock, and only luck kept me safe as I swam. Though I gave up thinking it was luck when it led me to the narrow passage where I could smell her scent and see her blood flowing out. I pulled my way through, hand over hand along the rocky seabed, and found her at the

end of it, the water boiling hot as she struggled with a rock that had caught her leg.

When my wyvern and I had been connected, I'd had great strength, along with the ability to withstand fire and high temperatures. I no longer had that, and it seemed that whatever healing my bond with Wren granted me, it did not make me impervious to pain.

I'd certainly felt every moment of agony when I lost my wings, and now, breathing in boiling water, searing my lungs, I felt almost as much pain. But I'd learned something, in that sacrifice: how to ignore pain in order to save the one I loved.

I swam behind Wren, who was now floating as if dead, though I knew she lived. Our bond told me with every beat of her heart, and mine. I found a handhold on the rock that pinned her, pressed my feet against the floor—it was a floor, not a cave, with some sort of mosaic underfoot—and set my back into the work of freeing my unconscious mate.

Slowly, too slowly from the amount of blood in the water, the rock rolled aside, and Wren's leg floated loose. I refused to look at what was left of her poor foot, knowing we had no time to lose. I wrapped my arms around her waist and dragged her toward the tunnel... only to watch as lava filled it in before my eyes.

If not for the remaining glow, I would not have been able to see how the tunnel had become our tomb. There was no other way out, and the sea was boiling around us. The water burned my skin, and Wren's body floated lifelessly at my side as I swam back a few feet, away from the inexorable heat.

There was nothing left to do, no exit from this place. The salt water that surrounded my face served as tears as I finally knew defeat. *Goddess, why? What part of Your plan does this serve?* The cavern was an eerie, glowing red, and I embraced my wife, my sky bond, my mate, and prayed, not expecting an answer.

But one came.

Just as I thought I might die from the heat, or the heartbreak of failing my love one last time, a golden ray of light snaked through the blood and water around us.

No, not light. A golden... tentacle?

Yes. I noted glowing suckers on it, though I could also see through it to the red-tinged water behind, so I knew it wasn't real.

Was I dreaming? I wasn't certain. As I watched, the tentacle grew, thickening into one as large as a tree trunk, then wrapped around me and Wren, encasing us in power.

*Sharing* the power. I felt the weakness drop from my limbs and the heat dissipate, as it lifted us up. I wasn't certain how, but the rock moved out of the way, the ceiling of the cavern parting, somehow. The water was doing it, I saw, as we got closer to the surface. The water itself was shaping the rocks and lava into a passageway.

Water gushed from my lungs, emptying them in one giant breath, before my head broke the surface. I heard Wren gasp as we breathed in the cool, clean air, the wind gentle as it slipped past our lips. And then we were lifted out of the water, held up by nothing but golden light and wind.

Above us, dragons circled in a stormy sky. My arms were still wrapped around Wren as the tentacle loosened slightly, holding us up to a creature I'd only seen once before, when he'd sunk my ship and taken my eye.

This time, I was glad to see him, though he was bleeding and burned so extensively, I gasped. "Levi," I managed to say, though my lungs still felt seared. "Help Wren."

"Or I can help you?" she asked. I turned and froze.

Naked, she sat on a throne made of light. Well, of tentacles and light. Her bright red hair flew in the wind around her face and shoulders, and she wasn't bleeding anymore. In fact, she was perfectly healed. Her beautiful gray-green eyes glinted with sparks, and her skin glittered, as if she had on a transparent dress made of scales. Or as if her skin itself had changed.

Were they scales, like a dragon, or a fish? I squinted to see, but she was moving toward me, in the air somehow, and they shimmered and moved.

“You came to save me,” she said, her voice strange and multi-tonal, almost hypnotic. “Twice, you have sacrificed for me. You have redeemed yourself.”

“No,” I began, but she wrapped her naked body around me, both of us floating on the wind itself. I felt my cock stirring and swallowed nervously, glancing at the kraken, who was holding us up with tentacles made of power and the wind itself.

“When a man does something wrong, he should repay that debt twice over,” Wren purred, as she began licking my throat. Her voice was more like her own now, though filled with hunger. “You said those words to me when I was young. And you have done that. Now, it’s time to take the forgiveness I offer.”

Beneath us, the leviathan had created a nest made entirely of tentacles, braided with high sides so there was some sense of privacy. Levi set us down in the nest, then turned his eyes to the skies. I would have thanked him, but my mate was purring, demanding my attention.

“Give me what you owe me, Talon.” Wren grasped my upper arms with her hands and parted her legs, pushing me onto my back. Her aroma overpowered the scent of the ocean, blending with it, making my mouth water. Her hands moved on me like water, silken and smooth, her fingers tracing the patterns that lovers share between them. Everywhere she touched, my pulse raced, as if she were lighting the very blood in my veins with some magical ecstasy.

“What I owe—” My words were cut off in a garbled moan as she moved on top of me and slid down on my waiting cock. Her walls were tight, and she gripped me with her thighs as she descended and ascended smoothly, each movement drawing the coiled pleasure tighter. “What is happening?” I asked, my voice garbled as my mate’s slick wetness drenched me.

She closed her eyes, throwing her wild red hair back, and I reached for her breasts, taking the sharp points of her nipples in between my fingers, exulting in her obvious pleasure.

“You’re going to mark me, husband.”

“I... I am?”

She looked down at me, her mysterious eyes swirling with power. “You are.”

Finally. *Finally*, I was going to claim her.

I was inside the woman I loved more than life, more than my wings, far more than myself. I looked up, tears falling from my eye, bliss building in my soul. I was fucking my wife’s perfect, dripping pussy, while... I blinked at the sky.

While dragons watched.

A tentacle snaked out, pulling Wren’s hair back from her face.

While her kraken mate held us in the air.

A laugh began to build inside me. After all these years, I was inside her, and I wasn’t even thrusting. The damned creature was doing it for us. I wanted to shout, but I wasn’t about to complain. Instead, I used the hands I’d freed to tease her nipples, then work her swollen clit, as the wind whipped her hair around us both, and the dragons spun closer.

“Time to give me your knot, and your mark,” Wren reminded me, and I concentrated on making her come around me. As soon as she began to shudder in her release, I thrust upward and felt my knot push into her tight channel, then swell, locking us together.

“My love, my mate, my wife, my little bird,” I growled, wishing my wyvern side could be here for this, could know the joy of joining with his other half, his sky bond. “I love you. I claim you, and mark you, and vow to keep you safe and care for you for all the days of my life.”

She leaned down, pressing her smooth neck against me. I thrust deeper, feeling her tighten around me, and sank my teeth as gently as I could into her skin.

Her blood healed me, almost instantly. And changed her as well.

The scales on her skin glittered bright gold, and as she came apart again, she threw her head back and... opened her wings.

# WREN



*H*ow was this my life? Even for the *Ankelsang*, this was a miraculous turn of events.

I wrapped my arms around Talon, feeling his love and awe pulsing in the mating mark he had at last put on my neck. I thought I could feel his wyvern spirit as well, though it seemed as if it were braided into my soul as much as his.

When I felt a prickling ache on my back and flexed my shoulders, I saw that, perhaps, that was what had happened. “Are these your wings?” I asked Talon, who smiled even as he shook his head.

“No, my love. Those are yours. And they’re exquisite.” His cock throbbed inside me, and we both grinned like children caught misbehaving.

A dragon swooped low and hovered as close to us as it could, carrying something, or someone. A familiar voice shouted, “Well done, wyvern! When you finish knotting our Omega, and the kraken is done being a pervert stroking both your asses with his wiggly bits, we’ll meet you down on the beach.” Wulfram shaded his eyes with a hand. “Nice wings, little *varl*. And scales, too? Good thing I like my women pretty and deadly.” The dragon flew off to the Svellvollr coast, landing on a rocky beach, alongside a few other dragons.

I laughed, though I knew I was crying as well. I’d gone from being pinned at the bottom of the sea to being knotted in midair, in full view of a bunch of strange dragons, over a dying volcano.

*Dying volcano.*

“Levi!” I called, and felt Talon’s knot subsiding, our combined releases spilling down my thighs as he slid out.

Suddenly, Talon and I were moving, dropping down, and the lurch in my stomach made me cry out. *Yes, little siren?* Levi’s voice was in my mind, but he held me up next to his face, his giant turquoise green eye whirling calmly. His real tentacles were holding us now, though I hadn’t noticed when the original golden ones had vanished.

“Oh, Levi!” His carapace had scorch marks all over it, and I covered my mouth with my hands to keep from crying out.

Talon was murmuring something under his breath. “The line of my beloved Emperor has been remade in fire, never to be broken again.”

Levi’s tentacles quivered. *What did you say, wyvern?*

Talon smiled, obviously hearing Levi in his head as well. “I was reading. They’re runes, on your shell,” Talon replied, his amber eye gleaming. “An old draconic language that the wyvern royalty has passed down for centuries. That’s what it says.”

He repeated the words again, and I smiled. “The curse is broken.”

The sun broke through the clouds above, and a ray of golden light fell on Levi’s carapace, lighting up the scorched runes as if they were holy fire.

*Thank you,* he whispered, and I felt a pulse of warmth and love in my nautilus mark... and then lower, in my womb, which cramped suddenly.

What did that mean?

A tentacle wrapped around me and rested on my lower abdomen, like a promise. I opened my mouth to speak, but at that same moment, a great roaring came from the beach where the dragons had assembled—in addition to Kir, who was standing close to the beasts, holding onto Fyrian. I wasn’t sure

who was holding who up, but Wulfram stood between them and the dragons.

“Go, now!” I told Levi. “Something’s wrong.” Before I’d finished speaking, we were moving as fast as the wind toward my warlord.



“YOU WILL NOT TAKE HER, *liefhald* or no!” a naked man—who had to be a dragon, though he did not boast the visible scales that Zebulun and his brothers wore—shouted at Zebulun. “Go ahead and take her father’s life. He’s the one who owes you a debt, not our dragon mate!”

Zebulun was standing in front of Wulfram and a young woman in an incredibly risqué dress, who had to be Cyndil. “I’m not your dragon mate yet, am I?” she yelled back, pulling away from Wulfram and going chest to chest—well, nose to chest—with the massive, silver-haired man. “And if you hurt one hair on my Daddy’s head, Agnivo, I will—I will never...”

The male sneered at her, his scarlet eyes flashing. “You will *nothing*. You are ours, and you will not leave the Svellvollr, Omega.”

“So I’m a prisoner?” The young woman was easily over six feet tall, and as broad as any woman I’d ever seen. She looked like a warrior queen from the old stories, but the man she was arguing with was enormous, easily eight feet tall, and terrifying to behold. Though he was in his human form, he breathed fire when he lifted his head to the sky, painting a tower of flame against the remaining clouds.

“Call it what you will, woman, you are never leaving us!” He stepped toward Cyndil, and she cowered back.

“Get away from my daughter!” Wulfram shouted, drawing his sword and lunging for the dragon.

*Foolish, brave man.* I cursed internally, but knew I would have done the same. And would have fallen, as he did.

The dragon struck out with a clawed hand in a move so fast it was like a flicker, or a spark, but the power behind it was horrific. Wulfram skidded over the rocks for a dozen yards, a fountain of blood pouring out of his neck, scarlet splashing on the gray stones. I knew instantly the dragon had dealt him a mortal blow.

“Daddy!” Cyndil screamed, running to Wulfram’s side.

The scene froze for a split second, then exploded into action.

Suddenly, Zebulun was there, wings outstretched, protecting Wulfram and Cyndil. Fyrian began changing, sheltering Kir.

The other dragons on the beach lurched into motion as well, though I couldn’t tell what they were doing. Attacking Wulfram? Trying to protect him? One of them was flaming one of the others, which didn’t bother me, since they kept the flames away from my warlord.

“Get out of my way!” I shouted as I flew toward the fight.

Actually flew, though I wasn’t certain how I’d done it. My wings streamed out behind me, like enormous golden rainbows. I heard Talon shouting, and sensed Levi moving below me, as if to catch me if I fell. But nothing would keep me from Wulfram.

I wasn’t sure the fighting dragons saw me at first, and they were still moving, blocking my view. “Be still!” I shouted, and my voice was a thunderclap. Every being on the beach was a statue, staring at me with mixed expressions of shock, horror, amazement, pride, and something like worship. None of them moved.

I wasn’t certain they could. An energy I had never felt filled me, overflowing into the very air around my body. When Levi had shared his power with me, I’d felt strong. And when Kir and Levi had claimed and marked me, I’d felt a surge of power move from me to them, though the bond between us amplified the power, rather than diluting it. Strengthened us all, and healed every wound.

When I mated with Talon, my wounds had healed. That was a power I could comprehend. But when I commanded the world to be still, the clouds in the sky stopped moving, the waves on the ocean itself froze in place, dragons hung suspended in the air for a long moment... This wasn't a shared power, like breathing water, or healing.

It was a loaned one, and I thanked Her for the gift of time. Time to save my warlord.

I landed next to Wulfram and grabbed his face in my hands. Biting my lip viciously, I pressed my mouth on his, pushing my blood inside his lips. "Drink it, my darling warrior. Drink it and live."

Time began again the instant my blood touched his tongue, and the world exploded into a frenzy of sound. I ignored it all, intent on the task at hand. Quickly, I pressed my other hand against his neck, trying to stop the blood that was leaving him, but his wounds were grave. I wasn't sure I would be able to save him.

Cora mar, *let me*, Levi whispered into my mind, and I felt a tentacle slip past me, wrapping around Wulfram's body. He used it to hold the wound closed, the suckers gently closing the gash. Slowly, a golden glow surrounded the area, as if he were cauterizing the wound somehow. As I fed more blood into Wulfram's mouth, I watched the tentacle become a hand, and saw Levi had partially changed, now kneeling beside us, though his torso was in the water.

Then Talon was there, supporting Kir, who looked almost as gray as Wulfram. I wanted to go to him, help him as well, but Kir still had a pulse. And Wulfram... did not.

"No!" I shouted, using my hands to pump rhythmically on his chest, forcing air into his lungs. "Not like this! He's mine!" I stared up at the break in the clouds. "He's mine, do you hear me? My Alpha. Give him to me!" There was no answer.

Had She stopped time for me to reach him, only to take him from me? Had I not suffered *enough* in my years of saving the girls and women who called out for help, for hiding places, for healing... only to hold one of the pieces of my

heart as he breathed his last? I began to tremble with despair, but Kir and Talon fell to their knees and laid their hands on Wulfram's shoulders.

“Do not give up hope, my Empress,” Levi commanded. He put his hand to his mouth and bit, placing the wound at Wulfram's blood-stained mouth. He fed his own blood into the warlord as I pumped his heart, waiting for some sign that he would wake.

The only sign that came was a wave that swept up the beach far higher than the tide should allow. The water frothed around Wulfram, washing the blood around him out to sea. And then another wave danced around our feet, as Levi hummed, feeding the Alpha his blood.

Wulfram's cheeks changed color, becoming pinker. The wound on his neck was closing, his hair began to glow, bright silver, like the moon, and then— “He's breathing!” Talon cried.

Was it true? I couldn't see movement in his chest, but there was so much blood. *Wait... yes.* There, a slow rise of his chest, but not the rhythmic motion of breathing. More like he was being filled inside with something. Air, or... power? His skin buzzed, my fingers tingling where I touched him, but Wulfram didn't open his eyes.

“Is he alive?” I wondered aloud.

“I'm not sure, *cora mar*,” Levi answered, stroking my hair as we waited. “If he does live, I have no idea what it will do to him to have so much of my blood.” When I raised my eyebrow, Levi's brow creased. “You had a swallow or two and became nearly immortal, with the power of healing. Who knows what an Alpha of Wulfram's caliber will become with so much of my power inside him?”

Wulfram's voice, though raspy and lower than it had ever been, forced my attention back to him. “I hope what I become is my *svichka*'s mate.”

“Wulfram!” I gathered as much of him up in my arms as I could, raining kisses on his face, beard, and neck.

“This is... what I always imagined... the battle orgies would look like,” he rumbled, and I pulled back. His blue eyes gleamed with humor, but there was a new, strange turquoise glow behind them, and I knew Levi had been right to guess that Wulfram might be changed. But just as I wondered if this was the same warlord I’d fallen for, he murmured, “Except there should be more knotting happening right now. Hop on, little one. I’ve been hard for you for months.” He patted the front of his blood-soaked trousers.

“Sounds like the same Wulfram to me,” Talon said dryly. “Maybe don’t knot my wife in front of your daughter.”

“My daughter?” Wulfram was on his feet quickly, swaying, but scanning the beach for her.

“She’s fine,” Levi said, though his voice was hard. “I made sure of it.”

I blinked as I took in the scene behind Levi. The top half of his body was human, as it had been in Verdun City months ago. But the bottom half had become tentacles—enormous, roopy ones that stretched behind him into the water, and to the other areas of the beach. And a good number of those were wrapped around the foreign dragons, holding them in place, like moths caught in a spider’s web.

They struggled against Levi’s grip, but he was half-submerged in the water, and showed no sign that keeping them immobile taxed him at all. In fact, he turned away from them for a moment to tend to Kir.

My selkie mate had collapsed on the sand, and while we all watched, Levi leaned down, offering a hand to him. A bleeding hand. Kir took it with a trembling hand and lifted it to his mouth, shuddering as he drank the smallest sip of Levi’s blood.

“Thank you, Sire,” he said softly when he was done.

“I’m your brother, Kir. Anything that is mine is yours.” Levi winked at me. I rolled my eyes and smiled at Kir, while Wulfram stalked across the rocks to his daughter.

Higher up on the beach, Cyndil sat next to Fyrian in his dragon form, wiping his horned brow with some of the fabric from her skirt, while Zebulun stood next to them in human form, staring at the young woman like he'd been hit in the head with an anvil, and wanted to be hit again.

The other dragons were trying to call out, or breathe fire, but Levi had wrapped smaller tentacles around their jaws, pinning them shut. I smiled. "Are you squeezing them to death, darling?" I asked softly, kissing his cheek.

"Would you mind if I did?"

I shook my head, but Levi shrugged. "They are the last ones alive on this earth. The Goddess has only just forgiven my line for our past crimes. I will not tempt Her to reconsider her mercy." His gaze fell on the biggest of the dragons, and I saw a cold glint in those beautiful eyes. "But I will speak with them."

I tried to follow, but my legs almost gave out beneath me. Suddenly, Talon was there, lifting me up. "I can walk," I protested, but Kir interrupted me.

"Limpet, you gave so much blood. Let him help you." He came up alongside us, running a cool hand down my warm, bare side. He looked as if he had recovered fully, and I was surprised he wasn't insisting on carrying me himself. But he merely spoke to Talon as he came up beside us. "You *do* make it very hard to hate you, wyvern. Well done." His dark eyes shone with remorse as he nodded to me. "I owe you an apology, my love. I should have trusted your judgment."

"You are forgiven," I murmured. "I love you too much to do anything else. But don't leave me again."

"I swear on my pelt, I will be by your side every moment that you desire." One corner of his mouth twitched upward. "Even if it means I'm by his side, too." He clapped Talon on the shoulder as he walked past.

I blinked at Talon, who looked just as dumbfounded as I felt. "Right. Let's go see about the captive."

I'd thought we would speak with Cyndil, but as we approached her, all the dragons began to thrash and react, even Zebulun and Fyrian turning and hissing at us.

“What the hell?”

Fyrian walked away with Cyndil, and Zebulun drew closer to speak to us. “Apologies, Empress. Apologies as well to you, He Who Calls the Storm and Calms the Depths,” he said with a dark look at the other dragons, before he bowed to me and Levi. The other dragons all went still, and after a moment, Levi hmphed, letting them all go at once. They fell to the rocky beach, groaning slightly as they regained their feet.

Zebulun went on. “We cannot help our reaction. Please do not approach our future dragon mate.”

“*Our* dragon mate, you little shit,” one of the other dragons muttered, right before he went sailing out into the ocean, courtesy of one of Levi's tentacles.

Zebulun smirked. “She has not claimed any mates, but our nature compels us to keep her away from all other males.”

“Not her father,” Wulfram growled, and pulled away from Kir to talk to his daughter. Their conversation was animated but quiet, and my attention was on the three other dragons, who had approached and were changing into human form, quickly kneeling before Levi.

“No, *cora mar*. They kneel before us both.” Levi said aloud, though I heard it echoing in my mind as well, and wondered if our mental connection was permanent. Oddly, I didn't mind the idea of being that close to him. Knowing he'd been pinned in that volcano made me not want to let him out of my sight ever again.

“Why are you bowing to us?” I asked. One of them glanced up at me, though he looked down immediately when he realized I was naked.

A violet-eyed one peeked and kept staring, looking slightly dazed. “We've never seen or heard of power like yours, Empress. All should kneel before you, and your immortal mate.”

“Stop flirting with my limpet.” Kir made a disgruntled noise and wrapped his pelt around my shoulders, pulling it closed.

“We lost our honor years ago,” the dragon said. “We were called to what we were told was a parley with one of the great Emperors, an emissary from the Deep Waters. This Emperor. When we arrived at the castle inland on the continent, we discovered it was no parley. It was to be a massacre, retaliation for a distant crime committed by the emissary’s elders. We were practically fledglings then, the youngest clutch involved in the battle—”

“It was no battle,” Levi said softly. “It was an ambush. I was tortured.”

“Yes. When they began to tear at you with their claws, we flew away. But we could not escape our guilt, our complicity. We did not stand up for you, for what was right. We’d lost all honor, so we exiled ourselves to the Svellvollr until the Goddess would send us a sign that She had forgiven us.”

“A sign?”

“Some way to redeem ourselves.”

“Twice over,” Talon said. “Honor lost is not regained so easily.”

“Little cousin!” The dragons all straightened and introduced themselves—Agnivo, Rivin, Lukyan, and Siamat—and I had a sudden memory of the enormous summer sausages lined up at the farmers’ markets in Verdun City. Except these sausages each had an odd, doubled lump at the base... They had two knots apiece?

I had just squinted to see if it was a trick of the light, when Kir covered my eyes with his hand and whispered, “Naughty limpet. Eyes on your own mates.”

I stifled a laugh, amazed that I could still laugh after the events of the day.

“What happened to you, little cousin?” the orange-eyed one gasped. “Your eye, your wings...”

“Your tact,” Kir snapped, setting a hand on Talon’s shoulder. “If these arserags want to regain their honor twice over, they could start by letting young Cyndil go, so Wulfram can pay Zebulun the *liefhald*, and we can get the hell off this barren wasteland of a continent.”

“I’m not going,” the young woman in question called, storming away from her father. “I’m staying here for now, and Fyrian is staying with me.” She sniffed. “I guess Zebulun can, too.”

“Are you certain, young Omega?” Levi asked with a frown. “If they have some hold over you, I assure you, I can break it. One dragon bone at a time, if necessary.”

“You could all come back to Drakonspear,” Wulfram suggested. “Or Wargate Hall.”

“No, Dad. I... I want to stay. I can’t leave them. I won’t go back to Starlak until they do.”

“If only our brother could have...” Fyrian’s voice trailed off.

“He is dead, then?” Agnivo asked, his scarlet gaze glittering with suppressed emotion. I narrowed my eyes at him; he reminded me too much of Baltor, on the edge of ferality.

“No. Baltor is chained in the cave under our castle. He attacked Wren, and burned away young Talon’s wings. He’s lost to the madness.”

“We could bring him here,” Rivin suggested.

“He might attack our dragon mate.”

Riled, the elder dragons switched into their draconic language, until Cyndil looked up and said, “Bring him now. I could never live knowing we hadn’t tried to save your brother, Zebulun.”

“Are you sure?” She merely nodded and quietly wiped the tear from Fyrian’s ridged face.

“That’s my girl,” Wulfram said quietly.

“She’s magnificent.” Her pride and confidence were all Wolfram, but the compassion in her face... “Your mother must have been an incredible woman, Cyndil.”

Cyndil had her arm swung around Fyrian’s naked waist, and she blushed prettily. “She was, thank you. But you... Dad says you can come visit anytime, what with you ruling the oceans, and... My lady, is it true you’re the *Ankelsang*?” She rushed out the words, squealing when I nodded. Then she wrinkled her nose. “Are you really going to claim my father as your mate? I mean, I love him, but his farts smell like the worst cheese ever created, and if he doesn’t wash his feet, they grow this gray—*mph!*”

Wolfram had covered her mouth with his hand and squeezed her, pulling her away from Fyrian with a scowl. We all laughed, even Wolfram. “Don’t spoil all my surprises, daughter. A woman likes a bit of mystery, or so I’ve heard.” That odd swirling was back in his eyes again, and I wondered what mysteries might lay in our future.

“I might claim him, if we ever have two moments together where we’re not fighting for our lives, or sneaking into dragons’ nests,” I said offhandedly.

The other dragons growled, but when Cyndil growled back, they all ducked their heads and moved toward her, like she was a lodestone and they were iron filings, reacting unconsciously to her presence. Reorienting themselves to follow her.

My men did that, too, I knew. They were doing it now, circling me, with me at the center. Even though they were the most magnificent males this world had to offer. So much like the ones the Goddess had loved, I remembered. That vision was burned into my mind, and I knew I would dream of Her every night for the rest of my long life.

*You have forgiven Talon, then?* Levi’s voice in my mind drew me back.

I smiled, and thought back, *I have. But I’m still going to make him call me Mistress.*

*Of course*, my kraken mate replied, slipping into the water and unfurling into the great beast he was. He may have unfurled even more than strictly necessary, but the dragons' reactions were priceless, as they fell to the rocky beach once more in deep bows, trembling with awe.

"We will come back to visit you, Cyndil." I raised an eyebrow. "I'll bring you some clothing, and herbs." She buried her face in her hands, embarrassed but laughing.

One of the dragons muttered, "Her clothes are fine." I ignored him.

Zebulun cleared his throat. "Fyrian, I'll get everything we need. Rivin, Agnivo and I are going to collect Baltor now."

"Bring my cooking pots," Fyrian requested. "And the jars of spices? Perhaps a few seedlings from the gardens?"

I grinned when Cyndil purred slightly, grasping his arm. "You can cook?"

Fyrian beamed down into her round face. "Any recipe in this world, little moon." Zebulun began a slow shift into his dragon form, while the older dragons waited rather impatiently.

"Can we go home?" Kir asked quietly while Wulfram fretted, though Cyndil was promising him she would be fine.

"Where is home?" I wondered aloud. "Verdan City? Wargate Hall? Zebulun's castle?" I glanced at Talon. "Wyngel?"

"The only reason I would ever return to that island would be to find the man who tricked me and hurt you, all those years ago. But I will not leave your side, even to kill Rabbas. I've lost too much time with you already, little bird." Talon dropped his gaze. "Though I would've liked to be there, to make certain he knew exactly why he was dying. Why he deserved it."

Kir shrugged. "Oh, he knew why he was dying. The Emperor made very sure of that."

"Kir? What do you mean?"

My selkie chuckled darkly. “I’ve known about Rabbas’s gory end for a while now. I like to think about it when I fall asleep.”

I chewed at my lip, wondering why Kir’s bloodthirstiness didn’t bother me at all. “Is it wrong to be happy about a man’s death?” Talon was already shaking his head, his eyes alight with grim satisfaction as he bowed to Levi.

Kir grinned. “About his long, agonizingly slow, horrifying death at the hands—er, tentacles of a monster?” He lifted me into his arms as Levi wrapped those very tentacles around us. “If it is, I’ve been feeling wrong about that particular death for a good while.” He kissed me thoroughly, my feet dangling in the surf as he waded a bit deeper. Every time the water splashed against me, I felt more and more at ease, as if the water itself was comforting me.

*It is. You are the Empress of the Deep Waters. They are greeting you. Home can be there, if you desire it.* Levi’s mental voice was clear, but I heard the note of longing in it. *You can live in the ocean with me and your selkie king.*

My gaze fell on Wulfram and Talon. They could not live in the sea. Or at least, I didn’t think so.

Talon murmured, “What about Odd? He can’t live in the ocean.”

“Perhaps a compromise?” I whispered into the wind. “A home close to the sea?”

“Omega? Wren?” Zebulun cleared his throat, speaking clearly in his dragon form. “Your home is ours, literally. We gave it to you, remember?”

“Are you sure, Zebulun?”

The older dragons were gazing at Zebulun in the most peculiar way. As if he were a toddler, and they were proud of his words. “Very sure. She loves books, and I plan to bring a large portion of my hoard here.”

“I’m going to cook for her,” Fyrian called. Cyndil just giggled as he escorted her to the bottom of the cliff, where one of the other dragons carried her to a cave opening set high on

the mountain face, before returning and helping Fyrian climb up in dragon form.

“They’ll really let you stay?” I asked Zebulun. “I thought dragons were fiercely territorial.”

Rivin answered for him. “It is but our first attempt to regain our honor, Empress. We will allow the younglings into our nest, and they will dismiss the *liefhald* on your warlord’s family.”

My smile matched Zebulun’s at that point. The castle at Drakonspear was as close to the sea as you could get. The gardens there were rich with herbs and vegetables, and the wild areas nearby with the plants I used for many of my medicines. My fingers itched to start collecting them. I could bring young women there—Omegas, if any were to be found—and teach them not only to sew, but to make medicines. And poisons.

“Ratter!” I said aloud, and every eye was on me instantly. “I need someone to tell her all our news. She’ll want to travel to us.”

“She’s the Warqueen of All Starlak, woman,” Wulfram said gruffly. “And the sneakiest piece of work I’ve seen in many years. She’s probably flushed out the traitors, cleaned out my treasury, and is already on her way to see what mischief she can find at Drakonspear.”

I smiled. He was absolutely right. “Then home to the castle, Levi.”

Levi lifted me to perch on the very top of his carapace, settling me in the center of a cozy nest made of small tentacles, some of which wrapped themselves around my legs and waist. The runes glowed all around us as my other three Alphas joined us.

“We’re leaving the boat?” I asked, then saw the shattered husk of the sailboat on some nearby rocks.

Kir chuckled. “We’re leaving some firewood so Fyrian can smoke salmon for his lady love.”

“Call her that again, and I will throw you off this lobster,” Wulfram growled.

“Lobster?” Levi sent a tentacle toward Wulfram, who dodged it, but slid closer to me.

“I’d advise you to be polite to the all-powerful Emperor while we’re on the open sea,” Kir muttered. “Last time I was rude to him, he left me without my pelt to swim two hundred miles home.”

We all tried not to laugh at Kir’s sour tone, and all failed. The cold wind roared past our ears, gulls and albatrosses gliding overhead, while dolphins and orcas leaped and spun around us. On the horizon, great whales breached, spinning as they danced for us. High above us, three dragons were flying toward the castle, far faster than we were moving. “Are dragons faster than kraken?”

Kir laughed. “Levi is giving them time to bring Baltor to the Svellvollr. But maybe we can set up a kraken-dragon race someday.”

Wulfram snorted. “Now that would be a match for the ages.” I pulled my warlord’s warm arms around me, listening to his heart beating against my ear as we traveled, and sent a prayer of thanks that he was still alive. Or alive again.

“The castle is ours. You know what that means?” I shouted over the wind. Wulfram shook his head. “It means when we fuck, we can be as loud as we want.”

His laughter rose over the sound of the wind. “Who do you mean by we, *svichka*?”

Now, that was an interesting question. I pondered it all the way home, as well as the gentle cramping that had begun in my core.

We needed to get home quickly.

# WULFRAM



The castle felt warmer than it had before, more like a home, but perhaps that was because our journey back had been so fast, and the wind so cold it had formed small icicles on my beard.

Though none of the others besides Talon and I seemed to have noticed the cold. I'd unashamedly huddled with him for warmth—Wren between us, of course.

That had given me some ideas for later. Talon and me, with Wren between us? I had a feeling we'd work well together, and not just when confronting dragons.

It had been pitch black by the time we'd reached our new home, and Leviathan had lifted us straight up the side of the cliff, depositing us on the ground outside the kitchen. Talon took care of the pup, while Kir and I worked together to stoke the fires in the kitchen and get a meal going. Wren had fallen asleep before the food was ready, and we'd set it aside for the next day.

The Emperor had come in to find us all staring at Wren, asleep on the narrow bed. He'd rolled his eyes, and used his kraken strength to silently carry two more beds into the room. In minutes, he'd made an enormous platform with room for us all to climb in, though Kir stayed on the far side of the bed from Talon.

Kir seemed to be giving Talon a chance—or at least, he wasn't being as obvious in his dislike as he'd been before—but it seemed that new accord didn't extend to cuddling. Of

course, I wasn't cuddling the others either, even if I did have one arm around Talon and the other around Wren when I woke.

I thought I'd woken first, though Leviathan's glowing turquoise eyes swirled in the darkness of the room. Wren was fast asleep, but moaning, her hands pressed against her abdomen. The air in the room was thick with her scent, though it had a new complexity now. A richness to the caramel that I could taste when I breathed.

"Kir's people were right. My curse is broken," Leviathan whispered. "I was remade in fire, in the volcano." We both shuddered, remembering what that redemption had almost cost us all.

"You sacrificed yourself to save Zebulun. To save one of the youngest of their kind. My heart sings for you and your brothers, Emperor."

"Call me Levi. After all, we are brothers through my blood as well, now." His eyes moved back to Wren, and he drew in a long breath. "Her curse is broken, too, brother. Her nature awakens."

My heart raced, understanding immediately what was happening. She was entering her fertile cycle. When she woke...

"We don't have long," Talon whispered, slipping out of the bed next to me. I followed to help gather vegetables for a stew. There was meat and root vegetables in the cellar, and by noon the heady aromas of rosemary, bay, young potatoes, carrots, and fresh venison in red wine sauce were filling the hall.

Wren wandered in just past midday, one hand clutched to her stomach, wearing a short chemise that fell halfway to her knees and nothing else, looking as unkempt as I'd ever seen her. Kir called her over to the fire and began brushing her red hair while Talon spooned small bites of the meal into her mouth. After a few minutes, a new scent was added to the table.

Kir sniffed exaggeratedly as he braided her hair into a thick rope and tugged on it, exposing her throat, then leaned over and pressed a heated kiss next to her newest mating mark. “What’s for dessert, caramel custard with lavender and honey?”

Talon stiffened, as if he felt the kiss, and stared at Kir with a mixture of trepidation and curiosity.

A deep longing to place a mark of my own on the other side of her neck filled me, and I stalked toward her. “Have you had enough food, *svichka*? Or do you need dessert?”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Is there more?”

I held up a small tin of candied violets I’d found in one of Fyrian’s locked cabinets. Well, unlocked now, courtesy of my hunting knife. “All for you, Omega.”

She smiled slowly and pushed away from the fire. “We could eat them in bed.”

Kir stood as well, grinning at me. “That’s a great idea. I’ll go help Levi with the...” Then he said something that sounded like “underwater sex dungeon,” but I was sure it was something else.

Thinking of Levi made my pulse beat slightly faster, and I lifted a hand to my neck, feeling the long scar from the dragon’s claw, and the line of circular marks that covered it, from when the kraken had healed me. The marks weren’t precisely circular, more nautilus-shaped, and I refused to think about what that meant. I had bigger fish to fry. Well, in a manner of speaking.

“Talon?” I asked, my real question unspoken. He was her mate, her husband, after all. It was his right to tend to her.

Talon kissed her, then winked at me. “I’ll stay here and finish my meal. Enjoy yourself with your warlord, little bird. Don’t wear him out.”

I made a rude gesture in his direction with one hand and shook the small tin at Wren with the other. “*Svichka*?”

“Coming, Wulfie.” Wren shot a smoldering glance at Talon before rising sensually.

“Not yet, little *varl*, but you will be soon.” I leered comically as she glided toward me.

Talon called out behind her, “Wulfram, why don’t you also show Wren all the new blankets and pillows we found this morning? Maybe she can set the bedroom up—”

“Where?” she snapped. “Where are the blankets?” Before he could finish the sentence, she’d grabbed my hand and was hauling me across the floor. Laughing, I escorted her to the room where we’d piled every blanket we could find in the keep, and she squealed in a girlish fashion and buried her face in them. “They’re perfect, Wulfram.” All of the pillows and sheets from the bedrooms we’d used previously were there as well, rich with the scents of her mates... and me.

At her command, I began carrying them into the room with the giant bed, setting them just inside the door. Apparently, I wasn’t allowed to help her build her nest, though she wasn’t coherent enough to tell me why not. She merely growled and forced me to stand at the door, watching as the pile diminished over the next hour.

The room itself was fairly small, about the size of the Queen’s nest in Wargate Hall. There was a good-sized fireplace, though Wren had ordered me to bank the fire as she was “roasting alive in her own skin.” There were no windows, one door, a small table with a carafe of water and a few cups. Not a bad setup for a temporary nest, but the bathing chamber was down the hall.

“We’ll need a better nesting room eventually,” I muttered aloud, just as Talon appeared in the hall with a giant copper tub. His eyes widened in horror, as did mine, when I realized Wren had heard me.

“You don’t like this nest?” In only her loosened chemise, her exposed skin was flushed and rosy, but her eyes were tear-filled. She glanced at the huge, square bed, where she’d arranged the pillows and sheets in an intricate pattern, not at all haphazard. “Oh, Goddess, you’re right. It’s terrible. It’s all

wrong—” She started pulling the pillows off, then stopped, sobbing. “I can’t make it right. I can’t make all the parts work together—”

“Fix it, idiot,” Talon hissed, backing away.

I stepped into the room, toward the crying woman. Each tear cut me deeper than any knife ever had. “No, this nest is perfect, Omega. All the parts work together perfectly.”

“No, I can’t let the myrrh and smoke touch the coconuts and salt. I’ve tried, but they keep mingling.” She crumpled in on herself, and I pulled her upright, trying to understand what she’d said, purring to calm her. “They won’t want to come in; they’ll stay away like they are right now.”

The purring seemed to work. “You can’t let Kir’s and Talon’s scents combine?” She nodded against my chest, and I purred louder, lifting her up. She was so small in my arms, and light, so unlike my Anna in appearance. But inside, both powerful, strong, brave women.

How had I ever been so lucky to have two women in my life, to teach me how to love?

“You are their queen, *svichka*,” I purred, stroking Wren’s hair and nuzzling her neck. “They will worship you together, and thank the stars for the chance to be with you. The nest is perfect, little queen. They will see; they will show you when they come back. Please let me enter it, and soothe you?”

When she shuddered, then nodded slightly, I laid her down in the center of the fanned-out, folded linens, and straightened. She protested, then settled as I began to disrobe, taking off each piece of clothing and weapon slowly, luxuriating in the heat of her gaze. Her eyes grew heavy, sensual, and her fingers moved to her thighs, moving her chemise higher.

“May I?” I asked politely, gesturing to her chemise. I didn’t wait for an answer, but knelt on the bed and took the offending garment in both hands, tearing it in half until my Omega was spread out like a feast before me.

And feast I did, like a starving man.

Her hands tangled in my hair as I plunged my tongue into her dripping cunt, her floral and sweet scent exploding as I devoured her, her cries filling the room. I held her thighs in my hands, my fingers wrapping nearly around each one as I pinned her to the bed, intent on bringing her as much pleasure as she deserved. Her back bowed when she came, slick flooding from her and drenching my beard.

I gentled her down, then grinned up at her. “How was that?”

She smiled blearily down at me. “Twenty-seven more like that, and you’ll be as good a lover as Kir.”

“Fucking hells, woman! You’ll be the death of me,” I roared, and set to at least match the selkie’s record. It wasn’t as impossible as it seemed—my *svichka* was so responsive, and her heat took over for her, until her orgasms were cascading, one on top of the other, her body shuddering with the power of her pleasure, her face almost as red as her hair.

“Knot, Alpha,” she whined, her Omega nature rising. “Need you.”

“As I need you, little *varl*,” I said, rising up to notch my cock at her entrance. When I realized how fucking tight she was, I wondered if it would be possible to fit even my tip inside her. The sight of my girth pressing against her tiny slit filled me with a dark urge to hold her down and thrust hard into her, as deeply as possible, and... *No. I will not hurt her.*

I breathed hard, controlling the feral haze that was beginning to rise up inside me. I had only just regained my honor with this Omega. I would not do it again. “I can’t, Omega. You’re too small.” A terrible thought flashed through my mind. “Am I... Am I not worthy, *svichka*?” Her confused gaze met my shame-filled one. If her body wouldn’t, or couldn’t accept me, it meant one thing. “Omegas choose. The Goddess chooses for you, yes? Perhaps She has found me wanting.”

Soft hands moved to my face, soothing me, and the little Omega beneath me began to purr, the sounds unraveling the knot of pain and sadness that had begun to form in my heart.

“No, Warlord.” I noted a glint of gold in her eyes, swimming in those gray-green pools. “She finds you very worthy.” She writhed slightly, taking more of me inside, another rush of hot slick making the movement possible. “Have no fear. This Omega was made for you, for your line.”

I shivered, unsure why Wren was speaking of herself in this way. As if...

She moaned again, begging for her Alpha, and I shook off the strangeness of the moment. “Knot me,” she growled, her eyes blazing at my hesitance. “Or call in an Alpha who will.”

“I’ve never knotted a woman, love,” I admitted.

“Good,” she purred. “Start now.”

Still, I hesitated. Omegas were built to take an Alpha’s cock, from all the stories. She’d been knotted by her other mates, right? And Levi was a large man, or sea monster...

Small fingernails scraped my arms, and a tiny hand slipped under my cock to wrap around my balls, giving an uncomfortably firm squeeze. “Alpha? Do as I say.”

I resolved to make the attempt, if only to save my balls. “Yes, my queen. This might hurt, though.”

Her eyes gleamed with mischief. “Promise?”

“You little minx,” I growled, pressing forward. The head slipped in, her heat almost scalding me, and I pushed a little more. She writhed around me, trying to force more of my length inside, but her walls were so tight, and my cock thicker than ever. There was no way my knot was going in there, but just sliding the first few inches was good en—

“Ahh! What did you... *How* did you?” I stammered. Her feet were wrapped behind my hips, her pussy enveloping my entire length up to my knot. I stared down at her lower abdomen, wondering if that new bulge was my cock, inside her. “Goddess, your cunt is paradise,” I groaned as she lowered, then thrust her hips back up again.

Somehow, she took every inch of me, and I brought her to her peak twice more. She cried out for my knot again and

again, but I had very little hope that my knot could enter that tight channel. I'd never been able to knot any woman before, and wasn't willing to damage my Omega in the attempt.

"If I have to knot myself, I will, Alpha," Wren goaded. Her saucy attitude was like an aphrodisiac, and I felt the tell-tale pulse at the base of my spine as she moved again, warning me that I was close. I gathered her small wrists in one hand and pinned her arms above her head to the pillow, holding her still before I spilled too early.

"Be still, Omega," I barked.

She froze, trembling as I took control of our lovemaking, thrusting into her impossibly wet, tight channel a little farther with each thrust, the first swell of my knot pressing against her entrance. I watched her eyes to make sure she was still wrapped in pleasure, not in pain, but when I glanced down at her torso again, I laughed wickedly.

"Look at you, *svichka*. Look at my cock inside you, moving." She lifted her head and moaned as she saw what I meant, the rise and fall of her body as my cock filled her. "I love to see you stuffed full of my cock, little *varl*. As soon as you come once more, I'm going to fuck my knot into you." I thrust harder, hoping that her own orgasm would open her for me. "I'm going to thrust my knot into you, fill you full of my seed, then bite your gorgeous neck and claim you forever."

"Yes!" she cried out, coming again. As soon as I felt her walls fluttering against me, I surged forward, my knot forcing its way inside her, just far enough to...

"Wren!" I shouted her name as my knot locked into place, swelling even more, and my release poured out of me and into her, filling her. The haze of the rut I'd staved off my entire life began to descend, but this time, I welcomed it.

Before I lost myself, I leaned over, my teeth piercing the narrow column of her neck, claiming her. Her blood was liquid lightning in my mouth, and I swallowed her down, as my knot grew even thicker. She cried out, then flung her arms around my shoulders, her small teeth sinking into my pectoral, striking hard and fast.

“Oh, little *varl*, bite me again,” I begged, as I began rutting into her, my knot somehow moving, practically reshaping her channel, the sounds of wetness and our breathing all that filled the room.

“Yes, Alpha,” she replied, and bit again and again as I filled her, creating a circle of teeth marks on my chest. I fucked her relentlessly, the rut riding me hard, until at last, I had no more to give.

But my Omega still needed more.

The room was filled with her perfume, and my scent, and the nest coated with our juices. I had only just slipped my knot free of her when she began thrashing on the bed next to me, in pain.

“Alpha!” she cried out, gripping her abdomen. “It hurts.”

“I’m here, *svichka*.” I turned her toward me, moving my fingers back down to soothe her heated flesh, just as someone opened the door.

“Need some assistance, Warlord?” Levi asked. Talon and Kir were directly behind him, and they all smiled, but their eyes were caught on the red-haired miracle squirming on the bed behind me.

“I wouldn’t say no, Emperor,” I said with a wry grin. “Her nest has room for us all.”

As did her heart.

## KIR



Levi and I had stayed away from the nest long enough to give Wulfram time to cement the bond with our Omega, and we'd both felt the moment she sank her teeth into him. Her satisfaction and pleasure coursed down our mating bonds, calling to us from the bottom of the trench where Levi and I were designing a gift for her. A palace, where she would learn what it meant to be an Empress of the Deep Waters, and her subjects could come to pay homage to her.

Some of them had already arrived: whales by the dozen, dolphins by the hundreds, and even a pod of merfolk from the far Northern Sea, with near-translucent skin and odd blue-white hair, singing about the "being of light" waking at the top of the world. We didn't think they meant Wren, but I remembered her golden glow when she'd taken down the volcano to release Levi, and wondered.

Levi smiled and welcomed them, but when I asked, said merfolk were always going on about the end of the world.

Feeling Wren's satisfaction, we both stopped greeting the denizens of this cold sea, then swam as fast as we could when her happy glow became a raging torrent of need.

"The warlord's failing," Levi noted, lifting us up the side of the cliffs.

"No one Alpha could meet our Omega's needs," I said.

Levi's hand stopped me. "Remember that. You, me, all of us here? We are the most favored sons of the Goddess to have the right to call her our mate. To serve her *together*."

I knew what he meant. “I’ll do my best to forgive him.”

“No. Do better, King Kir. She needs you to welcome him into your life, and allow her to love him freely.”

A pulse of shame surged through me. “I’m beginning to. For so many years, I saw him as the enemy. It’s hard now to think of him as a potential friend. To trust him, even if she does.”

His expression grew troubled. “Without his past actions, I would never have found her. You would never have befriended her. None of us would be here to serve our queen, our Empress. When you question his terrible crime, for which he has been completely redeemed, you question the Goddess’s plan. She *chose* Talon for Wren. Do not think you know better than Her.”

“I... I won’t. I hear you, brother. I’ll do better.” Mind reeling at the concept that perhaps this had all been intentional—that Talon might have been as helpless in the currents of fate as the rest of us—I opened the door to the kitchen, and my eyes fell on Talon himself.

It was still jarring to see him without his wings, and when he smiled at me uncertainly, the black eye patch was yet another reminder that he’d suffered as well. Maybe we’d all suffered enough.

“Kir? She needs you,” he said. “Levi, you as well.” He was setting out a bowl of meat scraps and water for the puppy, and handed us a tray of provisions before turning back to the stove. He’d placed a sprig of fresh flowers on the side of the cheese and fruit, and I was touched at his thoughtfulness.

“Talon?” I asked, as Levi carried the tray toward the room where the scent that pervaded the castle was originating.

“Yes?” He didn’t look at me, and his tone was subdued.

“You know she needs you, too. She... wants you.”

He glanced at me, hesitance in that amber eye. “I’ll come if you call.”

“No,” I told him, grasping his shoulder. Levi was right. Talon had more than redeemed himself in Wren’s eyes. Who was I to sour the glorious future we would have? An eternal future, that would either be joyful or fraught, depending on how much of an arserag I was during this first heat, and these days of coming together as co-mates. “We all come when she calls. And she needs us all now... brother.”

Talon dropped his dishcloth on the floor, grasping my forearms. “Kir, thank you.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but at that very moment, Wren’s cries carried all the way to the kitchen. “Alpha!”

We both ran to answer, stopping at the open door, where her perfume spilled out, bathing us in it. Levi stood just outside the door, waiting for us, it seemed. Wulfram lay, giddy and exhausted, next to Wren, who writhed frantically as he worked his fingers inside her.

“Need some assistance, Warlord?” Levi stepped away from the wall.

“I wouldn’t say no, Emperor,” Wulfram said as he moved to the edge of the bed, proudly displaying a ring of bites around one pectoral, all already healed. Wren whined at the loss of his touch. “Her nest has room for us all. Kir, are you coming in?”

“Damned straight,” I replied, stepping around Levi. “Omega, may I enter your nest?”

Wren smiled, though I could tell she was hurting. “Please, Alpha,” she murmured, and I began climbing over the lip of a row of pillows that had somehow withstood Wulfram’s presence.

Once inside the nest, I hovered over Wren, kissing her heated skin and blowing softly on it. “May Talon and Leviathan and I all enter together, and help the tired warlord satisfy you?”

“You ass, I could go for days yet,” Wulfram muttered, but stayed on the edge of the bed.

“I need,” she whined. “Need you all...” I felt Levi and Talon enter the nest, though they sat some distance away.

“What do you need, limpet?” I whispered, rumbling a soft purr as I dropped kisses on her forehead, then down her cheeks to her chin and neck. I moved my mouth to her breast, sucking at my mating mark. “Do you need a cock inside you? A knot?” She moaned, opening her legs, and I chuckled as I dragged my hand through her drenched pussy, then licked it, before rubbing my knuckles through it again, pushing slightly up into her. “You could fit more than one cock in there, love. Wulfram stretched you for us. That was kind of him.”

Her eyes went heavy as I beckoned to Talon. “Wyvern, you should taste this.” I held out my fist, and he licked her slick off the knuckles, slowly, his eyes on Wren the whole time. “What do you think, Talon? We share a mate. Can we share her perfect cunt? Both of us inside her at the same time, stretching her?” She hissed out a breath when I whispered, “Both of us knotting her?”

I bit down on her breast, and she arched her back, orgasming suddenly. Talon was beside me, his teeth on her other breast, before she was done quivering with the climax. “She likes that idea, Kir. I think you’ll find I can share very well.”

He kissed our perfect mate, murmuring in her ear, as I lay on my back in the center of the nest. Then he turned her so she faced me, laying her down on my chest, her red hair falling in a curtain, secluding us from the room.

Her smile was uncertain, and I hated that I was the reason she felt that at this moment. “Are you sure, Kir?” she whispered, forcing herself to speak, fighting through her heat-induced haze to tend to me.

What had I ever done to deserve this woman in my life?

Cupping her face in my hands, I pressed a tender kiss to her lips. “We’re immortal, moonsong. All of us are now, through Levi.” Across the bed, I heard Wulfram grunt, as if this was the first time he’d realized what it meant for him to have taken Levi’s blood. “We’re going to be making love to

you, individually and together, until the end of the world. You love him, yes?”

She nodded, her eyes shining, as I sank into her. Her slick was so copious, it coated me entirely. I thrust in shallow strokes, hitting that spot inside her that I knew brought her the most pleasure.

“Then he is my brother, limpet. I will treat him as such.”

Wulfram groaned, as Talon rose up behind Wren, taking her hips in his hands and pressing his slick-covered cock to her channel just behind mine. “Call him our brother-husband, not your brother. Brothers don’t... do that,” Wulfram complained, as Talon began to slowly glide inside her.

“I would do anything for my love, my Mistress,” Talon murmured, pressing deeper. The sensation of his cock rubbing alongside mine was disconcerting at first, but Wren’s obvious bliss burned away any hesitance I might have felt.

“I would as well, Talon.”

We moved carefully, gingerly at first, not wanting to hurt her. But Wulfram had gotten her ready for us, and she gasped for us to move faster. We set up a tempo, both of us gliding in and out, as steady as the tides, sinking a bit deeper with each thrust. I could feel Talon’s knot pressing against mine, and the added sensation almost had me spilling too soon.

I slowed, and Talon followed suit, while Levi snaked a tentacle between her legs and around her clit. I wasn’t certain, but from the way Talon’s eyes widened before he looked down at his cock, another tentacle was doing something behind our cocks.

“Do you think you can take another mate?” I breathed through the pleasure as her pussy tightened, the walls thickening, the slick flowing even faster. My knot was growing bigger, and I knew it was time to thrust deeper. “Do you think you can take your lovers’ knots, and take another mate in your tight ass as well?”

Wulfram spat out a curse, and I turned my head to see him jacking his thick cock as he watched, the flush of red on his

face indicating he was close to losing control.

“I’m... I’m...” Wren panted out the words through whatever Levi was doing to her ass, as I slid my knot into her, holding off my orgasm with every ounce of control I had. Talon nodded, pressing deeper. His knot slid alongside mine, in an impossibly tight fit, and Wren cried out in another climax. “It’s so much,” she shouted, her back arching.

“Too much, love?” Talon asked, pulling her hair back, while Levi blew a cool breath across her flushed skin. “Should we stop?”

Her eyes snapped open, and golden light spilled out across the room. “Don’t you fucking *dare*, Alpha!” I thought it was her glow, and some of it was. Light poured from her eyes, a strange, echoed glow emanating from her abdomen, above her womb. But not all of it was her.

Talon’s face, wreathed in pleasure, was just as bright... and the light that was flaring out from him was shaped into wings. Wyvern wings.

He opened his eye, and I saw a slitted pupil, amber fire blazing so brightly it hurt to look directly at it.

“Talon,” I whispered. “Your wings. Your wyvern is with us.”

“I am,” he answered. He smiled as he thrust. “We are.”

Tears streamed from Wren’s eyes as she wept for joy, and from the climax that was consuming her, and soon, us. “Now, Alphas, *now!*” she screamed, and the golden glow was like a silent, glorious explosion in the room.

Talon surged forward at that moment, and not a second too soon, as her fierce command had set off my climax. My knot swelled inside her, locking in place—or trying to, as Talon’s knot was suddenly there, and we were filling her, holding her, flooding her with hot waves of our seed.

Levi beckoned to Wulfram, and he slid across the mattress, holding the tip of his cock close to her mouth. She darted for it, sucking with delirious pleasure, and I was certain Levi was shooting his own release on her chest, though I was lost to the

sensations of my best friend and the man I had called my enemy, both coming all around me, with me.

For a long moment, all four of her mates were inside her—Talon and me stretching her pussy to the very limits, Levi's tentacle in her ass thick enough now that I knew Talon was feeling it, and Wulfram in her mouth.

Her eyes opened, and they were a beautiful combination of gray-green and gold. "Yes!" Wren screamed as Wulfram pulled out and spilled his seed on her neck.

Or I thought it was his seed. Luminous, pearlescent ropes of liquid gushed out of his cock, splattering Wren's breasts. It obviously felt good, since Wren's cunt tightened around me with every droplet that hit and soaked into her skin.

We were surrounded by miracles, the four Alphas and our Omega, and the wonders didn't cease.

They went on for a week, and though the most glorious moments were the ones spent inside our Omega's body, the connections that formed between us brothers were every bit as significant, and miraculous.

At last, after seven full days and nights, Wren's heat came to an end.

# WREN



“Are you still hiding?” Levi popped his head into the library, where I’d spent most of my waking hours in the days since my heat ended.

I held my current book higher over my face, tucking my legs up under my skirts. “I’m not hiding, I’m doing research on Omegas, dragon mates, and... other things.”

He wandered into the room. “Other things like”—he craned his neck to read the title on the cover of the book—“Queen Travalya’s Fiery Harem Tales?”

I set the book down. “It’s a diary. A journal. Very important historical artifact.”

“I have a very important historical artifact right here, little siren,” he said, cupping his groin. “And it misses you very much.”

“So crude. You’ve been hanging out with the warlord,” I muttered, tossing a ruby at him. He caught it with a small tentacle and tucked it into a pocket, then sat alongside me.

“That warlord is very worried about you. So worried that he’s composed ten sonnets in the past two days.”

“Sonnets?”

“Mhmm. Good ones, too, if a bit morose. But when he found a lap harp and started playing this morning, we had to hide it. That Alpha has many gifts, but singing is not one of them.” He pulled me onto his lap. “You’ve been avoiding him.

All of us, to a certain extent. What vexes you, *cora mar*? What did we do wrong?”

I buried my face in my hands. “None of you did anything. I just can’t look at you ever again.” When he didn’t say anything, I muttered, “I did things no decent woman would do.”

Levi’s chest shook as he tried to stifle a laugh, “*Cora mar*, most of us did things during your heat that no human could even attempt. Can you honestly tell me you didn’t enjoy every moment?”

“No,” I moaned, throwing my arms dramatically over the back of the chaise. “What’s worse is I want to do them again, often, and I’ll only have a heat about once a year, so I can’t even pretend I’m overcome by my Omega nature. You’ll all know what a filthy mind I have.”

“Now, now, Omega.” Levi kneeled in front of me, pulling my legs around and rucking my skirts up to my waist. “Let me give you a kiss, and then we’ll talk about what it means to be an Empress.”

“A kiss?” I asked, laughing as he settled between my legs and began devouring my pussy like he was starving.

*I am starving for you, beloved. Always.*

It was a very thorough kiss. In minutes, he had me screaming his name and aching to be fucked, but he refused, pulling me back onto his lap.

“No, *cora mar*, we need to talk. All of us.” He let out a whistle. “Come on in, Alphas.” The library door opened again, and my three other mates walked in with sheepish expressions.

I looked up at them, blushing. “I’m sorry I ran away.”

“*Svichka*, what did I do?” Wulfram groaned, falling to the floor. “My fiery love, whose flames I quenched in haste; and ne’er again shall know her touch, her taste—”

“Has he been in the port wine again?” Levi grumbled.

Sighing, Kir nodded. “No more poetry,” Talon begged, as Wulfram began a second verse, then stopped with a belch.

The warlord walked on his knees to me and cradled my face in his hands, whispering as if the others weren't right there, "I hurt you, didn't I? I know I'm big, far bigger than the others. I'll never even look at your ass ag—" Kir slapped a hand over his mouth.

"Oh, Goddess. No, Wulfram, you didn't hurt me."

I shot a glare at Levi, who was muttering, "I'll show *you* big."

"Did you just need some time alone?" Talon asked. "You hardly talk to us at meals; you're always collecting herbs or reading. We miss you, little bird."

"You promised to come to the sea," Levi added. "I have so much to teach you about your domain. The dolphins have been asking for you."

I hung my head. "I... I was embarrassed. By some of the things I said and, um... made you do, during my heat."

Kir started coughing, Talon went a peculiar shade of red, and Wulfram gave me a silly, drunken grin. "But we liked it. Even the parts we'd never tried before." He batted his long lashes over those blue eyes. "And you make a very good Mistress, not just to Talon. When you used the oils and put your fingers in my—"

This time, it was Levi who slapped a hand over his mouth. "An Empress gets what she wants. Men? Did any of you do anything that you regret?" Kir and Talon exchanged glances, then shook their heads.

Wulfram licked Levi's hand to get him to remove it. "I only regret not getting to do more of it since."

Talon spoke up. "You didn't make us do anything, little bird. You may have opened our eyes to new delights—and Levi may have done some questionable things with his tentacles that do merit some further discussion," he added, glaring jokingly at my kraken. "But I speak for us all when I say that week will be one of my most cherished memories." He winked. "And not just because Levi tattooed a seagull with squid ink on my ass."

“It’s not a seagull. It’s a wyvern.”

“Looks like a seagull,” Kir muttered.

We all laughed, and they passed me around, giving me hugs and whispering assurances into my ear until I was in Wulfram’s arms. “Never run from me again. Wren, beloved, you are an Empress of the Deep Waters, a queen of the wyverns and the selkies, the Warqueen of my heart—”

“But *I’m* the Warqueen of All Bloody Fucking Starlak. Where are *my* hugs and kisses?”

We all spun toward a door we hadn’t even known existed, in the back of the library, and gasped as a very dusty Ratter walked out of it, dragging Goran behind her.

“Come on, then. Where are my kisses?” she repeated with a cheeky grin, holding out a hand dripping with gold rings and gaudy gemstones. “You can start with my hand, but what with me being Warqueen, I make most folk start at my toes and work up.”

Goran growled. “No one kisses your perfect toes but me, my queen.”

She blew him a kiss, but then was in my arms, embracing me. “By the Goddess’s bleeding hangnails, Mistress, you let these fellows bite you all over, didn’t ya?” Her eyes were on my new mating marks, but my men coughed.

“Ratter, how did you—you know what, never mind. Can we get you and Goran some dinner?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” she said. “Food, conversation, and a bath would be nice.”

“And a room,” Goran added.

I spun on my heel, spearing him with a glance. “*Two* rooms, Warlord. You meant two rooms, didn’t you?”

He froze in terror, which was absolutely appropriate. “Ah, um, yes, Empress, Queen, *Ankelsang*, ma’am... Of course I meant two.” Wulfram dragged him out of the library, and the others went to prepare dinner, while Ratter came to my room

to change after a side trip to the kitchen for a snack, and a quick bath.

Odd jumped up on her lap as she sat cross-legged on the cushioned chair in my sewing room. I started pulling out the fabrics I'd found for her dress. "So, Mistress, I hear I'm not Warqueen of All Starlak, if we're splitting hairs. Word is the dragons that flew off to shack up with Cyndil deeded the entirety of Northern Starlak to you. Along with this castle, which was only on one map in the libraries of Wargate Hall, and none of the maps in Rimholt or Verdan, I'll have you know." She wriggled in place, her gray eyes flashing. "Can you imagine the secrets I'll uncover here?"

"I can indeed, and the treasures, though you may not keep all of them. This, though, I'm making for you, Miss Warqueen of Most of Starlak." I pulled out the black silk I'd discovered. I had a feeling it was spider silk, treated somehow to make it hardy enough to withstand a needle and thread. It was the softest material I'd ever touched.

"Oh, Mistress, this is too fine for me," Ratter sighed, putting down the puppy and pressing it to her cheek. "Where will I ever go that I'd need something this fancy?"

I grunted, making a mental note to ask her to stop calling me Mistress, now that Talon had called dibs on the name. "Nothing is too fine for the apprentice to the Empress of the Deep Waters," I replied, reaching into a velvet bag on my table. I pulled out the gold filigree and pearl crown Levi had given me all those months ago at the docks in Verdan City, and placed it next to the chest that held my red gown. "And you can wear it to my coronation, for one thing. It turns out, Levi's subjects want a chance to meet me. And even one of his brothers."

Ratter's eyes widened. "Another kraken? You gonna add him to your harem?"

"You little brat!" I laughed, knocking her off her seat with a gentle shove. "You don't think four is a big enough harem?"

She rolled her eyes. "For you, maybe. No offense, but you're pretty small. Four is probably a safe number for you."

I'd aim higher." She wiggled her eyebrows.

"Five? Six?"

She took out the obsidian-handled knife that was her favorite, and began flipping it faster than the eye could follow. "Why not seven? As long as I could have a lot of different types."

"Like a wyvern, a kraken, a warlord, and a selkie, as I have?"

"For a start, maybe. But who knows what else is out there, just waiting for their street rat princess to come and whisk them off their feet. Or fins. Or tentacles. Not that I'm looking, you know. I still think most men are only good for catching enemy arrows or testing new poisons."

"Even Goran?" I teased.

"Maybe especially him. Have you heard the man's poetry? It's a crime against all womankind." She hopped down, her knife vanishing as fast as it had appeared, and picked up Odd. "For now, I'll stick to loving knives, poisons, and puppies. See you at dinner, Mistress!"

"Don't steal all my jewels," I shouted at her back as she ran out the door.

"I make no promises," she yelled back. "Some jewels need stealing!"

I laughed softly as I gathered up the black dress, folding it carefully. An odd aroma, of mint and rain, rose up as I packed it carefully away, but I heard Levi calling from the main hall, and knew it must be time for dinner.

## WREN



The boisterous meal we shared that night, with Ratter and Goran holding court and telling implausible stories of their travels across Starlak, was loud and wild and perfect. Talon and Kir had cooked an incredible meal, using fish Levi had provided. I wondered for a moment if all the fish in the oceans were his subjects, and if these ones had done something to displease him, but didn't ask. I wasn't sure I wanted to know, though I'd probably find out when I went to the underwater palace with Levi and Kir the next day.

The scallops in lemon and olive oil, and the goat cheese and chive-crusting halibut were so good, I had seconds of both. I'd been hungrier than usual since my heat ended, but if I ate this much, I'd need to sew all new clothing for myself.

Not a bad idea, actually. I'd need something to fill my time for the next few hundred years. When I mentioned that to Levi, he drew me close and kissed my head. "I think you'll be busier than you expect, my love." When I asked what he meant, he only moved his lips to mine and kissed me so thoroughly that Ratter threw a bread roll at us, making retching noises.

I sat at the head of the table, at my mates' insistence, and Ratter sat at the other end, at Goran's insistence. He selected each morsel of food that ended up on her plate, even cutting the meat into perfectly symmetrical bites before offering it to her on the end of his fork.

I was almost certain she was going to kill him before the end of the evening, but when I whispered that to Talon, he

sniggered and began cutting my food in a similar way. It made me feel ridiculously pampered.

I suppose an Omega could get used to it.

Ratter's sweet, high voice rang out over the laughter of the men. "So, we killed the rest of the traitors at Wargate Hall, left the cook in charge—"

"The *cook*?" Wulfram shouted. "Not a warrior?"

Ratter sneered. "That woman is the most terrifying being left alive in the keep. Not only is she extremely proficient with a carving knife, but she knows as much about poisons as I do—how do you think your family survived the past decades with so many snakes in your own hall? She's been feeding you, your children, and your loyal warriors antidotes for everything from adderbane to trakespar leaf for years. Which, as you know, almost always contain trace amounts of the fatal herbs themselves." Ratter grinned at Wulfram's dropped jaw. "My guess is you've built up immunity to most common poisons. I wonder—"

"Don't poison my mate to find out, apprentice," I growled.

"Would I do such a thing?" she gasped. Goran started choking, but went quiet and bright red when she did something under the table. Probably setting her knife against his femoral artery, but she could have been fondling him. I had a feeling knife play wasn't off the table for either of them.

Not that she should be experimenting with such activities; she was far too... *Oh*. I sighed. She'd turned eighteen over the course of the past months.

"Ratter, remind me to get you some herbs tomorrow," I said quietly. "You're still too young to bring any more apprentices into this world."

Goran went a brighter shade of red, and Ratter's hands both appeared above the table as she hissed an enraged, "Mistress!"

"Please ask her to stop calling you that." Talon's own face was slightly pinker than usual.

“It’s on my list,” I replied, stuffing a piece of soft goat cheese into my mouth. “Now, how long can you and Goran stay, Ratter? My coronation won’t take place for a year, or so Levi says.” I wasn’t sure why he’d stated that, but he explained.

“We have to give the family time to assemble.”

“Family?” Talon asked.

“Yes, I’ve sent merfolk to all of my brothers, and to Havira, to invite your family as well. Kir, I sent searchers out to see if any selkies still live. If they do, they will attend, and greet you as their king.”

Kir dropped his head, dabbing at his face with a napkin. “Thank you, brother.”

Levi raised an eyebrow at me and Wulfram. “I wasn’t sure who from Verdan or Starlak you would want to attend, but it will take far longer for my brothers to wake than for humans to travel across the continent—”

“You think they’ll all come here... for me?” I blinked at the certainty in his turquoise eyes.

“For the *Ankelsang*?” Wulfram teased. “The legendary woman who saved so many of our vulnerable women and children, and protected our Alphas from themselves? We’ll be lucky if the entire continent doesn’t come racing through the mountain tunnels to get here. I’ll bet some of them are already on their way.”

Ratter had gone pale as he spoke. “Uh, Goran? You know those little surprises we left in the tunnels? We may want to remove those before—” Goran was on his feet and heading out the door before she was done speaking. “What?” she complained when we all turned to her. “Those tunnels were a weakness we had to defend. And... there were so many jewels in them. Diamonds the size of my head, Mistress. Whole *caverns* full of them.” Her voice had gone dreamy and soft. “I needed to protect them.”

“Are we sure she’s not part dragon herself?” Talon teased, as he started to clear the plates.

Ratter snorted, standing to help. I heard a strange clinking sound as she stepped toward me. "I'm all street rat, wyvern, and don't forget it. It's the rats that'll rule this world when all the rest of you lot are gone."

"It's the rats that'll empty their pockets on the table before they go and do the dishes, apprentice," I warned.

Wulfram buried his head in his hands. "I made her Warqueen. I have no one else to blame when my country is stripped bare."

"I'm insulted," Ratter declared with a sniff, then turned to go.

I tsked. "Apprentice? Now."

"Fine." Her shoulder slumped as she started dumping things on the table. A gold fork, two soup spoons, three of the gems that had been in the centerpiece, and a key to something.

"You little wretch!" Wulfram growled. "That's the key to my family's treasury!"

She wrinkled her nose. "Well, yes. I wasn't exactly going to leave it at Wargate Hall now, was I? Someone might abscond with my stuff."

"*Your* stuff?"

"Yeah, mine. I decided what I want for my *liefhald*." Wulfram went still. "That's right," she crowed. "You forgot about that, huh? Well, I want access to the family jewels."

We all started laughing as she blushed, realizing what she'd said.

"No, oh gross, no! I'm not into old men with gray hair and saggy balls. That's disgusting!" We all laughed harder, except Wulfram, who mumbled that his balls weren't saggy. Ratter spoke through gritted teeth. "I meant, I want the key to the treasury in Wargate Hall, and permission to take anything I want out of it."

"My family histories are in there! The accumulated treasures of twenty generations of my line, and weapons that

stretch back to the beginnings of Starlak as an independent nation.”

“Don’t remind me. You had weapons I’d never even imagined before,” she groaned, a faint hint of mint and rain wafting from her. Was the idea of weapons turning her on?

*Oh, shit.* She was going to need those herbs sooner rather than later.

With a sigh, I stood. “Why bother cashing in your *liefhald*? You’ve already taken what you want out, haven’t you?”

She arched one dark eyebrow. “Permission, forgiveness, they’re so closely related, aren’t they? As long as I have one or the other...”

“Yes, little rat, you can have access to my treasury and its contents, and we will call the *liefhald* paid,” Wulfram announced, tousling her hair as he passed her, then pulling me into his arms. “I wasn’t planning to go back to Wargate Hall in any case, not permanently. I have a new home now.”

“Are you sure?” I asked as he pressed a kiss to my forehead, then picked me up so he could reach my cheek, my chin, my neck, and nibble on his mate mark.

He murmured in my ear, “A new home, a new family, a new country. There’s nothing back there I need.” My heart pounded as he carried me out of the dining hall and toward my nesting room. “The only thing I cannot live without is right here.”



The next few weeks were filled with love, laughter, and lessons. Levi taught me to control the winds and water, and though I did not have his ease with them, I was able to harness enough of their power to push a boat around the sea. He promised me I would be able to fly at some point, and not only with the wings that appeared now and again mid-climax.

I had to set the dress I was stitching down long enough to stop laughing. Our other mates had taken to doing all sorts of naughty things in the bedroom, to try and get Talon's and my wings to appear. Alphas were already competitive, but once they realized it only happened when one of them had done a miraculously good job pleasing me, they had made a game of it.

Or a battle, and Talon and I were the spoils of war.

*My lovely spoils of war, might you have time to come and visit the palace?* Levi's mental voice interrupted my thoughts. *A small group of selkies has arrived.*

"Does Kir know?" I said aloud, but Levi didn't answer. I grabbed Kir's pelt and ran to the kitchen. Talon was there with Wulfram, training Odd to sit and stay. Well, Talon was training the puppy, and Wulfram was sharpening his knives, muttering something about Ratter taking his best blades. "Where's Kir? Selkies!"

Talon's smile lit up the room. "Ratter was showing him the hidden passageways in the castle. They're making maps."

"She's probably prying the hinges off every door they find, planning to take them away when she goes back to Rimholt next summer," Wulfram grumbled. "I'm now missing four daggers, and one of my vambraces."

"I'll get the vambrace back," I promised. "I know Anna made it."

Wulfram hmped. "What about the daggers?"

"Pick your battles," I teased, then kissed him on the head and ran to the library, where Kir was already slipping inside the narrow passage.

"Limpet, what's happening? I felt your excitement in our bond." He pressed a hand to his shoulder. "You're practically buzzing."

I thrust his pelt into his arms. "Selkies, Kir. They've arrived." His tanned face went pale, as he repeated my words. "Yes, arrived. Don't you want to meet them?"

I grabbed his hand and pulled him out the door, ignoring Ratter's distant "What's happening?" from inside the walls. We ran down the stairs to the beach and were at the water within minutes, just as Levi walked out of the waves in his human form.

"My Empress!" he said, sending a gust of wind to tickle me, then nodding to Kir.

Three dark seals swam up behind him, changing forms once they were chest-deep in the waves. Two appeared as young as Kir, though selkies did not age like humans, so there was no telling how old they might really be. But the third was a wizened, gray-haired woman with flashing dark eyes and skin more wrinkled than any I had ever seen, on any creature.

Levi winked at me, before speaking loudly over the surf. "King Kir, my brother, I sent out the call to all the waters of this world, and it has been answered. The Queen of the Eastern Seas and her sons have arrived to pay homage to me and my new Empress, and meet you as well."

Kir walked over to the selkie queen and, to my great surprise, threw his arms around her neck. "Grandma," he said, his voice choked with tears. "How are you... Where did you...?"

"How'd I manage to stay alive this long, what with me bein' the ugliest, oldest selkie in the wide world?" She laughed, and when she did, fish jumped out of the water all around her. As quick as a hummingbird, she grabbed a minnow out of the air and popped it in her mouth. Then, she began walking toward me and Levi. "Your father, Goddess bless him in the waters of paradise, didn't much like having a matriarch around. Said too many of the selkies were turning to me for guidance. So he chucked me out, and sent me to the East. Where I found a lovely young selkie lad who didn't seem to mind my age and experience." She shook all over as she laughed. "We had these two young ones before he was taken from me."

She gestured to the selkie men, who had started walking out of the water when an odd wave swept past, leaving them

both suddenly wearing kelp loincloths. I shot an amused glance at Levi, who was trying to look innocent and failing.

The males both dropped to their knees, bowing their heads. “Empress. We pledge our loyalty to you, and to the Emperor of the Deep Waters. May we serve you well for the rest of our days.”

Kir stepped forward. “You plan to stay here? In the Northern Sea?” he asked, and I could tell he was trying to hide his excitement.

One of them nodded sadly. “We are all that is left of the selkies in the Eastern Seas. The others of our parents’ generations who survived the plagues, bred with merfolk or sea witches, and the lines ended there. We four are all that is left.”

“Hm, are we now?” Kir’s grandmother mused aloud and pushed the two aside. “Let me take a look at you. Ah, pretty as the sirens of old. That red hair! I had red hair as a young selkie. Turned all the boys’ heads, though I never caught so big a fish as yon Emperor.” Her eyes twinkled, and Kir took her hand.

“Grandma, please meet my mate, my moonsong, Wren, Empress of the Deep Waters.”

“Empress.” The woman bowed her head. “I’m more delighted to meet you than you can ever know. My little Kir here needed a woman like you.”

“There are no other women like her,” Kir said with a chuckle, and Levi agreed.

I grasped her hands in mine. “Call me Wren.”

I had to fight tears when she folded me into a hug and murmured, “Then you call me Grandma.”

“You’ll stay?” I asked, as we began walking out of the surf.

“Of course I will. You’ll be wanting a grandma to help with the baby,” she said offhandedly.

“The what now?” I pressed a hand to my stomach.

“The selkie that’s doing teeny-tiny backflips in your womb right this instant. It takes some special skills, raising a selkie child to be as good and kind as young Kir here—oh, my.” I heard a great splash behind me, but I couldn’t move.

All the years of hoping and wishing for a child—though I’d filled my life with so much that mattered—had left marks on my soul. “I gave up hope so long ago,” I whispered, and felt Levi’s tentacles surround me as I wept silently. “Are you certain?”

“Very much so, sweet child. I’ve delivered more baby selkies into this world than my own, and I’m the matriarch. I’m certain you have conceived, and I can feel that she’s one of my line.”

“She?” I was crying so hard now, I almost couldn’t speak. “It’s a girl?”

“It is. In about a year, you’ll have a sweet little selkie princess to love.” She smiled again. “I’ll stay as long as you want me. I’m not certain that grandson of mine is going to be much use.”

“Oh, Kir!” I turned around to see that Kir had passed out and was floating in the shallow water. The other males scooped him up and carried him with us, while Levi and Grandma took turns laughing and looking slightly peeved.



AFTER DINNER, Levi pulled me onto his lap in front of the fire, while the rest of the household cleared up and told stories around us. None of my mates would let me so much as lift a dish after Grandma’s revelation, though Levi had not seemed surprised. He had appeared slightly perturbed, though.

“Are you grumpy about the baby being Kir’s?” I asked quietly. “I know you long for a child as well.” His hands rested over my abdomen, and though I was sure it was too soon to feel anything, there was a small flickering, like a feather brushing against my womb.

“I’m a bit jealous,” he admitted, though he was smiling as he stroked my stomach through my dress. “But no. The selkies deserve to have their line remade as well.” He kissed my neck. “And if what I’ve read is true, kraken gestation is five years at least, sometimes ten. This can be a practice run for the longer race ahead.”

“Five *years*?” I screeched, twisting around in my seat to stare at Levi’s face. He had to be joking. He was not.

“Possibly ten. The gestation varies.” Levi’s dark skin went a shade deeper.

I hissed at him like a cat. “I’m going to cut off your balls. That’s what I’ll do. I’ll make it so you *can’t* impregnate me for a decade at a time.”

The room had gone silent. My mates were all staring with wide eyes, and Grandma and Ratter were sniggering in the corner, while Goran stared daggers at the two selkie males who were mooning over Ratter rather conspicuously.

Wulfram was the first to find his voice. “If it helps, I’ve raised children already. I’m not in any rush to have more.”

Ratter burst out laughing. “Good thing, Wulfie. Your grandbabies are going to be born around the same time as Wren’s little seal girl. You’ll be busy babysitting squirmy little dragons.”

“They had *better not* be giving me grandchildren,” Wulfram growled, violently flicking his remaining vambrace open and closed, like he was imagining it stabbing into dragonhide. “I’m not ready to be a grandfather. Cyndil’s a baby! She’s only been walking for a few years!”

Ratter grabbed Goran and headed for the door, calling out on her way, “She’s most likely living every woman’s dream, getting railed on the regular by seven fire-breathing monster men, Wulfie. I’d be stunned if she’s not already knocked up.”

Wulfram cursed, while Goran choked out, “You don’t dream of seven monstrous men, do you, my sharp-petaled daisy?”

Ratter just laughed, beckoning to the selkie males. “Come with me and Goran, hm? I’ll show you my favorite tunnel.”

Kir’s grandmother laughed so hard she fell out of her chair, then stood and teetered off after them. “Favorite tunnel, my oysters. Got to protect my young ones from that one. She’ll have their skins before they know they’ve taken them off.”

When they had all left, I glared as my mates clustered around me. Talon slid into a kneeling position on one side, with the puppy on his lap. Kir folded his legs gracefully, one hand resting on the pelt I wore around my waist whenever he didn’t need it. Wulfram carried an entire carafe of port wine over to the fire and sat in front of it, drinking straight from the bottle, though he wound one large hand around my ankle, squeezing gently.

My scent filled the air around us, but I was still mad. “Do you all want babies, then?” I asked, not certain what answer I wanted to hear.

“I’d take as many as you will bear,” Kir admitted.

Wulfram sighed, taking a long drink. “A child of yours and mine would be a force to be reckoned with. I’d love to be a father again, and this time, get it right. I wouldn’t leave them to go to war, or leave their mother unprotected. I’d spend every minute of my life making this world a brighter and safer place for them, and myself a better man and father.” His blue eyes speared mine as I saw that he needed this chance to redeem himself, in his own mind. “Yes, little *varl*. I would give much to see you heavy with my child. I would give anything you ask.”

I caressed his face when he leaned close. “How could I say no to that?”

“I want at least ten,” Levi said baldly. “And I don’t care if you cut off my balls for saying so. I’ll grow new ones.”

“You can do that?” Kir asked curiously. Wulfram snorted into his wine.

Talon held up Odd. “I’m fine with a puppy, little bird. No need to cut off my balls.”

Levi cleared his throat as I reached underneath me and grabbed his balls, giving them a gentle squeeze. Then I moved my hand to his cock—which had been hard for the past few minutes—and squeezed it, too, for good measure.

“Don’t act like you wouldn’t hand your balls to her if she asked,” Kir muttered to Talon, as Wulfram passed him the wine. Talon smirked, but didn’t reply. For some reason, that had my other three mates groaning.

“If you sacrifice one more body part,” Wulfram teased, “what will it take for the rest of us to measure up?”

They all turned their faces to me. I rubbed myself on Levi’s leg, letting my scent fill the room and mingle with theirs. “Oh, I’m sure I can come up with a suitable way,” I purred. “In the next few thousand years or so.”

“Let’s start now.” Levi lifted me out of his lap, carrying me to our bedroom and my nest, my other lovers right behind us.

Outside, the rain splashed against the walls of the castle, and the wind sang a wild, shrill song, while inside we dove into a wide sea of pleasure, allowing ourselves to sink into it, and each other, all night long.

## EPILOGUE



WREN

“*I*’m nervous, Kir. Why am I nervous?” I pulled at the waist of my red coronation gown, the one I’d begun sewing over a year and a half ago, before that fateful trip to the Svellvollr. We’d gone back only once since then to check on Cyndil and her dragons, since my selkie pregnancy had been complicated.

“Waaah!” That complication began wailing in her crib by my bedside, and Kir picked her up, carrying her to me with a large cloth while I laughed and began unbuttoning the front of my dress.

“Of course she’d want another feed, when we’re already late to the ceremony.”

“They won’t start without us, *svichka*,” Wulfram said from the door. He settled the cloth on my lap to cover the red silk as Kir handed Starling to me. I set her at my breast, and she quieted immediately as she drank.

“Such a miracle,” Kir breathed, entranced as always at seeing me feed our baby girl.

“Indeed. The Goddess only made one set of tits that deserve the title, brother,” Wulfram said with a sigh.

Without looking, Kir smacked him on the leg. “Don’t say tits in front of the baby.”

“Such a perverted warrior you are,” I teased. “If I didn’t save the milk for Starling, you’d steal it all.”

“Fuck, little *varl*,” Wulfram grumbled, standing to adjust himself. “I could have a little taste; she wouldn’t miss it.”

I rolled my eyes. I wasn’t certain why, but my milk had come in gold, glowing with power, and if Levi hadn’t assured me it was the perfect food for our baby, I would’ve worried. But all of my mates had sampled a drop or two, and said that it made them feel energized for days afterward. Which was what Starling needed, at almost a year old and still so small. Energy, and nutrients.

I’d given birth to her four months early, on the first day of autumn. Grandma had been the only one of us not worried about the premature girl. She’d come into the world wrapped in a sealskin caul—as all selkies did—and had been perfectly formed, even if her eyes were turquoise instead of dark brown like the other selkies. The matriarch had assured me I had nothing to worry about, and that many selkie pups were born early.

But now, Starling’s human skin glittered with scales when she was angry, and the month before, I’d noted small protrusions on her back, as if tiny wings were starting to form. She’d also begun to show signs that she had powers unlike any other selkies. Just the day before, when we’d made her go down for a nap, she’d manipulated the winds to pick up Odd—who weighed almost as much as I did now—and settled him in her bed like a living stuffed toy.

“She hasn’t spoken a word, and she’s still smaller than any one-year-old human,” I fretted, switching her to the other side. “Maybe we should try her on solid foods again. She might like fish.”

“Stop worrying, limpet. She’s exactly as she was meant to be,” Kir said. After a few moments, he lifted the drowsy baby, who gave a loud burp and fell asleep. “I’ll take her to Grandma.” He slipped out the door.

Wulfram was at my side in an instant, cleaning up the few drops of golden milk that trickled from my breast—with his tongue, of course. I swatted him away. “Not now, Warlord. I’m late for my own coronation.”

“Talon’s been teaching me how to be your servant, *svichka*. Let me help,” he said, his massive hands moving dexterously to button up the diamond fastenings of my dress, then tucking a strand of my hair behind one ear. None of my mates had wanted me to wear my hair up, although I did that most of the time now, with an infant who loved to pull hair in the household. But today, I’d let my bright red tresses flow down my back, almost matching the color of my gown.

I lifted my selkie’s skin off the chair beside me, then set it down again, wondering if I could get away with carrying it, or if that would be an affront to the selkies. I’d need to hand it to Kir at the water’s edge anyway.

“Little flame?” Levi’s voice had me turning.

“Levi, why are you here? What’s wrong?” He wasn’t supposed to be in the castle. He was meeting me at the water’s edge, where all the attendants had gathered. Then we would perform two identical ceremonies—one on land, and one at the bottom of the trench—so all the guests had a chance to witness the moment. “I’m meant to walk down with... Where’s Talon?”

“I’m here, little bird.” Talon stepped around Levi. “You’ve been flooding all our bonds with your worry. So we decided to make sure you knew there’s nothing to worry about.”

Levi nodded in agreement. “We need to help you understand what it means to be an Empress.”

Suddenly, my buttons were undoing themselves, and wind was rushing up my skirts. “Levi!” I shrieked.

“Shush, little siren. You don’t want the guests hearing you,” Levi teased as he and Talon both dropped to their knees in front of me, their hands wrapped around my thighs, opening me to them and holding me there.

Before I could blink, Wulfram was behind me, one hand wrapped around my hair, the other gently circling my throat. My breasts were open to the warm wind that rushed in from the small window, teasing my nipples into peaks. I let out a soft moan as I felt Talon’s and Levi’s tongues descending on

me in tandem, each of them devouring me like I was their last meal, and they were competing for the largest share of my pleasure.

“Ahh!” I started to cry out as my climax swept over me, but suddenly, Kir’s mouth was over mine, muffling my noises as those devilish tongues kept going.

“Oh, look at that,” Kir murmured, pulling back with a wicked gleam in his eye as he lifted my breasts in his hands. Golden milk was rushing down from my tight nipples. “You’re making a mess, limpet. Don’t worry. I’ll clean you up.” He closed his mouth around one nipple, giving a long suck, then swallowed with a growl.

No, that was Wulfram growling. “Mine,” he demanded, grasping my other breast in his hand. He couldn’t reach it with his mouth, so he worked it, squeezing the liquid out into his palm, then drinking it. “Fuck, little *varl*, you’re going to make me shame myself. I could come just tasting you.”

“I will,” Talon groaned. “My Mistress’s cunt is all I need to find my release.” I looked down and saw he’d pulled his cock out of his trousers, and was stroking it.

“Don’t waste it.” I shuddered as Levi’s tongue, still buried in me, got longer somehow. “I want it.”

“Where would you like it, Mistress?”

“In my mouth. Feed it to me.”

“How will he do that, when I’m holding your throat, little *varl*?” Wulfram snarled in my ear, scraping his teeth on my neck, then working more milk out of my breast.

“Like this, Warlord.” Talon squeezed his cock harder, spilling his release into his cupped hand. He stood, offering it to me like some pagan sacrifice, his amber eye blazing.

I could just make out the hazy outline of his wings behind him, and saw his pupil was slitted. His wyvern had been healing over the past year, and in certain moments, forced his way to the surface. Especially in moments like this.

“Wyverns feed their mates. My beautiful sky bond, let me feed you.” He held his hand to my mouth, and I drank.

It was filthy. It was also, somehow, holy. I came again the second the sweetness of his myrrh and smoke hit my tongue, and licked his hands clean when we were done.

“Now are you ready for your coronation, *cora mar*?” Levi asked as he stood, the men all helping me back into my clothing. Only Talon had found his release, so the other three had to make adjustments in their pants. I giggled as Wulfram struggled to keep the head of his erect cock from protruding out of the waist of his trousers.

“I think you need new trousers,” I noted. “You’ve outgrown those rather suddenly.” But then I took a deep breath, and felt a few stitches pop in the waistline of my dress. “Oof. Maybe I’ve outgrown mine as well. Maybe I should stop eating so much,” I said to Talon with a wink.

“Never say that.” He took my arm, and the others followed behind.

Levi stepped in front of me and Talon, while Kir took my other arm, and Wulfram followed right behind. I was hemmed in by some of the most powerful men in the world as I walked out into the sunlight, into a crowd of royalty and legends.

Overhead, dragons roared and flamed the sky. On the rocks, the most significant people in all our lives cheered. Valerie ta Farthan, the Queen of Death, was there with her fresh young bride, who wore so much perfume, I was almost certain she was hiding a more significant scent. Ratter stood beside Valerie, alternating between staring at the older woman who she’d taken as her role model back when Valerie taught her seven ways to kill a man with a hairpin, and glaring at Goran.

Goran stood some distance away, very pointedly not looking at Ratter. When they’d shown up three days ago, I wasn’t certain what had happened between them, but Wulfram had hinted that Ratter had finally asked something of Goran he wouldn’t do. I’d sent Kir with a bottle of brandy to Goran’s room, and he’d come away with a strange pallor and a

nonsensical story about a warrior's ladder that Ratter wanted to climb.

When I'd asked Wulfram what a warrior's ladder was, he'd had to draw a picture of how piercings could be applied in that very sensitive area. The men had all vanished for a pre-coronation drinking party the night before, and I'd wondered what had them all laughing and shuddering in turn this morning at breakfast.

From the way Goran was standing right now, though, I had my answer. "Poor boy," I sighed. "I hope he thinks it was worth it."

"Your Omega's happiness is worth any pain in the world," Talon said softly. "He'll be fine."

"He'll be more than fine," Wulfram grumbled. "Boy took nine rungs on that ladder of his. *Nine*." I made a mental note to ask him later what that meant exactly, but smiled serenely at a waving Cyndil now, who stood head and shoulders above everyone in the crowd, save her brother, Kavin, a red-haired giant of a man whose grin was infectious.

Wulfram smiled at his son. His mate, Roya, had not been able to attend, but Kavin had been overjoyed to support his father and me... and the man standing next to Kavin had told me when he arrived the week before that he would have flown ten times as far to see me again.

I smiled so hard my cheeks hurt at the wyvern who stepped out of the crowd to greet me, his deep brown wings and chestnut hair gleaming. "Hey, Ick. I'm so glad you came."

Icarus the boy had been my playmate, confidant, and rescuer. Now he was grown, and the king of Wyngel in Talon's place. But his eyes glittered with love and mischief as we neared him.

"I'm glad I did, too, Wrennie. You clean up well," he teased. "Even if you did make us wait out here, with no wine in sight."

Levi made a sound of mock displeasure. "The Empress of the Deep Waters is worth any wait." Kir winked at me, and

Wulfram hummed in agreement.

“Icarus, join the honor guard,” Talon invited, letting go of my hand and allowing Icarus to step up and take it. Talon fell back beside Wulfram.

“This day is perfect now,” I whispered. “My two best friends in the world at my sides, and my mates all around.”

Icarus gave me a side hug and murmured in my ear, “I was kidding about the cleaning up. You smell like all four of your mates fell into a vat of caramel and went running through a field of flowers. It’s a good thing you’re about to dive into the ocean.”

Serenely, without moving a muscle, I used the wind to creep down his shirt and tickle his ribs, right where he used to be most sensitive when we were little.

“Stop,” he gasped, trying not to react. His cheeks were trembling with the effort.

“I’ll stop when you pee your pants,” I threatened, just as I had when we were little. I let him go then, since my feet were at the water’s edge, the surf flirting with the hemline of my red gown.

Levi stepped up and spoke quietly, but the wind carried his voice to every listener as if he were right beside them. “Welcome, friends. I am He Who Calls the Storm and Calms the Depths, also called Leviathan, the youngest Emperor of the Deep Waters. Today, I present the woman who has made my long life complete. For thousands of years, I hungered for love. For meaning to my long life. For Wren.”

The others stepped back, and Levi dropped to his knees in front of me. Instantly, every person gathered there kneeled as well. I was the only one left standing, facing the water, while Levi faced the crowd.

“Wren, *cora mar*, Omega, known as the *Ankelsang*, wife and sky bond of King Talon, mate of King Kir and Queen of the selkies, mate to Wulfram, once the Warlord of All Starlak and now blood-brother to my line. You have been my Empress since the first moment I found you at sea. But with this day,

and this crown, you become the Empress in truth to all the denizens of the Deep Waters, witnessed here by those who dwell in both realms.”

He reached a hand back toward the water, and a wave lifted an elaborate crown, dripping with rubies and pearls, the gold that made it up fashioned into waves and crescent moons. He took it from the water and turned back to me, gesturing for me to duck my head.

“You will rule the Deep Waters with me and any of my brothers who may yet live.” He went on, and I wasn’t certain anyone but me would hear the sadness that crept into his tone as he listed the titles I would bear, and the responsibilities and privileges of my position. None of his brothers had come to witness the coronation. Whether they were sleeping, or had gone to silt, Levi didn’t know. But their absence was the only bleak spot on the day.

I’d thought the crown would be heavy, but it felt as light as a feather. I adjusted it, marveling at the blueness of the sky and the calm surface of what was always a choppy sea, even in mid-summer as it was now. Almost glassy calm, except for one spot in the center of the horizon—a dark hump, that was growing... closer?

“Wren?” Kir whispered.

“Thank you, my Emperor,” I replied as Levi rose, holding my hand and facing the crowd.

He continued. “In the Goddess’s name, please greet the newest member of my line—”

“The newest *two* members,” a voice called from the waves, but not in any human language. This speech was one I’d been learning for the past year and a half, hoping for this day. “Welcome, little sister.” The voice was thunder and pounding, like a surf beating down on land and crushing it into sand.

Levi stepped into the surf, his tentacles unspooling into the water as we watched the hump move at a ridiculous speed toward us. “My eldest brother,” he said with a smile.

I heard Kir call out to the crowd, “If you felt like leaving early, this is your moment. Anyone who stays, kneels for the Great Emperor of the Emperors.”

No one moved, except Ratter, who was suddenly at my side, her obsidian blade in her hand for some reason. I shot her a look. “Just in case,” she whispered, her eyes fixed on the new Emperor.

In less than a minute, the new kraken was upon us. He towered up into the blue sky, and I thought his carapace was a peculiar color until I realized it was almost entirely covered with barnacles, shells, and stones.

“Jewels,” Ratter breathed, and I realized she was correct. The stones were enormous swaths of faceted gemstones. “Where did he get those?”

“Shipwrecks,” Levi answered absently. “Lusca had quite a collection at one point. Of course, he sank most of them himself.”

“Introduce us,” she demanded.

“Don’t!” I slapped a hand over her mouth as the beast shifted into a human form.

Well, mostly human. He was easily ten feet tall, and his features were strange, hypnotically beautiful and colorful, as if he’d used some other template besides human men to choose it. He held something in one hand that I recognized.

“The scepter,” I breathed. It was the same crescent-moon-topped staff I’d used to open the volcano. “I thought it was destroyed.”

“Lusca!” Levi stepped forward to clasp his brother’s hand. “The ocean did not sing of your coming, but my heart leaps to behold you.”

“Little brother, I would not have missed this moment for anything. The seas tell the story of your Empress.” He turned to me and smiled, and I felt my knees go the tiniest bit watery.

“They do?”

Ratter had gone completely still next to me, and I hoped she wasn't going to faint. This creature's presence was overwhelming, his power beating down on me like the surf itself. Everyone else on the beach was prostrate, except for my mates, me, and Ratter.

"Indeed. They call you The Flame of the World's Waters, the Deep Heart of Healing. They say you are one of the world's greatest treasures, and I see they carried only truth to me." His eyes burned with a blue fire. "Even now, you hold the next Emperor within you, dear sister. No, I would not have missed this day for anything."

I shook my head in confusion. "The next..."

I heard one of my mates behind me whisper, "I *knew* it."

Levi smiled down at me, his face streaked with tears. I bit my lip to keep from crying. "No wonder my coronation gown didn't fit," I said, like an idiot. And then I went on, my mind spinning. "I'll be pregnant for five years."

"Ten," Lusca corrected, with a look of censure at his brother.

"Oh. Ten." I really wasn't sure how to feel about this news.

But then Levi cupped a hand on my cheek, staring into my face with an ocean full of love for me. "Are you happy, *cora mar*?"

"To be the mother of your children? To be the one chosen to heal your line? This happiness is worth any pain in the world," I said truthfully. "And I have four mates to help me bear the price of love, to help me when I ask, to stand by me for the rest of time."

I glanced at the men who'd changed me and held me through my darkest moments, and given me a life that was beyond my wildest imaginings. My wyvern, my selkie, and my warrior stood tall and proud to be my mates. Their hearts were in their eyes as I told them I loved them, then turned back to my kraken.

“Levi, my love, I promised you my heart long ago. And you have it still.”

They *all* did.



Thank you so much for reading! If you enjoyed Wren’s story, please leave a review. It makes all the difference in the world to indie authors.

Need more? Join Merri’s newsletter at [www.merribright.com](http://www.merribright.com) for an exclusive, very naughty peek into Wulfram’s point of view during Wren’s heat.



Curious about what’s next in this world for Ratter? The next excerpt is a chapter from Lusca’s point of view.

Warning: Cliffhanger ahead! If you can’t stand on a literary cliff for a few months? Stop reading now.

# LUSCA, THE EMPEROR OF EMPERORS



The waves had whispered to me only a moment ago, or so it seemed, that the curse had come to an end. That my youngest brother had somehow found an Empress and remade our line in fire, though every wave that brought that story to my ears told it differently. Were there dragons? Had the sea itself caught fire? Had the Goddess truly appeared, and spoken a command to stop the flow of time?

Though it seemed too wild to be true, I had felt that frozen moment. It had woken me from my sleep... No. Not sleep. My death. I had already decided to go to silt, when that long moment—and a small wave's unlikely story—changed my mind, driving me from the seabed in the warmer waters I had always preferred, to this cold, rocky coast.

I had swum here to ascertain the truth of the rumor for myself, though I had learned long ago not to hope. Still, if this errand turned out to be only one more dream denied, one more hope crushed, I knew the silt waited for me. It was soft, and comfortable. And at least the hunger had dissipated. Death would come easily.

I bade the waves to conceal my passage, not wanting to alarm my brothers who slept in the seas I journeyed through. The world was much as it had been, though I noted a lack of magical sea dwellers. Nothing caught my attention enough to alarm me.

Though some scent on the air here as I approached the rocky coast attracted my notice. Fresh green plants, mint perhaps. And rain, as if from far away, falling on dry places.

I did not call out to my brother, commanding the waves to silence as I approached. It was true. He stood in human shape on the rocks, next to his flame-haired bride. And she... Oh, what joy was this? She already quickened with the next in our line.

I swam to the beach, took shape—though I wasn't certain which shape; my memories of human forms were mingled with the forms of many other creatures, even some of the magical ones that had long ago left this world—and spoke in the language of my kind. “Welcome, little sister.”

To my delight, she turned and smiled, understanding my words.

Next, I greeted my brother, my heart lifting to see him alive and well, and so happy he glowed with internal fire. “Little brother, I would not have missed this moment for anything. The seas tell the story of your Empress.”

That strange scent in the air here teased me again, and I drew a deep breath into my lungs, seeking it. The Empress smelled of summer flowers and sweetness. Too sweet for my liking. Where was that fresh green scent, that hint of rain?

Distracted in a way I had not been since I had first learned to hunt my own meals, hunting now for something more tantalizing than any meal I had ever tasted, I spoke to my new sister, sharing my joy at her pregnancy. My stomach burned as I sought the elusive perfume, and my heart fell when I finally recognized the sensation.

I was hungry.

Was this the great hunger returning? The curse on my line to know no satisfaction, to never be filled, to seek endlessly in the waters of the world and not find relief? Perhaps the curse had only ended for my youngest brother.

Disheartened, I held out the scepter a wave had brought me, with a wild tale of the sea burning and the Goddess's return. I offered it to the Empress. “The waves carried this to me with a very odd tale, one I would love to hear after the ceremony. It is yours, yes?”

Her face betrayed her shock, but she recognized the staff. “Thank you. I suppose it is mine,” she said, reaching for it.

But before she could take it, another hand grasped the scepter. A small, pale, perfect hand that glowed like the moon lived beneath the thin surface of her skin. My eyes met the woman’s—no, the *girl’s*—gaze, and the world spun as I sank into her silver-gray eyes.

Fearless, she stared back with a confident smile and an arched eyebrow. I took in her appearance. She was taller than the Empress by a head, and wore a black gown made of fine silk, almost the same shade as her long hair. Her nose was straight and narrow, her lips lush and full, her eyes wide with nothing at all like innocence, though there was something nearly childlike about the way she tilted her chin as she took me in.

In one hand, she held one of the obsidian-bladed knives of fate. And in the other, the scepter. I felt my jaw open wide. Somehow, she had plucked the staff from my hand, though I had no intention of giving it to her.

“It’s not yours,” I whispered in my language to her, and her eyes clouded for a moment, the gray of a sunless sea vanishing to be replaced in a blink with a raging, golden fire I knew at once.

“It is.” Her voice rang out, as Her eyes poured golden light over the waters, painting the surface with fire. Her long hair swirled around Her head in an unseen wind, glittering dark and bright.

I fell to my knees in the water, sucking in a breath. “Goddess?” I fought to speak the word under the barrage of Her power.

All around me, the others fell to their knees, even the dragons holding still in the air. Her gaze moved to the horizon to the north, where an answering glow of bright white flashed in the sky.

“Goddess?” I repeated, stunned.

But the girl merely blinked, the gold gone from her eyes as quickly as it had appeared. “Hmm. *Goddess*. I don’t know, I suppose it’s a lot better than sweetheart or darling,” she said saucily after a long minute. “Yep, Goddess will do. Thanks for the stick, cutie. I’ll see you later.”

And then she was gone.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you for reading *The Wyvern's Redemption*. If you left a rating or review when you finished, thank you even more!

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A final thank you to Mr. Bright, for being so proud of me. I'd ask you to stop telling everyone I write tentacle smut, but it's a great way to cull the holiday card list. Love you!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Merri Bright writes stories filled with magic, since those are the books she loves to read. She spends her days dreaming about naughty angels, misunderstood demons, sexy shifters, growly Alpha males, and frequently refuses to limit her heroines to just one love interest.

Please join [Merri's Mischief Makers](#) on Facebook where you'll discover random giveaways, sneak peeks of new novels, book recommendations, and silly/sexy/funny stuff. Or email at [merri@merribright.com](mailto:merri@merribright.com).



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