

TO
KISS
A
DRAGON

LORDS
OF
FORBIDDEN
FANTASY

MIRANDA BRIDGES

TO KISS A DRAGON



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To Kiss a Dragon
by Miranda Bridges

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About Miranda

CHAPTER 1



M aliq

“The woman must be killed.”

Jazin looks at me, my brother’s dark gaze now streaked with gold after that concise statement. The dragon within him wants to surface. And the evidence isn’t just in the lightening of his eyes. It’s also in the tendrils of smoke leaving his nostrils and the scales covering the backs of his hands.

I can’t blame him. The beast within me also stirred at the mention of a female who might invade our lives. The Golden Horde doesn’t take kindly to outsiders, but humans are the most abhorrent to my people. Too much suffering has been caused by them.

“We aren’t sure if she’s a threat,” Yurik says. The shaman exhales and shakes his head. Tiny shells, held in place by golden threads woven into the ends of his hair, make a soft tinkling noise when they collide. “When Asili gave me a vision of the woman, he said she was going to arrive and for us to expect change. The sky god didn’t say she’d bring danger to the Horde.”

Jazin narrows his gaze. It’s completely gold, and the matching scales on his hands have crept up to his elbows. “Change is not welcome, and she won’t be either.” He folds his arms and jerks his chin at the shaman. “Tell him, brother,” he says to me. “Tell Yurik that no good can come from this vision of his.”

“I don’t presume to speak to the gods,” I say, my words slow and measured. “And I won’t dismiss the message Asili sent to Yurik. It must be

deliberated upon.”

My brother rears back. The scales now cover the majority of his torso. They reflect the flames in the fire pit, bright and molten. If he doesn't exert some self-control, he'll shift, and I have no wish to subdue Jazin. But given the topic of conversation, it's likely he'll force my hand.

“There's nothing to think about!” he shouts. “Give me the order, and I'll end her life before she has the chance to hurt anyone. This is the only way to keep our people safe.”

The shaman frowns, deepening the creases on his forehead. “She is important. For whatever reason, the sky god showed her to me. We can't ignore that.”

“I can, and I do,” Jazin snaps.

“Enough.” My command, although spoken with an even tone, has Jazin's muscles tensing. “Be still, brother. Whether or not she is killed on sight, the woman won't have the opportunity to endanger any members of the Horde. You have my word on that.”

My vow does little to pacify Jazin, but it does give him the wherewithal to relax. Minutely. At least the likelihood of him destroying the belongings in my home has decreased.

Yurik cocks his head. “What will you do, Zahtan? Kill the woman, or find out why Asili believes her to be significant?”

It doesn't take long for me to come up with an answer. “Both.”

CHAPTER 2



*H*elena

“You needn’t bother,” I say quietly. “You know I don’t care what I look like.”

Amara tugs on a strand of my hair before arranging it atop my head and pinning it down. In the mirror’s reflection, I can make out the sparkle of mischief in her gaze. She might be younger, but it has no bearing on her inclination to chastise me.

“Behave, Helena.”

“Don’t you ever grow tired of obedience?” I ask.

My sister’s lips pull to the side. “I believe so.”

“But you’re not sure?” I lift a brow. “That’s the exact struggle I find within myself. Why do we obey the vampires without an ounce of protest?”

“Because we’re under their protection. Every other creature beyond these walls would kill us.”

I nod in agreement. “Perhaps, but it’s more than that. Even the times I gather the courage to refuse Desmond’s orders, I can’t get it out.” I make a circling motion with my hand. “It’s like the rebellion is suppressed.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing. It could be the reason we’re still alive. Now, hold still.”

She falls silent while continuing to style my hair. Light brown curls rest against my temples and the nape of my neck in an inviting, almost seductive manner. Never mind the fact that I’m the opposite of sensual and have no

desire to attract my master's attention. At least my magic—or ability, depending on who you ask—protects me from that.

If Desmond could sleep with me and *not* give me access to the blood magic he wields, I think I'd be far worse off than I am now. My sister as well. Although, I'd kill anyone who tried to hurt her, no matter what it cost me.

I glance at the door of our shared bedroom, verifying it's shut. And locked. Not that the metal bolt would prevent a vampire from entering, but it's enough for me to know I'm unlikely to be overheard.

"Feeding them disgusts me," I say, lowering my voice. "Yet I find myself doing it regardless."

Amara nods. "It's the same for me."

"Tonight will be different."

Even as the words leave my lips, there's something inside of me that rises, making my tongue heavy, like lead in my mouth. I swallow to alleviate the sensation, but it remains. As it does whenever I think about defying my vampire master.

My sister grabs me by the shoulders and spins me on the chair to face her. "Helena, don't provoke his wrath just for the sake of pride. Please, I'm begging you."

The worry in my sister's blue eyes sweeps through me like a cold wind, removing the heat of my anger. "I won't. It's just..." I fist my hands in my lap, resisting the urge to strike something. "I don't understand why we can't think or do things in direct opposition to—"

As if someone's wrapped their fingers around my throat, my sentence halts. And not for the first time. Magic is the only explanation for this.

A fog descends on my mind, enveloping me. I blink to clear it, and nothing changes. "What was I saying?" I ask.

Amara stares at me with a blank expression. The same one that's sure to be found on my face.

"Forget it." My forehead throbs, and I massage my temples. "I can't remember what we were discussing, but it's not important."

"It's time for you to get going." Amara adjusts a curl, placing it just behind my ear. "You look lovely."

"Thank you. We both know it's all for show because the vampires like decadence and whatnot."

My sister places a kiss on my cheek. "I'll see you in our quarters in the

morning, once the vampires have gone to sleep.”

“Absolutely.” I get to my feet and throw my arms around her, embracing the other half of my heart. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Don’t forget what I said. Behave, Helena.”

“Of course, I will.”



A light breeze sweeps past me, stirring the tendrils framing my face. I lean on the brick ledge and gaze out of the window. The stones dig into the fabric of my sleeve, but I don’t give it a second thought. Like most vampires, Desmond is wealthy and can replace the dress without effort.

Just as easily as he can replace me.

His human thrall.

The clouds in the night sky block the moonlight and the stars. I frown, disappointment settling on my soul. How long has it been since I felt the sun? The moon is the only substitute I have, and even that is unavailable to me right now.

Still, the land stretching out below me is beautiful. It’s cloaked in darkness except for the fires lit beyond the border of the Crimson Castle where my sister and I live. The residents in the distant hills are the lycans, a people I’ve never seen because they are the mortal enemies of the vampires.

Actually, everyone is, including the fae and the dragon hordes.

I suppose they’re my enemies as well.

“Come here, Helena.”

I turn away from the window at the sound of Desmond’s command. As though my body has a will of its own, my feet carry me to where he lounges in a chair by the fireplace. My instincts scream at me to do the opposite. I’m used to my body and mind constantly warring with my intuition. It’s been this way since I can remember, going back as far as my childhood.

Considering how long I’ve been with the vampires, my memories are few.

The fire blazing in the hearth casts shadows on my master’s face and clothing. Boots, polished to a shine, reflect the dancing flames. They’re followed by a pair of black pants, a red vest cut narrow at the waist, and a white shirt that’s accented with lace. Desmond’s midnight hair is swept back,

left to trail down his spine, and his skin is smooth, pale, and cold to the touch. He's classically handsome with an ethereal beauty.

His near perfection, gifted to the majority of his kind, has never sat well with me.

The vampire fiddles with a dagger, twirling it. "See anything interesting?" he asks, his voice smooth like the silk he wears.

I shake my head. "The view has not changed."

"It won't until we conquer our enemies. And you play an integral role in that."

"What role?"

"I'll explain in a moment. Come closer." He takes my wrist and pushes back the material of my sleeve. My heart beats more quickly at what's to come. "Sit on my lap," he says. "I wish to feed."

With my pulse racing, I step into the opening between his legs and perch myself on his thigh. He sets the dagger on the table beside the chair and brings my captured wrist to his mouth. When he sweeps his lips over the delicate skin there, I shiver.

The disgust I mentioned to my sister runs through me like a river, with nowhere to go. Yet I do not burst, even as words of rejection gather on my tongue, choking me.

"This will be our last night together until you return from your mission," he says.

My eyes widen to the fullest extent. "What?"

"It's true. You'll leave the castle tonight with an escort who will take you to the border of our lands. From there, you'll seek out the dragon lord, leader of the Golden Horde."

"To what end?"

Desmond pauses, and in those seconds, I swear my heart stops beating. "You need to sleep with him."

"Why?" The answer dawns on me as soon as the question leaves my mouth. "You want access to his powers by feeding on me."

"What we do with his magic is none of your concern. Your objective is to have sex with him and return back to me."

The resolute tone in the vampire's voice has me gripping his shirt with trembling fingers. "I can't!"

"I don't like this arrangement any more than you do, but the orders have been given, and the mission will be completed."

“But, but—” I sputter, “I don’t know anything about the dragon lord or the Golden Horde. How am I supposed to seduce a man that I’ve never met?”

The vampire’s crimson gaze sweeps over my face and downward. I immediately retract my hands, placing them in my lap. Neither the high neck nor the long sleeves of my blouse protect me from the apprehension that springs forth at his lengthy perusal. When his eyes return to mine, there’s a shine of lust within their depths.

“With your beauty, it will not be a challenge,” he says. Desmond clears his throat and turns to stare at the fireplace. “Why do you think I dress you in clothing that covers almost every part of you? You’re a temptation that I have to battle constantly. Even so, I touch you more than is necessary for a feeding. Which could be an issue. You’re my thrall, and I am your master, but there are times that I think your magic has weakened mine.”

“I can’t leave my sister.” My mind churns and my heart weeps at the thought. “Please don’t make me go.”

Even though my pride shrivels at the desperation in my voice, I had to say it. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Amara, and she’d be devastated if I left. That’s without taking my own feelings into consideration.

“If you want what’s best for her,” he says, drawing out the words, “you will go.”

A spark of fury ignites within me. It spreads quickly, heating my cheeks. “What do you mean?” It’s the question that elicits the most fear in me, but I have to know the answer.

Desmond exhales a breath full of impatience. “She is Vorigan’s thrall. As the captain of the Dark One’s forces, he will do *whatever* is necessary to ensure you successfully complete your mission. Am I understood?”

My entire body shakes with emotion, equal parts horror and rage. I nod, unable to conjure a response that won’t make matters worse. The only option available to me is to find a reason that’ll prevent my departure.

I can’t see this mission as anything other than a death sentence.

“Won’t the dragon lord kill me? Or any other hordesman, for that matter?”

Desmond shakes his head. “You will tell him the location of an ancient artifact that will reveal itself in five days time in the light of the blood moon.”

“Which is?”

“A dragon egg. It’s nothing but a useless relic, yet for some reason, it’s important to the dragon lord. The knowledge of its whereabouts will stay his

hand and give you enough time to earn his trust.”

The vampire reaches into his pocket. When he withdraws it, there’s a necklace resting on his palm. It’s a plain leather string threaded through a gray, teardrop-shaped item. He flips it over, and the brilliance of color momentarily transfixes me. The iridescent quality makes the gold glitter but also hints at different hues depending on the angle as the light hits it.

I run my finger over the surface, finding the texture hard and smooth. “What is it?”

“A dragon scale. Presumably from the missing artifact, but no one knows for certain.”

Desmond takes the necklace to secure it around my neck. His touch is cold, but I ignore it, still mesmerized by the sparkling object. “Having this will prove to the dragon lord that you know the egg’s location. Now, you need to pay attention while I tell you where it is.”

I listen intently to all of the information, knowing my life and Amara’s depends on my memory. Overall, the expedition sounds simple enough. Whether or not that’s true, it’s the dragon lord’s problem. And he is mine.

“I shall miss you,” the vampire says.

I lift a brow. “Me, or my blood?”

He laughs and tweaks my nose. “Such a tart. To be honest, it’s both, my dear.”

“Hmm.”

“Don’t be like that.” When I remain silent, Desmond leans close, pressing his cool cheek to mine. “I’m a lieutenant, which gives me no choice. You know I wouldn’t send you away if it were up to me. Marcel requested the most loyal and obedient human, and his captain chose you. It’s an honor.”

I shrug.

The idea of being away from my sister has conflict churning in my gut. My mind tells me that I should panic and try again to convince him to let me stay. However, my heart leaps at the chance for freedom, to find some way to rescue myself and my sister from the vampires’ tyranny. My head aches with the opposing views clashing inside.

“Don’t leave in anger,” Desmond says, leaning back to look me in the eyes. I stare into the depths of his gaze, drowning in the red hue as his pupils dilate. “You know the sacred rule: you mustn’t harm your vampire master,” he says. “If you go and things are unsettled between us, that’ll pain me, Helena. You need to forgive me. *Now.*”

Everything goes hazy, like a thousand cobwebs have been spun in the recess of my mind. I blink at Desmond and nod slowly. The acknowledgement is at odds with the sick feeling in my stomach.

He smiles, the tips of his fangs peeking out. "There. Much better."

I continue to stare at him. I'm not frozen, but my mind and body have taken on a lethargic state, as though I've been buried in sand. It's strange, yet nothing I haven't experienced before. It's the very thing I tried to explain to Amara earlier.

Desmond runs his lips along my jawline, interrupting my troubled thoughts. "Kiss me," he whispers.

Like a puppet on a string, I obey. The kiss fails to ignite my blood or bring about arousal. It's... similar to washing my hands: mundane and uninspiring. Even though it doesn't disgust me as much as him drinking from me, the act of kissing is still repugnant.

Desmond pulls away with a groan. "Gods, what I wouldn't give to fuck you."

Fear slithers around me like a serpent. I swallow past the sudden dryness in my throat. Despite the fierce desire to object, I say nothing while my heart thrashes in my chest.

"Your magic would siphon mine," he says, "and I can't allow that. Do you know what would happen if the humans in our care were suddenly imbued with the ability to use compulsion? Or if they possessed the strength and speed of a vampire?" Desmond shakes his head. "Marcel would rip my head from my shoulders if I were to indulge. That is for certain. Our kind doesn't refer to him as the Dark One without just cause."

I tilt my head. "Compulsion?"

He waves a pale hand. "Nothing you need to concern yourself with."

"Very well."

"Brace yourself and don't move."

CHAPTER 3



*H*elena

My entire frame stiffens when Desmond captures my wrist and raises it to his mouth. His fangs extend beyond their normal length, and his gaze brightens, shining like a pair of rubies. He punctures my skin.

And my lower back grows warm.

The fog has yet to clear from my mind, but even so, the urge to shove him away burns in my gut. My body remains still when I try to lift my arm. This only exacerbates the sour feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Why do I let him do this to me?

I stare straight ahead and run my gaze over the room, taking in the luxury of my surroundings instead of focusing on what's happening. Everything around me is made from the finest of materials and covered in red. From the silk sheets to the plush carpets, the blood-red is present. It could be one of the reasons this place is called the Crimson Castle.

Desmond lifts his head, and the skin of my lower back instantly cools. The vampire licks his lips, pulling the last drops of my blood into his mouth. I grit my teeth, suppressing a shudder, and hold his gaze. He smiles at me right before lapping at the punctures on my wrist. The wounds immediately heal over, leaving two small dots barely visible to the naked eye.

I drop my gaze to my lap and thread my shaking fingers to keep them still. "Why does my back grow warm when you feed from me? Are the two things connected?"

“For a thrall, you’re very perceptive.”

“Please tell me.”

The desperation in my voice irritates me, but not enough to keep me from pushing Desmond to respond. There are so many things I wish to know. I’ve gone to bed every day right before the sun rises with questions percolating in my mind, yet whenever I attempt to initiate the conversation with my master, I can’t. Maybe the vampire will finally give me an answer, even if it’s only one out of the hundreds I want.

Desmond sighs. “You’re blood-bound to me,” he says. “I used blood magic to connect us. It’s a customary practice between a master and his or her thrall.”

“So you’re bound to me also?”

“No.” He laughs, giving me an incredulous look. “Why would I do that?”

“I thought you... loved me,” I say, struggling to push the words out. They’re like too much salt being poured on my tongue, almost making me gag. However, I’m not above manipulation if it’ll keep me from having to leave.

The vampire scoffs. “I could never love a human, but I do care about you. And I certainly want to fuck you.”

“How did you bind me?” I ask, keeping my voice even.

“It’s an exchange of blood.” He waves a hand in dismissal. “No more questions.”

My mind immediately goes blank. It’s so fast and severe that I blink a couple of times to gather myself. I manage, but it’s very ineffectual. Confusion still swirls within my mind.

“Now we must say our goodbyes, Helena. Your mission awaits.”

“I have to leave now?”

He nods. “In a few moments.” When I fall silent for a time, he grabs my jaw, and his eyes arrest me, his pupils expanding. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I’m nervous,” I say, the truth pouring from me like water from a spout. “I don’t know how to deal with the world beyond these walls. What if I fail? Where does that leave my sister?”

“Let’s not think about such things. You will be fine as long as you do what you’re told and then come back to me.” He releases my face to drag his fingertips down the length of my spine and across my lower back, right over the skin that was heated a moment ago. “When you return, I’ll need to feed

from you immediately. Until then, I'll find another human. I believe your sister will do nicely."

"But you can't!" I say, begging him with my gaze. "Vorigan feeds from her because she's his thrall. If you were to do the same, she'd die from blood loss."

"She's the closest thing to you, my dear. A poor substitute, but one nonetheless."

"Won't your captain have reservations? After all, she does belong to him."

When the vampire shakes his head, the brief flicker of hope within me dies. Only to be replaced with a rage so powerful that my hands shake with the need for violence.

"Please," I say through clenched teeth. "I'll do anything. Just don't drink from her."

Desmond wraps his arms around me and pulls me flush to his torso. "Enough of this. I require one final goodbye before Vorigan arrives to take you away."

The vampire kisses me before I can think to protest. He squeezes me so tightly that my ribs ache and his lips slant over mine in a frenzy. The energy he exudes is wild, unrestrained. And increasing.

I want to push him away, to hurt him for wanting to endanger my sister, yet my body refuses to obey my command. Again. Frustration unfurls in my chest, combining with my anger until I'm a powder keg, ready to explode.

The kiss continues, but the second a metallic tang hits my tongue, everything changes.

I... awaken.

Like a flower bursting through the earth to greet the sun, I'm no longer surrounded by darkness. But like a flower, I'm weak, vulnerable. That doesn't stop me from shoving Desmond.

The vampire stares at me with his chest heaving and his jaw slack. My attention is snagged by the blood gathering along a small cut on his lower lip. The same blood I tasted. That realization has my stomach roiling.

"How dare you reject me," he hisses.

When the male grabs my hair with a punishing grip, I wince. Pain throbs along my scalp, and I clench my teeth to keep from crying out. I won't give Desmond the satisfaction of knowing how much he's hurting me.

He studies me, his gaze probing. "I don't understand how you were able

to act of your own free will. You will tell me. That's an order."

His pupils dilate and there's an expectant air about him that I can't explain. But I can't ignore it, either. Nothing makes sense. I don't have an answer for him, and it doesn't help that he's frightening me. Not only with his physical threats, but with the things he's not saying.

"It was your blood." Despite my best efforts to keep my voice even, there's a quiver to it that snakes its way through my words. "The taste of it shocked me."

"Hmm..."

His nonchalant response is at odds with the tension lining his body. The muscles of his thigh underneath me are taut, and his breathing has picked up in speed. He still has a harsh grip on my hair. Everything about his demeanor has my instincts screaming in warning.

I reach for him, slowly bringing my hand to his face, cupping his cheek. "Please don't be angry with me. It'll ruin our final moments together."

Desmond's gaze narrows in suspicion. "Very well. Kiss me, thrall."

It's a test.

One that will cost me my life if I fail.

I paste a smile on my face and sweep my thumb over his skin in a caress. "As you wish."

Closing my eyes, I lean forward and press my lips to his. The vampire groans when I wrap my arm around his neck and my breasts graze his chest. With my free hand, I take his wrist, encouraging him to hold me. As soon as his arm is wrapped around me and his other hand is occupied with holding my hair, I deepen the kiss.

And reach for the dagger on the table.

I move slowly, my fingertips gliding over cold steel, causing elation to bloom in my heart. I grip the weapon just as the vampire fondles my breast.

The gap between our bodies is all I need.

Channeling every ounce of rage into my movements, I plunge the dagger into his chest, right where his heart is.

The vampire stiffens, and a shocked expression carves itself into his features, giving him the appearance of a marble statue.

I shove against the dagger to push off his lap, and the blade sinks deeper, stopping at the hilt. We share a look, one I'll remember for the rest of my life. The betrayal in his gaze shines bright. Almost as much as the triumph sure to be found in mine.

His eyes glaze over, the life leaving them. It shakes me to the core. Equal parts panic and exhilaration, I stand on trembling legs, withdrawing the dagger from Desmond's body.

What in the hell did I just do?

CHAPTER 4



*H*elena

The sacred rule: You must never harm your vampire master.

I grimace as I look at the male slumped in the chair with blood oozing from the wound in his chest.

I'm fairly certain I just broke the sacred rule.

A lot.

My heart slams against my ribs, and my hands shake. I stare at the dagger clutched in my fist like it's not my fingers gripping it tightly. Like there's no rage simmering underneath my skin. Desmond has taken advantage of me using vampire blood magic.

For years.

Not only that, he was going to endanger my sister. My love for her is the only thing stronger than my fear. Strong enough to prompt me to kill.

My mind spins as it processes the ramifications of what I've done. Any moment now, someone will come to his room, and I'll be caught. Knowing the vampires of the Crimson Castle, my blood will be siphoned from my body, or it'll end up next to my master's.

Well, *former* master, considering he's dead.

A knock sounds on the door, and I jump, slapping a hand to my mouth to keep from screaming.

"Lieutenant?"

I can't think of anyone I'd rather not face. The notorious captain,

Vorigan, makes Desmond look like a lamb in comparison. The only male who scares me more than him is the ruler of the vampires, the Dark One. Desmond told me that Marcel drinks the blood of his enemies and feasts on their bones.

Not just because it's his natural inclination or for sustenance.

Another knock at the door, only it's more insistent this time. "Lieutenant, do not keep me waiting."

I wipe the dagger's handle on Desmond's tunic in a desperate attempt to mask my scent and place the weapon next to fallen vampire. Then I stand up straight, taking a fortifying breath. It does little to calm my nerves, but I need my heart to beat at a steadier cadence. Or Vorigan will hear it pounding wildly, and I'll be done for.

"I'm coming, my lord," I say, my voice even.

I make my way across the room, knowing each step could be my last. When I reach for the door handle, I school my features into some semblance of stoicism, or better yet, a dazed expression. It's been my state of mind for as long as I can remember.

Only now, my thoughts are clear in a way they've never been.

"Good evening, my lord." I bow my head. "My master is indisposed at the moment, and I'd like to extend my apologies."

Vorigan's nostrils flare, no doubt smelling the spilled blood with his heightened senses. "I do not accept them. I will see your master now. Desmond?"

The vampire strides past me and comes to an abrupt halt. He spins to face me, and my skin prickles. "What in the name of darkness happened?!"

"He was like that when I arrived to service him for his feeding," I say. The skin of my wrist throbs with my lie. Thank the gods for this long-sleeved gown.

"Captain?"

A soldier under Vorigan's command strolls into the room. His black uniform is crisp, pressed and neat, displaying his rank of lieutenant. The clothing is fitted, tailored to his body, and a pair of gleaming epaulets decorate his shoulders. Although similarly dressed to the captain, this vampire bears a silver medallion on his chest instead of a gold one.

His gaze makes a full circle, beginning with Desmond and ending with me. It takes every bit of self-control I possess to keep from fidgeting.

The male turns to Vorigan. "What's happened here?"

“I don’t have an answer, Oliver.”

The soldier looks pointedly at me. “What about the female? Could she have done it?”

Vorigan scoffs. “Our magic is too strong for a mere human to overcome compulsion. Since their will does not belong to them, it’s impossible for them to attack us once given the command not to. Besides, this one has been with Desmond for years, and she has never proven to be anything except obedient. It’s why this thrall was chosen for the mission.”

Oliver’s gaze darts to where I stand, frozen in my fear. “Why didn’t she tell anyone about Desmond?” he asks.

“I’m not sure.”

Vorigan strides over to me and lifts my chin with his finger, his skin cold like the stones beneath my feet. He stares straight into my eyes, drilling into their depths. I maintain my stillness. Like all vampires, this male is a predator, and he can sense the intentions of his prey.

“Tell me, thrall,” he says, his voice taking on a silky quality and his pupils dilating, “who attacked your master?”

“I don’t know, my lord. He was in this state when I arrived. Not much time had passed before you showed up.”

Oliver’s brows snap together. “Her heart is racing.”

“It’s normal,” Vorigan says with a sigh. “My thrall’s pulse is so erratic that I believe she’ll die of fright at any moment. It’s the way of humans, weak and pathetic. Only the darkness knows why they have magical abilities. If it weren’t for that, I think Marcel would let us bleed them dry.”

Oliver makes a non-committal sound.

“Did Desmond tell you about your mission?” Vorigan asks me. When I nod, he says, “State its objectives.”

I take a deep breath. “I’m to leave today and seek out the dragon horde that lives to the west, at the base of the mountains. Once there, I’m supposed to get close to the dragon lord and use my ability to siphon his power, which will imbue my blood with his magic. Then I am to return here to my master, where he’ll drain my essence and gain the ability for himself. Then Desmond will use it in service of the Dark One’s military and conquer the hordes, as well as the rest of his enemies.”

Vorigan nods. “That is correct. And if the dragon lord were to catch you in your deceit?”

My stomach turns over as I recite the words Desmond spoke to me

earlier. "I'm to say nothing of my involvement with the Crimson Castle, sacrificing my life if need be in order to protect her secrets."

"Very good," the captain says. Vorigan turns to Oliver and gestures to me. "See? This female is still under Desmond's compulsion. She couldn't have attacked him."

Vorigan strides over to where Desmond's body hangs limply on the chair and makes a clicking noise with his tongue. "You poor bastard."

The vampire picks up the dagger, and I flinch when he holds it out to me. "My lord?"

"Take it," he says. "It's best if you have something to defend yourself with. We want you to make it alive to the horde."

I swallow the bundle of nerves in my throat and reach for the weapon with a trembling hand. The cold steel does little to make me feel safe when surrounded by vampires, but I suppose it's better than nothing. I tuck it into my boot as an excuse to gather my composure.

Oliver folds his arms. "Even though this thrall didn't attack Desmond, we're still left with a problem. Someone did this, and we have to find out who. Either we have a traitor in our coven, or one of the humans has found a way to negate the effects of our compulsion. Considering that's how we keep them under our control, this does not bode well for us."

"We will find the answers in time," Vorigan says. "For now, we carry out Marcel's orders, and clean up this mess."

I bow to the vampires. "I shall take my leave then."

"Wait."

At the command, I freeze. The captain closes the distance between us and takes my wrist. The strength of his hold makes my heart thrash in my ribcage. With a simple flick of the hand, Vorigan could expose my lies if he sees the nearly healed punctures on my skin.

Then he'd snap my neck.

"My lord?" I ask.

"Did your master tell you about the artifact? You failed to mention it."

"Yes."

The captain drops my wrist, and I fist my hand to keep from rubbing the area. After his touch and Desmond's kisses, I've never felt more dirty, more violated in my entire life. If it weren't for the fact that I'm leaving the castle, I might act impulsively.

Well, more so than when I stabbed a vampire in the heart.

Oliver steps up to the officer. “Would you like me to escort her to the border now?”

“Yes,” Vorigan says. “Get as close to the horde’s encampment as you can without exposing the woman. They might be barbaric, but they won’t kill her straight away unless she’s seen with you. Even those animals know how valuable a human’s magic is.”

I’m about to go from blood-drinking tyrants to living amongst savages.
The gods hate me.



The horse hates me.

If it tramples my body—like it seems inclined to do—I’ll hate it in return. I reach for the reins and scowl at the beast when it tosses its head and snorts. The leather straps dangle along its long neck, taunting me.

I’ve never interacted with horses before. Having been enslaved by the vampires at an early age, there hasn’t been a reason to do so until now. However, I’m determined to learn. My fear of the animal is nothing compared to my fear for Amara’s life if I don’t complete my mission.

“Get on the horse, thrall,” Oliver says. “It will not be long until dawn approaches.”

“I’m afraid the creature isn’t being cooperative, my lord.”

Vampires can’t sense a lie like the fae, but they can smell fear. And that’s just as inconvenient for us humans. Actually, all of the species besides our own are a major inconvenience.

The soldier exhales, his demeanor full of frustration. It’s not hard to surmise that he’d love nothing more than to kill me right now.

The feeling is mutual.

Gathering my hatred for the vampire, I snatch the reins, glaring at the horse in challenge. It eyes me and stomps on the ground. My anxiety rises, making my hands shake.

“Can you just hold still?” I grit out.

Oliver’s mouth thins. “If you don’t get on that horse this instant, I’ll strap you to it for the journey ahead.”

I’m not giving you the satisfaction.

I ease my foot into the stirrup, and it takes me a few tries to swing my leg

over the saddle. My triumph is short-lived. Oliver nudges his mount into a trot, and my horse takes off after his, forcing me to hang on for dear life.

The only positive aspect to this whole situation is that it keeps my mind busy. If not, I'd have to process the fact that all of my memories have been suppressed during my years of captivity. They have yet to turn in full, but some have trickled through.

I shove that aside. Having a mental breakdown is not on my list of things to accomplish. Saving my sister is all that matters.

The journey seems to go on forever. Every step of the horses' hooves chips away at my patience, leaving hardly anything behind except raw nerves. The forest is supposed to be tranquil, a place I haven't seen since I was a child, yet it offers me no comfort. If anything, the freedom it suggests irks me further.

"Almost there," Oliver says.

I look around as if the scenery has changed, but it hasn't. Only my imagination has been triggered, creating new beings from shadows and voices from the wind. I'm not sure if the forest is unnerving because it is night or because of the company I keep.

Either way, I'm ready to be rid of both.

As if sensing my unease, the horse's muscles tense against my thighs, and its steps become hesitant. I pull my cloak tightly around my shoulders and raise my hood above my head, covering my hair.

Oliver holds up a hand, and my entire body goes stiff. "This is where I leave you," he says. "If you follow the base of the mountain, heading west, you'll run into the Horde. Remember, say nothing of your allegiance to the Crimson Castle. Because if you do, or fail to return with the dragon's magic, your sister will pay the price."

I acknowledge the vampire with a nod, my movements steady and at odds with the fury skittering down my arms and legs. "I will come back, my lord."

And you'll rue the day.

After sending me one final look of disdain, Oliver urges his mount into a circle and races in the opposite direction. I can't say that I'm sad to see him go. However, being alone in these woods is not exactly ideal. With no other options left to me, I click my tongue and pray that the stubborn creature beneath me follows my unspoken command. It does, but not without a whinny of protest.

Silence descends upon us as I continue on.

The quiet weighs on me like a heavy blanket but fails to keep me warm or evoke feelings of security. Whenever there is a sound, it's that of a creaking branch or a rustling of leaves.

Until it isn't.

A noise from overhead reaches my ears, and I strain to identify it. My steed stops mid-trot, its ears flicking back and forth, confirming I'm not alone in what I'm hearing. For the first time since I left the castle, the horse and I are in accord, both of us on alert.

I trust the animal's instincts just as much as my own, because in this place, we are both prey.

The flapping noise draws near, and my heart beats louder. I look up, my eyes searching frantically to see what is producing the sound, to make out what flying creature is descending. Getting closer.

Something zips through the night sky, but not before entering a beam of moonlight, illuminating the creature above. A dragon.

Of course it is.

CHAPTER 5



*H*elena

I swallow down the scream that builds my chest, trying to rein in my panic at the sight of the large beast.

My horse does the complete opposite.

It releases a scream, a whinny that echoes through the forest and nearly deafens me. I slam my palms to my ears and try to block out the sound.

A roar follows the horse's cry, signaling we have been spotted.

The horse rears up and sends me flying. My fall is broken by a large bush, one that's fragrant and filled with roses. The thorns dig into my skin and slice my flesh as the animal runs away like the coward it is. I suppose I am a coward as well because I would run if given the chance. However, when I try to remove myself from the foliage, the thorns dig deeper into my clothing and hair.

I release a string of curses that would make a vampire's pale skin flush.

A loud thud sounds not too far from me, and I cease muttering and thrashing. Only my eyes are moving, trying to find the dragon that's no longer in the sky above me. My pulse quickens. It pounds so loudly I swear the creature could locate me by that alone.

Perhaps it does, for the beast appears a moment later.

Its body is a mass of golden scales, bright like the sun itself despite the darkness of night surrounding us. However, the moonlight does reflect off the scales, making them glitter like coins. The twin horns that curl upward from

its head resemble a crown, and the pair of large wings are like a ship's sails, ready to catch the wind at any moment. The creature's eyes match, a polished gold that shines with intelligence and curiosity.

The majesty of the dragon stuns me.

I heard about them, but I've never seen one. Especially not up close. It blows out a breath and puffs of smoke waft from its nostrils and lips. The smell of ash and burning wood tickling my nose brings me out of my stupor.

Fear gathers in my chest, filling my lungs with a scream. I clench my teeth and battle the urge to release it. No good can come from that. Instead, I concentrate on my rapid, uneven breathing and force it into a steady rhythm.

All of my self-control is undone the second the dragon locks eyes with me and heads in my direction.

For such a large beast, it moves stealthily, putting one giant foot in front of the other, its claws sinking into the grass. The creature tucks its wings close to its body to avoid the trees' low-hanging branches, and its long tail drags behind, disturbing the fallen leaves.

Now the dragon is close enough for its breath to skim my cheeks. I immediately envision being engulfed in flames. No longer able to control my rising panic, I let every thought flow from my head to my mouth.

It's a newly developed behavior. Or it was always there and Desmond's compulsion kept it at bay. Bastard.

Either way, words pour from me at an alarming rate.

"Please, don't kill me," I say. "First of all, I highly doubt that I'll taste good. Second, I'm not large enough to satiate your hunger considering I'm mostly skin and bones. And third, I have something you want."

The beast blinks at me.

I slap a hand to my forehead. "Gods above, I have no idea if you understand what I'm saying. Could you nod or something? A confirmation would be greatly appreciated."

The dragon's nostrils flare, and I flinch. When it doesn't immediately open its jaws and breathe fire or consume me, hope settles in my chest. The beast slowly dips its head, and my eyes go wide.

Is it nodding to show it understands me?

I wait for it to do something. What, I'm not sure. All I know is I don't want to upset it with any sudden movements, so I lie there.

The creature brings its nose to my belly, inhaling once, and then continues south. A warm puff of air hits my thighs right before the dragon

positions its nostrils between my spread legs.

It takes a deep breath.

And I smack the hell out of its snout.

“Bad dragon! What are you doing?” I ask, my voice one octave away from a shriek. “You can’t just stick your nose in my crotch and assume all will be well. I can’t believe I thought you possessed the ability for rational thought. Your behavior just now shows the opposite.”

I wave my hand in a shooing motion, uncaring that the roses’ thorns scrape my skin. “If you’re a member of the Golden horde, now would be the time to announce yourself. If not...” I run my gaze over the deadly beast, and a grim smile tugs at my lips. “If not, then I just signed my death warrant by striking a creature that could kill me with little effort.”

My righteous indignation is the only thing keeping me from succumbing to the terror roiling in my gut. I concentrate on my anger and use it to fuel my movements. Kicking and flailing, I attempt to dislodge myself from the bush.

If it’s going to eat me, then fine. But I refuse to sit and let it happen.

The dragon watches me, its golden gaze scrutinizing. Then its tail enters my line of sight and wraps around my middle. Before I can utter a protest or yell in panic, the creature plucks me from the bush and sets me on the ground.

On my hands and knees, I stare up at it as the grass tickles my palms. The enormity of the beast overwhelms me, makes me want to run and hide. I do neither of those things. On shaking legs, I push myself off the ground and lean precariously to the right.

Once again, the dragon assists me by using its tail. The warmth from its scales seeps into my clothing, into my skin, and I almost sigh. My cloak has done little to ward off the chill. Even so, I step away from the creature.

I was sent to fuck a dragon, not cuddle with one.

“Thank you,” I say, “but I really must be going.”

Although I feel ridiculous talking to the beast, I continue to do it anyway because I can’t help myself. I’ve been alone for several hours with only that obnoxious horse for company. At least it didn’t sniff my crotch. I suppose I should be grateful for that.

I give the creature a little wave and back away slowly. Since it hasn’t confirmed or denied whether or not it’s a member of the dragon horde, I have to continue on. I might not carry out the mission to the vampires’ specifications, but I do have goals to accomplish.

Once I'm a fair distance from the dragon, I spin on my heel and head west. The sun hasn't risen just yet, but the forest is already showing signs of life. Squirrels and chipmunks scamper about, while birds preen their feathers in preparation for flight. The leaves from the trees glisten with morning dew, shimmering all around me.

I'd find this place lovely if I wasn't tired and hungry. That damn horse left me without a more convenient mode of transportation and also took my rations. I pull the edges of my cloak together and a curse falls from my lips with every step I take.

To distract myself, I mutter every foul and perverse word I can think of. Which is a lot. I can attribute that to the vampires, whose mouths were as nasty as their blood-drinking habits.

Periodically, I look over my shoulder, but the dragon isn't following me. I find that I'm relieved. And also irritated because it would've been a boon to find the Horde quickly. When Desmond told me about the dragon egg's location, he said that not all dragons are shifters. Some are just beasts of the air, the ancestors of the dragon horde. I suppose I found the latter.

The trees start to thin once I get close to a stream, allowing me a glimpse of the sun's rays. I haven't experienced sunlight on my skin since before I was taken captive by the vampires. They live in perpetual darkness, unable to withstand the sun, and as their prisoners, we were subjected to that lifestyle.

Only now, I'm free from their rules. However temporary.

I climb up on a flat rock that's not covered by the trees overhead and face the sun as it gradually climbs higher. The mixture of bright blues and soft pinks in the sky fill me with joy, and the moment the sun's heat kisses my skin, I open my arms wide and close my eyes.

Bliss and contentment warms me inside just as much as the sun does.

My eyes fly open at the sound of approaching footsteps. They're soft, nearly inaudible, but with how tranquil the forest is, I'm able to detect them, even with my limited human senses.

I spin in the direction of the newcomer, throwing myself off-kilter. Flapping my arms prevents me from falling. However, I almost teeter off the rock when I take in the naked man in front of me.

Of course, he is.

The barbarian's skin is tanned and his muscles toned, his body full of power and covered in scars. And golden tattoos. They sweep across the expanse of his chest, across his flat stomach, and encircle his arms.

I don't dare let my eyes drop lower.

His black hair disappears behind broad shoulders in a braid that trails down his back. Bits of gold wink at me from various strands. His dark eyes are lined with kohl, and they glitter with ferocity.

He watches me, his stare bordering on rude.

With me standing on the rock, we're at eye level, and I consider jumping down to avoid him. His gaze pierces me like a rose's thorns and his intensity makes my legs as weak as a rose's petals. Our eyes stay locked on one another since I don't have the courage to look away.

"*Yasim eraz terzi?*" His voice is a rich, deep rumble with an underlying air of command.

I shake my head, careful to prevent my gaze from drifting lower. "I don't understand what you're saying."

He blows out a breath. "I surmised as much. Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Who are you?" I ask with raised brows. "Your identity determines how I answer your questions."

"I'm of the Golden Horde."

"I'm of the human horde. Obviously." I gesture to myself with impatience. "I don't have pointed ears like the fae or claws like the lycans, and since I'm in the sunlight, I'm not a vampire."

His eyes narrow. "I scented you, so I know *what* you are. I'm asking *who* you are."

"You scented me?" When he gives me a curt nod, I continue. "That's strange. Are you the dragon I saw a few hours ago?"

"Your identity determines how I answer your question."

With him throwing my words back at me, I purse my lips. "I'm Helena."

"Helena," he repeats. My name sounds like liquid gold on his tongue, a sweet caress to my ears. "What are you doing here?"

"Why are you naked?"

The male's lips twitch. "Does it bother you?"

"Certainly."

"Why is that?"

I gape at him. "Why... what? Isn't it obvious?"

"No." He tilts his head, and his braid glides along his back. "The only reason it would bother you is if you *weren't* interested in mating with me."

"But I'm not," I sputter.

He steps closer and takes a deep breath, his nostrils flaring. “So you say.”

“So I *know*. Look, I need to speak with the dragon lord. Do you know where I can find him?”

“Yes. But why would he want to talk to you?”

I make a face at the irritating male. “I have something of interest to him.”

“What is it?”

“Like I’m telling you,” I say with a huff. “It’s the only thing I have that’ll keep him from killing me.”

The hordesman nods. “Perhaps. Humans are not welcome on our lands. They’re thieves who consort with vampires. Any being that steals another’s magic should be eradicated.”

“I can see that you’re not opposed to giving your opinion.”

When he frowns at my muttering, I clear my throat and recenter my thoughts. This male riles me up in a way I’ve never dealt with. I’m not sure how to handle it, other than to refrain from engaging him in unnecessary conversation.

“You’re right, about all of it,” I say, “but I don’t want to cause any trouble.”

“You carry the scent of vampires on your skin. That is problematic, in and of itself. Let alone your siphoning ability.”

I grit my teeth to keep a handle on my temper. “As someone who had their freedom stolen from them at an early age, I’m not inclined to steal. If you’re not going to take me to the dragon lord, then leave me alone.”

I jump down from the rock and fumble the landing. The male reaches out to assist me, but I shove his hands away. People say that ‘pride goeth before a fall,’ but that’s preferable to letting this barbarian help me.

He shakes his head. “Foolish human.”

“You’re going to be the fool when I tell your leader about the artifact I’ve procured for him.”

I walk away, only to be interrupted by a strong hold on my upper arm. My glare doesn’t dissuade the male. If anything, it makes his eyes gleam with determination.

“What artifact?” he asks, his words clipped.

When I lift my chin in response, he grips me tighter and yanks me to him. I slam against his naked body, and my face flames. Being pressed against a male’s cock wasn’t part of the plan.

At least not right away.

“Human, if I have to repeat myself, you will not like what transpires after.”

“What are you going to do to me that the vampires haven’t already done?” I ask, my voice laced with hatred. “Are you going to take away my free will, imprison me, and force me to—” I turn my head, breaking the stare. “Your threats don’t mean anything to me.”

The hordesman brings his mouth right next to my ear, his breath whispering against my skin. “Did the vampire fuck you until you screamed for his cock? Because that could be your fate if you don’t tread lightly, little one.”

CHAPTER 6



*H*elena

I jerk back, ignoring the way my heart thrashes in my chest.

“If you do that,” I say quietly, inserting steel into my tone, “I’ll siphon your magic, then use it to kill you.”

“I knew that was the true reason you came here.” He takes my chin in hand, his grip bordering on pain. “Know this, if you think to sabotage the Horde, you will suffer in ways you can’t begin to imagine.”

My mouth goes dry at his threat. Before, I could tell he was trying to frighten me with the threat of sex, to push me into slipping up and revealing something I shouldn’t. But this isn’t an intimidation tactic. He would make good on his word.

“In exchange for information concerning the artifact, I need sanctuary,” I whisper. “That’s why I’m here.”

“From the vampires?”

“Yes. I only need the protection for a little while, just long enough for you to teach me the basics in survival.” Shame and embarrassment combine, burning my cheeks and giving heat to the truth underneath the lie. “Even though I’m free, I don’t know how to fend for myself.”

The male runs his gaze over the entirety of my face, making me feel exposed. Vulnerable. I turn my head and look at the ground, unable to hold his stare. It does something to me, creates both fear and excitement in my chest.

“Very well.”

I look at him and offer a tentative smile. “So, you’ll help me?”

“No, but I will take you to the dragon lord. He’ll decide what to do with you.”

“All right. Thank you.” When he doesn’t release me, I dart my gaze from my arm to his hand. “Are you going to let me go?”

“In just a moment.”

My entire body goes on alert. I’m not totally confident that he won’t hurt me, but I’m not as fearful for my life as I was when he first approached me. This male is brutally honest. If he wanted me dead, he’d say so.

And then he’d do it.

Silence gathers around us, and all the while, he simply stares at me. Despite the fabric of my sleeve acting as a barrier, his touch sets off a heat in me that’s unexpected. And unwelcome. I’m not certain of his intent, but being the recipient of his attention makes me nervous.

“Do all of your people run around without any clothing?” I ask, my anxiousness getting the best of me. “Or is it just you?”

As if coming out of a trance, the male blinks once and refocuses gaze on me. The side of his mouth lifts, and my mind goes blank. Even when he’s scowling, the naked barbarian is attractive. But when he smiles?

Well, that makes me think stupid thoughts.

I drop my gaze. Which is the biggest mistake I’ve made thus far. More so than killing Desmond. I’ll reprimand myself when I get over the shock.

The hordesman is... *blessed* by the gods.

At least I think he is. It’s the first time I’ve seen a nude male, but I can’t imagine a cock bigger than his. Gods be merciful, if such a thing exists.

I yank my gaze from his massive, semi-erect length, and rip my arm from his hold. Although, I highly suspect it’s because he allowed me to get free. Then I march off to find the horde.

“You’re going the wrong way,” the male says.

After coming to a halt, I briefly close my eyes and take a breath for patience. “Would you be so kind and point me in the right direction?”

“Yes. But you’ll have to look at me.”

I straighten my spine and slowly turn to look at him over my shoulder. He smirks at me, as though knowing the lengths I’m taking to keep from staring at his cock. I can’t help the fact that I’ve never seen one before, and it makes me curious. When it’s common knowledge that you steal someone’s magic

through intercourse, it plays havoc with a person's sex life.

"It's that way," he says, jerking his chin.

I don't wait for him to say more. As though my feet are on fire, I walk away quickly, not wanting to linger. That male has unnerved me more than Desmond ever did. Possibly due to the fact that unlike the vampire, I'm attracted to the hordesman.

Maybe I am a fool like he said.

My shriek echoes in the forest when the male appears by my side unexpectedly. With his long legs, he easily keeps pace with me even though I try to leave him behind. He's also physically fit. Where I'm struggling to keep from panting, the male shows no signs of fatigue. For this alone, I could hate him.

"Thank you for your help, but I can take it from here," I say.

"The dragon lord would not want anything to happen to you."

I huff. "I don't believe that for a moment. Can you... cover yourself?" When he quirks a brow, I hold out my hands. "I don't know. Maybe with a leaf, erm, leaves?"

"They'd make my balls itch."

"That was unwanted information."

"And that was an unwanted suggestion."

I roll my eyes. "What's your name? I told you mine." He stays quiet, piquing my curiosity. "Don't you utilize names in your culture?"

"Of course. I'm just not inclined to share it with you or anyone outside of my people."

"Very well. I shall make a name for you." I tap my chin in thought. "The great oak."

Because of his height, of course.

"A tree?" He glances down at me, his dark eyes gleaming. "You're always finding an excuse to mention my cock."

"That's because you keep shoving it in my face with your nudity."

"Oh, human, if I put it near your lips, you'd thank me before welcoming it inside your mouth."

I frown, coming to a stop. "That's it. I'm finding the horde on my own."

His laughter follows me as I walk away quickly. It's running, if I'm being honest with myself. But now is not the time for truth.

Not when there are naughty images of the barbarian floating through my mind and the sound of his laughter is making my stomach flutter.

“That arrogant son of a bitch,” I mumble to myself. “How could he say that to me, and with such confidence? Does he have no decency?”

This is a male who runs around naked, so apparently not.

“I have no decency,” he says, as if privy to my thoughts. “Nor do I care to develop any. It would serve no purpose.”

At the sound of his voice, I spin around. He’s right there. Claspng a hand to my chest, I scowl at him. He’s stealthy, I’ll give him that.

“Go away.”

The hordesman walks up to me in two long strides and shakes his head. “Humans are weak and susceptible to harm. There are dangerous creatures that live in these woods. I’ll escort you the rest of the way, whether you like it or not.”

I sigh in defeat. There’s no hope in me getting rid of him.

He falls into step beside me, and I face straight ahead, doing my best to ignore him. And the way his muscles ripple underneath his tanned skin. Or the way his dark hair sways back and forth. He’s beautiful, in an unrefined way.

Still an asshole, but beautiful.

“How did you escape the Crimson Castle?” he asks after a time.

My throat tightens at the mention of my former residence. Prison, to be more accurate. “I killed my vampire master.”

The male’s eyes narrow slightly, but that’s the extent of his reaction to my statement. Perhaps murder is a common occurrence among his people and not looked down upon. If so, that doesn’t exactly encourage me to seek out the dragon lord’s help.

“How?” he asks.

I swing my gaze to him. “With a dagger.”

“Did you decapitate the vampire?”

A sense of foreboding skitters along my arms. I shiver and tug my cloak more firmly around myself to ward off the sudden chill. “What does it matter?”

“It matters.” The hordesman’s eyes glimmer with hatred, one that’s just as strong as mine. “If you didn’t cut off his head or rip out his heart, the vampire is very much alive. In stasis but alive.”

“There was so much blood...” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. “There’s no way he could’ve survived that.”

“You are mistaken. There’s no way a *human* could’ve survived that. Your

master will regenerate by slowly recovering the lost blood, and then he'll awaken."

The ramifications of this sends my mind reeling. My skin grows cold as the blood leaves my face. I stumble over to a tree and lean heavily against the trunk. My legs shake, and I close my eyes, trying to gather my composure.

I've left my sister to die.

"You truly didn't know?" The hordesman sounds close.

"No. If I had, I would've removed his head. And tossed out of the window for good measure."

"*Sajir aya.*"¹ His voice takes on a gentle tone. "Mistakes are made by all. Humans are not alone in this."

I open my eyes and I'm immediately arrested by his gaze. The male lifts his hand and trails his fingers along the side of my face. I resist the urge to lean into his touch, to indulge in the comfort of a stranger. A naked one at that.

"Do not punish yourself," he says. His arm falls back to his side, but he steps closer. The heat of his body washes over me and makes my skin prickle with awareness. "You survived what few people have and still had the courage to fight back. Think on that, instead of what you should've done. Living in the past serves no one. Learn from it and move on."

I blow out an exhale full of resignation. "I'll try."

I suppose I need the horde's protection more than I originally thought. Definitely the dragon lord's magic. It's the only way to save Amara.

"Do you think he'll come for you?" The hordesman lowers his head, and I bite the inside of my cheek as nervousness zips along my spine. "Were you more than his thrall? His lover, perhaps?"

"That's private."

"It matters."

"You keep saying that."

I fold my arms to create a barrier of sorts between us. The male doesn't realize I need space, or he chooses to ignore it. Either way, he steps even closer, forcing me to throw my arms out to stay him. My palms slap against taut muscles and soak in the warmth of his skin.

The male looks down. When he raises his head, there's a fire in his gaze that makes me want to run. Streaks of gold briefly light up his dark eyes. Or I imagine it because of the sun playing tricks on me.

"If that vampire searches for you, he'll seek you out amongst my people,"

the hordesman says. “That alone will put them at risk and the dragon lord won’t allow it. Therefore, the nature of your relationship with your master must be disclosed.”

“Fine.” I lift my chin. “But not to you. I’ll disclose that to your leader and none other.”

He squints down at me. “Stubborn female.”

“Arrogant male.”

“People often confuse confidence with arrogance.”

My lips thin with displeasure. “In this instance, I’m not.”

His heart beats steadily underneath my hands, and I jerk them back. With him crowding me, it’s nearly impossible to get away, so I cross my arms and give the male a pointed look.

“Shouldn’t we get going?” I ask.

He runs his gaze over me, scrutinizing me in a way that almost makes me squirm. I stifle a sigh of relief when he takes a step back. Skirting around his large frame, I walk in the direction we were headed.

“How much further?”

“It shouldn’t be long now.” His gaze darts in my direction for a moment. “You’ll have your audience with the dragon lord soon enough. What have the vampires told you about him?”

My mouth pulls to the side as I consider his question. I really don’t know much of anything, but I doubt he’d believe me if I said that. “He’s the only one in his horde that can take on the dragon form. The rumor is that he’s been searching for a certain relic and has yet to acquire it.” I tap the side of my head. “Good thing I know where it is.”

The male takes on a pensive expression. “How do you know he won’t kill you the moment he has it?”

“There’s no guarantee, but the vampires said he keeps his word, no matter what. Because of that, I believe him to be honorable. To a certain extent, anyway.”

“He does not promise things without the intention to follow through,” the hordesman says. “That is true enough. However, it means the dragon lord is selective in the things he vows to do.”

I shrug. “Makes sense.”

We crest a hill, and at the bottom of the grassy decline is the horde. The air is filled with the scents of burning meat, along with the earthy musk of smoke and wood. The village is a cluster of domed huts covered in hide,

supported by wooden frames. There are no streets, only well-worn paths between the dwellings, indicated by the deadened grass. The people have yet to leave their homes, but there is a quiet buzzing, signs of a new day's tasks underfoot.

"What else?" the hordesman asks.

"By the gods, you're persistent. Haven't I told you enough?"

The male shakes his head. "Your presence in our camp is a risk, one that can potentially endanger the entire horde. So no, you haven't begun to assuage my need for information."

"We've arrived," I say, "so your need is just going to have to wait."

"Oh female, my needs are always seen to. Promptly."

I roll my eyes. "With you being naked all the time, that doesn't surprise me. By the way, is it customary for your people not to wear clothing? If so, I might have to reconsider my already limited options of protection."

"You needn't worry, little one, everyone will be properly dressed."

"I wish you'd join them."

"Don't let my body make you uncomfortable."

That's like telling water not to be wet.

"Which structure belongs to the dragon lord?" I ask, desperate to change the subject.

He points, giving me an eyeful of his bicep and golden tattoos. "It's the one right there."

"The biggest one. Of course, it is."

"Why shouldn't he have the best of everything? He is the leader."

"I suppose. It just speaks of greed."

The male frowns. "It signals wealth, power, and the ability to keep his people safe and cared for."

I shrug. I wouldn't know anything about that. Desmond kept me in slavery. Yes, he provided food and shelter, but it came with the heavy price of my free will.

The village stirs to life right before my eyes. Males leave the dwellings with their weapons in hand. Thank the gods, they're dressed. Well, they have buckskin pants on, but every one of them is shirtless. The females, dressed in long skirts and sleeveless shirts, chase their children through the walkways between the huts. The little ones shriek with glee and run faster in response. A smile tugs at my lips.

What beautiful freedom.

The high-pitched squealing of the girls and boys reminds me of a distant past, a place where I was once at liberty to do such things in wild abandon. With Amara and my parents. I scrunch my forehead, trying to pull an image of them to the forefront of my mind. It's difficult.

And painful.

The hordesman continues to stand beside me, his gaze straight ahead. He doesn't prompt me to continue on, which is favorable. I need a moment to get my bearings.

Because the people below are beginning to notice us.

One by one, they swing their gazes in my direction. I straighten my spine and lift my chin at the scrutiny. Considering how suspicious the hordesman has been with me, I'm not surprised at the reaction of his people.

They think I'll steal their magic. With the frowns and scowls being directed at me, I don't think they realize I'd have to sleep with a person to get their ability.

Or that's only adding to their distrust.

I meet each individual stare with one of my own but without the hostility. If I'm to gain sanctuary with these people and invite their protection and tutelage, it'd be best if I didn't anger them from the onset of my arrival.

A male enters the scene, one that's different from the rest. He's older. The creases around his eyes are deep, and his black hair is streaked with white. He carries a wooden walking stick, or staff, with strings of shells fastened at the tip. The tinkling noise precedes him wherever he goes.

Right now, that's towards me.

CHAPTER 7



*H*elena

I take a fortifying breath and glance at the male next to me. The hordesman folds his arms, and the attention from the camp shifts to him. And stays there.

Of course it does. He's naked.

Without putting much forethought into my actions, I position myself directly in front of the male in an attempt to shield his nudity.

"What are you doing, human?"

I look at the male over my shoulder, not bothering to hide my exasperation. "There are children staring at you. It's indecent and rude to be so blatant with your nakedness."

"What's rude is for you to stand in front of me, whilst giving me your back."

"Why?"

"It signals your dismissal of me."

I scrunch my face in confusion. "There's a logic to that, but you and I both know that's not my intent."

"It's the very reason I haven't tossed you aside."

"Well, thank the gods for that small reprieve," I say, my tone flippant. "No matter the fact that I'm trying to protect the children from your vulgarity."

The sound of the shells clinking together becomes louder, snagging my attention. The older male makes his way slowly yet steadily in our direction. I

fix my gaze on him. He's a better, more *clothed*, choice. He looks from me to the hordesman now standing beside me and nods once.

Then the old man smiles.

It has gooseflesh covering my skin. I resist the urge to rub my arms by clenching my fists. Although his expression is warm, welcoming even, it's at odds with everyone else's attitudes towards me. That alone puts me on edge. If he's the dragon lord, then I'm less concerned with my life being taken from me.

The hordesman next to me acknowledges the newcomer with a curt nod. "Yurik."

The older man dips his head, keeping it bowed longer than I expect. "Zahtan."

The two men launch into a discussion that I'm not privy to. The language must be that of their horde, something I've never heard before. It's a harsh dialect and very guttural sounding, spoken from deep in the throat.

I watch their exchange and my fascination with the whole ordeal grows. The hordesman's voice doesn't raise in volume, but it does in intensity. On the other hand, Yurik continues to speak evenly, his placid tone soothing to my nerves.

However, both of them occasionally flick their gazes in my direction.

I was prepared to be the topic of discussion, but it's hard to appear reserved when your life is at stake.

Waiting has never been my strong suit. After some time has passed, I clear my throat. Both of the males immediately shift their attention to me. Zahtan's mouth thins, disapproval written all over his face, while Yurik maintains his soft smile.

"Please excuse me, but I'd like to know what is being said about me," I say. "Also, is there any way I could speak to the dragon lord now? If I'm to negotiate the knowledge of the artifact's location with him, I'd rather do it sooner than later."

Yurik full-on grins. His pearly teeth are bright against his tanned skin. Apparently, he finds me to be humorous.

Zahtan, not so much.

The hordesman looks at me as though I've shifted into a vampire. I'm not sure if he wants to kill me or if my behavior was just that awful. From the way his mouth thins, to the narrowing of his gaze, he's one breath away from silencing me.

Hopefully, not permanently.

“She is unexpected,” Yurik says, not bothering to hide his amusement.

Zahtan grunts. “She is human.”

“That much is obvious. The question is: what to do with her?” The older male scratches his beard, and the movement causes the shells on his staff to click together. He turns to look at me. “That is what we were discussing, *rima*.”

“Rima?” I repeat.

“Outsider, not of the horde,” Zahtan says.

I nod in understanding. “What have you decided?”

Yurik steps up to me, close enough for me to see the glimmer of excitement in his eyes. “The sky god, Asili, told me of your arrival and what we must do.”

Nerves gather in my stomach, but I force myself to speak. “Which is...?”

“You are meant to be here,” Yurik says.

“Oh, well that’s good news.” I smile at the older male. “And the dragon lord? Will I get to speak with him?”

The two of them share a look that’s heavy and full of tension. Shivers race down my spine. It’s not exactly a foreboding, but it’s not comforting either.

They revert back to their language. Every one of Zahtan’s responses are clipped, a simmering anger underneath every syllable. Is all of that because of me?

“The artifact is an egg,” I blurt out. “A dragon egg, I believe.”

The energy pouring from Zahtan shifts. It’s so fast that I back up a step. He follows me, crowding my space and towering over my small frame. I meet his harsh stare, but it takes every ounce of courage I possess.

“What color is it?” he asks me, his voice quiet. Too quiet.

“That’s a trick question. A dragon’s scales change color, depending on the light touching it.”

He leans closer. “Where is it?”

“I’ll tell the dragon lord and none other.”

Zahtan lifts his hand. When I wince, he freezes. “Do you think I mean to strike you?”

“Yes,” I say. I avert my gaze. “It wouldn’t be the first time someone bigger and stronger has done that to me.”

At the feel of his fingers on my chin, I suck in a breath. With a gentle

touch, he guides me back to facing him, his gaze now burning with an unholy fire. Only this time, the flames within aren't meant for me.

Zahtan mutters words beyond my understanding. If I were to guess, he just cursed. A lot.

"Listen to me, human, and hear me well. The day I raise my fist to you in anger is the day I'm no longer fit to be a warrior."

"But you said you'd make me suffer," I remind him. "That sounds pretty angry to me."

He exhales, his hand falling away from my face. "That's *if* you were to threaten the lives within my horde. That is the only circumstance in which I would find it justified."

"Your horde?" I blink at him. "Does that mean—"

A low growl hits the air. Zahtan spins around and lifts a fist, cutting off my sentence. My gaze darts from side to side, trying to locate the threat, while I slowly sink downward until my dagger is in my hand. I grip the handle tightly and look to the male for guidance, ready to defend us. Following the direction of his stare, I freeze once I find what he's focused on.

A pair of silver eyes peers at us from behind a bush.

Yurik doesn't move. However, Zahtan steps in front of me, blocking my view of the danger not more than six feet from us. I skirt his tall frame to stand beside him. If there's a battle to be had, I'm not just going to stand there and do nothing.

"Position yourself behind me," the hordesman says, his voice so low I can barely make out his words. "I will ensure your safety."

I shake my head. "I won't let you fight alone."

"Foolish human."

The growling becomes louder, putting an end to our brief exchange. The animal slinks into from behind the foliage and lifts its muzzle, nostrils flaring. Whatever scents the wolf detected has the creature baring its teeth.

My fear of the canine is briefly interrupted by the sleek majesty of it. White paws and a gray coat, paired with shining gray eyes, makes this animal stunning. Having never seen a wolf, I can't help but be impressed by it. It would be a shame to end its life.

But I will always do what's necessary. Even when it's difficult.

I glance at Zahtan, ready to follow his lead, only to become stupefied. Golden scales have magically appeared along his forearms and across his broad shoulders. Twin wisps of smoke pour from his nostrils, and his hands

now bear claws.

At my gasp, he swings his head to me, piercing me with his golden eyes. They are molten, bright, and full of aggression. This time, I know for certain it's not because the sun is playing tricks on me.

"The dragon lord," I whisper. "It's you."

CHAPTER 8



*H*elena

Zahtan doesn't answer me.

Instead, he takes a menacing step toward the wolf and releases a war cry that has my scalp prickling. The noise is animalistic, savage in a way that no man can replicate. This moment has become a challenge between two beasts.

Both harboring the intent to kill.

The wolf snarls in response, the fur covering its back now standing straight up. I ignore my apprehension toward the hordesman and place myself closer to Zahtan. The golden scales have spread, covering the entirety of his torso. The thought of him shifting before my eyes grazes the back of my mind. Not enough to distract me, but enough to stir my curiosity.

The hordesman says something in his native tongue, a command from the sound of it. His tone is just as ferocious as his body language. The wolf crouches—right before turning tail and sprinting off into the forest.

I release a pent-up breath now that the danger has passed.

“That went well,” I say in an effort to dispel the tension surrounding me.

Zahtan spins to face me. With his golden eyes locked on me, he leans down until the wisps of smoke streaming from his nostrils hit my nose.

“When I give a command, I expect immediate obedience,” he says. His voice is barely above a whisper, yet it's as though he's shouting at me. “If you can't agree to that, then you won't be allowed a step further.”

“Obedience?” I squint up at him, my past hurts resurfacing at the word.

“I’ll never obey another male just because he threatens me with his authority or strength. I’ve lived that way for too long, and I refuse to be shackled, unless it’s of *my* choosing. To a male worthy of complete devotion, who reciprocates my feelings of loyalty. I’ll accept nothing less, so do your worst.”

Zahtan snatches my chin. The heat from his touch is blazing, hotter than normal. “Is that a challenge?”

“No. It’s a boundary, a limit on what I’m willing to do.” I briefly close my eyes and blow out a breath. “If you’d gone through what I have with the vampires, you wouldn’t be keen on the notion of immediate obedience.”

“As Zahtan, I obey no one.”

“Except the gods,” Yurik says, his voice underlined with chastisement.

My brows snap together. “Zahtan isn’t your name?”

The hordesman shakes his head. “It’s my title. Before you ask, no, I will not give you my birth name.”

“That’s fine. I didn’t care to know anyway,” I say.

If the male was fae, he’d be able to detect my lie.

My mind scrambles to make sense of everything. I can’t explain why Zahtan didn’t readily identify himself as the dragon lord, but he’s certainly rectified that now. And all I’ve managed to do is anger the male. I don’t regret standing up to him, but it doesn’t bode well for my plan to seduce him. He’s unlikely to sleep with me if he hates me.

“Can we come to some understanding?” I ask, gentling my tone. “I give you my word that I’ll heed your every command before acting of my own free will.”

He scoffs. “You are not battle-trained, nor are you familiar with the dangers outside of the Crimson Castle. If you were, you wouldn’t have insisted on traveling alone. And you wouldn’t have faced a wolf twice your size with nothing more than a tiny dagger.”

“Then teach me. Show me how to protect myself, amongst the other survival skills.” I remove his hold from my chin. The warmth from his touch still lingers on my skin, and I force myself to shove the thought aside. “You know that’s what I want.”

“Yes,” he says, “but let me tell you what *I* want.” The giant male steps closer, and the scent of him washes over me, filling my senses with earth, pine, and something unique to him. “I want for you to give me the location of the egg. Not only that, but I want every bit of information you possess about

the Crimson Castle.”

“Very well. I have no love for the vampires.”

He smirks at me, and my heart plummets into my stomach. “And lastly, you have to endure the *aldemir servet*.”

After being an uninvolved bystander, Yurik walks up to us. Considering how quiet he’s been during our exchange, his behavior amplifies my nervousness. “Zahtan, do you think this is wise?” he asks. “She is human, not horde.”

The dragon lord nods. “I’m very aware of the fact. If she’s here to steal magic, then I need to know that before she leaves my camp. But if she’s not here for that purpose, the ritual is the only thing that can prove her innocence. Either way, it will give us whatever truth she carries.”

I gulp. “It will?”

“Yes, it’s an ancient ritual of our people,” Yurik says, “designed to bring out authenticity.” He runs his gaze over me and exhales. “But you are not one of us.”

“Clearly,” I say. I shift my attention to Zahtan. “There has to be another way or something else I can do.” When he shakes his head, I hold out my hands in supplication. “I’m here to learn, not take your magic.”

How easily the lie falls from my tongue. If I keep saying it, I might even begin to believe the falsehood.

The dragon lord quirks an ebony brow. “That remains to be seen.”

“But...” I fist my hands and bring them to my sides, my face warming because of what I’m about to disclose. “In order for me to borrow—not *steal*—your magic, I’d have to have sex with you.”

Both of the male’s gazes widen with shock.

“I told you that earlier,” I say. “Remember?”

The dragon lord shakes his head. “I didn’t translate it as such.”

“Well, that’s the only way for the transfer of power to work. But you still carry your magic. And, I’d only get your abilities for a time, since the effect wanes quickly. I don’t know what you’ve heard, but I know for certain it’s not permanent.”

Zahtan eyes me warily while Yurik strokes his beard in thought. “We were under the impression it was done through touch,” the older male says. “However, the details were unknown to us.”

The silence that descends makes my skin crawl. I shift from one foot to the other, unable to keep still while I digest their reactions. If they believe

me, it'll go a long way in securing my protection. Although, it could prevent me from getting me into the dragon lord's bed.

When Zahtan speaks, I jump, my nerves now raw from waiting. "Is there such thing as a partial magic transfer that happens without sex?" he asks.

My cheeks burn. I know I'm the one who brought it up, but having this hulking, naked barbarian talk to me about physical intimacy is not something I'm mentally prepared for. Considering the way I clench my thighs together, I'm not prepared sexually either.

Vampires are ridiculously attractive, but I never experienced a sexual response around them. Not even Desmond, who compelled me to kiss him. In comparison, the dragon lord has awakened something in me, triggering my arousal with his proximity or a mere touch. I hate the lack of control I have over my body.

If I'm to secure Amara's freedom, I'll have to embrace my attraction to the dragon lord, not suppress it.

"Human?"

I'm yanked from my musings at the sound of Zahtan's voice. I shake my head to recenter my focus and look at him.

"Are you going to answer my question?" he asks.

"Oh, right, small scale absorption..." I bite my lip and worry it between my teeth. "Well, I've never experimented with my ability in that way, so I can't give you a definite answer."

My mind drifts back to Desmond and his kisses. Every time it happened, there was a minuscule clearing of my mind. If I were to guess, the contact transferred some of the vampire's blood magic, weakening his compulsion over me. Do I want to disclose that to the dragon lord?

Would it encourage him to kiss me?

To touch me intimately?

That needs to happen eventually, but I'm not sure how to get to that point. It can be tomorrow's problem. Today, I'm just trying to get survive my first encounter with the male.

Zahtan juts his chin in the direction of the camp. "We can finish this discussion in my home. I have more questions for you, human."

"Of course." I purse my lips and tilt my head. "Before we go, I'd like to have your word that I'll be protected while under your care. And that I'll be taught the necessary skills I've requested. I need to hear it."

"You ask for much, but have yet to reveal the details surrounding the

artifact.”

I dip my head in acknowledgment. “True. The blood moon will reveal the dragon egg in five days’ time.”

“And the location?”

“To reach the destination, it should take you a night and a bit. Maybe two days if there are delays.”

Zahtan grunts. “You forget that I have the gift of flight.”

“Yes, but you will have to travel on foot at some point.”

“Five days’ time is not enough for you to learn skills that take weeks, or even months to learn.”

I shrug. “I’ll improve later. For now, I just need to know the basics.”

“Very well. *Koji imato juric oni, tamman bahir iya zen¹.*” When I scrunch my forehead, the male says, “I have given you my word as the dragon lord. The shaman can attest to this.”

Yurik nods. “It is so, *rima*.”

“And you,” Zahtan says, walking up to me, “will uphold your end. Our deal is null and void if you fail to produce the egg or mislead me with falsified information.”

“I understand and accept.” I smile at them, relieved to have made it through the negations intact. “I’m grateful.”

Zahtan grunts. “We shall see.”

He says something to the shaman in his native tongue... right before he strides past me, giving me a perfect view of his rounded backside. It’s a finely honed and taut ass. I bite the inside of my cheek and avert my gaze before Yurik catches me staring.

“He’s just going to return to the camp like that?” I ask.

The older male shrugs. “Clothes are a hindrance when it comes to shifting.”

“Well, they aren’t when it comes to children.”

I fist my skirts and race in Zahtan’s direction. Failing miserably to keep my gaze from drifting to his sun-kissed ass. Gods, it’s sexy.

“Wait!” I call out.

The dragon lord halts and looks at me over his shoulder. “What is it now, human?”

I don’t respond until I’m by his side. After removing my cloak, I hold it out to him. He squints down at me, and I hurriedly explain. “You’re naked.”

“Given the cool breeze sweeping over my cock, I’m fully aware of the

fact.”

My face flames, but I ignore it. When is he not making me blush? Eventually, I’ll get used to his crude comments. I hope.

“Take the cloak and cover yourself.” When he quirks a brow, I release a breath full of frustration. “You’re naked, and there are children present, remember. That’s... not proper, even for a dragon shifter. I understand the reason you avoid clothing, but that’s no excuse to traumatize the little ones. They’re innocent.”

Zahtan slowly turns to face me, and I grit my teeth as the full force of his attention falls on me. “Traumatize?” he repeats. “That sounds like your reaction. Is it because you are also innocent?”

I glare at him, even as my stomach flips. “That’s none of your business. Focus on protecting the children from your indecency. That is what’s important.”

“It matters.”

“Why do you keep saying that? I find it quite bothersome.”

My nervousness around this male has never waned. If anything, it increases with every exchange. I should avoid it all together, but given my predicament, I can’t. However, that doesn’t mean I won’t stand up for what’s right.

With a determined huff, I take the ends of my cloak and erase the remaining space between us. He frowns at me when I encircle his waist and tie the fabric together. I ignore his stare as it bores into my skull and the way my fingers tremble. Once I’m done, I step back and give him a firm nod.

“That should suffice until you put on some much-needed clothing.”

Zahtan glances down at the makeshift skirt and then at me. “You are strange, *rima*.”

“You can call me whatever you want as long as you cover yourself.”

“I think not.”

He rips the cloak from his body. His cock swings like a pendulum, and the movement catches my eye. Of course, it does. The dragon lord flicks his gaze to my burning face and the hint of a smile plays about his lips.

“Gods strike me down,” I mutter.

“Here.” Zahtan extends the cloak to me. “I know you’re concerned for the children, but I don’t make a habit of exposing myself to them. I’ve stashed a pair of pants in an oak not too far from here, and I will don them before entering the camp.”

I wrinkle my nose. "I don't want that back. The garment is... tainted." *By your cock and balls rubbing all over it.*

The male slowly shakes his head and tosses the cloak to the ground. "Have it your way."

He faces the opposite direction and disappears behind a large tree.

"If I *did* have my way, you'd still be wearing the thing," I mutter.

The tinkling of shells reaches me a moment before Yurik enters my line of sight. "Come with me, *rima*. Unless you'd rather assist our Zahtan in getting dressed?"

I make a face at the shaman before snatching up the cloak and balling the material. "Are all of your people prone to mischief, or is that just a trait the two of you share?"

"The sky god, Asili, enjoys a little impishness from time to time. If he didn't, you would not be here."

CHAPTER 9



*H*elena

“Can you tell me more?” I ask the shaman. “The sky god is not one that I’ve heard much about.”

The older man nods. “He is a wind-bringer and the original lord of the dragons. It’s he who gave Zahtan and many others the gift of flight through shifting into their beast form. You see, the sky god didn’t want to be alone in the heavens.”

My heart softens at the sentiment. Having my sister by my side is the one thing that keeps me sane in a world of uncertainty. Without her, I’d be lost.

“You look sad, *rima*. Why is that?”

I paste a smile on my face. Although Yurik is nice, he’s still not someone I trust. The fact that I have a sister isn’t useful to him, but I’m not willing to chance it. Amara is all I have in the world.

“It’s nothing,” I say. “I just feel bad for Asili. It’s nice to have someone to love and to be loved in return.”

“Agreed, but if not for his loneliness, the dragon hordes would not exist.”

“I suppose.”

He pauses and turns to face me. I halt and fold my arms, unsure of why he stopped. His body is relaxed, but his gaze is narrowed, his expression intense.

“I have a word for you from Asili.” When I make a face, the shaman grins at me. “Yes, *rima*, you heard me correctly.”

“What is it?” I ask, my curiosity getting the better of me.

“The sky god is going to send you a companion, someone to advise and guide you on your journey amongst the horde. That way, you will not be alone.”

My first inclination is to deny his claim, but I press my lips together instead. Who am I to say whether or not Yurik hears from Asili? Besides, it’d be nice to have someone to talk to since my sister isn’t here with me.

“A companion,” I say slowly, testing out the word. “When will I meet them?”

The shaman lifts a shoulder in a half-shrug. “Who knows the ways of the gods? The only thing I know for certain is that he doesn’t want you to be lonely.”

“That’s very kind of him. How will I know who it is?”

“All will be revealed in time. I’m only telling you this so you’ll be prepared, and therefore open to their arrival.”

I nod. “I can do that.”

Yurik leads me to the campsite, through the middle, and to the other end. By the time we get to our destination, I’m not sure it’s safer here than at the Crimson Castle. Every individual—except the children, gods bless them—glared at me with unconcealed hatred.

The whole ordeal leaves me shaking. And wondering why the shaman is so chipper about my presence. I assume it has something to do with the sky god, but I’m too unsettled to ask. And me having a companion? I’m still unsure about that, given the horde’s opinion of me.

“Weren’t you supposed to take me to the dragon lord’s home?” I ask. I lift my hands and gesture to the trees around us. “This location isn’t any different than where we were before.”

If you ignore the brown spots that may or may not be blood. Gods, I hope I’m wrong in my assumptions, because I’m starting to think that the dragon lord is about to sacrifice me...

That would be very inconvenient.

“Patience, *rima*.” Yurik grins at me. “Everything will be revealed in time.”

“Hopefully not as much as your leader’s backside.”

It’s official, my nerves are in control of my words again.

The shaman barks out a laugh that ends on a wheeze. The tinkling of the shells adds to the sound of his merriment. “The vow Zahtan made is going to

add chaos to his life.”

I frown. “I resemble that remark.”

“Indeed you do. You might want to free your hands, because there’s work to be done. Your lessons begin now.”

Yurik tilts his head and I slide my gaze to the right. Zahtan stands there, wearing pants—finally!—with a slain deer draped over his shoulders. Rivulets of blood trail down his chest, and I follow the descent before I think better of it. After quickly shifting my attention away from the male’s chiseled stomach to Yurik, I lower my voice.

“What lesson?”

“Zahtan is about to begin carrying out his vow.”

When the dragon lord lowers the large buck to the ground and withdraws a wicked-looking blade, I grip the cloak until my knuckles turn white. I’m not sure what he’s about to teach me, but I think I might have to excuse myself from this bout of information.

“Come here, human,” he says.

My feet stay firmly planted. “Why?”

“You wanted to learn the way to survive, and that begins with how to properly skin game.”

“That’s logical,” I say slowly.

This is what I asked for. Regardless of how much it fills my stomach with nausea, I need this skill if Amara and I are to survive after I free her. The idea of not depending on anyone is enough to prod me into action. I drop the cloak and roll the sleeves of my gown up to my elbows. As soon as I’m close enough to see everything without obstruction, I stop.

“Come closer.” Zahtan gestures to the deer with the tip of the knife. “And pay attention.”

I grimace. “There’s so much blood.”

He gives me a look that suggests I’m a simpleton. “Do as I say. Afterwards, we will discuss the Crimson Castle. One skill for one piece of information, as agreed.”

“All right.”

I crouch beside him, careful not to brush his arm with mine. “What do we do first?”

The dragon lord grabs the buck’s hoof and brings the weapon’s edge to the animal’s leg. I brace myself and bite my lower lip, right before everything goes black.



“What happened to her?”

Yurik’s voice floats over me, making my head pound.

“She fainted,” Zahtan says, his voice full of ire. “How can I fulfill my oath when the human is too weak to learn?”

“Give her time. She is not one of us and you need to temper your expectations. Also, you might want to wipe your hands first before touching the human.”

The dragon lord makes a non-committal noise. Then he presses a warm hand against my forehead and my cheek. “She doesn’t have a fever,” he says. “I suppose the human isn’t comfortable with the sight of blood. Ironic, considering where she fled.”

“Or maybe that’s the reason she fainted.” The noise from Yurik’s staff glides over me, and then, “Only Asili knows.”

“Find my brother. He can skin the deer properly while I take care of the indisposed human. Given how thin her body is, she’s most likely lacking sustenance.”

“Agreed.”

Seconds later, a pair of arms slide underneath my body. My head lolls, hitting Zahtan’s chest, and I inwardly bemoan my lack of strength. I came here to be independent, yet I find myself being carried like an infant. At least my aversion to blood saved me from watching the deer being skinned. For now.

The dragon lord walks swiftly as though I weigh nothing at all. Is he stronger than most because of his dragon magic? I wonder...

The sound of a tent flap being jerked aside is followed by Zahtan lying me down on something soft. Without his hands touching me and scrambling my thoughts, I force my eyes open.

Within the male’s hut is a central fire pit that holds no flames at the moment. It’s surrounded by furs lining the floors and walls made out of hide, supported by wooden beams. Chests of various sizes sit in random places with unlit candles, vases, and other trinkets sitting on top. A bed sits across from me about a foot off the ground, covered in a dark, supple-looking fur. Lastly, there’s a chair, a throne of sorts, with a hide draped over the seat.

“Did you enjoy your rest, human?”

I give Zahtan a caustic smile. “Why yes, thank you. So, I take it the

lesson is over?”

“Most assuredly.”

“How’d I do?”

The male stops in the middle of washing his hands in the basin. “Splendidly,” he deadpans.

I laugh softly. “Hopefully, I’ll do better next time.”

His brows lift as disbelief settles on his face. “When was the last time you ate?”

“I’m not sure.”

He doesn’t say anything else and goes back to washing his hands and forearms. I briefly close my eyes and rest for a second, not having fully recovered yet. My moment of serenity is interrupted by Zahtan walking past me and tossing aside the material that acts as a door to speak to someone. After that, he seats himself in the chair, his attention straight ahead.

I lie there until a feminine voice calls out and the dragon lord answers. Then a female enters the dwelling, her hands laden with platters of food. The aromas are pleasing, albeit foreign to me, and I sit up with the hope that I’ll get to enjoy a meal. The hordeswoman flicks her gaze to me while presenting the food. Her dark eyes sparkle with curiosity instead of malice like the rest of her people, so I chance a smile.

She returns it.

The small connection warms my heart. Could she be the companion Asili sent for me?

Zahtan says something to her in his native language. She answers him in kind, with her head bowed, her long dark hair creating a curtain and shielding her face from me. Her voice is soft, like the sound of a rippling brook, and she’s very beautiful. It wouldn’t surprise me if she’s the dragon lord’s wife. Or at the very least, his lover.

The idea of Zahtan having a woman in his life makes my stomach clench. How in the world am I supposed to seduce a male who already has someone in his bed? I know I should’ve considered that before getting to this point, but the vampires didn’t leave me much of a choice.

After the hordeswoman leaves, I sit up to face the male, taking a deep breath to fortify myself. “Are you married or taken by a woman?”

His gaze narrows in either confusion or as a warning. He doesn’t respond and continues to stare at me until my scalp prickles. I grip the fur underneath me to keep from fidgeting.

“It’s a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ question,” I mumble, looking at the floor. “I only asked because I don’t want to cause problems for you. And myself, if I’m being honest. We’re alone in here, and I don’t want your female getting the wrong impression of me.”

She’d be right on all counts...

My self-loathing has never been more potent than at this moment. All I can do to ease my internal turmoil is think of my sister. Amara’s life is worth any difficulty I might experience.

The dragon lord inhales as though to speak, and I lift my head. The hordeswoman’s voice floats through the air before he says anything. Instead of talking to me, he calls out to her, and she joins us.

After she places the jug on the floor beside the food, the hordeswoman bows her head once again, awaiting his dismissal. He gives it with a quick jut of the chin. I smile at her when she makes her way toward the door, and she does the same, giving me a bit of courage.

“What’s your name?” I ask. “I’m Helena.”

She casts a worried glance at her leader. “Isa.”

Then the woman is gone. And I’m happy. I made a friend. I think. Yes, Amara is my friend as well, but she doesn’t count because she’s family.

“Why did you ask for her name?”

I swing my head to lock eyes with Zahtan. From his tone and the expression on his face, he isn’t upset with me, only inquisitive. I can handle that.

“I’ve never had a friend before and she seemed kind, so...” I let my sentence dangle as the realization of my words hits me. How pathetic is it that I’ve never bonded with another person outside of my sister?

Embarrassment washes over me, stealing my appetite. “Please forget I said anything.”

The dragon lord places his forearms on the tops of his thighs, leaning forward. He regards me with a thoughtful air, but I ignore it. I’m too humiliated to care about him scrutinizing me. I mean, when is he not?

“You are not here to make friends,” he says.

I wince at his words as the truth of them hits their mark. “Agreed. I don’t know what I was thinking. Let’s just forge—”

“But if you do, Isa is an ideal companion.”

My mouth falls open. I press my lips together and tilt my head. “Is she your wife?”

His gaze narrows in warning.

“You never answered my question,” I say, my voice dropping to a whisper. “I’m not trying to intrude. I swear. You have to understand how dangerous it is for me to be here, and I don’t want to add to that by insulting your wife with my presence. I have enough problems to deal with.”

Not to mention, it’ll be that much harder to seduce you if you’re already in a relationship.

“The only danger here is you, *rima*.”

“What could I possibly do to you?” I throw up my hands. “You’re bigger and stronger than me. Plus, I have no one on my side, while you have an army at your disposal. We are not the same.”

“Only a fool would discount something or someone based on their size. And I am no fool. Your magical ability, plus your knowledge of the egg’s location, makes you very dangerous to me.”

I scrunch up my face in confusion. “It makes me valuable, not dangerous.”

“You are a threat for reasons you can’t even begin to understand.”

“Then tell me.” I lean forward in challenge while my heart pounds in my chest. “Explain to me how a single woman, with no skill or talent, can be a threat to the great dragon lord.”

Ribbons of gold appear in his dark gaze and his nostrils flare. “Your beauty alone is enough to bring any male to his knees.”

I drop my head, unable to meet his stare. I’ve never considered myself highly attractive. Not even when Desmond insisted. But hearing this powerful man say it...

I almost believe him. *Almost*.

“Giving me false compliments isn’t going to encourage me to reveal the artifact’s location any sooner,” I say.

“The only liar here is you.”

He abruptly gets to his feet, snagging my attention. I lift my gaze to his. And find it completely golden without any traces of black remaining.

“Eat and rest, but do not leave this place. If you do, I can’t be held responsible for what befalls you.”

CHAPTER 10



*H*elena

Without the dragon lord's presence crowding me, I dive into the food.

Eat, drink, and be merry is the goal during this brief reprieve. By the end, my stomach is full of seasoned fowl, berries, and fermented wine. If I don't fall asleep in the next hour, it'll be a miracle. My day usually ends with the rising of the sun, but that'll have to change now that I'm in the horde's camp.

I grip my cup and take another long drink, savoring the flavors that dance along my tongue. A hiccup takes me by surprise, and I grin. Having never drunk anything stronger than water, I find that I'm enjoying this relaxed state brought on by the alcohol.

Drinking in the morning hours is a custom I can get behind.

A hordesman enters, pushing aside the hide covering the entrance of the structure. I nearly spill the contents of my cup all over myself when he says, "Maliq, *brazo an maja*¹?"

The male's eyes zip to me. My spine straightens at his harsh stare, and I set the cup next to me, lacing my fingers afterwards. To hide their trembling.

Too frightened to look elsewhere, I run my gaze over him. He's large, close in breadth and height to Zahtan, with a goatee instead of clean-shaven. His facial features are also similar to the dragon lord's, but this male has deeper, harsher lines around his mouth and across his forehead. Perhaps that's because he's met me.

"You," he says, switching to the common tongue, "should not be here.

Where is my brother?"

"The dragon lord?" When he nods, I shrug in response. "I don't know. He told me to stay here. Who are you?"

"Jazin to you, *rima*."

"I'm Helena."

The hordesman scoffs. "I don't care what your name is, only your reason for being here. Why is that? Have you come to destroy the horde? Steal our magic for your own nefarious deeds?"

His off-putting attitude toward me doesn't surprise me. However, the anger that rises in my chest does. I could attribute my newfound courage to my temporary freedom from the vampires.

Or the wine heating my belly.

I squint up at the male. "Zahtan has vowed to protect me. Because of that, I'll only answer to him. Not you or any other male in this camp. Understood?"

"You dare talk to me in such a fashion? You, a treacherous human, who is good for nothing other than death?"

"I dare, hordesman. And to the delight of your lord."

It's mind-blowing how adept I've become at lying in such a short time. Jazin certainly believes me. If he didn't, he wouldn't have smoke leaking from his nostrils.

I blink several times. Golden scales have appeared on his forearms as they tremble with his rage. His eyes, black a moment ago, are now a pair of golden suns, bright with thoughts of violence.

Another dragon-shifter... I didn't know it was possible. Either the vampires misled me, or they weren't aware.

When Jazin takes a threatening step toward me, I throw out my hands. Inserting steel into my tone, I say, "If you come any closer, you'll give me a chance to steal your magic. Trust me when I say that you don't want me to have it. Because if I had your power, I'd be a worthy adversary you might not win against."

The hordesman stiffens, the muscles in his body going taut. Twin plumes of smoke steadily leave his nostrils, rising into the air, and golden scales now cover every inch of his exposed skin.

My heart thrashes in my ribcage. Staying his hand was my only objective, but I might've gone too far in challenging him. From what I've learned, the warriors in this camp carry their pride as surely as they do a weapon: openly

and with a sharp edge.

“Whatever lies you’ve fed my brother won’t hold,” Jazin says, his fisted hands trembling by his sides. “I’ll make sure to get rid of you before there’s a chance to steal what doesn’t belong to you, vampire whore.”

I shrug, despite the sting of his insult. “A vampire whore today, and a dragon lord’s whore tomorrow.”

My scream hits the air when the hordesman lunges for me. I fumble, failing to grab my dagger because my hands shake too much for me to grip it properly. Jazin’s hand wraps around my throat, cutting off my air and silencing my call for help.

He lifts me until we’re eye-level and my feet dangle beneath me without purchase. I claw at his wrists, my nails sliding over the smooth dragon scales. My attack fails to loosen his hold.

“If you think that I won’t kill you despite my brother’s vow, you’re mistaken,” Jazin says, his voice more of a growl than actual speech. “The Golden Horde will never suffer a human’s treachery again. I’ll appoint myself as a vessel of Asili and make sure of it.”

The hand around my neck tightens, and my instinct to survive turns into a frenzied attempt at self-preservation. My vision becomes blurry, and my lungs cry out for air, but I don’t give up. I can’t fail my sister by dying today.

“Jazin!”

At the sound of Zahtan’s sharp command, I go limp with relief. Jazin spins to face his brother and immediately releases his hold on me. I plummet to the ground and briefly close my eyes, struggling to pull deep breaths into my body. I wheeze and cough while the two men standing above me engage in a heated discussion.

“Explain yourself,” the dragon lord says. There’s an edge to his voice that cuts like a blade, making me flinch even though his anger isn’t directed at me. “Now.”

The other male points to me. “She admitted her plan to take your magic, Zahtan. Ending her life is the only way to keep you safe.”

The dragon lord says something in his native tongue, and Jazin shakes his head. “I won’t avoid the common language for her sake,” he says. “The human doesn’t need to be shielded from anything. She’s the enemy, not an honored guest.”

Zahtan folds his arms. “That may be true, but as of now, she’s *my* guest. And you will treat her as such until I order you to do otherwise.”

“Brother, don’t be blinded by the fact that she’s female. The woman—”

“Do you think I can’t withstand her beauty? Am I the type of male to make decisions with my cock instead of with logic and reason? You insult me, brother. First, by questioning my decisions, and second, by attacking the human. In doing so, you’ve rendered my vow to her as empty.”

Jarin clenches his jaw and bows his head, his scales receding. “My apologies, Zahtan.”

“The human has more fortitude than you think. She’ll rally from this, but it will be your last attempt on her life. Swear it to me.”

“By Asili, I swear the human will not die by my hand.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to refrain from speaking. Jazin’s oath is not exactly what the dragon lord meant, but it’s better than nothing. The male’s hatred for me only reinforces my need to seduce Zahtan.

Sooner rather than later.

The dragon lord gives his brother a curt nod. “Leave us.”

Jazin lifts his head. “As you wish.”

He strides from the hut, his eyes and skin still bearing hints of gold. Right before he leaves, the male’s eyes zero in on me, his gaze bright with a promise of violence.

As is mine. If it becomes necessary.

Zahtan crouches next to me. I stare up at him as the male raises a hand, and then retracts it as though he has second thoughts about touching me. “Do you wish for me to summon the healer?”

“No,” I croak. “I’ll be fine. Jazin scared me more than he hurt me.”

“Did you provoke him?”

I bite my lip, while deciding on whether or not to tell the truth. “Yes. But he started it.”

He quirks an ebony brow. “And you couldn’t hold your tongue, even to save your own skin?”

“That would’ve been the wise or strategic course of action. But I am neither of those things.”

I shove off the ground to get into a sitting position, and this time, Zahtan does touch me. His giant hands wrap around my upper arms right before he lifts me. I stare up at him with my heart pounding wildly in my chest.

Him touching me is a good thing, I remind myself.

“Thank you,” I mumble. Self-consciousness, along with an awareness of his masculinity, leaves me unsettled. “Not just for assisting me, but for saving

me. You say I'm a danger to this horde..." I release a self-deprecating laugh and shake my head. "I think the horde is a danger to me."

Zahtan says nothing and lets his hands fall away from me. He stays close, his dark eyes roaming over me, again and again.

I drop my gaze. "What is it?"

"In order to stay true to my word, I'll have to keep you by my side. It's the only way to protect you, *rima*. No one would dare defy me openly. But privately? I believe I underestimated my people's hatred of humans."

I suppress a wince. It's difficult to bear the burden of an entire civilization's prejudice toward you. Despite my plans to be here for a short while, I have no desire to be treated heinously.

"If I could apologize for what the humans did to you, I would. However, we both know it'd do little to appease them," I say. "Even then, I'm sorry. For whatever happened to cause you such pain."

And for my future betrayal.

Zahtan is right not to trust me. I can only hope he doesn't find out about my plans and kill me before I've had a chance to carry them out.

The dragon lord dips his head in acknowledgement. It's not the same as accepting my apology, but it's better than an outright dismissal. "Did you eat?" he asks.

I glance at him. "Yes, thank you."

He leans close, so close that I could kiss him. His nostrils flare briefly, and then he smiles at me. "You drank as well. That could explain my brother's provocation."

"Possibly." A blush rises to heat my cheeks. "I've never had wine before."

"Never?"

I shake my head. "No, but I find it delightful. There are a lot of things I've never experienced that I'm eager to try."

"Such as?"

"Anything really. Just having the sun on my skin is a joy." I briefly close my eyes, recalling that blissful moment in the forest. "It's the simple things in life that I want most."

Zahtan regards me with a watchful air, his private thoughts swirling in his gaze. A flicker of gold comes and goes, like a flash of lightning. "Survival is simple, but to truly live? That requires something more. A quality and a depth that might not be easily found."

“Are you truly living?” I ask.

The male pulls back, his gaze hardening. “I don’t think a leader can, not when his people are his utmost priority.”

“Oh, I see.”

I gnaw on my bottom lip, fighting off the feelings of guilt assailing me. His dark eyes flit to my mouth. And turn completely gold.

Does he want to kiss me? Surely not.

From the intensity in his stare, to the twitch in his jaw, my nervousness flares. And takes over.

“A lover?” I squeak. At his frown, I clear my throat and try again. “Do you have a lover? You never answered me.”

He cocks his head. “Why do you need to know?”

“So she doesn’t try to murder me in a fit of jealousy.”

For such an intelligent male, I find him quite ignorant to the most obvious things. Such as this, and shielding his nudity from the general public.

Zahtan releases a breath, full of exasperation. “You needn’t worry about such things. If anyone is going to kill you, it’ll be because you’re a human. Not due to some irrational emotion such as jealousy.”

“Thank you for that,” I mumble.

“My sense of hearing is excellent. You know this, yet you continue to mutter as if I can’t make out your words. Some of which are quite foul. I’m shocked the trees didn’t immediately burst into flame from the scorching language.”

I purse my lips, fighting off a blush. “First, you spy on me. Then, you chastise me? I’m beginning to think decency is foreign concept to you.”

“I’m a savage,” he says with a shrug. “I will not apologize for who and what I am.”

“Don’t forget to add ‘frustrating’ to your list of traits. You still haven’t given me an answer to my original question.” I tilt my head, running my gaze over the male. “Are you ashamed of your woman? Is that the reason you won’t acknowledge her?”

“No.”

He didn’t deny a female’s presence in his life. Finally, I’ve been given an answer. Only it’s the one I don’t know how to reconcile.

I bow my head and run my fingers over the soft furs beneath me as the futility of my situation overwhelms me. My goal to sleep with the dragon lord was almost insurmountable given how much he hates my kind. Now

with him having a woman? Impossible.

Thoughts of my sister's fate ricochet in my mind. I press my fingers to my temples, trying to ease the incessant pounding. I've failed her before I've had a chance to begin.

I can't go back, and I can't continue forward. Hopelessness settles on me like a physical weight, and my shoulders slump.

"*Rima?*"

I flinch at the sound of his voice. For a moment, I'd forgotten his presence while drowning in my guilt. At the feel of Zahtan putting his finger underneath my chin, I stiffen. Slowly, he lifts my head until our gazes meet.

"What troubles you? I might be arrogant, but not enough to think your sudden disquiet has something to do with me and another female."

"It's nothing. Just forget this conversation ever happened."

When he glowers at me, displeasure etched into his features, my eyes widen. In the midst of panic, my brain scrambles to provide a response.

"I left someone behind. Someone I cared for deeply."

"Who?" The male lifts my chin a little bit more while leaning closer. His warm breath skims my cheeks, amplifying the blush already present. "Your vampire master," he says, his voice threaded with anger, "and lover?"

My mouth thins. "Are you ever going to leave that be?"

"No. It matters."

"He's not my lover. Never was."

The dragon lord's gaze searches mine, drilling for the truth. Some of the tension leaves his face at the emphatic shake of my head.

"I swear it," I say. "Perhaps I should've told you earlier that I didn't have a sexual relationship with my former master, but you unsettled me with your frankness and abrasiveness. It made me reluctant to share anything of a personal nature."

"If you wish to stay under my protection, you will tell me what I want to know."

I press my lips together. Not in rebellion, but out of necessity. I have no direction, no plan to rescue Amara. It sickens me. If only I was confident enough to try and seduce Zahtan, despite him having a lover. It's just not in me. Never mind the fact that I'm not the type of person to ruin someone's relationship by interfering.

I turn my head to remove his touch. Only for the dragon lord to forcefully take my chin in hand. I swing my gaze to his.

Finding it rimmed with gold.

“There is no female that warms my furs at night,” he says.

“Oh. Well, that makes me feel better.”

He quirks a brow. “Does it?”

“Yes.”

For so many reasons. All of them selfish.

“Why?” he asks, his voice gentling a little.

“As I mentioned before, it’s for my safety. And secondly, if I’m to learn from you, I’d like your undivided attention.”

“You have it.” His pupils contract, the golden rings slowly over-taking the black. “Whether we like it or not.”

CHAPTER 11



*H*elena

The dragon lord strides through his camp like the leader he is, his steps sure and his gait causing his braid to swing back and forth. Bits of gold decoration in his hair catch the sun, as does his bronzed skin.

He is a sight to behold.

I race behind him until I reach his side. He flicks his gaze to me, and I smile in return. Zahtan blows out a breath and goes back to facing forward, but I refuse to be deterred by his attitude.

Now that I know he's unattached to another woman, I'm happy to have my plans back in place.

And I'm more eager to execute them.

I have to finish my mission before some other female catches his eye. After that, he can sleep with whoever he desires. I'll be long gone.

And that much closer to my sister.

"I can guarantee that the effort required to master knife-throwing will remove the smile from your lips, *rima*."

I resist the urge to make a face at him. "Maybe. But it has to be better than skinning a deer. At least I won't faint during this lesson."

"That remains to be seen."

This time, I give in and roll my eyes.

He quickens his pace, all but forcing me to run in order to keep up. Not that I mind. With the hateful stares I'm receiving, I'd rather get to the training

grounds sooner than later.

When we reach the small clearing, I'm out of breath. Of course, Zahtan is not winded whatsoever. Bastard.

Shortly after we get there, several hordesmen arrive. They're all similar in appearance to the dragon lord. From their dark hair, bare chests, and golden tattoos, the males are the embodiment of beautiful savagery.

"Don't stare any harder, lest your eyes fall from your skull, human."

I swing my gaze to Zahtan. "I've never left the Crimson Castle, so forgive me for indulging my curiosity."

"I didn't realize your curiosity needing indulging." He folds his arms over his massive chest, continuing to stare straight ahead as a glower creeps onto his features. "If that is the case, you will do so with me. And me alone."

"What?"

"I will not repeat myself, *rima*."

My forehead wrinkles as I scrunch my face. The command is ridiculous in nature and makes no sense. "Why?"

He swings to face me. His giant frame towers over me, blocking the sun. This male is such a force to be reckoned with, yet I find myself provoking him again and again. My temporary freedom from Desmond has messed with my head. It's the only explanation for my continuing insolence.

"You are not to engage with my warriors in any capacity."

Considering Zahtan and Jazin are the only people with dragon magic, they are my only targets. The former more so than the latter.

I huff. "I wasn't planning to."

"So you say."

"So I *know*."

"I'm serious, *rima*. Do not converse with them, entice them, or fuck them. If you do, you will not like the consequences."

"Fuck them?" I whisper-shout. "Are you out of your mind? Jazin called me a vampire whore, and now you would label me as one for the horde?" I fist my hands by my sides. "Be careful that you don't teach me how to throw a knife with great accuracy, or you might find it lodged in your spine, great Zahtan."

The dragon lord stares at me, crumbling my inner resolve. It has my heart pounding furiously. And then his mouth lifts into a smile.

"*Rima*, there are times when I believe you have dragon fire in your veins."

Before I can determine whether that was a compliment or an insult, the male gestures to a nearby tree. The gold of his tattoos catches the sun's rays, stealing my focus.

"This is your target," he says. "But first you need to learn how to properly handle your weapon."

After I retrieve the dagger from my boot, I give it to him. Zahtan wields it with great care, but also with ease. He goes through the process of how to hold the blade and aim it. As well as how to sharpen it, keeping it in pristine condition.

Meanwhile, the dragon lord's warriors begin their training session. They go through a series of movements with and without weapons in hand, while counting in unison. Their deep voices snag my attention, and I find myself sneaking glances at the group. Their high level of discipline and uniformity takes me by surprise.

"Eyes on me, human."

I snap my gaze to Zahtan. He stares back at me, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. With a flick of his wrist, the dagger soars through the air and sinks deep into a tree.

"How did you do that without looking?" I ask. "That was incredible."

"Talent and skill. Neither of which you possess." He points to the weapon. "Retrieve it and begin your training like I showed you."

It takes every bit of my self-control not to stomp as I walk. Zahtan might be rude, but he's right about me: I don't have any skills. As far as talents, I'd like to think I have some. I'm just not sure in what capacity.

When I reach the tree, I find the dagger buried to the hilt. For a second, I can only marvel at the strength behind the hordesman's throw. I grip the weapon and tug on it with all my might.

It refuses to budge.

Unwilling to let that deter me, I grab the handle with both hands and pull. I think the blade comes loose a bit. Maybe.

Gritting my teeth, I tighten my hold, brace my foot on the trunk, and do my damndest to free the weapon.

It slides from the tree, and I stumble back, nearly falling on my backside. A blush warms my cheeks, and I curse the dragon lord for putting me in this predicament. It's one thing to be humiliated, it's another for it to be in public.

I'm not sure why he's worried about me enticing the warriors when it's likely they're laughing at me.

After taking a fortifying breath, I walk a far distance from the target and hold the dagger like Zahtan instructed. It flies from my hand and straight into a bush. This time, I swear I hear masculine chuckling. However, I refuse to turn around and look.

I mutter expletives as I march off in search of my weapon, most of the insults aimed at the dragon lord. I doubt his hearing is good enough to pick up on what I'm saying. If so, he's going to be upset.

Once I find the dagger, I try again.

Only to end up with the same result.

The entire morning consists of me doing my best to hit the tree and failing to do so. One time I manage to nick the bark. It's an improvement but a far cry from the original goal.

My shoulders begin to ache, not to mention my arm feels like it's going to fall off, and I'm continuously stifling a yawn. Had I been at the Crimson Castle, I would've been asleep hours ago. My aim, which was already subpar to begin with, deteriorates as the day drags on.

The hordesmen are still working through their training exercises when I finally give up. With my dagger back inside my boot, I settle myself underneath the tree that I was supposed to mangle and watch the males. Bronzed skin covering rippling muscles, along with shiny onyx hair, leaves me transfixed.

Either I'm delirious from sleep, or my inhibitions have completely disappeared. Considering my mission to sleep with Zahtan, I suppose this is a good thing. My eyes wander to the giant male again and again.

"Fancy him, do you?"

I go from reclining against the tree, to sitting straight up, my widened gaze darting from side to side. "Who's there?"

"I don't have a name. I suppose I should rectify that immediately."

"Where are you?" I lean toward the person's voice, trying to locate him. It's a male for certain. His tone isn't deep or guttural like Zahtan's, but it's not high-pitched either. "I don't see anyone nearby."

"Don't be daft, girl, I'm right beside you."

I drop my head to scan the area. There's nothing next to me except grass, some fallen leaves, and a rock. Yes, it's peculiar because it has white rune marks etched into its black surface, but there's nothing else that makes it significant.

"Um... I don't mean to be rude, but I can't seem to locate you."

A scoff, and then, “Of all the people for Asili to gift me to, why in the god’s name did it have to be a human?”

I squint, peering closer at the rock. A minuscule shimmer covers the markings, making them glow and shift. I rear back. “Asili?”

“No, I’m the foretold companion. However brilliant the gods believe themselves to be, I think Asili has had his divinity warped.”

“You’re my companion?”

The rock doesn’t nod, but the rune marks have morphed into a face. A very disgruntled one. “Yes. Haven’t I been saying that from the start?”

“I’m still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that I’m having a conversation with a rock, something that’s not supposed to be able to talk.”

Another scoff. I catch the shape of his mouth as it moves, shifting into a deep frown. “Not only do I talk, but I also provide wisdom and counsel. That is my purpose. Only after I’ve assisted you will Asili pull my soul from this wretched form and back into the heavens.”

“I see.” Although I don’t understand anything. “No offense, but I thought Asili was sending me a hordeswoman a companion. Isa, to be exact.”

“That is a faulty assumption,” the rock says. “You will not find another companion better than me.”

I’m sleep-deprived. That’s all this is. The last twenty-four hours have finally taken their toll, rendering me a simpleton. I’m emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausted, and this is the result.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say, cringing as I continue to feed my delusion.

I let my head fall back against the tree and close my eyes. If I needed a sign that it’s time for me to rest, a talking rock is it.

“Tired, eh?” he asks me.

“Mm-hmm.”

“I suppose I should get used to the weaknesses that mortal beings carry. Sleep is one for certain. Such a waste of time. If you didn’t have to indulge, then we’d be halfway through your journey of development already.”

Without opening my eyes, I nod. “That would be nice, especially because I’m not sure where to begin. It’s difficult to seduce someone who hates you.”

“That is your goal?”

“I need his dragon magic, and I can only get that through sex.”

“Show him your tits. That will quickly change his mind.”

I slap a hand to my forehead and groan. “*This* is the great wisdom from Asili? I must be going mad.”

“Any hot-blooded male would love to gaze at a pair of breasts. Fondle them too. Perhaps suckle them as well.”

A strangled sound is all I can manage. I open my eyes and make a slicing motion through the air. “Enough. I don’t care how tired I am, I’m not in the mood to discuss my body or what a male would like to do to it.”

Imagining Zahtan’s warm mouth on my skin...

That heats me up more than the sun.

“Do stop acting like a virgin, girl. Find some gumption.”

“I *am* a virgin,” I grit out between clenched teeth. “And I’d appreciate it if you cease this topic of discussion. Immediately.”

“By the balls of Asili, I can’t believe this. I’ve been sent to assist an innocent in seducing a beast? If you make it through the mating, I’ll be surprised.”

I massage my temples. They began pounding at the rock’s first suggestion, and my discomfort has only grown since. I really need to sleep.

“Can we take a break and continue this conversation after I’ve rested?” I ask. Hopefully that’ll set my mind right and rid me of this apparition.

“I suppose.”

The rock grumbles to itself, but most of the words are so muffled that I can’t make sense of them. However, I do catch the phrases “lady bits” and “bouncy tits,” and that has my face flaming again.

“What shall I call you?” I ask. “You’re black and shiny, so onyx would work. Maybe obsidian. Horneblende is another. That material was used in the tile that covered the floor in my old bedroom.”

“I’m hard, not horny, girl. By the ass of Asili, I swear you’ll drive me to madness.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m already there.”

“I quite like augite,” he says, unperturbed by my attitude. “Or perhaps Biotite.”

“Obsidian. And I will call you Sid.” I fold my arms for good measure. “That’s the end of it.”

The rock is quiet for a moment, and then its strange, rune-marked eyes find mine. “Sid will do nicely.”

CHAPTER 12



*H*elena

“Wake up, *rima*.”

At the sound of his deep voice, my eyelids flutter open to reveal Zahtan staring down at me, looking none too pleased. Beads of sweat are scattered across his skin, making it sparkle underneath the sunlight. I follow a single drop until it collides with another, trailing down his torso and over the ridges of his stomach. It ends when making contact with his pants, where his cock bulges underneath the material.

Of course it does.

I cover a yawn and scan the area, needing a different focal point. All of the warriors have left the training grounds, and the sun is a lot higher in the sky than it was when I first started my lesson. If you could call it that. I did little else besides throw a dagger, only to trudge after it while swearing.

And then there’s Sid.

I drop my gaze to the ground next to me. The rock still bears its runic markings, but the animated face from earlier isn’t there.

I must have made the whole thing up. It’s amazing what the mind comes up with when you’re exhausted. Even so, I pick up Sid and put him in my pocket.

“Let me see that,” the dragon lord says.

He holds out his hand. I hesitate. I’m not sure why. The rock is simply that: an object of nature that does nothing except exist. Obviously, it doesn’t

talk.

I retrieve Sid and place him in the hordesman's palm, eyeing the male. When the rock doesn't immediately start mouthing off, I smile at myself and shake my head. I really let my imagination get the best of me. I'm still not quite sure why my brain recommended that I expose my breasts, but that's another matter entirely.

And not something I wish to think about for long.

"What do those marks mean?" I ask.

"It's a prayer of protection meant for Asili."

"That's sweet."

Zahtan narrows his gaze at me, causing a chill to skitter along the back of my neck. "These stones were a common occurrence at one point amongst my people," he says. "We've always waged war with the vampires, believing them to be creatures born of evil and darkness, but there was a time that resulted in much death. Hence the supplication to our gods. Specifically, Asili, because the males able to shift were dwindling in number."

Despite the sun shining all around us, I hug myself to ward off the cold energy rolling off of the male's body. "I assumed you were the only one able to take a dragon's form until I saw your brother's scales appear."

"If Jazin did as I asked, you never would've witnessed that," Zahtan says. "I don't know what your plans are once you've fulfilled your end of our agreement, but I would caution you to keep that information concerning my brother secret. The vampires don't need another advantage over us."

"Another advantage?" I repeat.

The dragon lord lowers into a crouch directly in front of me. I meet his gaze, unable to look anywhere else. "What you witness and learn here is not to be revealed outside of this place," he says, his voice even but sharp. "Do you understand?"

I nod slowly, not wanting to provoke his already growing temper. However, I have yet to see any scales or smoke appear. That's a good sign.

"There are many reasons we don't welcome outsiders, *rima*. Don't make me regret my decision."

"The artifact must be more important than the vampires realized, or you wouldn't be making so many concessions when it comes to me being here." My lips pull to the side as my thoughts tumble over one another. "I'm not sure how to convince you that I hate my former master more than you could possibly imagine. All I can promise is that if I'm given another chance, I *will*

kill him. And cut off his head.”

I pause and then grin at Zahtan. “That’s one lesson of yours I’ve learned and will definitely put into action.”

He stares at me with an unreadable expression on his face. Until the side of his mouth tilts up. “You’re a bloodthirsty little thing.”

I wag my finger at him. “It’s best you remember that.”

“The day you best me is the day I’ll give up my throne.”

“I don’t care about your throne, only your knowledge.”

And magic.

I can’t keep forgetting about that during our conversations. What I need to do is find out what qualities in a woman he’s attracted to. If all else fails, I suppose I could “show him my tits.” I shudder at the thought, embarrassment heating up my insides. How would the dragon lord respond to me if I actually had the fortitude to go through with it? He’d probably wrap my cloak around me to shield my nudity like I did to him.

“Is something wrong?” Zahtan asks, his brows gathered. “Your complexion is flushed, more so than it was to begin with.”

“Too much sun.” I cover my cheeks and find them blazing to the touch. Without the sun’s rays blocked by the leaves overhead, my skin is tender. Although, I can’t blame everything on the sun. My inappropriate thoughts of Zahtan stir something within me. “How long was I asleep?”

“Long enough. Let’s go.”

With a groan, I shove from the ground and into a standing position. The dragon lord unfurls his large frame with an ease that I envy. Is there anything he can’t do well?

“What are we doing now?” I ask. “Considering how successful I’ve been at these lessons, I’m sure you’re eager to teach me another. But if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to sleep.”

Without responding, he starts walking, and I hurry to his side. The male flicks his gaze to me and then goes back to staring straight ahead. So I do the same.

The village is alive with activity. From spinning wool to caring for horses, everyone is doing something worthwhile.

“Your people are quite industrious,” I say.

“If you don’t work, you don’t eat.”

I nod. “That’s a good rule to live by. Speaking of... when do we get to eat? I’m starving.”

“No doubt your time spent sleeping worked up quite an appetite.”

“It did, indeed.”

I press my lips together to keep from laughing. It shouldn't amuse me when the hordesman teases me, but it does. Part of me likes it enough to banter with him further.

“After I eat, I plan to sleep some more in preparation for dinner,” I say with a wink. “That's assuming I haven't missed it. If so, then it's time for second dinner.”

He shakes his head. ““Second dinner' does not exist.”

“Yet.”

“Not ever, *rima*. There's no need for it. That's an overindulgence of the flesh.”

I school my features into a mock stern expression. “And the dragon lord would never give in to his fleshly desires because it's beneath him. Isn't that right?”

Zahtan stops abruptly and slowly turns to stare directly into my eyes. I hold his gaze, watching his dark eyes flicker with golden streaks. “The dragon within me *always* thinks about satisfying its carnal desires, and very little else,” he says quietly.

My body sways toward the male, and the essence of him washes over my senses. “And what would those desires be?”

His nostrils flare. “Things better left unsaid. And unfulfilled.”

I rise on my tiptoes and place my lips close to his ear. “You can trust me not to tell anyone.” When I'm flat on my feet, I look up at him. His gaze is molten, the gold within swirling due to his tumultuous thoughts. “Please, tell me,” I say, my voice breathy with anticipation.

He slams his eyes closed at my supplication. “Don't.”

Concern wraps around me like a vine, propelling me to reach out and touch his forearm. He grinds his teeth when my fingertips graze his heated skin. Inside, my heart pounds with both fear and excitement. I wonder if he can hear it, if he's aware of his effect on me.

“I can't imagine a woman who wouldn't want what you have to give,” I say.

“Does that include you?” He reveals his golden eyes to me, and they dig past my defenses and straight into my soul. “Are you a woman who wants what I have?”

My answer is one of the few truths I still have amidst the web of lies I've

been spinning. “I’m scared of you.”

How do I explain that I’m terrified of what he makes me feel? That I’m overwhelmed by the things he inspires in the deep recesses of my mind?

Zahtan straightens and takes a step back, a glower settling on his face. “Courage is not something you lack, Helena.”

The distance between us allows me to breathe easier, but I immediately miss the connection we shared a moment ago. It was in every breath, every look, and every unspoken word between us.

“You don’t know me,” I whisper. “I’m scared of a great many things.”

“You’re right. I don’t know you, and it needs to stay that way.”



Lunch in the dragon lord’s hut is a somber and awkward affair.

That’s what happens when you overstep your bounds with your host. Asking Zahtan about his hidden desires isn’t something I would’ve normally done. But my mission demands that I find out what he’s attracted to.

If only I could blame all of my motivation on my goal to seduce him.

Part of it does stem from my curiosity. I really want to know what makes a male like him lose control. If it’s even possible.

That part of me is not to be trusted.

Our meal, which consisted of nuts, berries, and fresh-baked bread, sits on my stomach, making me drowsy. I stifle a yawn and peer over at Zahtan.

The male has yet to finish eating. While I gobbled mine down like a rabid wolf, he takes his time as though savoring every morsel. What else does he do meticulously?

Is that how he is as a lover?

Or is he a savage, intent on releasing his lust in a way that satisfies both him and the beast within?

My instinctive answer is both. I can envision the dragon lord taking his time to pleasure a female while also conquering her with every touch and every kiss.

I let my gaze roam over his mouth, taking in the contours of his lips and the strong curve of his jaw. He is so beautiful. Regardless of how he treats me, that fact will always remain.

What would it be like to kiss him?

My face grows warm at the thought.

“Are you ill, *rima*?”

I jerk my eyes away from his lips and drop my gaze to the floor. “No, I’m fine.”

“You appear flushed as though you have a fever,” he says, his tone carrying threads of exasperation. “Perhaps you had too much sun exposure?”

“That’s probably it.” I nod emphatically to convince him. Although my over-enthusiastic approach could have the opposite effect. “Because the vampires abhor the sun, they never let us go outside during the day. I haven’t felt the sun’s rays on my skin since I was a child.”

“Us?”

My lips purse. “Excuse me?”

“You said that ‘they never let us go outside.’ Who is ‘us?’”

I wave a hand in dismissal while my heart tries to escape my ribcage. The male is far too perceptive. “Myself and the other humans, of course.”

He nods, but his gaze is sharp, piercing mine. “What else can you tell me about the Crimson Castle?”

“What do you want to know?” Any topic other than my sister is preferable. If Zahtan knows about her, he’ll be more suspicious of me than he already is. “I can’t promise that my information will be useful, but you’re welcome to anything that I have.”

The male stiffens in his throne. It’s slight, almost imperceptible, but I’ve been watching Zahtan closely ever since I first laid eyes on him. What’s gotten into him?

“How many vampires reside there?” he asks.

“A hundred? Maybe more. The structure is massive, and I was only able to see so much from my window.”

“Are humans the only beings enslaved, or do they have other species under their control as well?”

I bite the inside of my cheek at the disturbing line of inquiry. It wouldn’t surprise me if the vampires held prisoners other than humans, but to think of it makes my stomach roil. Those evil creatures need to be destroyed. If I had the power to do so, they’d be gone and my people freed.

“There are no other slaves that I know of,” I say. “However, I’ve never been to the dungeons, so it’s definitely possible.”

“Have they forged alliances with the fae or the lycans?”

I shake my head. “The vampires have never veered from their objective to

rule all of the nations in this land.”

Zahtan strokes his chin in thought. I yawn again, not bothering to cover my mouth this time. He frowns, and I offer him a lop-sided smile, my sleep deprivation lowering my defenses.

“Any other questions?” I ask.

“Later.”

“Wonderful.”

I rub my eyes, which feel like they have sand in them, and then plop onto the floor. The soft hide cushions my body, and I relax, my muscles losing all tension. My eyes close as I release a sigh of contentment.

“Good night,” I mumble into the furs.

“It is still day, *rima*.”

“For you.”

“Soon it will apply to you as well.”

I think I roll my eyes, but I’m not sure because sleep pulls me under. My last coherent thought is that I hope Zahtan will watch over me. I’d hate to die before knowing what it’s like to kiss him.

Just once.

CHAPTER 13



*H*elena

I awaken to near darkness.

The only light in the dragon lord's hut comes from the glowing embers in the fire pit, but it's enough for me to see well enough. I immediately search for Zahtan and locate him asleep in his bed. He's lying on his back with one arm behind his head and the other draped across his bare chest. Thank the gods an animal fur covers his lower half.

If not, I'm certain I'd be subjected to another eyeful of his cock. I can't imagine the hordesman choosing to sleep with clothes on. Unless he did it out of respect for me?

Definitely not. He was naked when I met him.

I snuggle deeper underneath the blanket covering me, which wasn't there when I went to bed. My heart expands at the thoughtful action. Maybe the dragon lord isn't as uncaring as I believe him to be.

My mind drifts from Zahtan to my mission, then to my sister. Is she living? Does Amara know I'm alive? Can I successfully seduce the dragon lord and use his magic to free her?

If I recount my actions thus far, my progress has been minimal, and every day that passes is lost time.

Step 1: Locate the dragon lord. Once that is done, do your best to convince him not to kill you. Complete.

Step 2: Engage in the learning of useful skills. Meanwhile, gather

information about Zahtan and use it to devise your plan of seduction. Complete.

Step 3: With the strategy in place, put it into action. Kiss him.

Step 4: Almost sex?

Step 5: Actual sex???

Step 6: If all else fails, show him my tits...

I quietly scoff at my internal monologue. How in the gods' names did I ever believe myself to be capable of something like this? I'm a virgin without any experience or knowledge of what a male desires. Both Desmond and Zahtan have said I'm beautiful, but how can I use that to encourage the dragon lord to want me enough to act on his lust?

If I were to kiss him, would that be the key to unlocking his reservations?

With these tumultuous thoughts ravaging my mind, I toss and turn until I can't take it anymore. I suppress a groan of frustration. My body has rested long enough, and there's no way I'll be able to fall back asleep. However, I can't just lie here until dawn.

A thought strikes me like a lightning bolt, and I sit up. I could bathe. That's certainly an activity in which I want to be alone, without Zahtan hovering nearby. Perhaps I can relax once that's done.

The only challenge is to leave the hut without alerting anyone.

Each one of my movements is slow and deliberate. Silence is of the greatest importance, especially knowing the dragon lord's senses are heightened. It feels like it takes forever for me to get into a standing position, and all the while, my gaze stays locked on the hordesman.

"Zahtan?" I whisper.

As I watch him for any indication he's awake, my spine is so stiff it could fracture if I were to inhale too deeply. When the male doesn't respond, I release a pent-up breath. And exit the dwelling.

As soon as my boots touch the ground outside, I'm running.

I keep my steps light and vigilance high, but the freedom of the outdoors is intoxicating. The dragon lord has such a presence about him that I find it draining at times. Solitude is a reprieve that'll help in clearing my head.

Once I'm past the village's perimeter, I stop and remove my shoes. The cool grass tickles the soles of my feet, and I wiggle my toes in the greenery with a soft laugh, full of delight. Then, for good measure, I hold out my arms and spin with wild abandon.

For the first time in my adult life, I feel like a child; uninhibited and free

to enjoy myself.

My hair settles on my shoulders, but it lifts into the air again as I skip to the stream's edge. I dip my toe in the water and nearly shriek at the cold temperature. Bathing doesn't hold as much of an allure as it did earlier, but I won't be deterred. Cleanliness is paramount.

With a quick glance at my surroundings, I confirm I'm still alone and begin unfastening the buttons on my dress. Some are tricky and hard to reach, prompting me to curse in frustration.

Eventually, the material pools at my feet, and I step from it and into the cool liquid. My skin immediately prickles, and I wrap my arms around my breasts to fortify myself. It's not as though I'm bathing to be sweet-smelling for Desmond. This is for me. I will enjoy this small act of freedom, however minor.

Once the water causes the scrapes on my arms to burn and laps against my private area, however, I'm keen on changing my mind.

"This fucking water is cold enough to freeze the cock off of a male, let alone my poor lady bits," I grumble.

"For my sake, let us hope that is not the case."

Still covering my breasts, I let out a shriek and spin to face the shore, grateful the water is shielding my lower body.

Zahtan stands there with his arms folded and a neutral expression on his face. With him hidden in shadow, I can't make out whether or not he's angry, but on the chance that he is, I set out to pacify him.

"Good evening, sir," I say, inwardly cringing at my formal speech and high-pitched voice. I clear my throat and try again. "Don't mind me. I couldn't sleep and thought I'd take a moment to engage in a quick respite."

His lips turn down into a look of disapproval. "What did I tell you about leaving my home unprotected? I can't guarantee your safety if you do."

"You can't guarantee it regardless, or your brother wouldn't have almost killed me." I shrug. "Besides, everyone is asleep. No one's the wiser."

"I am quite awake, *rima*."

He runs his gaze over me in a slow, leisurely fashion that has my blood warming despite the chill of the water.

My nipples pucker under his perusal, and I hug myself more tightly. Nervousness skitters along my extremities at his presence, irritating me. "Yes, I can see that," I snap.

His brows rise at my tone. I ignore it. I know my mission is to have sex

with him, but I can't think about that right now. Not with him intimidating me the way he does.

"You know I'm alive, so you can take your leave," I say. "There's no reason to stay."

"There are plenty of reasons for me to linger." His voice is deep, more so than before, and there's a roughness to it that has my pulse racing. "Do you want to know what those reasons are?" he asks.

I shake my head even though I desperately want to know the answer, to hear him speak to me in that sensual, gravelly voice of his. It has shivers coursing down my arms.

Or that's due to the freezing water.

"You're as helpless as a newborn foal," he says. "This is the first reason."

"I'm not *that* helpless," I mumble.

However true the statement may be, it stings to hear. I lift my chin with a sniff of disdain but bite my tongue. Engaging Zahtan in an argument isn't likely to encourage him to leave. And I won't get out of the water until he's gone.

I've never been naked in front of anyone. Not even Amara.

"Another reason you shouldn't be left alone," he continues, ignoring my retort, "is because you're too much of a temptation."

I blink at him. "A temptation? You can't be serious."

"I am. Very much so, *rima*."

"Well, you need to reevaluate the situation. I'm not..."

While keeping my arm firmly planted against my chest, I use one hand to gesticulate wildly since words fail me. I'm fairly certain I resemble a duck in how much I'm flapping about, which would be the *opposite* of enticing.

"I'm not a harlot," I finally manage.

Zahtan blows out a breath and slowly shakes his head. "You can't be as innocent as you act. Not with having been in a castle full of blood-thirsty vampires who indulge in their carnal desires without thought to the repercussions."

Is it more strategic for me to admit that I'm a virgin? Or will my lack of experience be off-putting to a male such as Zahtan, who's most likely slept with every available female in his camp? I don't know that for sure, but it wouldn't surprise me. There's something about his inner fortitude and confidence that draws me. After a lifetime of uncertainty, I can appreciate those qualities in him. I assume most females would.

“I’m not—It’s none of your business,” I say.

The dragon lord steps closer, enough for me to see the gold encircling his pupils. “It matters.”

“Only to whomever I wish to bed.”

His mouth thins. My gaze darts to it, invoking images of kissing him. I bow my head and stare at the water lapping at my navel, wishing for this conversation to end.

“And who is that male?” he asks. The question is like a cool breeze grazing my body and has me shivering again as though he touched my skin. “Give me his name, *rima*.”

“Why?”

“You needn’t concern yourself with matters of the horde.”

I huff and do my best to ignore how my leg muscles are tightening. “I’m freezing, and the water isn’t getting any warmer. Could you please go away?”

“I’m not leaving you alone.”

“I know, I know. I’m weak, and you’re my only hope of survival.” I roll my eyes. “You say I’m a temptation, but no one’s here except us, so who are you referring to exactly? The males asleep in their huts who’d love nothing more than to murder me? You’re delusional, Zahtan.”

“Delusional... or deranged.”

That has my head snapping up and my gaze shooting to his. The growing pain in my calves doesn’t stop me from asking, “What is that supposed to mean?”

“We can finish this discussion after you’re dressed.”

“That has been my goal for several minutes. Please turn around so I can retrieve my clothing.”

He narrows his gaze. “Don’t try to run. If you do, I’ll catch you, and things will become most unpleasant.”

With how frozen my legs are, I highly doubt I could run even if I tried.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say.

The dragon lord gives me one final look of warning and turns to face in the opposite direction. My shoulders droop in relief, but it’s short-lived. A sharp pain zips through my left foot and up my calf, causing me to double over.

I suck in a breath at the agony piercing my leg. That tiny breath has the dragon lord spinning to face me, a look of concern etched into his features. I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on bending my foot to stretch the muscles,

but it only causes the hurt to amplify.

And for me to lose my balance.

Just before I plunge into the water, I catch sight of Zahtan sprinting toward me. The cold liquid surrounds me, darkening my vision, and inciting my panic. I flail my arms to right myself, but my leg refuses to obey my commands, and I sink deeper. My cry for help has icy water filling my lungs, and I envision myself drowning. Dying.

Until a pair of hands wrap around my upper arms and my head breaks the water's surface. The dragon lord stares down at me with golden eyes as I blink away the droplets streaming down my face.

"Breathe, Helena."

On command, I inhale, my lungs desperate for air. Zahtan holds me steady while I cough and sputter. The pain from my leg continues to assault me, and I let out a tiny whimper.

From one second to the next, the male hauls me into his arms, pressing me firmly against his chest. The heat of his skin fights against the chill of my body. Exhausted from my brush with death and unable to ease the cramp in my calf, I let my head loll onto his shoulder while wrapping my arms around my breasts.

Zahtan strides from the water, and I swear it parts for him. He lowers us to the ground, settling me on his lap. "Where do you hurt?"

"My left leg."

He takes my calf between his large hands and presses his warm fingers into the muscles there, massaging the area. I grit my teeth as the pain intensifies. In response, the male makes a soothing noise.

"It will get better. Just be patient."

As if the dragon lord cast a spell over me, the spasms decrease in severity. We sit there, neither of us speaking while he eases the cramp. This continues on for a while, until the pain is gone and we have yet to move.

With the danger past, my nudity and the fact that I'm in his arms come barreling to the forefront of my mind. "Thank you," I say. "I'm fine now."

The dragon lord says nothing and continues to rub my leg. Everywhere he touches kindles tiny flames on my skin. I'm still freezing from the cold water, but if he doesn't stop, I'll be ablaze soon.

I lift my head, only to find him already staring down at me. My throat tightens, halting my words. His eyes are more golden now than any of the other times I've seen them this way. Is it because he's angry?

Or could it be for some other reason?

“Your skin is softer than I imagined,” he says quietly. “Is that true for every part of you?”

My lips part on a silent gasp when his fingers leave my calf to slowly trail along the outside of my thigh and along my hip. I lie frozen in his arms, my mind blank as I’m bombarded with the sensation of his hands on different parts of my body.

Zahtan holds my gaze while he traces the shape of my arm and then the length of my shoulder. When he drags his index finger along my throat and over my lips, I can hardly breathe.

“You’re like silk everywhere,” he says. He plucks the string of my necklace and lightly tugs on it. “What’s this?”

“Proof.”

“Of what?”

“My desire to help,” I say.

The male’s eyes widen at that. Then even more when the dragon scale is revealed. “This is from the artifact,” he whispers. His voice takes on a quality of reverence that stirs my blood. “For the first time since I met you, I can finally dare to hope.”

“Do you want it?”

Zahtan inhales deep and slowly releases the breath. He stares at me all the while. He places the scale on my chest and covers it with his palm, his fingers resting lightly on the mounds of my breasts. Then, he shakes his head. “I’m not ready to take it just yet.”

I blink to clear the fog in my mind. My arousal has been ignited by the feel of his hands and the sensuality of his words, putting me into a state I’ve never experienced. This acute lust has my core pulsing and heat creeping along my skin.

More than anything, I want to kiss him.

I lick my lips, and his gaze shoots to my mouth, his pupils contracting. I’ve given away my intentions, yet he doesn’t pull away when I lift my chin and sweep my lips across his. Instead, he goes taut, as though he’s the one who’s frozen.

He turns his head and slams his eyes shut, his chest heaving with breath. In his native tongue, he releases a string of sentences I can’t decipher.

“I’m sorry,” I say, dropping my head to lie on his chest, while avoiding his gaze. “I was curious.”

“I want to blame you, but I can’t. Not when I am more than curious.”

With a swiftness that makes my head spin, Zahtan gets into a standing position. He sets me on the ground, and when I don’t topple over, he retrieves my clothing and all but shoves the bundle into my free hand.

“Get dressed,” he says, his eyes darting back and forth along the water’s edge. “We’ve wasted enough time here.”

CHAPTER 14



*H*elena

Zahtan doesn't speak to me again after that.

Except to order me to stay put in his hut until his return. In that time, I replay the events from earlier in my mind and try to make sense of it all. There's no reasoning to be had, other than he rejected me.

However, that kiss is all I can think about.

Well, that and the way he touched me.

I sit there, running my fingers through my damp, knotted hair, and relive every single moment. My skin tingles at the imagery that conjures, and my breathing quickens.

How can I be so attracted to someone who doesn't feel the same intensity toward me? Zahtan did say he was curious, but that's hardly the same thing as fierce desire.

If he didn't respond to me while I was naked and kissing him, then this mission is doomed.

The tent flap is pulled back, and I jerk my head in that direction. Isa appears, and I smile at her, grateful for the distraction. Just like the last time I saw her, she reciprocates the warm welcome. After the dragon lord referred to me as a waste of his time, I'm eager to be with someone who wants me around.

"Good morning," I say.

The hordeswoman dips her head in acknowledgment and sets a tray of

food beside me. “Good morning. At Zahtan’s request, I am to stay with you until he returns.”

I pat the furs. “Sit with me. It’ll make the day that much more pleasant.”

“Oh, I couldn’t.” Isa’s dark gaze shifts from left to right before returning to me. “It’s impudent for me to lounge in Zahtan’s dwelling without his permission. It’d be considered too forward.”

“You can blame me if he gets upset. I’m a foreigner and have no insight on what’s acceptable in your culture.”

She glances at the entrance once more. “That is true... I have witnessed your disrespect on several occasions now, so it wouldn’t be out of character for you, *rīma*.”

“Helena,” I correct, gentling my tone. “Please use my name. I don’t need another reminder that I’m not welcome here.”

Isa bows her head, and when her eyes find mine, the brown within is lighter, warmer. “Helena.”

“Why don’t you sit down and explain my transgressions to me? I don’t think Zahtan would be opposed to that.” My lips pull to the side in a grimace. “He doesn’t have any reservations pointing out my shortcomings.”

“Very well.”

The hordeswoman lowers herself to sit next to me with such poise and grace. Head held high, she keeps her back straight and folds her hands in her lap as though holding court in a grand castle. It’s enviable.

“Please eat, while I explain our ways,” she says. “Hopefully, it will help your future interactions with the dragon lord.”

I plop a morsel of food into my mouth and mumble, “Not likely.”

“Let’s begin with your place.”

“My *place*?” I wheeze, nearly choking on my breakfast.

Isa nods. Her serious expression, accentuated by the furrowed brow and focused gaze, only adds to my astonishment. “Yes, Helena, your place. Like the rest of us, it is to follow wherever Zahtan leads.”

“Haven’t I done that?” I frown at her when she shakes her head. “I don’t understand.”

“When the pair of you walked to the training grounds you placed yourself beside the dragon lord. And you did it again when you left. By positioning yourself next to him, you’re declaring you’re his equal.”

I stifle the urge to groan. “So I’m supposed to walk behind him?”

“Yes.”

“Gods strike me down,” I mutter to myself. Isa squints at me, and I wave a hand in dismissal. “What else have I done?”

“When you first arrived at our village and stood upon the hill, you stepped in front of our Zahtan. By doing that, you implied your authority outweighed his.”

“He did mention that to me...”

I massage my forehead where it begins to throb profusely. It’s no wonder the dragon lord isn’t attracted to me. What male desires a female who insults him during every interaction?

“Dare I ask if there’s anything else? I know you’re trying to help me, but I find it difficult to trail behind Zahtan like a lost puppy. It’s... demeaning.”

“To you,” Isa says, her tone soft yet firm. “Don’t let our differences create a chasm between you and your reason for being here.”

Every muscle in my body locks up, but I force myself to grab a slice of bread. “I know what *I*’m here for, but what does the horde think my reasons are?”

Isa sighs. “Everyone has a different outlook. Some say you’re here to spy on us for the vampires. Others think you’re here to steal Zahtan’s magic. Our shaman, Yurik, believes Asili sent you to us.”

I grip the bread so hard that crumbs fall to the floor forgotten. Despite the turmoil gathering in my chest like the winds of a thunderstorm, I manage to keep my voice even. “Why do you think I’m here?”

The hordeswoman looks down at her lap before bringing her gaze to mine. “I think your reasons, whatever those may be, are without malice.”

Her confession eases my tension, even though guilt continues to weigh heavily on me. She’s right about all of it. I wish I could confide in her and purge the emotions that suffocate me, but it’s too risky.

“Thank you.” I take her hand in mine and squeeze it in a show of appreciation. “I escaped the vampires to start a new life for myself. However, if I don’t learn the necessary skills to survive, I won’t live long enough to enjoy my newfound freedom. That is why I’ve asked Zahtan to teach me.”

“I understand,” she says. “My soul cries out at what you must’ve endured at the Crimson Castle.”

Nerves skitter along my arms. I release her hand to rub my skin and dispel the unwanted sensation. “I prefer not to talk about that dark time in my life.”

Isa nods before getting to her feet. “We will speak of it no more.”

She walks over to one of several chests in the room and lifts the lid. I watch her, my mind still reeling with the things I've learned. She returns to my side clutching a familiar satchel.

"I believe this is yours."

I put the piece of bread back on the plate and take the bag, hugging the item to my chest. "This was secured to my horse. How did you find it?"

"My people revere horses. Some say it is why the wild stallions and mares come willingly to the hordes, just as your mount did."

"Hordes?"

Isa settles beside me once more. "Yes, the Golden Horde, the Jade Horde, and the Sapphire Horde. They make up the entirety of our race."

"I knew there was more than one, but I had no idea about the details."

"There is much you don't know," she says.

"Then teach me."

"Very well, but after you dress and I tend to your grooming." She wrinkles her nose daintily. "You smell of horse and vampire. That garment needs to be washed."

I look down at the dress I've been wearing since I left the Crimson Castle. It's not filthy, but it's not freshly laundered either. Plus, it's torn in several places because of my time spent flailing about in a rose bush.

"Did you wash your hair in the river?" she asks.

It's a simple question, yet it evokes visions of the dragon lord cradling me to his chest while I was naked. Words lodge in my throat, so I shrug. Isa chastises me by clicking her tongue, and it reminds me of Amara, making my eyes sting.

"Dress now, and I'll see to your hair," she says.

Needing a moment to collect myself, I get up, still holding the satchel. After rummaging through the bag, I ignore the rations and grab hold of the garment inside. It's another gown with a high neck and long sleeves, adorned with lace. It's frilly and out of place in the horde camp.

Shoving aside my self-consciousness, I turn away and undo the buttons along the back. Even if I were to dress like a hordeswoman, it wouldn't soften the horde's attitude towards me. On the contrary, they might be offended if I were to don their clothing.

Isa's loud gasp fills the room. I spin around so quickly that the material on my shoulders falls to gather along my arms. The female stares at me with her lips parted and eyes wide.

“What is it?” I ask, careful not to give in to the shriek tickling my lungs.

“On your lower back, you carry the mark of one who has been blood-bound to a vampire. It is a sign of evil.”

I hold out my hands in supplication. “Please, let me explain.” When Isa gives me a curt nod, my mind races with potential responses. I decide on the truth. For once. “Zahtan knows.”

She jerks back, her gaze widening further. “Impossible. He would never endanger us in this fashion. Not after what happened with his parents.”

“His parents?” I take a deep breath and refocus my thoughts. “I attacked my former vampire master. Currently, he’s in stasis, but I’ll leave this place before he awakens and comes looking for me. You have my word.”

An uncomfortable silence covers the room like a dense steam, and I find it hard to draw even breaths. Isa continues to eye me from where she sits, her gaze occasionally darting to the entrance as though she wishes to flee. I can’t blame her. I want to run away as well.

“Please,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “Believe me when I say it’s not my intent to hurt anyone.”

Isa exhales and nods once. “My uncle said Asili sent you, and as a worshiper of the gods, I have to trust what he says.”

“Yurik is your uncle?”

“Yes,” she says. “He is the reason I speak the common tongue. Only a few members of the horde do. The rest think it’s beneath them.”

“I see.” I swallow past the sudden dryness in my throat and all but force out the inquiry. I need to know, yet I’m nervous to hear the answer. “What does the mark look like?”

“It’s a swirling design, the lines and curves inked in a deep red. It’s no bigger than the size of a fist and no longer than a finger.” Isa shudders. “Nothing else manifests in such a way, other than blood magic.”

“Just wonderful.”

I turn around, all but feeling her gaze along my skin where the mark sits. While I undress and put on the fresh garment, all I can think about is how my back used to grow warm when Desmond fed from me. My suspicions about that being related to blood-binding were correct. Unfortunately.

“You know a lot about vampires,” I say over my shoulder. “How is that?”

“The depth of knowledge you have on your enemy determines the battle’s outcome.”

Her tone is colder than I’ve ever heard it, sharp and void of the warmth I

felt from her earlier. I shiver before I turn to face her. “Is there a way to get rid of it?”

“Yes, but it is the *only* way. You must kill your vampire master to break the blood-bond. Once you do that, the mark will disappear.”

The hateful gleam in her eyes is surely reflected in mine. I wasn’t lying when I told Zahtan that I despised the vampires. If there’s one way for me to gain the trust of these people, it’s to prove to them that we share a common enemy.

“Killing Desmond won’t be a problem,” I say, more to myself than her. “I failed once, but it won’t happen again.”

Isa smiles at me. There’s an edge to it that wasn’t there prior, but I ignore it. The topic of discussion is certainly unpleasant, to say the least.

“Grab the comb over there and come sit.” She gestures to an empty spot. “I’ll brush your hair properly and rid it of the knots.”

I do as she says, and her nimble fingers make work of my tangled mess. Again, I’m reminded of my sister. Gods, I pray she’s alive and that Desmond hasn’t fed from her overly much.

“Thank you for this,” I say, my tone somber now that my thoughts are on Amara. “My sister used to do this for me before she died.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Helena.”

The lie about Amara makes my stomach turn, but I can’t tell Isa the truth. Although I believe the hordeswoman to be my companion sent by Asili, I still don’t trust her enough to share my deepest secrets.

I sigh. “Even though it was a long time ago, I still hate the vampires with every part of my soul. It’s the other reason I came here.”

After pulling the dragon scale from where it sits between my breasts, I hold the string high enough for Isa to see. “I stole this from my former master, and I plan to give it to Zahtan as a gift for taking the time to teach me.”

“Gods above,” she whispers. “That’s part of the sacred relic.”

“How do you know?” I ask, tilting my head.

“It’s the only dragon scale with that color. The hordes are named in the way that represents their coloring. Our Zahtan shifts into a golden dragon and is of the Golden Horde. You see?”

“Mhmm...”

The minimal response is all I can manage. Only at this moment do I recall the golden dragon and what happened with him the other night.

Zahtan sniffed my crotch.

It's official. I'm going to die from mortification the next time I see him.

"If only we'd had the egg during our last encounter with the vampires," Isa says, interrupting my thoughts, "maybe we could've prevented more of our people from dying."

I turn to face her and take her hand in mine. It shakes as her emotions come to the forefront. "Now it's my turn to offer my condolences."

She sniffs and looks away but squeezes my fingers. "Thank you."

"What happened?"

"A human betrayed us to the vampires."

A chill zips through my body, and I bow my head while gritting my teeth. Jazin had mentioned something about a human betrayal, but I didn't trust him to tell me the truth while blinded by prejudice.

"That's awful. I'm so sorry."

Isa releases my hand and pats my shoulder. "It's in the past. Nothing good can come from dwelling on what cannot be changed. Now, turn around so I can finish what I started. The gold in your hair will look lovely."

Each of us retreats into our own thoughts, welcoming the silence. Enough has been shared for one morning. I don't think I can handle another revelation on how a human led to the deaths of so many people. My first instinct is to defend my kind, to argue it was the vampires' fault, but it wouldn't do any good. There's only one thing left to do.

Once I leave this place, I won't be getting justice for myself and my sister, but for the Golden Horde.

CHAPTER 15



*H*elena

Zahtan enters the hut, filling the space with his presence.

I crane my neck to look up at him and wait. He's sure to order me around in some fashion, but I won't let it get under my skin. Not when I'm finally beginning to understand the reasons behind his distrust of humans.

"Isa, leave us," he says with a wave of the hand.

The hordeswoman secures the end of my braid and bows her head. After that, she gets to her feet and glides past me and the dragon lord. "Good day to you, Zahtan."

He acknowledges her with a curt nod, and then she's gone.

Now that I'm alone with the male, nervousness skitters along my arms. I'm always aware of the hordesman because of his intense energy. He exudes power and strength in a way that makes a vampire look frail in comparison. That'd be comforting if I had Zahtan's allegiance.

"Come with me, *rima*. Your lessons begin anew."

I stand and face him while avoiding his gaze. He saw me completely naked a couple of hours ago, and I haven't forgotten the fact. Nor have I been able to forget the way it felt to kiss him.

I wanted more. For the first time since this mission began, I was less of a reluctant participant.

"What troubles you?" he asks, his voice gentler than before. "Is it your leg?"

“No, I’m fine. Can we go?”

“Look at me.”

As inconspicuously as possible, I inhale a fortifying breath. Then I straighten my spine and raise my head to meet his stare. Although I expected mockery, or perhaps annoyance, there are no signs of it. Instead, there’s a hint of concern that leaves me baffled.

And softens my heart.

“Tell me what ails you,” he says.

Zahtan runs his gaze over me, scrutinizing me in such a way that I feel naked all over again. I wrap my arms around my middle to fortify myself and his mouth turns down. He walks up to me, closing the distance between us in two long strides. The heat of his body invades my clothing and warms my skin.

“*Rima?*”

“I told you already,” I say. “I’m fine.”

“That is clearly a lie. You needn’t hide your pain behind a wall of pride. It’ll only prolong your suffering. Don’t make me ask again.”

The urge to fidget has me gripping my skirts to keep my fingers still. This male makes my pulse race with his nearness, and my legs tremble at the sound of his voice. Maintaining my composure while in his presence is a battle I have yet to win.

“You sniffed my crotch.” When the words fill the space between us and fully register in my mind, I cover my face with my hands. “Gods be merciful and smite me where I stand.”

I jerk back at the feel of his fingers encircling my wrists. As though I’m delicate, Zahtan gently eases my hands downward, revealing my burning cheeks. His gaze finds mine, allowing me to see the brightness within. His amusement makes his eyes glitter.

“Would you care to repeat that?” he asks, his tone light and teasing.

“No, I would not.”

“I must insist. I’m certain I did not hear you properly.”

Squinting up at him, I purse my lips. “You were the dragon in the forest that night.”

He nods.

“Then you know what transpired. Also, I’d like to point out that you could’ve revealed your identity in the beginning and made my life a lot easier.”

“I could’ve, but I didn’t trust you.” He sweeps his thumbs over my inner wrists in a gentle caress that scatters my thoughts. “I still don’t.”

“That’s fine by me. I don’t trust you either.”

“We are agreed then.”

The dragon lord continues to grip my wrists and run his fingers over the sensitive skin there. My breathing becomes uneven, my heart beating furiously. I stare up at him, unwilling to admit he’s affecting me while wanting his touch too much to pull away.

This moment takes me back to the early morning hours when he held me with tenderness and whispered things about my skin that set it on fire. The desire to kiss him rises within me, strong and fierce. His rejection of me is the only thing that keeps me from pressing my mouth to his.

I lick my lips, equal parts nervousness and anticipation. Zahtan’s gaze drops to my mouth. His pupils flare, and flecks of gold appear instantly. Is that a sign of desire? Or is the dragon lord amused by my attraction to him?

Unwilling to be subjected to further humiliation, I turn my head and break the stare. He drops my wrists and spins on his heel. His steps are with purpose, leaving me no choice but to follow as he exits the hut. Remembering Isa’s revelation on proper horde etiquette, I run to catch up until I’m walking right beside him.

Zahtan slides his gaze to peer at me with raised brows. In answer to his silent inquiry, I lift my chin. I am equal to any male when it comes to self-worth.

“What is the lesson for today?” I ask.

“You need to learn to ride a horse.”

“How do you know I don’t already possess that skill?”

The male’s lips twitch. “While in my dragon form, I saw you on your mount. If that’s what you consider skill, then I should abandon this teaching with all due haste.”

I make a face at him. “Laugh all you want, but it won’t matter to me. I think I did remarkably well for it being my first time on a horse, let alone traveling on one.”

“I am not a male of great faith like Yurik, but I believe in your ability to stay coherent today.”

“Ha. Ha.”

Zahtan leads us through the camp, and I remain by his side, using his large frame to block the stares of his people. He doesn’t stop until we arrive

on the other side, in a glade that's grassy and lush with trees surrounding the area. The sun shines on the emerald flooring and the leaves above, turning them bright green. The trees are typical of the area, the trunks supple and smooth, and the branches like those of a willow, drooping to the ground and twisting.

There are many horses gathered in the open space without a fence in sight. The herd consists of a natural palette featuring blacks, browns, and whites. My copper-coated steed is among them. It's easy to locate him since he's the only one with a saddle.

With that observation in mind, I turn to look at the dragon lord. "Do you expect me to learn to ride bareback?"

"Yes. A saddle is nothing more than a hindrance in the communication between a horse and its master."

"Just great," I mumble. "I could barely ride while on a saddle, let alone stay upright on the horse without one."

Zahtan smirks at me. "You'll learn, or you will fall. It's that simple."

I bite my tongue to keep from cursing. The dragon lord starts walking, and I trail him as he weaves through the throng of horses. Every one that we pass receives a gentle pat and a soft spoken word from him. It's in his native tongue, leaving me to guess what's being said. Whatever it is, his tone sends shivers through me.

I may or may not wish I was a horse at this moment.

"What are you saying to them," I ask, lowering my voice to match his.

"I'm thanking them for the use of their strength and speed. In return, I offer them my respect and care."

"Oh."

He stops a few feet from a black stallion that has a white mark on its forehead. The horse's coat is shiny in the morning sun, and its mane carries bits of gold foil at the ends. When the animal stomps at the ground, my body locks up with tension.

"That one doesn't seem too keen on you caring for it," I say.

Zahtan holds up a hand and slowly approaches the horse, whispering words I can barely hear. I stay back and watch the hordesman. Within a few moments, he calms the animal, and it nudges him with affection.

My mouth drops in astonishment. "How did you do that?"

"I already told you." He continues to stroke the length of the horse's neck. "If you treat something with the respect and loyalty it deserves, it shall

respond in kind.”

“Does that rule also apply to humans?”

The dragon lord pauses before speaking. It’s a quick hesitation, and if I wasn’t already staring at him, I would’ve missed it.

“Show me a human who’s worthy,” he says, “and I’ll show you a hordesman who can change his beliefs.”

“Fair enough.”

“This is Rihan. His name means ‘friend,’ in Durak, the language of my people.”

I scoff. “He seems far from friendly.”

“He is unruly to everyone except me. I’m the only one who’s earned the right to ride him. Rihan was with me during the battles against the vampires, and he is with me still.”

Zahtan whispers a final word to the horse and makes his way back to me. “You will learn with your steed, the one the vampires gave you.”

I nod and seek out the troublesome animal. He’s grazing amidst a group of mares, his tail swishing back and forth. I inwardly sigh.

“The last time I encountered this horse, it tried to kill me,” I mutter.

“I can’t say that I haven’t considered the same.”

I narrow my gaze at the dragon lord before turning to walk away. My steps are unsure, but the spark of irritation flickering inside me fuels my determination. My need to prove my worth has never been greater. The vampires didn’t value me except for the blood I provided them, and the dragon lord clearly sees me as worthless. If not for my knowledge of the relic, he’d most likely be rid of me.

The horse raises its head to look at me when I get close enough to touch him. We stare at one another in a silent battle of wills.

“I’m going to try to soothe you with kind words that I don’t necessarily feel,” I say, my voice soft. “It would benefit us both if you were to cooperate long enough for me to master the basics of riding. Did I mention you look lovely today?”

I reach out hesitantly to stroke its neck like I saw Zahtan do. When my fingertips make contact with the smooth coat, I grimace, waiting for the horse to react. It does nothing other than release a snort.

Sensing that the animal isn’t about to stomp me to death, I pet it a little more. “You really are quite handsome. And I’m not just saying that to win you over. Out of this group, you have the most interesting coloring.”

“You’ve eased his tension,” Zahtan says. “After I remove the saddle, you’ll need to mount him.”

The dragon lord makes quick work of the leather fastenings and the horse stands there, docile and without a whinny of protest. Once that is done, Zahtan folds his arms over his massive chest, bringing my attention to his honed muscles and beautifully bronzed skin. My gaze lingers for a second longer than it should, and I’m quick to meet his gaze instead. It’s narrowed with impatience.

I return his glare with one of my own. “I’m going.”

My first attempt to get on the horse is an epic failure. I’m not sure I got more than two inches off the ground. I refuse to look at the hordesman to confirm. If he laughs, I might scream.

The next two tries are an improvement but far from successful. I suppose that having a vampire threaten me is the motivation I lack. Well, that and a stirrup.

The dragon lord exhales before saying, “I swear by Asili, humans are the most helpless creatures to walk the earth.”

He strides over to me so fast that I don’t have time to process his nearness. Or his hands encircling my waist. As though I’m a feather, Zahtan lifts me and sets me atop the horse. I stare down at him while trying to process everything.

Especially the way my heart races at his touch.

“Thank you,” I say. My gaze briefly lands on his fingers, which are still wrapped around my middle and resting lightly on my hips. “I’ll be sure to do it on my own next time.”

Zahtan moves his thumb up and down in languid strokes that have my mouth going dry. He doesn’t stop even when I’m brave enough to meet his eyes. The gold is there, glittering back at me.

“Do you feel secure?” he asks.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to admit I’m anything but. With him caressing me while staring deep into my eyes, I can hardly breathe. My chest rises and falls erratically, and my hands are clammy. These are all signs of panic.

Or my attraction to the dragon lord.

“I’m fine,” I lie.

“Take the reins.”

I shake my head to rid it of the fogginess and reach for the leather straps.

Can he see my hands trembling? “Right. Got it.”

Zahtan’s gaze arrests mine once more. We share a look that I don’t understand, but something passes between us. He nods once and takes a step back. Without his hands on my body, my mind clears, and I’m able to focus.

“Wait for me to retrieve Rihan, and then we will go,” he says.

No effort is required on his part. The male swings himself atop the horse as if he was born riding one. When Isa said the horde had an affinity for horses, she wasn’t lying.

Zahtan clicks his tongue and urges his mount into a brisk clip. I lean over my horse’s back and whisper in his ear.

“Please be good. If you are, I’ll be sure to give you some sort of treat. All right?”

The horse takes off after Zahtan’s. Either my steed knows to obey the dragon lord, or it likes to eat. I’m fine with either one.

Over the next hour, the dragon lord goes over the basics of steering my mount using the reins, my words, and my thighs. I’m certain my cheeks grow red at some point during the lesson. Hearing Zahtan talk about my body isn’t something I’m accustomed to, but I hope I can dismiss its effects soon. I swear to the gods I’ve done nothing except blush since I met him.

“You’ll need to learn how to encourage your mount from a trot and into a canter, followed by a gallop,” he says. “Although you won’t be riding at that speed anytime in the foreseeable future.”

“You say that like it’s an insult, but I’m not in a hurry to break my neck.” I shrug. “I’m happy to get where I need to go at a steady pace.”

Zahtan’s gaze narrows, but I hold it. For once, he’s the first to look away. That small victory would have me smiling if my backside wasn’t so sore.

“Are we done for the day?” I ask.

“Yes, I have duties that require my attention.”

I fiddle with the reins, keeping my focus on my horse. “I want you to know that I appreciate you taking the time to teach me all of these necessary skills.”

“You forced my hand,” he says, his voice flat.

“I know, but...” I blow out a breath. “I didn’t want you to kill me. Surely you can understand that?”

He nods, and the movement causes the sunlight to reflect off of the gold bits in his hair. “I do.”

“Now that we’re past that point, we can be allies. Right?”

“I’m not so sure we are past that point, *rima*.”

I scrunch my face. “So rude. I’ll prove to you that I’m worth keeping alive.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?”

“I have no idea, but when the opportunity presents itself, you’ll be the first to know. And I’ll expect an apology.” I nod for good measure. “A *sincere* one.”

He grunts. “A Zahtan does not apologize for taking precautions to protect his people. You are a threat and will continue to be until the day you leave.”

“Fine,” I snap, my annoyance growing at his rejection of us being friends. My horse tosses its head at my aggressive tone and I hurry to soothe it. “There, there.”

“You speak to it as if it’s a child.” The dragon lord shakes his head, his voice full of exasperation when he says, “It’s a steed, made for more than just riding. He can carry a warrior in battle, so speak to it accordingly.”

“I don’t like the idea of war and death.”

“As long as the vampires live, those things are inevitable. You’d do well to remember that.”

“Like I could forget.” I roll my eyes. “What do you want me to say to my horse? That he’s a virile male, strong and stout? That when I’m on top of and riding him, I feel everything, every movement between my thighs, and I trust him to take care of me? Is that what you want to hear?”

Zahtan’s eyes blaze with gold.

He brings his steed to such an abrupt halt that it neighs in protest while tossing its head. I tug on my reins to stop my horse alongside his, watching the dragon lord’s facial expression grow dark. Whatever his thoughts are, they set off warning bells in my head.

“Do you think to mess with my head?” The male’s voice is low and gruff, so quiet that I can barely make out his words. “Do you enjoy playing games with me, *rima*?”

“I don’t understand what you’re upset about.”

He shoots me a look of surprise before suspicion covers his features. “Only a virgin would be so naive.”

My face burns, and I bow my head to avoid his stare. My cheeks are so hot that I’d swear a dragon set them aflame. There is nothing worse than discussing my innocence with this male. Yes, I realize he’d figure it out if we were to become intimate, but considering how little chance there is of that

happening right now, I'd rather not think on it.

"Are you truly untouched?" he whispers.

I keep my gaze focused on my hands. "It's none of your business."

"It matters."

After hearing that phrase too much in the past twenty-four hours, my embarrassment morphs back into irritation. "You keep saying that, but my innocence, or lack thereof, is only pertinent to the male who I allow between my thighs. And I'm not referring to my horse," I say.

"I can hear your blood pounding and your heart galloping inside your chest, *rima*. I have the answer I seek."

"Seek all you want, dragon lord. I care not."

"So you say."

"So I *know*."

I slowly lift my head, only to find Zahtan gazing at me openly. His potent energy and piercing stare prick my nerves. "What do you want?"

He watches me for a moment before responding, his tone resigned and less hostile than earlier. "As I stated before, some things are best left unsaid."

CHAPTER 16



*H*elena

It takes everything within me to keep from massaging my backside once we return to the village and I've dismounted my horse.

"What am I to do now?" I ask.

"You care for your horse by brushing his coat and thanking him." Zahtan walks over to a nearby hut and disappears inside. A few moments later he returns with a brush in hand. "Here."

I take the item and mimic his actions. He's back to whispering to his black steed as if the animal were his lover. That's something I refuse to do.

"Look," I say to my horse, "before we go further, I think you need a name. What do you think of Rusty?"

The stubborn creature blows out a long breath, its jowls and lips flapping. I may not have an affinity with horses, but I know a rejection when I see one.

"You don't need to get in a huff," I say. "You're lucky I don't name you 'thorn,' since you threw me in a rose bush when we met. Not to mention you're a pain in my backside." I look over to the dragon lord. "How do you say 'rose' in Durak?"

He frowns. "Is that to be his name?"

"Possibly," I say with a smirk playing about my lips.

"Whatever your choice, don't dishonor him."

I sigh. Apparently this male can't discern when I'm teasing him. "I won't."

“Come with me, *rima*.”

“Bye, Rusty,” I mouth to my horse.

We walk from where the herd grazes and return to the village. I position myself next to Zahtan, but this time he doesn't give me a look of reproach or surprise. I suppose the savage giant is getting used to my tenacity.

He might as well. I have no intention of behaving properly.

Not when that requires me to place myself beneath another in status. I respect the dragon lord's authority, and he most assuredly will best me in any competition. However, the value of a person isn't measured in such things.

“What are you thinking about?”

The male's deep voice intrudes my mental tirade and I swing my gaze to look at him. “Excuse me?”

“I might regret asking this, but what thoughts were in your mind just now?”

“Our equality,” I say without hesitation. “You command respect and wield authority, but you're not more valuable as a person just because of those things.”

His brows rise. “I'm not?”

“No.” I emphasize my answer with a shake of my head. “You are more skilled than I, and certainly bigger and stronger, but what I speak of has to do with a person's inner worth. Traits such as honor and loyalty.”

“What would a human know of such things?”

My lips thin. “I could ask what a savage knows of such things.”

“Point taken.”

“Regardless of your low opinion of me and my kind,” I say, eyeing him from my peripheral, “I strive to exhibit those qualities. Especially to those that I care for.”

Zahtan's gaze zips to mine. “If your vampire master isn't amongst that group, who does that leave?”

Damn it to the Crimson Castle and back.

Once again, I've let my mouth get away from me and exposed my relationship with my sister. I already lied to Isa about Amara being deceased, but I can't stomach doing that a second time. Although I may not be a stout believer in the gods, I won't invite their wrath by declaring someone amongst the living is dead. Who knows if that'll bring about her untimely demise?

“Wouldn't you like to know?” I retort.

“I would.” The dragon lord grunts. “Against my better judgment, of

course.”

“Of course. Why would anyone want to know the heart of a human?” After scanning the area, I’m met with the unabashed stares—and glares—of the horde members. “It’s best to forget I said anything.”

“I will... unless it becomes pertinent.”

“I’d expect nothing less. So, is it lunchtime yet?” I pat my stomach and grin. “I’m ready to eat again.”

Zahtan grunts, a sound that could be disguising a laugh. “When are you not famished, *rima*?”

“When are you not grumpy? The answer, my dear dragon lord, is never.”

“You’re nothing but skin and bones, yet I doubt you’ll ever fatten up.”

“Pregnancy would do it for certain.”

I immediately drop my gaze, focusing on the grass on either side of the worn path. The air feels saturated with unspoken thoughts and unwanted discussions. I don’t know what possessed me to mention pregnancy, but now that I have, I never want to again. However, if I’m successful in my mission to sleep with Zahtan, this is a subject I’ll have to face at some point.

But that’s tomorrow’s problem.

“So... lunch?” I prompt.

The male nods. “You’ll eat me out of house and home.”

I smile, the tension leaving my body at his jest. “I’ll certainly try.”



I think I pass out.

Those damn vampires may have permanently ruined my sleep schedule. Blood-sucking bastards.

After a solitary meal, served by Isa, I’m left alone. Without anything to keep me awake, I lie down on the soft furs... and come to when the sunlight peeking through the cracks in the ceiling shifts to the far side.

“Gods above, why am I in such a state of darkness?” comes a muffled voice. “Beings such as I aren’t meant to be buried in the ground. Where is that daft girl? She will rue the day I’m reunited with my true form, if she doesn’t retrieve me immediately.”

I scramble into a sitting position, shoving my braid over my shoulder while blinking furiously. “Sid? Is that you?”

“Of course it is, human. Don’t you recognize divinity when you’re graced with it?”

“Pardon me.”

I call myself all sorts of names as I crawl over to my soiled clothing and fish out the stone from the pocket. Sid’s rune markings are firmly in place, the force of his glower nearly singeing the ends of my hair. I do my best to convince myself that this is a dream, that the rock is nothing more than an apparition of my mind when I’m unconscious. A feisty one, for whatever reason.

“It’s about time, girl.” He huffs at me from the palm of my hand, his brows gathering and his tiny mouth thinning in displeasure. “I could’ve suffocated in there.”

I press my lips together. It’s unlikely that a supernatural being would be subjected to needs such as air, food, and rest, but who am I to argue? Sid is definitely not someone I want to provoke. My humiliation would be complete if Zahtan were to come upon me while I had a delusional conversation with a rock.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I didn’t realize you were back.”

“I come and go at my will. Not anyone else’s. No matter what Asili says.” Sid makes a face I can’t decipher, but I chalk it up to impertinence of a sort. It’s the most likely explanation, knowing him. “So, girl, where are we at?”

“Excuse me?”

“Did you bag and shag the dragon lord or what? And don’t leave out the naughty bits.” He waggles his brows. “I always did enjoy sex and everything leading up to it.”

My mouth falls open. It takes me a moment to recover, and when I do, my cheeks are hot to the touch. “I haven’t slept with Zahtan. Not yet.”

“Well, did you *stroke the bloke*, if you catch my drift?”

A strangled sound makes its way from my throat and into the air. “Did I what?”

“Did. You. Grab. His. Cock?”

The air in my lungs leaves in a whoosh. I clasp a hand to my breast, drawing in ragged breaths until I can think properly. For whatever reason, my subconscious is trying to kill me with embarrassment. And I need to set Sid... erm... myself straight.

“Look,” I say with a stern tone, “I appreciate that you’re here to guide me, but I can’t have you saying such crass things. It’s inappropriate and in

poor taste.”

The rock sighs with exasperation. “I’ll speak my mind, and you won’t do a bloody thing about it. We wouldn’t be having this conversation if you’d shown the dragon lord your tits,” he mutters. “Humans. Bah! I’d rather offer my counsel to a sly, devious fae than a girl who can’t say cock without blushing.”

I place Sid on the floor and glare at him.

He glares back.

“Now you look here,” the rock says, “we each have a mission, and it’s one and the same: to get you into Zahtan’s bed. I won’t miss my chance to be placed in my true form just because you’re innocent and embarrass easily. It’s time you grew up and faced the fact that seducing this male is going to make you uncomfortable at first. However, the dragon lord is attracted to you, so not all hope is lost.”

The truth is like a slap to the face, causing me to rear back. We stare at one another until I relent with a sigh. I’m beginning to think Sid is the part of my brain that will push me into taking unwanted action. Helpful, but extremely annoying.

“Fine.” I fold my arms, ignoring the self-consciousness that creeps along my skin. “I’ll do it. Tonight will be the night. Just tell me how to go about it.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.” Sid grins up at me, and I have the sudden urge to strike him.

“Since you’re not up for diving straight into things by showing him your tits,” he says, “I’ll offer a different, more gradual approach.”

I lean forward, eager for the advice, then mentally scoff at myself. Not only am I imagining Sid, but I’m more than willing to follow his lead. Absolutely ridiculous.

He. Is. A. Rock.

With that mantra playing over and over in my mind, I ask, “What do you suggest?”

“You’re going to use your innocence to entice him.”

I scrunch my face in confusion. “How?”

“Listen closely, girl. Any male enjoys looking at a female he wishes to bed. Trust me, I would know. In my true form, I fuc—”

“Focus!”

Sid grunts. “Right. As I was saying, the dragon lord has a will that was forged in the fires of his past. He won’t readily accept his attraction to you.

But if you're subtle, his desire will grow until he's forced to surrender to it."

"That's all well and good, but could you be a little more specific? I am clueless on how to 'make his desire grow.'"

"I was just getting to that. Damn and blast, girl, be patient."

He takes a deep breath as though I've irritated him past all reason, and I clench my teeth. And my fists. I'm uncertain that strangling him would be effective.

"The first thing you'll do is show him bits of skin," Sid says. "The curve of a shoulder. The slope of your thigh. Understand?" When I nod, he continues. "You'll want to touch yourself while you do this. Drag your fingers down the contours of your neck while moaning softly. That'll get him in the proper state of mind right quick."

"What else?"

"Make him feel useful by asking him to assist you with things. If you have the opportunity to be helpless in something that only his help can solve, that's the best way to go."

Thoughts of my knife-throwing attempts, my inability to mount my horse, and me fainting at the sight of blood come to the forefront of my mind. "I've mastered being helpless."

"Good. And lastly, you need to touch him as much as possible without being obvious about it."

I bite the inside of my cheek while thinking about the tactic of revealing skin and initiating contact. "I don't think the first part of your strategy will work. The dragon lord saw me naked last night, and he didn't act on his... desires." I drop my voice to a whisper. "Not even when I kissed him."

"By Asili's balls, that's a surprise." Sid's eyebrows rise so high on his tiny forehead that they might disappear. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"I appreciate your confidence in me," I mumble.

"I can work with this. Indeed, I can. Answer this: did Zahtan appear bored and relaxed when you were naked? Or was his body tense and his attitude surly?"

"Definitely the latter."

Sid lets out a whoop. I slap my hand over the rock's smooth surface, muffling his exclamation. He kisses my palm, and I jerk my hand back.

"Next time you silence me, I'll do more than kiss you," he says.

I glance at the entrance with my stomach churning. "I don't want anyone to hear you."

“They can’t.”

“They can’t?” I repeat, swinging my gaze back to Sid. “Why not?”

Because you’re a figment of my imagination?

“Because I’m only revealing myself to you, girl. I’m a demi-god. My magic, while not as strong as Asili’s, is still worth taking note of.”

I squint down at him. “So, you’re not something I made up?”

“By the rod of the god, you are daft on occasion. Listen, I was sent to aid you, and by my choice, I only reveal myself to you. Understand?”

“I think so.”

I’m not sure I believe him. Nor am I certain this is an improvement.

“Let’s return to what I was saying before.”

Sid takes a deep breath, and my gaze shoots to the door. If no one else can hear him, then I shouldn’t be worried, but it’s hard to be certain he’s telling the truth. Or if I’m just plain crazy.

“If the dragon lord was vexed when you were naked,” the rock says, “then he was fighting arousal. I’d be worried if the male acted disinterested or bored. That would mean you hadn’t stirred his blood enough for him to fight his passions.”

“But he didn’t kiss me back.” I briefly close my eyes as the feeling of rejection washes over me. “Why is that?”

“It’s because Zahtan has a strong will, but you’ll chip it away slowly.”

“He—”

I slam my lips together when the hide covering the entrance is pulled back to reveal the dragon lord. His gaze immediately lands on me, and I stiffen, invisible threads of self-consciousness wrapping around my body. He enters the dwelling fully and crosses his arms over his chest, peering down at me.

“Who were you talking to?”

CHAPTER 17



*H*elena

“I’m talking to myself,” I say. I hold out my arms. “You’ve left me alone here all day and expect me to entertain myself with nothing other than my wit. You shouldn’t be surprised I’ve succumbed to this. Well, that and a nap.”

Zahtan’s eyes become little more than slits. “You are safest here. I don’t know why I’m forced to repeat myself.”

“You don’t have to. I know you want that artifact enough to look after my well-being. With that in mind, is it dinner time?”

The male shakes his head, a smile slowly working its way onto his mouth. I gaze at it and recall how soft his lips were, despite his rough and hardened exterior. The dichotomy of him excites me.

“Isa will be along shortly to bring the evening meal,” Zahtan says. “But first, you will bathe.”

I blink up at him. “I will?”

Perhaps I’ve been more successful in the art of seduction than I thought. The idea is encouraging, if not a little intimidating. I don’t want the male forcing me to do anything beyond my comfort level. And getting naked in front of Zahtan on command is certain to make me *very* uncomfortable.

“Yes, you will,” he says. His tone leaves no room for argument. And when I suck in a breath to give my rebuttal, he interrupts me by saying, “You will have the privacy you require.”

“How? The area along the river is quite open. Not to mention the sun’s

rays have yet to diminish.”

The male nods, confounding me. “I’m aware,” he says. “It matters not. You’ll wash in here.”

“Here?”

“Do you plan on repeating everything I say?”

I shrug. “It’s possible. You tend to say things that require an affirmation of certainty.”

His expression morphs into one of exasperation. Then he even draws a breath while gazing at the ceiling. “I’ve never met a more anxious creature than you, human.”

“That’s fair. Now that that’s established, let’s discuss my hygiene.”

“You smell of horses. The scent aggravates my heightened senses. Also, you don’t have dragon fire in your veins. If you did, the river’s water wouldn’t have frozen you.”

I tilt my head. “Is that why your skin is always so warm?”

“Yes. Members of the horde have always carried heat in their blood, but shifters run hotter than that. Dragon fire is uncontested. It burns through ice and rock, its strength unparalleled.”

“That’s amazing, yet kind of unbelievable.”

“Believe it, *rima*.”

His gaze darts to the right, just before a male’s voice hits the air. The newcomer speaks to the dragon lord in Durak, and Zahtan answers. After that, a hordesman unknown to me enters. Followed by four more carrying a large object.

A metal bathtub large enough for me to recline in.

While suppressing my joy, I grab Sid and shove him in my dress pocket. Then I get to my feet and hurry over to stand beside Zahtan. He doesn’t spare me a glance, but his warriors do. Their expressions are a mixture of suspicion and anger.

Except one. His attention on me lingers.

I avoid his stare by averting my gaze, but I’ve already memorized his face, along with the patterns of his golden tattoos. His unwanted attention makes the muscles in my legs tighten with the urge to flee. Instead, I step closer to the dragon lord. So close the heat of his skin warms my arm, comforting me.

“Nazir,” Zahtan says, his voice like a whip, “*ser braze um dija ti vet*¹.”

The male nods once. “Ni broath majit, jak Zahtan. Dayan imanti zabrecki

nen vassil te².”

Then he leaves with the group. But not without Zahtan’s glare following him.

I turn to the dragon lord, ready to give my thanks, but he stops me by raising a hand. “Not yet, *rima*.”

I fold my arms and tap my foot, struggling to manage my ire. Me wanting to express my gratitude shouldn’t be suppressed. It makes me not want to thank the surly male at all.

The group of men from before return, only this time, four of them are carrying buckets of steaming water. The fifth person brings a screen with him. He sets it down, blocking my view of the tub.

But not completely.

There are small holes in the woven material. Just enough to get a tiny peek at what’s behind the screen. And a silhouette.

A plan forms in the forefront of my mind while the tub is being filled. Zahtan doesn’t speak again until the task is complete, but it’s more than enough time for me to solidify my strategy and come to terms with what it’ll require from me.

Once I’m alone with the dragon lord, I turn to him and smile. Remembering Sid’s advice has me lightly placing my fingertips on the male’s arm. My confidence rises when Zahtan doesn’t immediately pull away.

“Thank you so much,” I say, staring into his eyes. “It’s very kind of you.”

“Kindness has nothing to do with it. I can’t have you running off to the river only to get a cramp in your leg and drown before anyone knows you’re missing.”

I gather my courage and lean closer while shifting my hand from his arm to rest it on his chest. His heart pounds steadily against my palm, and his skin is hot to the touch. If Sid is right about me touching Zahtan, I have to get used to this intimate contact.

Which I like more than I should.

“You always answer me tersely,” I say, “but your actions tell me the truth.”

“And what is that exactly?”

“Despite your hatred toward my kind, you like me. If that wasn’t so, you wouldn’t have filled the bath with hot water or provided a screen to conceal my nudity.”

I wait for him to shove me away, or at the very least, deny what I’ve said.

However, the silence only grows, spreading throughout the room. My fingers twitch against the male's chest, and he drops his gaze to them.

That's when his eyes flash with gold.

And my mind makes the connection.

I gently take his face between my hands and his focus shifts to me, rooting me to the spot. "Your eyes sparkle with gold sometimes. I find it beautiful and intriguing. Why does that happen?"

"Because I'm a fool."

He takes hold of me, and his touch is like fire-kissed manacles encircling my wrists. My lips pull into a frown when he lowers my hands and releases them, breaking our connection. I don't fight it.

Subtlety is the goal.

"Bathe, *rima*."

I nod and reach for my braid. The male's eyes follow my every move. The more my hair is revealed and cascading about my shoulders, the more frozen Zahtan becomes. Except for the occasional twitch of a muscle along his jaw or the flexing of his arms as he fists his hands.

With my hair unbound, I stare at him. He returns my gaze, his eyes fully gold and blazing with heat. Even in my innocence, I can recognize his passion. Sid was right.

Not that I'll ever admit it.

As though Zahtan is a dragon ready to fly away, I move slowly to undo the hooks along the back of my dress. He doesn't say anything to stop me. Although surprising, I take advantage of the situation. If he's challenging me in some way, possibly thinking that I won't fully undress in front of him, then I have to make sure to call his bluff. I'm not sure how sensual I'll be with a beet-red face, but if showing skin gets me closer to what I want, then I won't back down.

The second the material slips from my shoulder to gather around my arms, my breathing quickens. I don't think the male is breathing at all. Zahtan watches me like the predator he is, perfectly still with his muscles tight, ready to burst into action. As his prey, I'm ready to run.

Whether that's to him or away from him, I can't tell.

My nerves are all but strangling me. I can't stop my fingers from shaking, and my chest rises and falls so rapidly that I worry I'll faint. It takes every ounce of fortitude I have to continue. However, thoughts of my sister are not what propel me forward.

It's the idea that this beautiful savage desires me.

I drop my gaze when the swells of my breasts are revealed. I'm too much of a coward to see the dragon lord's reaction. Not when he stares as though he might devour me. Sid didn't warn me about the intensity of sexual attraction. It's like a perfume, saturating the room with something pleasing to the senses. In my case, all of them.

My skin aches to be touched.

My lips beg to be kissed.

My body yearns to be worshiped.

I slowly lower the neckline.

“Helena.”

He says my name like a plea, his voice strained as though he's being tortured. There's only been one other time he's said my name in this way, and it was when I asked him about his carnal desires. Is he fighting the beast within, the one that only thinks of how to fulfill its wants and needs?

I snap my head up to look at him and find gold scales along the side of his neck. My lips part on a gasp. That tiny sound is enough to break the spell Zahtan is under.

The male places a hand over mine atop of my breasts, halting my movements. "Enough."

His rejection stings worse than a slap to the face. I wince and hang my head in defeat. "You lied to me."

"That isn't true." Zahtan shifts, wrapping his long fingers around my shoulders. They grip me securely. "Explain yourself."

"You said I was beautiful, yet you treat me as though I'm anything but. It confuses me."

He inhales and releases his breath slowly. The warm air sweeps over my forehead and cheeks as his hold on me tightens, his fingers nearly digging into my skin. "You may be the most beautiful creature I've ever beheld."

I sneak a glance at him. His eyes hold such conviction that I can't deny what he's telling me. "Then why don't you..." I let the sentence dangle, not knowing the way to express his continued rejection of me or ask about the reason for his resistance.

“If I begin, I won't ever stop,” he says.

CHAPTER 18



*H*elena

"That's what I want."

The truth flows from me like a leaf on a river's surface, swiftly and out of control. I've admitted to myself that I want this male for reasons other than completing my mission, but saying that to him makes my knees weak. His confession makes my heart race.

"We—"

He drops his hands from me as though I'm hot coals and takes a step back. The abrupt change in his demeanor has my defenses rising, my instincts following his. I shove my dress onto my shoulders just as a voice calls out.

Zahtan's gaze darts to me before he speaks in Durak. A moment later, Isa arrives with the evening meal. I force a smile on my face to keep up appearances, despite the turmoil churning in my stomach. I'm not sure I can eat a bite.

"That will be all, Isa," the dragon lord says, his tone sharper than usual.

She bows her head, but when she raises it her eyes flicker from him to me. Twice. Her assessment, whatever that may be, gleams in the depths of her brown eyes when she places the food in the designated area in front of his throne.

"Am I to return with the wine, Zahtan?"

He nods at her, his expression still stony and unreadable. I keep my smile firmly in place. I'm not sure how well I'm concealing my emotions, but I have

to try.

Isa returns with a pitcher and two goblets. The air in the dwelling only becomes more stifling in her absence. I stare at the wine with the intention of downing it entirely.

"Good evening to you both," she says.

I'm pretty certain that I cringe when the hordeswoman glances at the screen concealing the tub full of steaming water. But then she's gone, and I sigh in relief, my shoulders slumping and my cheek muscles smarting.

Unable to meet the dragon lord's gaze, let alone continue our conversation from before, I make my way to the bathtub. I'm not quite running, but it's close. The screen offers an illusion of privacy, and I relish it. Need it. This amount of space between me and Zahtan is enough for me to gather my composure. Quietly. The male can hear everything I do, and it's best I keep that in mind.

It sparks a thought... an idea takes shape, and I grin. It may not be exactly what Sid suggested, but it'll be easier for me to execute. I think.

The throne elicits a creak when the male sits. He's now across from where I stand, putting me directly in his line of sight. I take a deep, fortifying breath and undress completely.

With my silhouette fully on display, I lift my arms above my head in a stretch, arching my back. Zahtan says nothing, but I swear I hear him shift in his chair. The thump of the goblet hitting the arm of his throne follows.

I'm not the only one who believes wine to be a good idea.

Letting my arms fall to my sides, I make my way to the tub, mindful to not to give him my back. He knows I'm blood-bound to Desmond, but him seeing the mark would certainly ruin my attempt at seduction. I dip my hand into the water and a low moan escapes me.

Another mild banging of the goblet against the arm of the throne reaches me.

I run my hands along my chest, over my breasts, and down my belly to the tops of my thighs. My skin is soft like Zahtan said. Maybe he'll be more inclined to touch me after I've bathed.

"*Kinan yamina nun zer tresta mali tempir¹*," he says through clenched teeth.

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand you."

He mutters something that I guess to be curses and then switches to the common tongue. "Get in the tub, or I'll throw the damn thing outside."

I bite my lip to keep from grinning. Zahtan wouldn't be so cross with me if I wasn't affecting him. This gives me hope.

With as much grace as I can muster, I place one foot in the water, followed by the other. I swear that he sucks in a breath as I lower myself into the tub. The water is the perfect temperature, and I don't have to fake a groan. This is paradise.

For the next several minutes, I take my time washing my hair and body. I've never cared about my appearance before, and I'm not about to start. However, I can hear Amara's voice in my head telling me to try. With that in mind, I utilize the soap and scrub every inch of me until I'm sure to smell more fragrant than a flower.

If the dragon lord sniffs my crotch this time, it'll be like inhaling a bouquet.

I nearly burst out laughing at the thought. A giggle escapes me, and I slap a hand to my mouth. This is nothing more than my nervousness getting the best of me. But I can't help it.

"Are you done yet?" His voice is no less strained, but it is sharper than before.

"I'm coming."

"*Asili, serca ti malisma ver ut mina zahiri².*"

"What did you say?" I ask.

"Hurry. Up."

"Fine."

I rinse twice to ensure I haven't left behind any residue of the soap and rise to my feet. Water cascades downward as the droplets return to the tub. I ring out my hair. It's fuller than I remember. Or maybe it was always that way, and I just never paid attention.

After tossing my hair over my shoulder, I steal a glance at Zahtan and find his gaze focused on me. Even from across the room, his eyes gleam like twin moons, shining brightly.

They capture me where I stand.

It takes me a moment to breathe during the trance I've found myself in. I scan the area for a towel and wrap it around my body before stepping from the tub. "Where are my clothes?"

The male doesn't answer me. Instead, he stomps over to the entrance and calls for someone before returning to his throne. I wait behind the screen, not wanting anyone to see me in only a towel.

Although it covers most of my body, feelings of self-consciousness stir within me. I'm smaller in stature and less curvy than the females here. Does Zahtan find me less appealing because of that? It's hard to say.

I get closer to the screen and use the ends of the towel to dry my hair. It's difficult for me to stand there and do nothing while waiting for someone to arrive. When they do, it's Isa, and she has a garment draped over her arm.

"Will this do, Zahtan?" she asks.

"Yes."

Isa walks over to where I stand and peeks behind the screen. "For you." She lifts the bundle as though it's an offering, and I take it from her with a smile. "Shall I tend to your hair?"

Before I can answer, the dragon lord says no. Quite loudly. I offer her a look of apology. After all, it's my fault he's surly.

The hordeswoman frowns in his direction and turns to walk away. She leaves my area to stand before her leader, reverence instilled in every part of her body language. "Do you wish for more wine?"

"No. You may leave."

I watch the exchange from behind the screen and take note of Isa's hesitation. She is a better woman than I. There's no way I could serve Zahtan with a demur attitude. If he spoke to me like that, I'd be tempted to dump the pitcher on his head.

Although he's curt with me most of the time, I've seen another side of him, one that is deep. Hidden. The night the dragon lord saved me from drowning, he showed me how gentle and kind he could be.

"Hurry and get dressed so you can eat and go to bed," he says to me. "This day has been long and arduous, and I wish to see it end."

I'm fully clothed in moments.

The dress is a beautiful, ethereal creation, made from the finest, lightest material. The fabric is a blend of pastels, similar to the color palette of a sunrise. The design is simple yet elegant. With a flowing skirt that cascades down to the floor in graceful folds and slits along the thighs, it allows for movement. The bodice is fitted, with delicate straps that hold the garment in place, and intricate beading along the neckline adds a touch of sparkle and glamor.

I'd love it if I had some undergarments to go underneath it. However, I'm too shy to ask Zahtan for some. I'll have to make a request with Isa the next time I see her.

The warmth from the bath has soaked into my muscles, down into my bones, making me more relaxed than I've been since arriving here. I grab the ivory comb Isa left for me and walk over to my spot on the floor. Once seated, I attempt to remove the knots in my hair. In doing so, I let my gaze wander until it lands on Zahtan. He sits on his throne, his dinner untouched, but he clenches a goblet like it's a weapon.

"Thank you for the bath," I say. "It's so much better than that freezing river."

"You needn't thank me. I already told you, *rima*, I can't have you sneaking off only to drown because your human blood didn't keep you warm enough to avoid a leg cramp."

I shrug. "That's true, but I'm grateful nonetheless."

"You smell like a blossom. The fragrance is cloying, aggravating to my heightened senses."

"It'll wane in time. Stop your grouching."

He jerks back, his gaze widening. "For a weak human, you dare to speak to me without the respect I'm due."

"For an arrogant hordesman, you speak to me without the respect *I'm* due. Power doesn't obtain respect. Mutual respect does." I lift my head and meet his glare with my own. "Now if you'd be so kind and pass the wine."

I gesture to the pitcher by his feet. There's no way on this earth I'll crawl over to get it. Either the dragon lord will hand it to me, or I'll go without.

"It's empty," he says. "I drank it all."

"That's uncharacteristic of you. At least my goblet is full."

"It's not. I also drank yours."

My lips pull to the side. "As I said, very uncharacteristic of you."

"When limits of my willpower are being tested, wine becomes a godsend."

"I see."

He leans forward. "Do you, *rima*? Do you see the extent of my suffering?"

I bite my lip in consternation, unsure of how to respond. His gaze darts to my mouth, and his pupils contract. He breaks the stare by massaging his forehead.

Without him looking at me, I can breathe and study him unabashedly. The hand that holds the goblet is covered in scales, and his fingers now bear long, black claws. The scales on his neck have spread further, covering the

underpart of his jaw. Tendrils of smoke rise after leaving his nostrils and his lips.

That are tinged with blue.

"Do you feel all right?" I ask.

He drops his hand to look at me. "What are you about?"

"I don't mean to offend, but you seem unwell."

"Unwell?" A contemptuous laugh fills the air, along with more smoke. "If lust is a disease, then I am beyond unwell. It won't be long before I meet Asili in the great beyond. And when I do, I'll punch the bastard."

I get to my feet and discard the comb when the blue tinge around his lips deepens in color. He frowns at me, and I ignore him. His facial expression shifts from surprise to wary, but it doesn't stop me from approaching him. The closer I get, the more fear grips my heart.

Zahtan snatches my wrist when I reach for him to verify my suspicions. "What are you doing?" he asks with a narrowed gaze. The gold of his eyes still shine through the slits, but they're now rimmed with blue.

"Let go of me," I say. "I need to confirm something."

He runs his thumb over my skin before relinquishing his hold on me. "This better not be done in jest."

"It's not. Zahtan, I'm afraid for you."

"Why?"

I hesitate to touch him, my finger trembling while suspended in the air. No amount of deep breathing will calm me. Not when the dragon lord is in danger.

The moment my fingertips brush his skin and find it cool to the touch where the blue rims his eyes and mouth, I grow cold inside.

"What is it?" His inquiry has lost all hostility, but there's a thread of disquiet underneath his demanding tone. "Tell me the truth."

I look him straight in the face, meeting his probing stare.

"You're dying."

CHAPTER 19



*H*elena

"What?!"

The monosyllable is a roar that has me rearing back until I fall. Zahtan's hand shoots out to grab my wrist, keeping me from plummeting to the floor. Then he yanks me to him.

I careen forward and straight into his lap. Sprawled on his thighs in the most undignified manner, I fight off a hellacious blush. The dragon lord places a black claw underneath my chin and lifts my head until our gazes lock.

"Why do you think I'm dying, *rima*?"

"Your eyes and mouth are rimmed in blue, and your skin is cold wherever the discoloration rests. I've seen this poison before."

"Poison?"

I nod and then close my eyes in case he roars again. This time, it'd be in my face. When he repeats himself with an even tone, I open my eyes. The unease in his softens my heart.

"Yes, Zahtan. You've been poisoned." I cup his cheek and smile. "But don't worry. I know the antidote."

In addition to the claw under my chin, he rests another on top, gripping me so tightly that I can't pull away. The male brings me closer to him, close enough that I can see the golden flecks in his eyes. They're sparking with his simmering anger and disconcertment.

"Did you poison me, *rima*?"

My face falls at the accusation. And my heart cracks a little. I never expected Zahtan to trust me as much as someone close to him, but I had hoped my character would be enough to gain his respect.

"No," I say, wrenching my face out of his hold. His claws scrape my skin, but I ignore the sting. That isn't nearly as painful as him thinking I'm evil enough to murder someone unjustly. "You'd better call your healer. Or your next words will be to the gods when you leave this earth to meet them."

"You dare threaten me?"

I shake my head. "I'm trying to save you by prompting you into action. But since you won't call for help, I will."

He studies me, suspicion evident in his gaze. My fear for Zahtan combines with my disappointment to become a driving force of energy. Curing him is the only thing that matters right now.

I'm about to push away from him, but he stays me with a grip on my arm. Then the dragon lord brings a claw to my face and gently traces the scratch on my chin. "Hurting you was never my intention," he says softly.

It's unclear to me whether he's talking about his lack of faith in me or the simple cut on my skin. Either way, I accept his indirect apology. It's unexpected and unlikely to happen again.

"Thank you," I whisper. "Please, let me go so I can save you."

"There's no need. I am fit."

I blow out a breath filled with frustration, and then take his face between my hands. The deep bronze of his skin has already begun to pale, signaling the poison's progression. Zahtan must've ingested a lot more than I originally thought if it's moving so quickly. His time grows short.

"Listen to me, you beautiful, arrogant, infuriating male," I say, my voice a near shout. "If I don't leave right now to get the antidote, you will die. And as much as that shouldn't bother me, it does. For some ungodly reason, I like you. Do you hear me?"

"I think the dead from centuries past heard you, *sajir aya*¹." His mouth lifts into a half-smile. "I shall call for Yurik, and you'll see that you fret over nothing."

I press my lips together to keep from screaming. Instead of disgracing myself, I place my hands on the male's chest and push to get into a standing position. At least I try to. Zahtan wraps an arm around my back, anchoring me in place. I swing my gaze back to him, and that cocky smile of his

widens.

"I find that I quite enjoy having your body pressed to mine," he says. "I'm not sure I want you to go." He pauses, his brow furrowing. "Maybe I have been poisoned. I'm certainly saying things I shouldn't, things you were never meant to know."

My heart thumps so loudly it's all I can hear. Finally, the dragon lord is showing an interest in me and there's not a damn thing I can do about it because he's dying. The irony chaps my ass.

"Yurik!" I yell at the top of my lungs.

My shout is obnoxiously loud in the small space between us. Zahtan winces before covering my mouth.

"If the poison doesn't kill me, your call for aid certainly will."

I glare at him until he removes his hand. "Serves you right for not listening to me."

After shoving his arm away, I jump up from the male's lap. Then I back up several feet and turn to look at him, half-expecting the male to grab me again. However, Zahtan remains seated, now slumped on his throne.

He grips the armrests and gets to his feet with a look of determination. And hubris. I cross my arms and make a face at him.

The dragon lord can deny it all he wants, but I know he's feeling the effects of the poison. It's more than the blue tinges highlighted against his paling skin. It's the tiny beads of sweat dotting his forehead and the lack of strength in his body. Normally, I wouldn't be able to get away from him so easily.

I jerk my chin toward the entrance. "Yurik, or whomever your healer is, awaits."

"The shaman is a healer as well as someone who communes with the gods."

Zahtan takes a step, followed by another, but none of them are steady. He leans precariously to one side, and I'm running before he can object. I slip underneath his arm, resting it along my shoulders, doing my best to support his weight. I highly doubt I'm making much of an impact, given our difference in size.

"Shall I scream for him again?" I ask.

He scoffs, but it's without any heat. "I'll silence you before you have a chance to deafen me."

I refrain from rolling my eyes and tug on his arm, prompting him to walk.

The male takes a step and leans heavily on me. It's to the point I doubt I can hold on for very long. That's to say nothing of his waning stamina.

"Just a little more," I say, in an attempt to soothe myself as much as him. "We're almost there."

The male says nothing. His breathing has grown labored, and each of his inhalations are followed by a shuddering exhale. His steps are that of a child, small and insignificant. That is, until he falls to his hands and knees.

A cry of alarm leaves me as I drop beside him in a crouch. With my assistance, we ease Zahtan onto his back, where he stares dazedly at the ceiling. I brush a stray lock of hair from his forehead and blink back tears.

"Hold on." My words are broken, an unfulfilled sob. "Please fight to stay alive."

The male's gaze darts to mine, and a streak of gold passes through the darkness of his eyes before he closes them.

Panic like I've never known takes root in me, filling my body with frenetic energy. The need to do whatever it takes to save him wraps itself around me like a coat of armor, and I welcome it, let it overtake me. I won't let him die.

I press a kiss to Zahtan's cheek. Then I bring my lips to his ear, dropping my voice to just above a whisper. "You'd better not fucking die."

I'm on my feet a second later. The flap to the dwelling is shoved aside, and a warrior enters a moment after. Although he's a stranger to me, I don't let that stop me from walking straight to him.

"Your Zahtan is ill," I say, pointing to the dragon lord while fighting back tears. One escapes regardless. I wipe it away angrily, hating the show of weakness. "He's been poisoned. Send for Yurik."

The warrior's gaze darts from me to where Zahtan lies motionless on the floor. He nods once and disappears outside. I run in order to follow him.

The coolness from the night air sweeps over my arms, cooling them. I don't have time to retrieve my cloak nor dry my damp hair to avoid a chill. Nothing is more important than getting that antidote.

I race after the warrior just as a shout sounds behind me. Another one follows. I have no doubt someone's discovered the dragon lord in his precarious state.

"Wait!" I call out to the male I'm chasing. "Slow down."

He doesn't spare me a glance, which has me cursing. If there's a possibility that Yurik knows how to cure Zahtan, then I need to know before I

go traipsing through the forest. My hope is he does because that'll be faster.

When I round a dwelling and the warrior comes into view, standing beside the shaman, I almost burst into tears. Instead, I sprint to him. His horrified expression alerts me to the fact that the other male has told Yurik about Zahtan's condition.

"What has happened, *rima*?" the shaman asks me, his tone harder, more rigid than I've ever heard.

"He's been poisoned with emek." My words are thin, nothing but puffs of air. "Do you have the antidote?"

The older male's grim expression sours further. "I'm not familiar with the term you're using. That doesn't mean I don't know it by another name. I must go to Zahtan in order to confirm."

The shaman takes off so quickly that I have to jog to keep up with him. Not wanting to cause any problems, I remain behind Yurik instead of by his side. Now is not the time to defend my equality.

We reach the dragon lord's hut and stream inside. I steel myself, mentally preparing to look at Zahtan again. It pains me to see him debilitated and near death.

"Asili be merciful."

That's all Yurik says until he's finished conducting his examination. He turns to look at me, his dark eyes bright with worry. "He is fading quickly, and I don't know the nature of this illness. I've never encountered these symptoms."

I think my heart cracks in my chest.

"I have, and I know of an antidote." I slide my gaze to Zahtan and briefly close my eyes. "I hope there's enough time."

When I meet Yurik's gaze, it flares with hope, while mine is sure to be filled with determination. I spin on my heel and march toward the entrance.

"Wait, *rima*." When I turn around, the shaman gestures to the warrior beside him. "Terim will go as well, so he can protect you. Danger lurks at all hours."

I study the warrior, taking in the golden tattoos and the sturdy frame of tanned muscles which they decorate. His long dark hair is knotted at the base of his neck, and his face sports a full beard. Nothing about him is unusual except his eyes. They don't burn with hatred for me.

"How am I supposed to communicate with him?" I ask Yurik.

"I speak the common tongue." Terim lifts a shoulder in a half-shrug.

"However, I prefer not to pollute my mouth."

Just as I'm about to offer a retort, Yurik places a hand on my shoulder.

"My nephew, Isa's brother, is honorable," he says. "Be swift."

I nod in agreement and turn to the warrior. "Let's go."

His lips twitch. "Wouldn't it be wise for you to put shoes on?"

Of course, it would.



"Blue flower, red thorns. Blue flower, red thorns."

I mutter the phrase over and over again as if it'll manifest the valix. The light from Terim's torch illuminates the path ahead, and it doesn't have what I'm looking for. Every minute that passes without success weighs heavily on me.

I urge my horse from a canter and into a gallop, flicking the reins and squeezing my thighs like I was taught. Then I hang on for dear life, leaning over the creature's back to avoid falling. Rusty has proven useful, albeit stubborn, and more than willing to follow another rider. Terim's mare leads the way, bringing our party that much closer to Zahtan's salvation. I hope. It's a small glade filled with wildflowers, the place where the dragon lord brought me during my riding lesson.

When we arrive at our destination, Terim slows his mount to a trot, and I do the same, frantically scanning the area. Something blue catches my eye, and I shriek. The shrill sound has my horse tossing its head in protest, but I don't care.

"Keep quiet." The warrior assesses the area around us before dismounting. "Wolves roam these woods."

"Sorry." I grimace. "Look over there. I think that's the flower, but I need to inspect it to be sure."

Without thought, I swing my leg over the horse's back and drop down. I fumble the landing, and Terim's right there, his reflexes quick enough to catch me. I grin up at him sheepishly and step away. My hair flares about my shoulders as I spin and race over to the area with numerous flowers.

"Damn it all," I grumble. "There's nothing here but shit."

Ignoring the hordesman's raised brow and wide eyes, I stomp over to another cluster of foliage.

"Where in the holy fuck is it?" I push aside a fern and squint at the flowers underneath. "Show yourself, you little bastard."

"If I didn't know any better, I might think you're talking to me," Terim says.

I stand up straight and shove my hair out of my eyes. "If I don't find what I'm looking for, I might be. It's a blue flower with red thorns. I've heard it referred to as 'valix,' but it's different for you."

"Stay close to me while I help you search." He tilts his head, gesturing to the swords strapped to his back. "Just in case a predator thinks to try its luck."

"Thank you," I say with a smile. "If we work together, we're sure to find it."

We continue looking for the blossom until the moon has traveled higher in the sky, and I think I might lose my mind. Frustration is not a strong enough word to describe the anger and despondency flowing through every part of me. I press my fists to my eyes to quell the tears that threaten to spill. I'm unsuccessful.

With damp cheeks and my vision blurry, I keep trudging deeper into the forest. "I know I saw a cluster of valix. It has to be here somewhere. I won't go back empty-handed. I won't fail Zahtan. I can't..."

Sobs threaten to choke me, so I return to profane language. This time, Terim isn't surprised. Except when I mumble that this pursuit is 'as pointless as a cunt without an opening.' That crude remark earns me a chuckle.

"What about this?" he asks.

I take off in his direction, not more than three feet from me. After skidding to a halt, I bend down to examine what he's pointing at. There are several valix bunched together. It's more than enough to save the dragon lord.

"You found it!" I whisper-shout at the warrior. "I'm so happy I could kiss you." Pausing, I hold up my hands and shake my head. "I won't, but I'm very grateful."

Before he can respond, I turn my attention to the flowers. I crouch, retrieve my knife from my boot, and take hold of the stem. The thorns pierce my flesh while I cut off the head of the bloom, careful not to crush the liquid-filled petals. I repeat the process again and again until I have twice as much as I think will be necessary.

With the antidote in my palms, I rise and look to Terim. "We're going to save him." Tears stream down my face, and I make no effort to wipe them

away.

"You're bleeding," the warrior says, eyeing my fingertips.

I shrug. "A small price to pay for a life. Please hold them while I retrieve my satchel. They'll be safe in there."

Terim and I walk back to where we left the horses to graze, and I do my best not to feel embarrassed by my behavior. I wouldn't have been so overcome with emotion if I didn't care about Zahtan. Perhaps I like him more than I thought.

"Be sure they aren't crushed," I say. "The nectar that's within the petals is the antidote."

Six tiny drops to save a male larger than life.

The warrior nods and gently wraps the valix petals before placing them in my satchel and securing it to his mount. I walk over to my horse, a little lighter in spirit. As long as the dragon lord still lives, then he has a fighting chance to survive.

And whoever poisoned him will face his wrath.

I shudder at the thought of Zahtan's anger.

Terim appears at my side, his brows gathered. I look up at him—because every warrior is as tall as an oak tree—and wait expectantly.

"Let me assist you," he says. "We'll save time if I lift you onto your horse."

Despite the cool night air, my cheeks heat. I'd rather not remember my pathetic attempts from earlier, but we are both aware of them. And the profanity that ensued.

"Yes, please," I say.

He grabs me by the waist and hoists me onto the steed's back with little effort. And then he's on his horse, sitting astride it like he was born with the knowledge of how to ride. There's no disputing the members of the Golden Horde have an affinity with horses, gifted to them by the gods.

Then, we ride.

Zahtan better not be dead when I get back, or I'm going to be so pissed.

CHAPTER 20



*H*elena

The trip to the village is nothing but a blur of trees and bushes. My only focus the entire journey back is to maintain my seat atop Rusty. Fortunately, he doesn't throw me to the ground. After tonight, I might be willing to forgive him for tossing me that one time.

Once Terim and I arrive, we're running to Zahtan's hut. Fear grabs me by the throat when the dwelling comes into view. I don't know what I'll do if it's too late.

The warrior gets to the entrance first and pulls back the hide so I can enter, satchel in hand. As soon as I place both feet inside, I search for the dragon lord. He's been moved to his bed, where Yurik stands, chanting in Durak.

Is it a petition for Asili to save Zahtan's life?

Or a song of mourning?

There are other people present, also gathered around the horde leader. Isa and Jazin are the only ones I recognize. The rest are hordesmen, whose gazes are on me, pinning in place. The hatred emanating from them is nothing new, but the potency of it is enough to frighten me.

Terim enters the dwelling and stands behind me. His presence is enough to clear the foggiest clouding my mind and push me into action.

"I have the antidote," I say, lifting the satchel. "Please tell me it's not too late to save him."

Terim briefly places a hand on my shoulder. "It's not. He still lives."

Elation fills me. I start walking in Zahtan's direction, and Jazin's voice rings out, startling me.

"Bris maja¹."

The warriors are across the room and surrounding me before I've had a chance to blink. Two of them flank my sides and take hold of my upper arms with painful grips. Terim steps forward.

"We sought out the antidote and brought it back to heal our Zahtan," he says in the common tongue. "You must believe her, Jazin."

The male lifts a brow and answers in kind. "You think me foolish enough to honor the words of a human when she is the one who poisoned my brother?"

"I don't care what you think about me," I say. My voice quivers with fear for the dragon lord. Every second that passes brings him that much closer to death. I sweep my gaze over him, taking in the unnatural pallor of his skin, along with the lifeless, glazed look on his face, and my panic increases tenfold. "Please just let me save him."

"My Zahtan is strong enough to fight off the poison," Jazin says. "All we need to do is wait for it to pass through his system."

"You'll kill him!" I scream. My struggles begin, me using all of the strength I possess, but my attempt at freedom is over within moments. I glare at each of the warriors for good measure. Then I look to the now silent shaman, beseeching his help with my gaze. "Yurik, please."

The older male releases a sigh of defeat. "I don't have authority in this situation, *rima*. The dragon lord's heir is the one who stands in Zahtan's place when he is otherwise disposed. This is our way."

"But you're a healer," I say. "Surely that entitles you to make decisions on behalf of Zahtan in order to save his life. He will die if you don't interfere."

Isa lets out a sob, and Terim immediately walks over to her. The warrior embraces his sister, and she begins to weep openly against his chest. I wish I could do the same. Battling my emotions is taking its toll on me, but I can't think about that now.

I dig in the satchel and retrieve one of the precious blooms. Holding the valix up for everyone to see, I pluck one of the petals and put it straight into my mouth. After chewing and swallowing it, I say, "If you thought I would trick you into thinking this is something else other than an antidote, then why would I risk ingesting it?"

The shaman strokes his jaw in thought. "Let me see that."

Yurik makes his way to stand in front of me and holds out his hand expectantly while grasping his staff with the other. I give him the flower with shaky fingers, and my anxiety rises as I wait for his assessment. The elderly male, Terim, and Isa are the only allies I have since the dragon lord is unconscious.

"This is *hadija*, a harmless plant with a sweet nectar inside its petals." The shaman raises his head to look at Jazin. "It cannot hurt to try."

"No," comes the terse reply. The male folds his arms and juts out his chin. "I stand with my original mandate. The dragon lord is strong enough to fight this on his own. The fire in his blood is hotter than anything and will burn away the poison. We just need to wait until this passes."

A wail of sorrow and pain pours from my body. From my soul. It fills the room, bringing everyone's attention to me. I go limp, and the satchel falls to the ground unheeded. "You've sentenced him to death." My words are a broken sob, and tears stream down my cheeks.

For whatever reason, the warriors release me. Most likely because I'm making a spectacle of myself or they see me as weak and pathetic. I am certainly those things in my grief.

But the emotion that follows isn't.

My anger rises to the forefront, fueled by injustice and my need to save Zahtan. And by that logic, my sister. I won't let anyone get in the way of that.

I curve my body over the satchel, continuing to weep. It's not difficult since my feelings for Zahtan are real. As subtly as possible, I retrieve one of the valix blooms, hiding it in my hand.

"*Dun maja*," Jazin says, nodding his head at me.

Whatever the male said has the warriors reaching for me. I wave them off, saying, "I can stand on my own." Once I'm on my feet, I hang my head, depicting the pitiful human they expect to see. "Can I say good-bye to him?"

Jazin is quick to answer. "There's no need. He will be well soon enough, and that's when he'll decide your fate."

"I see." The surrender in my voice grates on my pride. "Very well."

And then I'm running.

My steps take me straight to Zahtan before anyone can react. I capitalize on everyone's surprise and confound them further by leaping onto the bed.

Jazin is the first to recover. His hand shoots out swiftly to capture my right arm. But I anticipated this.

With the valix in my left hand, I bring it to the dragon lord's mouth, crushing the bloom between my fingers. Droplets trail down my skin to land directly in the small space between his lips. I count them, my heartbeats in sync with each bit of clear liquid that disappears.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Jazin tugs on my arm with such force that I cry out. The movement causes me to lean to the right, draping my body over the dragon lord's. Zahtan doesn't twitch, despite my weight bearing down on him. His unresponsiveness scares me enough to momentarily block out the terrible ache in my arm and focus on the nectar creeping down my wrist.

I drag my left arm over Zahtan's mouth, praying there's enough liquid on my skin to cure him. He needed at least six droplets to fight off the poison completely. Perhaps more, given his height and large build. I'm not a physician, and my estimates are not set in stone, but I've dealt with valix enough to make an educated guess.

Jazin hauls me off the bed and drags me by the back of my collar toward the group of warriors by the entrance. I claw at the material cutting into my airways, my movements frantic and wild. The male drops me, and I collapse, drawing deep breaths into my lungs.

"Juto maja de vin sekar mah³," Jazin yells.

Two of the warriors grab my arms and yank me to my feet. I bite my lip to keep from crying out, and the metallic tang of blood hits my tongue. Although Jazin hurt my arm, I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me suffer.

The hordesman walks up to me until the tips of our boots are touching. When I meet his gaze, I make sure to let him see that he's not the only one capable of hate. "Enjoy your last night on this earth, *rima*, for tomorrow when the sun disappears behind the mountains, you'll be executed."

"When the dragon lord gets well, he's going to be pissed at you for treating me this way," I say with a bravado I don't feel. "So *you* might want to enjoy your last night of authority. Oh, and fuck you."

He slams his fist into my jaw. My head whips to the side, right before everything goes black.

CHAPTER 21



*H*elena

I awaken and instantly find myself in a mood.

Every part of me hurts, there are noises outside that woke me up, and I'm to be executed. I suppose that last bit would make anyone a little upset. I'm not sure the reality of that piece has sunk in just yet.

My vision takes several blinks in order to clear, but once I can see properly, I close my eyes again. It didn't take more than a second to gauge my surroundings and bring hopelessness to the forefront of my thoughts. The rope around my neck keeps me secure to a barrel in the middle of a hut. My wrists are bound, resting in my lap. I have no idea who the owner of this dwelling is, but that isn't important since it's not Zahtan's.

My eyes fly open as a thought registers despite my muddled thinking.

I look at the two warriors standing guard over me and clear my throat, now dry from disuse—and probably because of the screaming I did not too long ago. The intense throbbing of my jaw has me sucking in a breath. I've never hated anyone as much as Desmond, but I think Jazin might be a close second. Even so, telling him off was worth it. I think.

"Is the Zahtan alive?" I ask, my voice scratchy.

The males glance in my direction but are quick to dismiss me. Or they don't understand what I'm saying. Surely the dragon lord's title is enough to prompt them?

"Zahtan?" I repeat, inserting all of my concern into my tone. "How is he?"

“Lei Zahtan, hamdun davati, rima.¹”

My lips thin. I only understood two words out of that sentence. Very unhelpful and quite irksome. "Yurik? Can I speak to him?"

This time the warriors don't bother with a glance or a response. I huff, and the rope chafing my skin digs further into my neck. This irritation causes profanity to pour from my lips. I must admit that some of my curses are very creative, but my words won't do any good. I'm still a prisoner with no way of escaping.

I take a deep breath and gather my composure. Assuming I'm to be executed, I need to think of a plan. The only weapons or skills I possess are a quick wit and a foul mouth. That isn't exactly the arsenal I need. In fact, insulting Jazin probably wasn't the smartest thing to do. All that did was earn me a sore jaw, not to mention the throbbing in my arm.

I consider and dismiss numerous possibilities. Eventually, I grow tired of thinking and decide to handle things as they come and use anything I can to my advantage. I'm not above physical violence or stabbing someone.

For the love of fuck. My knife.

I wiggle my leg to confirm that the tiny blade is still hidden within my boot. When the object brushes my skin, I nearly smile. If I can get these two warriors to leave, I'll free myself. Now, all I have to do is wait for an opportunity.

Or invent one.

"I need to go to the bathroom," I say. "You know, relieve myself."

One of the warriors shakes his head, and the other turns his head to stare at me. That acknowledgement is all I need. Assuming a pitiful expression and widening my eyes, I repeat myself. And even add a 'please' for good measure. Not that they deserve my politeness, but a girl can't be too choosy when she's tied up and scheduled to meet with certain death.

The hordesmen talk amongst themselves in Durak. I can't make heads or tails of it all. I think the one on the right is advocating for me, while the other is firm in his refusal.

All of my hopes are dashed when a third hordesman enters the hut. His gaze lands on me briefly, then shifts to the other warriors when he begins speaking. The conversation between the three of them is short, and at the end, they all look at me.

I gulp.

The newcomer walks over to me and kneels. He says something to me in

Durak that I don't understand and retrieves a knife from his belt. I stiffen, my eyes going wide.

"Don't hurt me," I say, my focus still on the weapon.

Despite the rope digging into my skin, despite the fact that I'm outnumbered and inferior in strength, I try to get free. I bring my knees to my chest to shield myself but also to bring my dagger close. Just as I reach for it, the male places his blade on the floor and covers my hands with his in a gentle yet firm touch.

He repeats the phrase in Durak. His voice is a deep baritone, and the tone is soft, almost as if he's speaking to a horse to calm it. Immediately, I go still and gaze up at him. I suppose I'm no better than a mare because the majority of my fear leaves me in a rush.

The male continues talking to me in a coaxing way. While keeping his hand on mine, he slowly picks up his knife. I watch him bring the length of it to the rope tied around the barrel and saw through it. He frees my neck, and the relief to my skin is wonderful.

"Thank you," I say.

"Follow."

Finally, a word I know. He rises and takes hold of my still-bound hands, assisting me to my feet. I wobble a bit, and he's considerate enough to steady me. Since the sun hasn't begun to set, I don't think I'm to be executed right now. However, I have no idea what else he could want with me.

Anything—except execution—is better than being tied up like a dog.

The male releases me and gestures to the door. I trail him, and we step outside, which I find refreshing. He leads me through the village, and the moment Zahtan's hut comes into view, my heart beats wildly in my ribcage. We get closer to it, and I hold my bound wrists to my chest as my anticipation rises.

Now is the time for answers. I just hope the outcome is favorable for the dragon lord. And me.

The warrior holds the flap to the side and motions for me to enter. I do, and my gaze zips to the large bed. Finding it empty, a whimper leaves me at the thought of the dragon lord being dead.

"Stand before me, *rima*."

The sound of Zahtan's voice has me jerking my head to the side. The male watches me from his throne, very much alive. Pure joy fills me, and I release a sigh, my lips lifting into a smile.

"You're alive," I breathe, nearly dizzy with relief. "I dared to hope, but..."

With my focus solely on him, I all but run until I'm less than two feet away and stop abruptly. Seeing him up close and breathing has my eyes stinging with tears, but it's not enough. I have this burning need to touch him and confirm he's still in my world, with me.

When I lift my bound hands to reach for him, movement from my peripheral vision halts me. I flick my gaze to the left and find Jazin standing there. My joy at seeing the dragon lord is replaced with caution at seeing his brother present. I lower my arms and take a step back, surveying the room. Yurik is also there, standing on Zahtan's right side.

All three of the males stare at me.

My senses go on alert as my self-consciousness rises. I bite the inside of my cheek and gather my composure, schooling my features into a blank expression. I'll have time later on to feel stupid about the way I acted upon seeing the dragon lord alive.

One thing is quite obvious: he's not happy seeing me.

I run my gaze over him in a scrutinizing manner with my emotions firmly controlled. The majority of his color has returned, but there's a weariness in his gaze and in the dark circles under his eyes. Overall, he's recovered almost completely and in a short time period.

Unless Jazin hit me so hard I missed a full day.

If the tenderness of my jaw is anything to go by, it's not out of the realm of possibility. My stomach is empty and grumbles for a meal. However, that's nothing unusual. I think I'm always hungry.

"*Rima*," the shaman says, his voice formal and lacking the familiarity I've grown used to. "We have brought you here to give us an accounting of the events that have transpired as you recall them. Beginning with the poison and ending with your removal of this place."

"The events as I recall them?" I repeat the words, all but spitting them out. "I have nothing to tell you except the truth."

Jazin takes a threatening step forward. "Lies! That's all you've done since you arrived. It's the only thing your kind is—"

"Enough."

At the sound of Zahtan's voice, his brother stiffens, but nods in acknowledgement. The dragon lord looks to me and says, "Tell us your truth, *rima*."

I shrug, faking a nonchalance I don't feel. "Fine. Let's see..." I pause to

think for a moment, unsure of where to start. "The poison is known to me as emek. From what I know, this one has to be ingested in order for it to work. If that's the case, then the poison was in Zahtan's food or drink. His symptoms progressed too quickly for it to be anything except his dinner."

"We have come to the same conclusion," Yurik says. "Continue."

"During the time that Isa delivered the evening meal, I was preoccupied with bathing." I drop my gaze to the floor as I fight off a blush. "To be clear, I never came into contact with the food or wine that evening." I lift my head and meet the dragon lord's gaze head-on. "Since I was never alone with them, I couldn't have been the one to poison Zahtan."

"That remains to be seen," Jazin says.

Yurik frowns in the male's direction before settling his attention on me. "Tell us about the antidote, *rima*."

"It's called valix. Once I saw the skin around Zahtan's mouth and eyes rimmed in blue, I knew he was poisoned and how to cure it."

"Of course, you did," Jazin snarls. "Who else would possess such knowledge except the guilty person? We're wasting our time here."

Zahtan turns in his throne to look at his brother. "Your interruptions are wasting our time. They will cease, or you will leave."

When the dragon lord sits facing forward, our gazes lock. The lack of emotion in them deflates me. Does he believe I tried to kill him?

If that's so, then I have no chance of getting him to have sex with me. Not to mention I'm scheduled to be executed. Despite the uncertainty with Zahtan, I lift my chin, prepared to tell my side of things.

"The reason I'm aware of emek and its cure is because the vampires taught me," I say. "They are very particular about what we eat since it affects how our blood tastes. As far back as I can remember, I've always known about various poisons and their antidotes. When I saw the symptoms on Zahtan, I immediately left to find the valix."

I look at Yurik, beseeching his support with my gaze. "The shaman can attest to this. He sent Terim with me for protection, and together, we found the bloom. It's why the dragon lord is alive today."

The older male nods in my direction. "That is so, Zahtan."

"What else transpired?" The dragon lord stares at me and tilts his head. "Tell us."

"Terim and I raced here to give you the antidote, but your brother denied me. He said the dragon fire in your veins would burn the poison, and you

would recover." I lift my bound hands and point an accusatory finger at the male. "Jazin's thinking would've killed you if I hadn't interfered. I won't apologize for my actions."

Zahtan narrows his gaze. "Interfered?"

"I couldn't just let you die! I had to do something." My chest heaves with my outburst, and I hold my arms to my chest, trying not to cry in frustration. "The cure was in my hands, with you mere steps away, so I gave you the valix. What else was I to do? I *had* to save you."

I hang my head to avoid the males' gazes. But especially the dragon lord's. I don't know if I can handle him looking at me with accusations and hatred in his eyes. It would hurt me more than I care to admit. The last time we were alone, I reminded him that he liked me.

However, I like him too. Beyond mere attraction.

"That will be all, *rima*," Zahtan says.

I brace myself for whatever happens next. "Am I to be found guilty and executed now?"

CHAPTER 22



*H*elena

"No," comes the dragon lord's reply.

When I lift my hopeful gaze to Zahtan, he continues. "In my eyes, you are innocent of the vile accusations thrown at you. And my word is law."

A sob of relief tries to make its way from my throat, and I cover my mouth to stifle it. I can fall apart later when I'm alone, but I refuse to do it in front of Jazin. I won't give him the satisfaction.

"Tell her, Yurik," Zahtan says.

"Tell me what?" I ask.

The shaman's expression is thoughtful, but his mouth is pulled down, as though he's tasted something sour. "The poison was found in your goblet and your food, *rima*."

My brows snap together. "I was the intended recipient?"

When Yurik nods, I sway on my feet. The dragon lord begins to rise just as I gain my footing. My mind is reeling with the implications of what I just learned, but my heart recognizes the male's concern for me. However brief.

"I knew the Golden Horde hated me being here," I say, my voice quiet, my tone dejected, "but I never thought someone would try to kill me. Again."

I raise my hands to my temples, apply pressure, and briefly close my eyes. How can I stay when every moment spent here is a risk? Does it even matter if certain death waits for me at the Crimson Castle? Is there anything there worth returning to?

Gods, please let Amara still be alive.

My mind drifts along the current of my troubled thoughts. Although I drop my arms and stare in their direction, I ignore the males as they talk amongst themselves. They will decide my fate, that I'm certain of. It begs the question: what am I going to do about it?

"Whatever your thoughts," Zahtan says to the hordesmen, "you will speak them in the common tongue. This conversation is meant to be private. Yurik, tell me what else you've uncovered."

The shells on the male's staff click together when the shaman leans on it. "I've questioned everyone that might've come into contact with the food, and each one denied knowing about the poison. With the kitchen always open, the difficulty is pinning down a suspect. Anyone could've slipped in and done it."

"The culprit is in our midst." Jazin crosses his arms, his face twisted in anger. "This is a ploy of hers."

Zahtan tilts his head. "To what end?"

"To gain your trust."

"How is that effective?" Yurik asks. "I don't understand how the woman poisoning herself would get the dragon lord to trust her."

Jazin's gaze narrows to slits when he glances in my direction. "If she makes us believe someone is after her, then she gains the Zahtan's sympathy as a victim. If he was poisoned, then she'd be portrayed as a savior. Either way, the human is seen without guilt."

"That's ridiculous." I purse my lips. "Don't you think that if I wanted to poison myself, I would've had the antidote nearby? If you remember, I had to traipse through the forest at night to find the valix."

"Who's to say you didn't?" Jazin counters. "Perhaps you did that little stunt with Terim to gain his trust as well. Along with your show of tears."

"Tears?" The dragon lord slides his gaze to me. "What tears, *rima*?"

I turn my head as embarrassment covers my skin, making it prickle. "They were a ploy, just as your brother said."

"I told you," Jazin says, "I knew—"

"But they *weren't* to gain Terim's trust," I say. "They were to distract your brother long enough for me to save your life. I would've done anything, said anything if it meant giving you the cure, Zahtan."

My anger is quick to replace any self-doubt. I snap my head up and arrest Jazin's gaze with my own. "If anyone is to be questioned, it should be you. Zahtan would be dead if I hadn't interfered."

Jazin sneers. "You know nothing of dragon fire or its magic."

"You're right," I say with a nod. "But I do know about the plant that poisons one's blood, and that was more than evident in the dragon lord's symptoms." I throw up my hands with a sigh. "Think what you want when it comes to me. I refuse to defend myself any longer. I won't keep fighting against horde traditions and prejudiced mindsets."

With as much grace as I can muster, I sink to the floor and sit with my hands in my lap. It's as if everything I've been through hits me all at once and saps my energy. It doesn't help that I haven't eaten recently.

The males look at me, each of them with a different expression. Jazin's derisive smirk is present, while Yurik's face is etched with concern. The dragon lord runs his gaze over me in a scrutinizing manner, no doubt taking in my disheveled appearance, as well as the bruise on my jaw and the rope burn on my neck.

I watch him with bated breath. Does he care that I've been hurt?

"Leave us," Zahtan says.

"Brother, there is more to discuss."

The dragon lord's gaze stays on me when he speaks. "No, there isn't. I've made my decision. I wish to speak to the human alone."

Jazin's upper lip curls, and he steps in front of his brother, crossing his arms. "She'll only speak poison to your ears, just as she poured poison down your throat. You can't trust her."

The shaman walks up to Jazin and places a hand on his shoulder. "We must trust our Zahtan, in whatever he does. We owe it to him as our leader. Didn't I follow your orders when you were in authority, despite my personal objections?"

Jazin turns to face Yurik, removing his hold with a jerk. "They were unfounded, which is why I rejected them. It's you who didn't trust our Zahtan. You should've trusted that his magic would save him."

"Dragon blood doesn't make me invincible, brother." Zahtan lifts his gaze to Jazin's. "My susceptibility to poison is just a fact, however disappointing to you. Yes, I have the ability to heal quickly, but given the amount of poison I drank, my magic didn't have enough time to prevent me from dying."

"I'll take my leave," Yurik says. "Call upon me if you require my assistance, Zahtan."

The older male walks away, and my gaze trails him. When he's next to me, Yurik stops and leans down to pat my shoulder, his eyes full of

encouragement. That show of support has me smiling at him.

"Thank you," I mouth.

He nods once and then is gone. The hut takes on a colder air without his warm and caring presence. I impatiently wait for Jazin to leave as well. He does, but it's with a glare aimed at me.

The second I'm alone with the dragon lord, my nerves amplify. I lace my fingers and wait. I've never been good at being patient, and it takes a fair amount of discipline for me to sit still.

"Come here, *rima*." His tone is calm, but I refuse to move. "*Rima*?"

"Since you're not going to kill me, at least have the decency to use my name." The spark of defiance quickly extinguishes within me and I exhale. "I've been through too much to accept anything less."

"Come here, Helena."

I blink up at him, this imposing male who holds my future in his hands. Our gazes lock, and what I find within the depths of his eyes is intense emotion, slowly turning them gold. Not anger, but worry. Not wrath, but compassion.

It shatters my defenses.

With a great effort, I rise and hold my head high, despite the tears stinging my eyes. I want nothing more than to fall apart, but I can't right now. The silence in the air is only broken up by the shuffling of my feet as I make my way to the throne. Once I stand in front of the dragon lord, I do my best to put up emotional walls to protect me. I have to maintain control, no matter what he says.

Zahtan stares at me for so long that I bite my lip to keep from demanding he tell me what's on his mind and put me out of my misery. His gaze bores into mine, taking me hostage. The fierce emotions are still present.

But they shift to something dark when his eyes flit over the bruise on my jaw.

He raises a hand tipped with black claws, and I stiffen. "Hold still," he says, "and lift your arms."

I watch him slice through the rope with my heart pounding and my palms sweating. The bindings fall to the floor in heap, and I frown at the abrasions on my skin. They are worse than the one on my neck, making me wince as I flex my wrists.

"Thank you," I say, my attention still on my hands.

At the feel of his touch on my cheek, I look at him. The male slowly

traces the curve of my face with the back of his claw. His gaze turns an even brighter gold when he reaches the bruise on my jaw.

"Who did this to you?"

The low growl from him is strong enough to send vibrations through my chest. My eyes widen, and my mouth falls open. Breathing becomes difficult, and my inhalations are nothing more than small gasps.

"I am already furious," he grits out, "but if I have to repeat myself, my wrath will consume me."

"No one," I lie.

It's not a secret that I have no love for Jazin, and if he were to perish, I wouldn't shed a tear. However, pitting brother against brother is too devious. Too destructive. I just can't bring myself to do that to Zahtan.

The male takes my chin in hand. His grip is secure, yet he's mindful not to cut me. "I don't have to be fae to know you're lying. Who are you protecting?"

"No one."

His gaze narrows. "Do you think I can't scent your fear? That I can't hear your heart racing? Tell me what I wish to know."

"You," I say. I grab his wrist and run my thumb over the inner part like he's done to me in the past. I want to soothe his anger, but also reassure myself that I didn't imagine the concern in his eyes a moment ago. "I'm protecting you."

His head jerks back as though I struck him. "Me? I did that to you?"

The stricken look on his face has me removing his hold on my chin. I take his hand and press my cheek to his palm with a sigh. Then I close my eyes, unable to look at him when I tell the truth.

"No, but I don't want you to suffer more than you already have."

He drops his arm, dislodging my grip on him. I lower my gaze to the floor and hug my middle to steel myself against his rejection of me. Again. How many times must I go through this with Zahtan? Just when I think I've broken through his stubbornness, the male dismisses me.

"You *will* give me a name," he says, his voice laced with ire.

The demand is like an invisible hand on my throat. I shake my head and keep my eyes downcast. If he asks me for a second time, I won't have the strength to deny him.

At the feel of his hands taking hold of my face, I peek at the dragon lord through my lashes. "Please leave it alone."

“I can’t do that. I swore you’d be under my protection, and this is the second time I’ve failed to ensure your safety. Give me the chance to avenge you, to make things right.”

“Zahtan...” I lift my gaze to his and suck in a breath at his tortured expression. “I don’t blame you.”

He briefly closes his eyes as though in pain. “You don’t have to. I blame myself.”

“But—”

“Give me a name, or so help me, I’ll...”

“Jazin.”

CHAPTER 23



*H*elena

As soon as the answer leaves my mouth I take a step back, putting enough distance between us so Zahtan can't touch me. With me accusing his brother of brutality, everything is uncertain.

"Do you think I'm going to punish you?" he asks.

I bite the inside of my cheek, carefully choosing my words. "To be honest, I don't know what you're going to do with me."

"You needn't be worried, *sajir aya*¹. I know you had to fight Jazin to save my life. I've never been more certain of anything."

"You have no idea how scared I was for you."

"I do," he says.

I scrunch my face in confusion. "You do?"

"Yes. I might not remember everything that transpired, but all of the memories I have during that time are of you."

He reaches out to take my hand and slowly pulls me toward him until I'm standing between his legs, our gazes level even though he remains sitting down. "I can still hear your sobs as Jazin denied your claims for a cure," he whispers. "I can still feel your skin on my lips as you fed me the nectar. But most of all, I recall the way you kissed me before you left my side."

"Oh," I breathe. "I was hoping you wouldn't."

He tugs me closer, the heat from his body seeping into my clothing. "Why?"

“Why?” I parrot, blinking in confusion. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Nothing concerning you is ever as it should be.”

I purse my lips at that comment and his gaze dips to my mouth. He leans down until his breath skims my cheeks and the gold in his eyes captures me. Mesmerized, I cease... Breathing. Thinking. Everything.

“Breathe, Helena.”

“I can’t. I think my heart has stopped.”

He smiles. “Mine does every time I look at you.”

I gasp at hearing his confession. Zahtan catches the sound with his lips when his mouth covers mine. I reach out and grip his shoulders to keep from falling, my fingers digging into corded muscle and my eyes fluttering closed. Still grasping my other hand, he places it at the small of my back and guides me until our chests are flush, my thighs secured between his parted ones.

He brings his other hand to my hip, squeezing it briefly. Then he drags his fingers up my arm and along the curve of my neck, before plunging his fingers into my hair. His hold is firm, leaving me no choice but to submit to him as he tilts my head back.

“Open for me, little one,” he whispers against my mouth.

I do. Instantly. The feel of his tongue flicking out and gliding along my bottom lip makes me dizzy. When he releases the hand resting on my lower back, I wrap both arms around his neck and pull him closer, clinging to him.

The growl in his chest reverberates against mine as he deepens the kiss. It’s a primal sound, an approval that makes my legs weaken. This savage male devours me, taking each of my breaths as his own, leaving me wanting.

I’m lost in him, drowning in a sea of lust that drags me further down with each sweep of his tongue and every groan that spills from him. I moan softly as the dragon lord overwhelms my senses. The kiss and the feel of him become the only things in my world. Every inch that he caresses ignites, his fingertips leaving behind trails of fire on my skin.

I burn for him.

Everywhere.

I can do nothing except return his kiss, reveling in his embrace and letting myself melt into it. Our tongues intertwine and dance together as we explore each other's mouths and his hands explore my body.

His touch descends, gliding down the side of my breast until he palms the mound fully, claiming me in his grasp as though I belong to him. Arching into his touch, I’m alive with desire, wanting nothing more than to stay

entrenched in this moment. So, I let myself be consumed by passion and get lost in the fantasy of him as it comes to life.

Our story unfolding before us as only the gods could've foretold...

His fingers find their way underneath the fabric of my clothes sweeping against my inner thigh like a soft whisper, urging me to let go and give into him. This world of ecstasy is foreign to me, a language I can't speak. But this male does. Fluently.

Zahtan breaks the kiss to press his lips to my neck, just underneath my ear. I shiver and tighten my grip on his hair. He drags his mouth along my skin until he reaches the neckline of my garment. My chest rises with my breaths as I struggle to pull air into my lungs, but all of it leaves me in a rush when he slides his tongue between my breasts.

I let my head fall back in wild abandon. Everything he does to me is exquisite and I urge him further by arching my back. There's no hesitation on his part. He brings his mouth to my nipple and sucks, dampening the material of my dress.

Another moan slides past my defenses, but from the way his fingers dig into my skin, I know he enjoys hearing me slowly losing control. He repeats the delicious torture on my other nipple and dips his hand between our bodies.

My legs give out when he cups my bare sex. Zahtan is quick to grab me, his reflexes faster than any humans. He sets me on his lap with my thighs on either side of his hips and his cock resting against my belly. I freeze at the contact and open my eyes, overwhelmed by how exposed I am and unsure of what to do.

"Give yourself to me," he says between the kisses on my throat. "I won't let anything happen to you."

He nips at my shoulder with impatience when I don't respond right away. This is what I want, but once I surrender, there's no turning back. And no way for me to protect my heart.

"Do you know how much I've thought about this? Imagined touching you here?" Zahtan pulls back to look at me. When he brushes his fingers over my clit, I bite my lip and shake my head. "So fucking much it'd scare you," he says.

A light touch of his thumb, followed by a delicious pressure on my clit has me panting. And my arousal climbing. He strokes me as though he already knows my body intimately. Or owns it.

“*Lo vert ti, kalina mei²,*” he murmurs, his lips beside my ear.

“Mhmm...”

He kisses the corner of my mouth. “*Movi deh safine imat judur. Var tulin mer. Kada zil ura lesta, ornek bayar firat parjai³.*”

I have no idea what he’s saying to me, but his deep voice is sensual, a caress to my senses. It’s coaxing, alluring, and has me seeking out his fingers by rocking my hips. I’m rewarded with more sensation, more fire heating my veins.

For me, this is more than just physical pleasure. It’s an emotional connection I’m not ready to fully acknowledge.

Zahtan goes completely still under me a second before a male voice calls from outside. My eyes fly open and I twist on his lap, ready to run. The dragon lord snakes his arm around my waist and anchors me to his body, his hold like steel.

His other hand still between my legs.

Panic has my eyes widening and I turn to look at him. “Zahtan—”

He pinches my clit, his gaze focused on my face. “Not a sound.”

I freeze. For once, I’m giving him the immediate obedience he’s always wanted. Until he brushes my entrance.

A small whimper leaves me, earning a warning look from him. “Don’t make me repeat myself,” he whispers, “unless you want the entire Horde to hear you come.” Then raising his voice, he responds to the visitor in Durak.

I gape at Zahtan.

Surely he doesn’t mean to...

At the feel of his finger sliding inside my body, I press my lips together. He doesn’t insert it fully, just to the first knuckle, only to withdraw it and slowly begin again. Each gentle thrust of his finger takes him deeper and makes me wetter.

Brings me closer to the edge.

The other male speaks again, launching into a one-sided discussion, and recognition hits me. “Terim,” I mouth.

The dragon lord’s eyes are now molten gold, blazing at me. He continues filling me with his finger while leaning close enough so his words brush against my lips.

“My name is Maliq,” bites out. “If you say another’s name when I’m inside you, I won’t be held responsible for my actions. The beast within me will *not* share you.”

Zahtan gifting me with his name has my heart expanding, while his threat has my core fluttering around his finger. I acknowledge him with a nod and he picks up speed, driving into me with such force that I'd fall if he weren't holding me. Pleasure slams into me, building to a peak that I've never felt before. I rest my forehead against his shoulder, my erratic breaths fanning over his chest.

"*Kursat erdali men⁴,*" he says. His voice is even, almost sounds bored, while I'm grinding down onto his hand in desperation.

"Zahtan," Terim says, his voice more urgent than before, "*Ganar vin. Lo jalaf taliq lazo maja. Sebir non briska lehr.*"⁵

"It would seem that my warrior is concerned for you," Zahtan whispers in my ear. "What would he say if he saw that I was fucking you with my hand? Would he grow more fearful and try to fight me because your liquid heat now drenches my fingers?"

Still buried in the crook of his neck, I shake my head. I'm not sure if I'm answering him. Or telling the male *not* to stop, that I don't care who sees us as long as I come. This ache within me is all-consuming and only he can ease it.

"The scent of your arousal permeates the air," the dragon lord says, his voice still low. "It will be a challenge to think clearly."

He withdraws his hand from me and my body clenches as though to prevent it. I lift my head, my gaze searching his for an explanation. The male says nothing and brings his fingers to my mouth. They glide along the crease of my lips, coating them with the effects of my arousal.

"Taste yourself," he says. When I flick my tongue out, he smiles at me. "You're beautiful in your submission. Now, be a good girl and sit quietly." He switches to Durak and mutters something under his breath. "*Simsek vin lera Terim bursal wit. Risto vod kile ornek smati⁶.*"

Zahtan grabs my hips and assists me to my feet. Shock and bewilderment still have me in their clutches and I stand there, blinking at him. He palms my breast with a knowing smile.

"Be sure to conceal yourself. This should not take long, and I can finish what I started."

"*Urto⁷.*"

I race to the other side of the room and dive behind the screen right before Terim pulls back the hide covering the entrance. He walks inside and stops suddenly, his nostrils flaring.

My face flames. Does he smell my arousal? I lie still on my belly, afraid to breathe or do anything that'll gain his attention.

Terim's gaze darts back and forth as if he's searching for something. Or someone. Then he looks to the dragon lord, his brows gathered and expression unsettled. "I will be quick, Zahtan."

"Why do you address me in the common tongue?"

The warrior sets his jaw. "I wish for privacy."

"You have it."

"The human female is innocent of the charges against her," Terim says. "I was there when she approached Yurik and told him of the antidote. Her eagerness to save you was clear for all to see. She was willing to go into the forest, alone and at night, risking her life just to save yours."

Zahtan nods once. "Continue."

"I escorted her and we searched together," Terim says. "When she found the *hadija*, the woman nearly cried with joy."

I cringe. What he says is true, but I don't like reliving my desperation. Not to mention, it's embarrassing to hear someone talk about it.

"Then she wept when Jazin wouldn't give you the nectar." Terim shakes his head. "It sounded as if her soul was dying. That agony was painful to witness, but she didn't let it stop her. The woman rushed to your side and made sure you survived."

Zahtan's brows furrow and he remains quiet for a long time. The pregnant silence has me fidgeting. His stoic expression gives nothing away, does nothing to hint at his thoughts. When he finally speaks, I lean forward with anticipation.

"You're infatuated with the human," he says quietly, as though to himself.

It's a statement, not a question.

"I'm infatuated with her courage," Terim says, lifting this chin. "She's shown it again and again, but your brother would have her punished for it. That is why I've come. The human's life must be spared Jazin's decree of execution."

Zahtan waves a hand in dismissal. "Be still. The human is in no more danger than you or I."

"You've spoken to him then?"

"It'll be soon."

Although the dragon lord says this with an even tone, something

underneath it has my skin prickling with unease. I keep my gaze focused on him, searching for any crack in his expression that'll show the emotion he's hiding but find nothing.

“One last thing before I go.” When Zahtan gestures for the male to continue, Terim says, “Jazin struck her. If there's a formal challenge issued, I will be the one to do it.”

The dragon lord slightly tilts his head. “Is that so?”

Terim nods without hesitation.

The room goes quiet again, except for the pounding of my heart in my ears. Tension rises and builds like a physical presence, enveloping me tightly and making it difficult to breathe. If I could flee from here, I would.

“Thank you for your time, Zahtan.” Terim inclines his head in a show of respect. “Do you know where I might find the woman?”

Zahtan stiffens. It's nearly imperceptible. If I hadn't been watching, I wouldn't have seen it.

“What do you want with her?”

The warrior reaches into his pocket and when he holds out his hand, there's a small clay jar resting on his palm. “It's a salve for her wrists. She was bound for hours, with the harsh rope digging into her skin. I thought this would ease the discomfort as a result of the chaffing.”

Terim's gaze flicks to where I lie behind the screen. I haven't moved, but it doesn't matter. He's known I was here from the beginning. That makes his defense on my behalf that much more heartwarming. I highly doubt he's infatuated with me like Zahtan said, but it wouldn't hurt to have someone like Terim on my side. Not when I'm surrounded by enemies.

“Give it to me,” Zahtan says. “I will see that she receives it. And tell Yurik I need to speak to him.”

The warrior's mouth thins as though he's suppressing an argument, but he says nothing. After nodding once again, Terim leaves, taking some of the tension with him.

I let my head flop to the ground and the furs cushion my cheek. “That was very uncomfortable to overhear.”

Although I whisper, the dragon lord responds. “What did you think of it all?”

“I don't know, to be honest.”

“That's not an answer.”

“Well,” I say, “it's the only you're going to get.”

Zahtan gets to his feet and turns to face in my direction, looking at me through the screen. “Yurik is going to stay with you. Don’t leave my home for any reason.”

I scramble into a sitting position. “Where are you going?”

“There are some... *matters* I must attend to.

CHAPTER 24



*H*elena

“Human, come forth. Quickly.”

At the sound of Sid’s voice, I spin around. It takes me a moment to recall where I’d left him and by the time I snatch him from my discarded clothing, he’s in a fit. Thank the gods that I’m alone and Yurik hasn’t arrived yet. Although from the way the rock is carrying on, the Horde might hear him.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Not a word from you. I need you to listen closely.” When I nod, he continues, his runic eyes fixed on my face. “Your seduction of the dragon lord is nearly complete. If you share another kiss like the one I overhead, he’ll be fucking you before the sun rises. To ensure this, you need to be bold.”

“Bold?”

“Isn’t that what I just said? Asili’s balls, I swear you’re hard of hearing. Yes, you must be bold. Daring. Tell him what you want and he won’t deny you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Even as the words leave my mouth, I know I’m lying. I want to kiss Zahtan again, to feel his hands on my skin, to experience such bliss once more. And to finally be one with him.

“Don’t play coy with me,” Sid says with a scoff. “You might be a virgin, but you can still feel what he did to you. These people don’t employ subtlety,

human. You have to be direct. The male will appreciate that and it'll remove any lingering doubt he has concerning you. The blood moon rises in the sky and your time grows short."

I sigh at that. "You're right."

"Of course, I am."

"I'll do whatever I must."

"There's the gumption we need." Sid waggles his brows at me. "I can't wait to hear everything."

I make a face at him. "You're disgusting."

"And?"

"Well, I'm not giving you the satisfaction of watching." Clutching him tightly in my fist, I head toward a nearby chest.

"You're such a bore," he mumbles.

"I'll retrieve you after the deed is done."

He stares up at me with a lofty air. "After the deed is done, I'll be in the heavens where I belong."

"Then I should thank you now for all of your help, since this will be the last time we speak."

"You're welcome, human. Never let it be said that I wasn't an exceptional mentor."



Yurik is delightful company.

Much better than Sid.

After we share a meal, the healer suggests I apply the salve to my wrists, his voice is kind and nurturing. I retrieve the tiny jar from where it sits on Zahtan's throne and settle myself next to Yurik on the floor.

"You'll be leaving soon," he says, very matter-of-fact.

I nod. There's no use in denying it. The blood moon will reveal the artifact in two days and that's not very far from now.

"I worry about what awaits me."

The future is uncertain. Even having the dragon lord's magic doesn't ensure I'll be able to save my sister. Nor does it help my heart feel less heavy at the thought of leaving Zahtan.

"You are strong," Yurik says. "There's a fire in you that burns bright."

Brighter than most people. Its light will guide you.”

“Thank you.” I open the small container and a minty scent tickles my nose. After swiping my finger through the green paste, I slather it on my wrist, massaging the sensitive skin. “And please thank Terim for this.”

The shaman dips his head, running his gaze over my face. “My nephew is taken with you, *rima*. Like our Zahtan, he will be sad to see you go.”

“I doubt that.”

“It’s true. I am old and have witnessed many things in my life. I’ve seen how the dragon lord’s eyes follow you and how he battles the need to protect you, even from himself. My nephew does not struggle in this way. Not yet. If he had as much time with you as Zahtan has, he would.”

“Yurik,” I shake my head, focusing on my disbelief instead of how my heart expands in my chest. “I mean nothing to them. Terim is a thoughtful male and he is grateful to me for saving his king. That is all. And the dragon lord...”

The shaman leans forward. “What about him?”

He wants me but doesn’t trust me.

That hurts more than I care to admit.

“I’m nothing more than a distraction, a disturbance in the structure and order he maintains,” I say. I keep my gaze downcast, unable to maintain my composure if I were to look up and find sympathy in Yurik’s eyes. “Zahtan will be glad when I’m gone.”

“He doesn’t want you to leave. Whether or not he knows this for himself, I cannot say. The dragon lord has always put the Horde first, even above his personal needs and wants. It’s what makes him a good leader.”

The older male exhales and stares straight ahead as though seeing something, his gaze clouding. “His father was not. He was a good warrior, and a good husband, but as a leader he didn’t think about the Horde and how his decisions would affect everyone. This is why Zahtan resists you so. To allow another human to betray us for selfish gain is to repeat his father’s mistakes. He won’t allow it.”

“Yurik, please,” I say. “Don’t say anything more.”

I squeeze the jar so hard it could break, but refuse to meet his gaze. I’m too frightened he’ll see my growing feelings for Zahtan shining in my eyes.

“The traitorous human came to us under his master’s compulsion,” Yurik says, his gaze still on the far wall, unfocused. “At the time we didn’t know such a thing was possible. We have learned our lesson.”

“How do you know I’m not under compulsion?”

“You’re not privy to Horde secrets, *rima*. Believe me, that was the first thing I sought out to find when you arrived on our land. Your former master has no ties to you in that way.” He clears his throat and shifts his attention to me, his gaze landing on my hands. “The scent of vampire blood on your skin helped confirm my suspicions.”

I sneak a glance at him. “Thank you. It’s surprising to hear you let humans into your camp in the past.”

“We trade for the things we can’t produce on our own,” Yurik says. “Humans have nimble fingers which are helpful in crafting intricate or delicate things. Believe it or not, the heart of a dragon is a fragile thing...”

The shaman spends the rest of the evening asking me questions about my past—which I answer carefully—and making me laugh with stories about Zahtan as a child. Apparently, he was very mischievous. It’s hard to imagine the dragon lord that way now. But there’s no reason for Yurik to lie.

Which bothers me greatly since the shaman said that Zahtan will miss me. This implies that he cares for me, more than I let myself believe. Or hope for. What good is it if he returns my affection? Other than us coming together physically, nothing more can happen between us.

My desire for Zahtan, to have a taste of what could never be, creates a boldness in me I don’t recognize.

These thoughts and yearnings keep me awake long into the night, even after Zahtan returns and dismisses Yurik. I lie still on my mound of furs and watch the dragon lord as he makes his way to the throne and lowers himself into it with an exhale. The embers in the fire pit are just bright enough for me to make out his pinched expression, as well as the tension lining his broad shoulders.

I run my gaze over the male, drinking in the sight of him. He’s so attractive and I wonder if I’m the only person to feel this way about him. I highly doubt it. Somewhere outside of this hut is a hordeswoman who will become his wife someday.

May she rot.

“Don’t stare any harder, lest your eyes fall from your skull, human.”

I blink up at Zahtan from across the room. That’s exactly what he said to me the day he taught me how to throw a dagger and it has my lips spreading into a smile as I recall the memory. His smirk is playful, despite the weariness that’s draped over his body and etched into the lines around his

eyes. I want to comfort him so much that it has my hands shaking.

“I was worried about you,” I say, whispering the confession. The male’s eyes widen infinitesimally, his surprise showing briefly. “Are you all right?”

“It’s nothing that time won’t rid me of.”

My lips purse at the enigmatic response. “I don’t believe time heals all wounds or resolves all situations.”

“No?”

“No. It’s not some magical spell that rids us of the challenges life brings.” I sit up and meet his gaze head on. “Some burdens, whether it’s the ones we carry for ourselves, or another, will never disappear.”

“What burdens do you carry, little one?” He leans forward to rest his elbows on his thighs, tenting his fingers. “What do you know of responsibility and hardship?”

“More than you could possibly know.”

“I have reason to believe my troubles are just beginning, but I’ve gone too deep to ever have hope of salvation.”

The air around me thickens, choking me. Is he talking about me? Or am I that self-centered that I wish he was?

“Zahtan...”

His brows snap together and his mouth thins with displeasure. This, and the frustration I heard in his voice a moment ago, have me on my feet. I race to stand in front of his throne before I lose my nerve.

Our gazes lock. Now that I’m closer to him, I can make out the golden flecks glinting in the depths of his eyes. My blood thrums in my veins as the fire in his calls to me.

I reach out and take his hand in mine, wanting connection with him. Needing it.

“Don’t,” he says with a shake of his head.

I flinch at the rejection but hold firm. That’s when I notice the bloody smear along the back of his hand. My lips part on a gasp as I take in the torn skin around his knuckles. A quick glance at his other hand reveals the same type of wounds.

“Who did this to you?” I ask, my voice quivering with suppressed rage.

“You think to protect me, *sajir aya*¹? I’m both insulted and touched by your concern.”

When I scrunch my face in confusion, he smiles at me. If I wasn’t so upset, I’d be distracted by how gorgeous he is. Maybe I still am a little

because my skin tingles where we touch.

“Don’t you think my skills are so lacking that I can’t defend myself?” he asks. “I rarely instigate a fight, but I have never left one without claiming victory.”

“Who did you provoke?”

His amusement vanishes as tendrils of smoke appear, leaving his nostrils. “Leave it be.”

I take hold of my dress and dab at the blood on his knuckles. The crimson is quick to stain the material. I find an ironic satisfaction in this. Zahtan’s wounds came about on my behalf, so it’s only fitting that I be the one to tend him.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “I’ve never had anyone to protect me.”

The male stiffens. “How do you know this was for you?”

I look at him, letting my gaze take in every inch of his face, committing it to memory. “I don’t. I just hope it is.”

“Why?” he asks, his voice getting deeper.

“Because then I can thank you. *Properly.*”

My cheeks burn, but the warmth of them is nothing compared to the heat in his eyes. From one blink to the next, they’re completely golden, the black pupils nearly gone. My head spins at the speed in which his anger morphs to lust.

He briefly closes. “Don’t.”

When I reach out with my free hand to touch him, he repeats the order, his voice tinged with desperation underneath the gruffness.

“Why?” I ask.

“If I take you, I won’t be gentle. I’ll fuck you like an animal, like the one inside me that wants to consume you whole. The beast will demand nothing less than everything you have to give.”

I swallow to ease the sudden dryness in my throat. “What if that’s what I want?”

“Asili be merciful.” Zahtan yanks his hand from mine and I wince. “You deserve tenderness, whereas I have none to give. My fire would consume us both, leaving behind nothing but the ashes of our regret.”

“Zahta—”

“No,” he says with a forceful shake of his head.

“Maliq, please...”

The male flinches at my use of his name. “No,” he says hoarsely.

My pride is the only stopping me from throwing myself at him, hoping he'll catch me. I lift my chin and school my features to hide the sting of his rejection.

"I won't beg," I say. "No one is worth such a thing."

His gaze rakes over me, searing me where I stand. "I wish I could say the same."

CHAPTER 25



*H*elena

A wedding.

I can't think of an event that I'd rather not attend. It'll be full of cheerful people that I'd rather not be around. However, after hearing Isa chatter all morning, I want to go just so she'll cease prattling.

"You're reserved most of the time," I say to her as she styles my hair. "I wasn't expecting this side of you."

"Humans don't understand." She sniffs daintily. "Anytime a couple comes together in public to declare their intentions to join, it's more than a ceremony. This is a life-long commitment, more sacred than any oath. Other than a Zahtan to his people."

"Of course."

Undeterred by my non-committal response, she says, "Once a pairing occurs, it cannot be undone."

"I understand. Fidelity is important."

"A husband or wife can be put to death if they take a lover."

"What?" I turn to face her, but she holds firm to my hair, making my scalp prickle. "Are you serious?"

She nods. Then Isa nudges my head back to facing forward. "It is our way. Now you see why this is such a joyous occasion and not to be taken lightly."

"I'm beginning to understand. By the way, I wanted to thank you for this

dress. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever worn."

The dress is a stunning shade of red, bold and eye-catching. The garment features a fitted bodice that hugs my tiny figure and accentuates the waist, with a plunging neckline that adds a touch of allure. It is made of a luxurious, flowing fabric that drapes elegantly over the curves of my body, making me look more sensual than I really am.

"You can rescind your thanks. My Zahtan is the reason you have that. And I will agree, it is quite lovely."

"This was his doing?" I ask, not quite believing her. What male takes the time to dress a woman in such a manner? This possibly explains the reason I never have any undergarments...

"Yes, it was. Anything you've ever worn was selected by him."

I press my lips together to keep from sighing.

His words from last night weave through my mind. He wanted to be gentle and tender with me, which was thoughtful. Just like his attention to my wardrobe. It's hard to consolidate that male with the one who threatened my life when we first met.

"Isa?" calls a voice from outside.

"Urto, Balansi.¹"

A hordeswoman enters. She has dark, smooth skin and striking features, like the majority of her people. Her eyes are almond-shaped and gleam with intelligence, and her hair is thick and lustrous, woven into intricate braids adorned with beads and feathers. Her body is strong and lean, with sinewy muscles that speak of a life lived close to the land.

She smiles at Isa. The warm welcome fades the moment her eyes sweep over me. I ignore her while doing my best to keep my expression clear of the irritation rising in my chest. Balansi is no different than the rest of the people here, but I have to give her some grace. As of today, she's Zahtan's food taster.

And by extension, mine, since he refuses to feed me anything that's not from his plate. I'd bet my life on the fact that Balansi didn't know she volunteered to protect me from poison. I've seen her twice today for breakfast and lunch, and every time she's scowled in my direction. No doubt she'll do it again for dinner.

The impish part of me wishes there was a second dinner, just so it can add to her disgruntlement.

The hordeswoman dismisses me with a nod in Isa's direction and then

moves on to clean up the dirty dishes from earlier, along with my discarded clothing. She bustles about and Isa goes back to talking to me in the common tongue.

“Tonight you will witness the ties the Golden Horde has with one another, the very ones that make us strong and unified.”

“That’ll be nice to see.”

It will be a first for me. I’ve never seen a couple in love, attended a wedding, or any celebration really. However, any excitement I have is dampened by my upcoming journey. The dragon lord didn’t say anything to me this morning before he left—to do whatever Zahtan’s do—but the blood moon is near.

And I’m running out of time.

A sharp gasp yanks me from my thoughts. I turn my head toward Balansi, finding her gripping my discarded dress with shaking hands. Her wide gaze remains on the material as though she can’t look away for fear it’ll curse her.

“*Mela veh²?*” Isa asks.

“*Eta catral don ekli³.*” Balansi raises her head, allowing me to see the anger in her eyes. The dark emotion flashes in her gaze and her lip curls when she speaks. “*Hibir catral.⁴*”

Isa’s fingers in my hair go still. Then tremble. “*Tuka vesti⁵?*”

“*Bakris veln ira?⁶*”

“*Seburi mel jate. Volo yasali en meta dizna⁷.*”

I grab Isa’s hand and remove her tight grip from my hair while turning to face her. “What’s wrong?” When she shakes her head, I grab her by the shoulders. “Tell me.”

She doesn’t look at me, doesn’t move, until Balansi is gone, along with the stained dress. Her pinched expression has my breaths speeding up and my fingers digging into her skin. I shake her, unable to bear the silence.

“What happened?” I ask.

The hordeswoman’s gaze finds mine and the intensity within has me rearing back. “No one can ever know,” she whispers.

“Know what?”

“That you gave yourself to Zahtan.”

Memories from the night before flood my mind, making my blood hot. Scalding.

His filthy words in my ears.

His mouth on mine.

His fingers inside me.

Oh, yes, I certainly gave myself to him. Any resistance I had melted away at the feel of his kiss and his hands on my body.

I blink to clear my mind of the enticing images and focus on Isa's face. "Why?"

She narrows her eyes. "You don't deny it?"

I bite my lip and slowly shake my head.

"If the Horde knew, they'd consider him a traitor and come for your head."

"Ah, fuck."

What else can I say to that? My legs tremble with the need for action. Whether that be to run away or to warn Maliq, I'm not sure. All I know is that this is frightening, although not surprising. Did I really expect his people to approve of what he and I did, however private it should be? No, I didn't. However, I'd hoped to keep it to myself.

"Don't worry, *rima*," she says with a resolute tone. "I'll take care of you."

"Thank you."

My response is reflexive, but there's something in her voice that makes my stomach sour. I chalk it up to my nerves, which is understandable considering Isa just told me that everyone in the Horde might want to kill me. I have to speak to Maliq about this. If I can work up the nerve.

"How do you know Balansi won't tell anyone?" I ask.

Isa gets to her feet. "Because I'm going to talk to her. Right now. Stay here until I return. There's more to be done with your appearance."

I nod, my mind still spinning at this discovery. Maybe it's a good thing that I'll be leaving with Maliq in pursuit of the artifact. Sooner rather than later.



I thrum my fingers on the fur-lined tabletop in time to the music, and rest my chin on my upturned palm, letting my gaze slowly roam. There's a lot to see. Night might've come, but the blazing fires keep the darkness away. Just enough to create a warm atmosphere.

From the dais, I can clearly make out the newly wed couple as they dance, both of them dressed in traditional attire. It consists of black leather

that's been tanned and treated to make it soft and pliable, the material fitted loosely to their bodies. They're surrounded by the rest of the Horde, every individual looking upon them with joy. The musicians are minimal, but the three drummers and single lutenist provide enough sound to keep the joviality high and the dancers moving.

A wistful sigh sweeps past my lips. I want to dance. Other than the few times with Amara in our bedroom, I've never tried. Needless to say, my skills are lacking and would be an embarrassment. But I still want to. It looks fun.

Fun... that's a word I'm not familiar with. The only times in my life that have amounted to anything close are the moments I twirled in the sun and once more in the moonlight. That wild abandonment was healing to my soul, giving me a shard to hold onto, despite the rest of me being shattered. Perhaps, I can gain another piece if I join the dancers. Assuming Maliq doesn't stop me.

I sneak a peek at him from beneath my lashes and my heart squeezes. For the ceremony, he's left his hair loose and flowing. The ebony tresses catch the firelight, shining more than they should. My fingers twitch with the need to touch him.

Another sigh.

I wouldn't be familiar with the dragon lord in public, even before learning his people would kill me for it, but that doesn't mean I'm not tempted. I'm drawn to him in a way that doesn't make sense and threatens to break my heart, let alone take my life.

Amara, the things I do for you...

Or is it for myself at this point? I don't want to answer that. The truth could wreck me.

"Is the ceremony not to your liking, *rima*?"

Rima, not Helena.

I take a fortifying breath before I look at the male. His eyes watch me carefully from underneath his gathered brows, making my stomach flutter.

"Why do you ask?"

"You appear bored."

"You appear angry. Are you?"

His expression darkens. "No."

"So you say."

"So I *know*," he grumbles.

I press my lips together to keep from laughing. The mighty Zahtan

doesn't like his words being thrown back at him. And to make it even more amusing, he answered with my typical response.

The smile I'm wrestling with takes over. "If you're not angry, then why are there lines of tension just outside your eyes?"

"Because I want to kiss that smile off your mouth. It tempts me to do unseemly things with it."

"Oh."

The air in my lungs leaves me on that monosyllable. As if there's anything else I can say to that declaration. Sid told me to be bold, but I can't compete with the dragon lord. Not when his words make me squirm with desire. If only I could return the favor.

"What are the flowers for?" I tilt my head at the long-stemmed roses laid out on a decorated table off to the side of the dais.

As though with great reluctance, Maliq shifts his gaze from me to the red blooms. "They are symbolic. They represent the length or depth of a relationship. The younger, more closed rosebuds, show the beginnings of courtship. The fully open rose tells the world that the male fully trusts the female he gives it to. If she accepts his gift, she's acknowledging his claim on her."

"That's lovely," I say.

"Roses are present at every wedding. It is believed that the love surrounding the couple bleeds onto the flowers, giving them their red color, but also courage and life to new relationships, while nourishing the older ones."

I don't look at him, afraid he'll mock me for my self-consciousness. "Have you even given a rose to someone?"

"And if I have? Would that make you jealous, *rima*?"

"No, it wouldn't, *Zahtan*. Jealousy is an irrational emotion, one that I won't lower myself to."

If Maliq's gaze could set me on fire, I think it would.

The heat emanating from him intensifies and seeps into the right side of my body. I stare straight ahead, determined to win this battle of wills with him, even if I come to regret it later. He's provoked me just enough for me to bite back. I can only hope he doesn't eat me whole.

Balansi walks in front of the table with her hands full. She's not exactly a welcome distraction, but the food certainly is. It consists of seasoned fowl, rice, and fruit that has my mouth watering. However, the look of contempt on

her face has me averting my gaze. If I wasn't eating from Maliq's plate, I swear she'd spit on my food.

The hordeswoman presents the meal before the dragon lord. Once he nods, she nibbles on a small piece of every bit of food. Then moves onto sipping the wine in his now full goblet.

The only way I'm going to get through tonight, resisting Maliq's charms and dodging his barbs, is to get drunk. Yes, this is the way. I think.

I scan the crowd of dancers, finding Isa among them. She is beautiful yet sensual, every movement a promise, a glimpse of the passion she has to offer. Everyone watches her. Even Maliq.

If I didn't want to drink the wine, I'd dump it over his head.

Eventually Blanas leaves, but not without shooting me a final look of disdain. The dragon lord slides his plate over to me and I eat with less enthusiasm than usual. It's hard when pangs of jealousy constrict my stomach.

I'm so lost in my thoughts, silently grumbling to myself, that I'm startled by Terim's presence. I jerk my head in his direction, my face displaying the confusion I'm feeling. He offers me a smile that puts me at ease and I return it.

"Terim," I say, my voice soft.

His smile widens at my use of his name. "Helena."

Maliq goes statue-still beside me. I don't have the courage to look at him, but if the energy flowing his body is any indication, he's... *not* happy.

"Do not fail to acknowledge me," the dragon lord says. "I would hate to challenge you on a night meant for celebration."

Terim bows his head. "My apologies, Zahtan. I was overcome with the human's beauty. It temporarily blinded me."

A blush rises to my cheeks. I snatch the goblet and take a healthy swallow. The alcohol is different from the first one I tasted. It's sweeter, goes down more easily. I drink again and set it on the table, still gripping the stem.

"See to it that your blindness doesn't become permanent, Terim." Maliq shifts in his seat, the heat from his skin exacerbating my blush now that he's closer. "Human or no, a female should never cloud a warrior's judgment."

"You're right," Terim says. Then his gaze slides to me. "But even the mightiest of us fall victim to a female's charms at some point."

I empty the goblet in lieu of running away. The two males speak about me as if I'm not sitting there. It's irritating, but more than that, it's

uncomfortable. As is, I can barely deal with Maliq when he's surly, not to mention Terim being flattering on top of that.

"There are no charms here," I say, hoping to break the tension and end the conversation. I wave the cup, gesturing to the crowd before us. "Even if your people wouldn't take my head, I'm not charming in the slightest. Being stubborn, mouthy, and tenacious are all I have to give."

Terim plants his hand on the table, a rose stem in one of his fists. He leans forward, his gaze unwavering, pinning me where I sit. "I want that."

"You do?" My question is genuine. This isn't a quest for compliments or to appease my self-esteem. I truly don't understand why a male would want what I have to offer. "Why?"

"Because he is a fool," Maliq says. His voice is low enough for only the three of us to hear. "Only someone lust-ridden would say such things."

The truth of his words is like a knife wound to the heart. I want to clutch my chest where it aches, to check it for bleeding, but I won't give Maliq the satisfaction of knowing he hurt me. I drop my gaze to the rose, refusing to look at either male while I gather my composure. Shifting my pain toward anger is easy enough, as long as I don't allow it to burn me from the inside until I'm scorched beyond repair.

"Do you speak of yourself or Terim?" I ask. My voice is surprisingly even considering how I'm taunting the dragon lord. I cover the warrior's hand fisting the rosebud. "Is this for me?"

Terim grins. It's one of those authentic, warm smiles that reminds me of Yurik when he finds me amusing. But in an endearing way. Unlike Maliq, whose only goal is to upset me. Or so it seems.

It's hard to think about kissing him, or anything else that transpired between us when he's behaving this way. If I thought he cared about me, I'd suspect he's jealous. Even if that emotion is beneath him. On that token, I'd assume kissing a human would be as well.

"Yes, Helena."

Terim gently pulls his hand away to offer me the rose. When I take it, his grin widens. And Maliq's eyes narrow.

"Thank you for accepting my gift," the warrior says. "You honor me."

I bring the flower to my nose and inhale. "It has a strong scent, despite being closed so tightly. I'm surprised by that--"

Maliq reaches over and plucks the stem from my hand. Thank goodness the thorns had been removed. "The human isn't aware of our customs," he

says. “You will not take advantage of her ignorance.”

“Do you think I'm a threat to her?” Terim asks. “Or do you have another reason for interfering?”

The dragon lord tilts his head. “Don't speak in riddles. Say what you mean or say nothing.”

I need more wine.

Thank the gods that Balansi had the foresight to leave the pitcher behind. If it wasn't poor manners, I'd drink from it. Keeping my hands steady enough to pour the wine is harder than it should be, but worth the effort.

I hide behind the goblet, downing its contents. Too quickly, I'm sure.

“Do you want her for yourself, Zahtan?” Terim folds his arms over his chest. “That's the only explanation for your behavior.”

Maliq slowly rises to his feet. The glare he shoots Terim has my scalp prickling. I throw my arm out to grasp his forearm, digging my fingers into his skin to keep him still. And hopefully, silent. The dragon lord doesn't look at me, but his muscles twitch under my fingertips. I squeeze him again in warning.

“Terim, I'd like to have a word with Zahtan, if you don't mind.” I smile at him. It's forced, too bright, but he doesn't comment on it. “Thank you for the gift.”

The warrior doesn't move and for a heart-stopping moment I think he's going to challenge Maliq. However, he dips his head and says, “Save me a dance, fair Helena.”

Then he's gone.

Without acknowledging his Zahtan. Oh, boy.

CHAPTER 26



*H*elena

I'm drunk.

And it's quite fun.

Or it would be if Maliq wasn't brooding next to me, ruining the moment. I ignore him. It's easy when there are people all around, each one of them doing something.

Dancing. Kissing. Talking. Laughing.

All things I wish I could do with the infuriating male beside me. Especially the kissing. Not that I would do it in public. With physical intimacy being new for me, I'm not brave enough to do it in front of an audience. However, the hordesmen and women have no such reservations. They delight themselves in each other.

How I envy them.

With a sigh of longing, I snatch up the rose before Maliq can stop me. The smell of the flower appeals to my senses and I inhale the sweet perfume of it again and again.

"If you don't stop, you'll become light-headed," he says, his voice a low rumble.

I inhale again. Loudly. I can add 'spite' to my list of charms.

"Helena."

My heart thrashes in my chest at hearing him say my name. It's a warning, plain and simple. But it makes my core pulse.

“‘*Rima*’ to you, Zahtan.”

“I can see you are going to be difficult.”

I flick my gaze to him. “Absolutely.”

Just to prove my point, I fill the goblet once more. The dragon lord frowns, disapproval written all over his face. He’s lucky I don’t dump this pitcher’s contents on his head. Actually, it’s nearly empty. Whoops.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough to drink?” he asks.

“You don’t know what it’s like to be…” I press my lips together to stop the truth from revealing itself. “Never mind.”

“Tell me.” He leans closer, the heat from his dragon blood warming me more than the wine ever could. “What don’t I understand?”

“Is the celebration almost over?” I ask, staring straight ahead. “It’s hard to be present, yet unable to participate.”

Maliq’s voice sweeps past my skin, the baritone timbre sliding over my ear. “What exactly do you want to participate in?”

“All of it.”

The answer leaves me in a rush, brought on by his nearness and my nerves getting the best of me. I can’t take it back and don’t even try. What I do is take another drink of the wine.

“With whom?” This is barely above a whisper, so soft that his voice could be the wind. “Tell me, little one.”

“I think not.”

When I raise the goblet, he grabs the cup, stilling my hand. “You’ve had more than enough,” he says.

Maliq removes both the goblet and the pitcher to the far side of the table. I refrain from making a face at him. Barely.

“You can’t tell me what to do,” I say. I run the soft rosebud over my mouth, wishing it was his lips. “And you owe me an apology.”

His brows rise. “I do?” When I nod, he goes on to ask, “Why?”

“For confusing me. Again.”

“Explain.”

I shake my head. My vision spins and I blink to correct it. I suppose dancing is no longer an option. Pity.

“Helena, don’t play games you can’t win. We both know that I’ll have an answer from you, one way or another.”

“Do your worst.”

“You’ve made that threat before,” he says. “Tonight will be the last

time.”

I slide my gaze to him, ready to fire another retort, but his hand shoots out. He plucks the flower from my fingers and holds it out of reach when I lift my arm to retrieve it.

“Give that back to me.” I keep my hand in the air, palm now facing upward. “It was a gift.”

Maliq lowers the rose to glide it along my forearm. Tiny bits of pleasure bloom wherever the petals touch and my lips part on a gasp of surprise. He brings the rosebud to my palm and taps it in rhythm to his words.

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” I say, my voice breathless.

“If you want it back, answer me.”

My lips purse as a streak of rebellion zips along my spine, straightening it. I cross my arms and look ahead, doing my damndest to ignore the gorgeous male next to me. Eventually he’ll get tired of chasing me. And if he doesn’t, this game will lead to him rejecting me like always. Gods, I’m so tired of it all. For once I want him to want me like he says he does, to do something about it.

“You can’t shut me out,” he says, his voice closer than before. He runs the soft petals over my temple and down the side of my face. I repress a shiver. “I won’t give up, little one.”

I remain silent in answer. The silkiness of the rosebud travels along the side of my neck. He stops, resting it on the spot where my pulse races.

“Not only can I hear your heart racing, but I can see your pulse fluttering underneath your delicate skin.” He drags the bloom downward, through my cleavage and over the mounds of my breasts, taking the time to trace each one. “Wherever this flower kisses your body, I would do the same with my mouth.”

I reach out and grip the table’s edge to steady myself. And to keep from touching him. I have to prove to him and myself that I won’t fall victim to his charms, not when he doesn’t intend to follow through.

He lightly taps my nipple. The peak instantly hardens and I fight off a blush. He does it again, but to the other one with the same result.

“Your body readies itself for me,” he says. “I scent your wet heat gathering between your supple thighs.”

I shake my head. It’s the only way to communicate my denial. My lie. Even as he speaks, my core flutters, aching for something only he can give

me. It's as though Maliq ignited something inside me that continues to burn for him, but I don't have the insight on how to get rid of it. Or feed it.

"Keep your hands on top of the table," he says. "Don't move them for any reason."

Before I can guess at his intention, the male uses his free hand to grip my thigh and pull it towards him, opening my legs. The material of my dress covers me, but I'm vulnerable in this position. With a flick of the wrist, exposed.

I slam my thighs shut even though my body wants nothing more than for him to continue teasing me. He clicks his tongue in admonishment, right before he adjusts his hold on the flower and slaps the stem against the top of my thigh.

The unexpected contact startles me and I swing my gaze to his. The swat didn't hurt, but it could've. It's on the tip of my tongue to scold him, but the rosebud glides along the side of my thigh, over my bare skin, scattering my thoughts.

"If I were to caress you between your legs, would my fingers come away drenched, Helena? Is that why you hide yourself from me?"

Maliq grips my inner thigh and slowly pulls my legs apart. Only this time, he anchors me in place by putting his ankle atop of mine. My chest rises and falls haphazardly on a wheeze as he leans close, his lips by my ear.

"Be quiet. Unless you want the Horde to know that I'm playing with your pretty cunt."

He straightens and goes back to facing forward, the same as me. Only he continues guiding the flower over my skin, everything hidden behind the table and the furs covering it. First the outside of my thigh, followed by the inside. Heat swallows me, making me fevered, sweat beading between my breasts.

After angling the flower, he uses the stem to move the material of my dress off to the side. It drapes at my hip to pool beneath me. The cool night air kisses my skin, battling the warmth slowly heating me from the inside.

He sucks in a breath at the sight of me, now that I'm completely bared to him.

I squirm in my chair. We were alone the first time Maliq touched me and he didn't expose me like this. Now we're on a dais with his people a foot away and he's taking things further, beyond my comfort.

And yet... part of me enjoys this challenge and the risk that comes with

it.

Is it something I can see to the end? Or will I be the first one to give in?

“*Idra mani lev orto meh,*” he says, his tone more gruff than before. “*Asili, mansyr ekar mali dir eto maja. Syar. Romi.*”¹

I can’t breathe, let alone talk. It takes every bit of concentration I have to remain still in my seat while he runs the rose along my inner thighs. The moment the soft petals graze my sex, I bite my lip.

“I mean what I said, little one. Every place this rose touches you is the place I want to put my hands...” A sweep over my clit. “My mouth.” Pressure against my entrance. “My cock.”

He spins the flower and I imagine it being the head of his cock. A whimper leaves me, despite me fighting it. This male is giving me fantasies I’ve never considered, never cared to think about before. But now that I am, I’m overwhelmed with desire for him.

“I scent your arousal,” he says, low enough for only me to hear. A couple walks past our table, the male’s arm around his female’s waist, and they bow their heads to the dragon lord. “*Verborir lan zetos*”²,” Maliq says to them.

They respond in Durak before walking away, staring into each other’s eyes. I’m too on edge to look at them and see if they suspect anything. From the way Maliq’s voice sounds steady, if mildly bored, I think I’m the only one who’d give us away.

Even so, I close my eyes, needing a moment’s respite to gather my composure.

The delicious pressure at my entrance disappears to be replaced with a swat to my clit. With a noise of protest gathering in my throat, I jerk my head to stare at Maliq. He meets my gaze with a heated look.

“Keep your eyes open. I want to see the passion turn the blue into sapphires, ready to weep. Just like your cunt.” He brings the rosebud, with the petals now beginning to loosen, to his nose and inhales deeply. A low rumble leaves him in a growl that’s more animal than human. “Divine.”

My body takes over, desperately seeking out what it wants. I circle my hips and let my head fall back to rest on my chair, still gripping the table. All the while I feel his gaze boring into me.

The rosebud is at my clit once more and a strangled noise leaves me as I stifle my groan. “More,” I whisper.

“More what? Tell me exactly what you want.”

“More of everything.”

He shakes his head. "That's not correct." The pressure against my swollen flesh increases, making my hips buck. "You want to come."

I nod, looking at him without concealing the desperation sure to be found in my eyes. "Yes."

"Say. It."

"I can't."

Shaking my head, I stop breathing as my core pulses madly, then clenches, my entire frame going taut. I'm on the precipice of something that will satiate me or drive me to madness. Either way, I have to find out.

Once again, Maliq halts his movements, prolonging my torture. Amplifying my need.

"Damn you," I grit out.

He waves the rose back and forth in front of my face. I can smell the effects of my arousal coating the petals and I nearly moan. That flower symbolizes me: it'll bloom into something beautiful, if it can just feel the heat of the sun.

"I told you to tell me that you wanted to come and you refused," he says. "Say the words and I'll reward you for being obedient. Your passion belongs to me now. Do you understand?"

I'm hot all over. Every inch of me that he's teased begs for more. I drop my gaze, taking in my flushed skin and the moisture coating my inner thighs. Something inside me unfurls like a mythical creature being born, unwilling to be caught and suppressed. I cling to that image. Or insanity.

"Look closely, my dragon lord," I say, my words almost a purr. "Or you might miss the passion you claim to own."

His gaze snaps to mine then lowers to my hand as I drag it down my belly. I reach for my clit, with me more than ready for relief. He's not the only one who can offer pleasure.

Maliq snatches my wrist before I can touch myself. "Be careful."

"Or what?" I lift a brow in challenge. "The Horde will hear me?" I release a laugh that's mocking but husky, a sound I never thought I'd have the ability to produce. "Let. Them. Hear."

I tug on his hold in an attempt to get him to release me. The male tightens his grip and rises to his feet, yanking me to mine. He towers over me, bringing our faces a breath apart.

"We finish this," he says. "Now."

CHAPTER 27



*H*elena

My heart is going to give out.

I know I acted out of defiance, but that's because I wanted to provoke him enough to make me come. My mind is nearly crazed with how much my body cries out for relief. Every part is sensitive to touch, every inch of skin burning with desire.

Maliq pulls me to him. Already unsteady on my feet, I slam into his chest, my breath leaving me in a whoosh. He grips my arm with his free hand, holding me in place but also keeping me upright.

"You are unexpected," he says. "You're like an inferno, searing my insides and scorching my inhibition, rendering them ash. But I am a dragon lord and it is *I* who creates fire. And who consumes it without becoming burnt."

"Maliq—"

His name is caught on the wind and carried away as he all but drags me behind him. I quicken my steps to keep up with his long strides, blindly following. There's no other choice. At least, not one I want.

He's finally going to make good on his promise to me; to be with me in a way that no male ever has. And might never again.

But I can't think about that now, not when the inspiration for my every fantasy is before me. My pulse picks up in speed, matching my ragged breathing. Half born of exertion and the other half excitement.

All of me is nervous.

“Zahtan,” calls out a voice.

Maliq stops so suddenly that I plow into his back. He’s quick to steady me, but his attention is on someone else. It’s on Terim.

“What do you want?”

The warrior takes a step forward, but stops at the narrowing of Maliq’s gaze. He responds in Durak, his dark eyes flickering to me. I’m too high-strung—and drunk—to reassure him that all is well. If that’s even why he’s here. Maybe he’s reached out to the dragon lord for a matter concerning the Horde.

If the tightness in the male’s voices are anything to go by, whatever the subject is, it’s serious.

The discussion increases in volume and intensity. Both males stand to their full height, eyes bright with anger, bodies stiff with tension. I take a step back, wanting distance from whatever is about to erupt from this exchange.

My movement snags Maliq’s focus. He swings his gaze to me and I jerk my arm back, hoping he’ll release me.

“I want to sleep,” I say. It’s partially the truth and the most believable. “Please.”

“Go straight there,” he says.

I nod in agreement. It’s not a hard order to follow. I wouldn’t mind a few moments to myself before Maliq joins me.

If he hasn’t already changed his mind.

The male drops his hold on me and I march off, but not before giving Terim a small wave. He jerks his chin in my direction, his placid expression leaving nothing for me to interpret. Whatever’s happening between him and Maliq, I have no reservations in letting them figure it out in private.

The noises from the wedding celebration follow me as I make my way deeper into the Horde’s camp. Once I’m sure I’m alone, I remove my sandals, digging my toes into the cool grass. I repress the urge to dance or spin in glee, but I’m giddy. And not only from Maliq’s caresses.

I’m... happy.

I stop in the pathway and frown. Being with the dragon lord is supposed to give me access to his magic and a rudimentary knowledge of practical skills. But not joy.

My heart beats loudly in the quiet, as though to protest. I clutch my chest and take a deep breath, trying to contain the panic rising within me. When did

my mission become a pursuit of pleasure that has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with emotion?

I close my eyes, squeezing them tightly as if that will make this dilemma vanish. When I was under Desmond's compulsion, my mind always battled with my heart... but I'm not under anyone's control except my own.

And my heart is currently winning.

I'm so caught up in my inner turmoil at this discovery, I don't sense another's presence until pain flares at the base of my skull. Stars shoot through my vision right before disappearing into complete darkness.



I'm dead.

At least, I wish I was.

Unable to do anything except feel, I take in my surroundings one sense at a time. My chilled skin grows colder as the wind sweeps over me. The shivering leaves above are the only sounds other than my thin breaths as I struggle to inhale.

My pain is stronger than anything. It radiates, pulses like a life-form, at the back of my head, making it difficult to think properly. I'm sitting on the ground with my head bowed since I lack the strength to lift it, and my mouth is dry. Is that from screaming? Or did I even get a chance to call for help?

A quick dig into my memories produces nothing. Just darkness and agony invading my body and mind. Where am I?

Maliq.

My mind and heart both chant his name, calling for him.

I force my eyes open, intent on searching for him. My vision starts off blurry. After a few blinks it clears and I scan the area, finding nothing except trees all around, none of them familiar. However, the rope around my wrists is nothing I haven't experienced before.

Neither is the low growl that skims my ear.

My gut screams for me to move. I jerk on my bindings with a quick tug. I've been tied to a tree trunk and my knife is of no use to me back in Maliq's hut. Even so, I force myself to stand.

Dizziness assaults me. Another growl, closer this time, clears my mind faster than I can blink. I dart my gaze back and forth until it lands on a pair of

silver eyes. A wolf.

Of course, it is.

With its superior senses, I'm certain it detected my presence with a mere sniff. That leaves me with two options. The first is to remain silent and pray the creature doesn't come for me. The second is to scream and pray that a different creature comes for me. One of the dragon variety.

I take a deep breath and release a sound shrill enough to wake the dead.

And I keep it up until my lungs collapse and my throat gives out. Then begin anew. The wolf joins me in my call, lifting its head and howling. Unlike me, it receives an answer.

Several of them.

One pair of silver eyes becomes many. I stop counting at five. Certain death stares me in the face in the form of a wolf pack.

As if taunting me, they encircle the area in which I stand, slowly coming closer. My screams have lessened in strength and volume, becoming nothing more than desperate cries. Each one could be my last.

I look up in search of a way to survive. All of the branches above me are too high for me to grab without enough slack from my bindings. I plant my foot against the trunk and pull with all my might.

Desperation clings to me like the beads of sweat dotting my back and soaking into my clothing. For all of my efforts, the rope doesn't loosen, nor does it give. I groan in frustration. Anger and fear fuse together in the pit of my belly, giving me the wherewithal to keep trying, to find a way to stay alive.

I scan the ground. Rock and sticks are the only things at my disposal, but I've already begun crafting a plan. I crouch down and gather all the stones within my reach, along with the longest, sturdiest tree branch.

Then I wait.

I might die, but it won't be without a fight.

The first wolf to advance is quick. He darts toward me, and then backs away the moment I swing the stick in a wide arc. It becomes a dance, with him gaining distance at every interval.

He snaps his jaws and yips when I shriek. If a wolf could laugh, I'd swear this one mocks me. I swipe the air with my weapon. The predator leaps out of the dangerous pathway, giving me enough time to grab a large rock the size of my hand.

I throw it with as much force as I'm able and it pegs my attacker. An

animalistic yelp has my chest swelling with satisfaction. However, the growl that follows deflates it.

The wolf barks once. A command. The others gather 'round, their lips peeling back with snarls. I release a scream, only this one is that of a warrior, a woman unwilling to accept the fate before her.

My war cry is like the breaking of glass. It shatters the fear clawing at my throat. I grip my stick, the bark digging into my palms, leaving the skin smarting.

The next wolf to advance is bolder than the first. My weapon slams into its snout, forcing it back as the creature shakes his head. The next is a blur of gray in the moonlight. Its jaws clamp down onto my ankle and I yell as pain shoots up my calf.

The animal tosses its head, tearing my skin and dragging me to my knees. I grab another stone, the largest of the bunch, and bring it down on the wolf's head. A sickening crunch follows and my stomach heaves. But I don't stop hitting it until its jaws slide away from my leg.

Blood splatter covers my clothing and my face. Yips and snarls fill my ears. The forest is a composition of death and destruction.

A sound rises above the rest. A roar so ferocious, so savage it has my heart stuttering in my chest.

It causes the attackers to freeze where they stand, their fangs bared, their ears twitching. I want to investigate what has them transfixed, but I can't afford to. Instead, I retrieve my stick and lean my back against the tree to support my weight.

Another roar fills the night.

It streaks through the leaves above, rattling the ground below, and disturbing the wind. I flinch. The sound is filled with rage. Such fury that I wait for it to strike me where I stand.

Only there are no footsteps. I tilt my head the slightest bit and that's when I catch a glimpse of something golden. A dragon appears a moment later, its gaze narrowed and teeth exposed.

The wolves spin to face the threat. Readily dismissing me. I dare not move, not wanting to regain their attention. But my presence hasn't gone unnoticed, not when the dragon stares straight at me.

"Malik," I mouth, too afraid to make a sound.

The dragon releases a growl that has me biting back a shriek. And has the wolves advancing. In a fog of terror, I watch the battle unfold. The pack

charges the dragon as one unit. They're met with a snapping of jaws and a swipe of sharp claws. Cries of pain and barks of anger join the sounds of bone crunching.

I don't close my eyes, but the gruesome sight makes me wish I would. The dragon mets out punishment in the form of death while the wolves attempt to wound, to bring down the beast. It's a lost cause.

Bodies litter the ground.

Blood paints the grass.

My legs give out. I sink down until I'm sitting, blinking back the oncoming faint. If I pass out, I've already decided to blame it on the wine, not my aversion to gore.

As quickly as the battle began, it ends, blanketing the forest in a deceptive quiet. The newfound silence doesn't tell the story of danger that just paraded through, taking many victims. It doesn't speak of my fear as it morphs into relief at the sight of Maliq shifting out of his dragon form.

His gaze finds mine and he strides to me, uncaring of his nakedness. Or the blood trailing down his arms and legs. The male kneels before me, almost as though to pledge his devotion, and reaches out a shaking hand to cup my cheek.

"Helena." My name is a tortured groan. An apology that I never demanded. "Are you all right?"

CHAPTER 28



*H*elena

Maliq doesn't wait for my answer. His hands are on me, running over my extremities, grazing my skin with his frantic movements. His fingers tremble as he lifts the hem of my dress and his gaze sweeps the bite mark there.

He releases a string of words foreign to my ears, but the emotion behind them is one I can translate. Agony.

"Be still," he says.

Then the male takes my bindings and slices through them with a claw-tipped finger. I gasp as he rips a strip of material from my skirt, but for once I obey and don't move. He wraps my calf, tying it off securely before looking at me, his stare so intense I can barely meet it.

"As Zahtan I never request, never beg," he says, "but for you, Helena, I beseeched every divine being in existence, promising to offer my soul while on my knees, if meant I'd find you amongst the living."

"I'm alive because of you."

He takes my face between his hands. They no longer tremble, but I'm shaking. With the need for him to hold me, to comfort me.

"I think the gods feared what I would do, if you weren't," he says. "My vow of vengeance went unsaid, but it raged in my soul, loud enough for them to hear."

I place my hand on his chest and his heart pounds furiously against my palm. "Maliq."

His name is the only word that matters to me, the only one that rids me of the horror from a moment ago. This male fought for me savagely, fiercely and without remorse. This is how I want him to make love to me.

To *love* me.

I slide my hands upward until they encircle his neck and press my body to his, wanting to be close to him. He growls in his throat, the sound animalistic, despite him no longer in dragon form. His gaze still shines as bright as it did in the battle, but now the gold churns with something other than the need for violence.

It's just... need.

Maliq slams his mouth to mine and spears his tongue between my lips, claiming me in one motion. I cling to him, not trying to temper the ferocity brewing underneath his skin. I want everything he has to give, no matter what it costs me.

And it might be more than I can afford.

He groans and rips his mouth from mine, breaking the kiss. I blink up at him, still swept away in a tide of passion. A question forms on my lips, but it's replaced with a gasp when he stands and tosses me over his shoulder.

"Maliq." My voice is nothing but a puff of air as he sprints through the trees. "Wait."

"The beast within me wants to be soothed that you're alive. The only acceptable way is to be inside you, Helena. But if I take you now, you may not survive."

"Oh."

He increases his speed and sharp currents of wind slap at my cheeks, tangling my hair. Even so, his voice still flows past my ears.

"I can't be balls deep in that sweet cunt anytime soon, unless I want to end up at risk of shifting again."

His muttering has me clenching my thighs.

"Scenting your arousal is not helping matters, Helena."

"Sorry."

He barks out a laugh. "No, you're not."

I shrug. I think. It's hard to know when being jostled about.

Quicker than I anticipated, Maliq slows to a jog, his grip still tight across the backs of my thighs. I push off his shoulder and lift my head. Then wait for the spinning to stop. When my vision clears, I frown, not able to see much. A strip of moonlight pools on the ground next to me, providing the

only light in the space.

“Where are we?”

“My lair.”

“Your lair?”

He grunts. “Are you going to repeat everything I say?”

“Say something that makes sense and I won’t have to.”

“My dragon needs to know you’re safe. That is why we’re here. It’s a cavern near the camp.”

Maliq grabs my hips and lowers me to the ground, sliding my body down the length of his. My breath catches at the hardness of him. He growls, the vibrations skittering along the side of my neck. He places an open-mouthed kiss there.

I grip him tight. Not because of my wound or the fact that I can’t see much more than Maliq in front of me. I just don’t want to be apart from him.

“Tell me to stop,” he whispers between kisses. “You’re in no condition to handle the things I want to do to you.”

I’ve lied about everything else, but I can’t about this. It’s too pure, too precious.

Words don’t feel adequate. Not when compared to the emotions this male stirs in me. I run my fingers through his hair like I wanted to do since the day I met him. The strands are finer, softer than mine and glide over my hand like silk. He doesn’t stop kissing my skin and I let my head fall to the side, silently encouraging him. Telling him how much I don’t want him to stop.

He digs his fingers into my hips, holding me still before pressing his cock into my belly. I moan shamelessly. My modesty left the moment he begged the gods to spare my life.

“If I were honorable, I would take you back to camp and tend to your wounds,” he says, his warm breath sweeping against the column of my throat. “But my magic will heal you, and the selfish part of me knows this.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. Or why he’s talking to begin with. My leg pains me, but it’s nothing compared to the ache inside me. Maliq has teased me, bringing me close to my climax, only to leave me wanting. That won’t happen again.

With a sharp tug on his hair, I lean into his sturdy frame and lift my leg, wrapping it around his hip. The feel of his cock between my thighs has my lips parting on a gasp. To think of him filling my body...

“I can see we’re done talking,” he says. There’s a hint of amusement in

his tone, but it's quickly replaced with a serious tenor. "Don't move."

He shreds my clothes.

My dress falls to the ground in a pile of ribbons, pooling at our feet. The air in the cave doesn't hold the same chill as the forest, but it still has my skin prickling. Or maybe it's Maliq's golden eyes tracing every one of my curves that has me shivering.

He feasts on me with his gaze while dragging the back of his claw down my side. The scales on his forearm wink at me anytime the moonlight glints off of them. This male harnesses power and danger within his body, yet he touches me with a tenderness that has my heart lurching in my chest.

"I want this to be perfect for you," he says, "but I don't know how to contain the beast. It's never been this way for me. He wants to take you in the way that's natural to him: to devour, conquer, and claim."

"Tell your dragon that I'm not afraid of fire." I grip his hand and bring it to my sex, pressing hard. "Not when I already burn."

Maliq stares at me. His chest rises and falls sharply, and a muscle along his jaw pulses, but he doesn't move. Tendrils of embarrassment gather in the pit of my stomach and I shove them away.

Using his knuckles, I pleasure myself, running them up and down my clit. "I'm going to come, with or without your help."

The male growls and jerks his arm back. "I already told you once: your passion belongs to me and none other. Keep your eyes on me."

He removes my leg from around his waist and takes half a step back. Only to get on his knees before me. I stare at him, my uncertainty and excitement mixing together.

With excruciating slowness, Maliq slides his palms on the outside of my thighs and then to the back, where he grips me. Spreads me. He brings his mouth just in front of my entrance and wisps of smoke rise from his nostrils to lightly skim my clit.

I watch him flick out his tongue and then moan the second it laps at my swollen flesh. Pleasure assaults me with the force of a heavy wind, causing me to sway. Only his hands squeezing my thighs keeps me upright. Even so, I reach out and weave my fingers in his hair, holding onto the dark strands to keep me tethered to him. Before my orgasm takes me away.

Maliq lifts my leg and drapes it over his shoulder, forcing me to open wider for him. He continues to lick and suck my clit, alternating that between quick nibbles and tiny bits of pressure that have me groaning. I grind my hips

against his mouth, using my grip on his hair to bring him closer.

My eyes flutter shut as my sex clenches, tightens with release. A pinch to my clit makes me suck in a breath. I drop my gaze to Maliq and his golden eyes narrow.

“Look at me,” he says, his lips brushing against me.

I swallow deep and inhale a fortifying breath before nodding once. He encircles my clit with his tongue before pulling the bit of flesh between his lips. The hard pull of his mouth sends me careening into rapture.

My legs shake as my moans fill the cavern. Maliq draws out my pleasure, never stopping the strokes of his tongue or letting up on the delicious pressure. He brings his hand to my entrance, groaning when his fingers discover the dampness there, and slides one inside me.

I freeze, my sex fluttering around his finger. But when he uses it to stroke me, I fall into bliss once more, only it’s stronger. Strong enough to make my legs give out.

Maliq is there, guiding me downward and into his arms. I stare up at him through hooded lids, drunk on lust and gratification. He brushes back a stray lock of my hair, looking down at me with a strange expression. One I’ve never seen on his face before.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, cupping his cheek.

He takes my hand and kisses my inner wrist. “Nothing.”

With his assistance, I sit up. When I straddle him, his eyes widen, giving me an unobstructed view of his thoughts. Of his concern for me.

I caress the side of his face. “Don’t worry. I promise I’ll be gentle.”

His lips twitch with suppressed laughter right before he wraps his arm around my waist, pinning me in place. He brings his other hand to my entrance, gliding his fingers through the wetness there.

“I’m not the one with a tight little cunt, about to get fucked by a dragon,” he says.

His smile finally appears. Confident and tantalizing with a hint of playfulness. Everything I love about him.

“Promises, promises,” I mumble.

He dips his finger inside me, pushing deep, and then rotates his hand. My body coils around him before relaxing. Each stroke stealing my breath until I’m panting.

I grab his shoulders and dig my nails into his skin as he takes me higher. Stretches me further. He adds another finger and the feeling of fullness

increases.

“Ride my hand, *jahira*¹. Just like you’re taking my cock inside you.”

My body is quick to obey him. It settles into a rhythm that brings me closer to release. Closer to him.

“You’re not stretched enough,” he says, inserting a third finger inside me. “I don’t know if I can wait long enough to prepare you, not when you’re fucking my hand like a goddess made flesh.”

“Oh my—”

He thrusts inside me so forcefully that my lungs collapse. “You’ll say *my* name or nothing at all.”

I come with his name on my lips, saying it again and again like a prayer. Except I’m not petitioning the gods. No, I’m begging this male to fuck me, to make me his.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs.

Maliq removes my hand from his shoulder and brings it to his cock. I marvel at the feel of him, letting my fingers explore. Hard yet soft. A girth that has my sex weeping. Quivering.

He hisses when I grip him firmly and run the head of his cock along my slit. We both groan when I do it for a second time. Every sound of ecstasy that leaves him encourages me, emboldens me.

I position his cock at my entrance and slide down on it, taking the head inside me. The arm around my waist trembles, but his free hand snakes down between our bodies to steadily massage my clit. With a gentle shift of my hips, I take more of him.

Every inch of his cock is a battle won.

Every groan is a flag of surrender.

I might get fucked by a dragon, but he’s going to get tamed by me.

Maliq increases the speed and pressure of his sweeps over my flesh. I arch my back and my eyes flutter closed. “I’m going to come.”

He moves the hand from my waist to grip the back of my neck. One squeeze. “Eyes on me. I want to see the moment I fill your sweet cunt, the moment you realize it’s me who makes you feel this way.”

My orgasm slams into me and I cry out. Maliq is ready. He tightens his hold on my neck and presses me down while thrusting up. My core spasms wildly at my release, the feel of him, and the flash of pain.

Then there’s nothing but pleasure as he begins to move, watching me all the while, his gaze never leaving mine. I fall apart in his arms, powerless to

do anything except follow where he leads me. Our passion is an inferno that only builds as he drives into me over and over, each stroke claiming another piece of me. I match his movements, trying to navigate this wave of pleasure until it crashes, drowning me.

“You ride my cock so well,” he grits out. “Like you were made for me. Made for me to fuck.”

“Maliq, please.”

I’m begging. Pleading. Dying to come.

As if he hears the sob at the back of my throat and the tears gathering in my eyes at his brutal thrusts, Maliq drives into me even harder. Taking my body. My very will.

I scream his name as my orgasm overtakes me. He watches me, face contorted with pleasure and concentration. Until he lets go.

Maliq comes with a roar that shakes the ground. He doesn’t stop thrusting into me, doesn’t stop slamming me onto his cock, even though it swells, making me come again.

He waits for me to drift back down from rapture, for my release to ebb, before laying us down on a pile of furs. My back to his front, his heart beating against mine, and his cock still pulsing inside me.

“Helena?”

I stiffen. I’m not ready to leave the euphoric state I’m in. It’s everything I wanted, but didn’t know existed. In this moment I can imagine Maliq loves me and that he wants me in his life. For me to think about anything else... I just can’t.

“If I pretend to be asleep, will you stop talking?” I whisper.

He adjusts my hair, moving it away from my neck in order to place a kiss there. “I’m insulted if you think you could actually sleep with my cock filling you.”

“I’m willing to try.”

Maliq laughs. The sound is gruff, throaty from shouting. My name.

“I’m not,” he says. He withdraws a little and drives back in with a groan. “I don’t think I’ll sleep again, not when thoughts of this will plague my thoughts. Haunt my dreams.”

I close my eyes while stifling a moan. He won’t be the only one who remembers this moment. It will be something I treasure until the day I die.

“Helena, are you all right?”

No, I’ll never be the same. Not after this night, not after loving him.

“Mhmm.”

He pauses, releases a long breath, and then kisses me just below my ear. “You don’t sound certain.” Maliq snakes his arm over my hip to rest his palm against my chest. “Your heart beats too quickly as though you’re frightened. Are you scared of me because I was too rough with you?”

I shake my head.

“Then what is it?”

“It’s nothing.”

When Maliq pulls back, withdrawing from me, there’s an immediate sense of loss. The joining of our bodies is something I wanted for a little longer. And more than once.

He turns me so I’m lying on my back with him hovering over me. I stare up at him, taking in the contours of his face and chest, as well as the brightness of his gaze. There’s a tenderness that wasn’t there before. It makes my heart ache.

“*Jahira*, don’t lie to me,” Maliq says. “You trusted me with your innocence and your body. Now I want you to trust me enough with your thoughts.”

“I don’t want to see you hurt. What we’ve done...” I squeeze my eyes shut. “Your people won’t accept it.”

He presses a kiss to one eyelid, followed by the other. “Look at me. Look at your Zahtan.” When I do, Maliq rewards me with a kiss on my lips. “Listen well and heed every word that I say. The Horde will not oppose me in this. There will be some individuals who won’t like your place in my life, but they will bend the knee. If not, then they’ll be dealt with.”

I blink up at him. “Dealt with?”

“If they’re foolish, they can challenge me for the right to rule. That’ll only result in their humiliation, and possibly their death. If they don’t, then they’ll adhere to my authority, as they have since I became the leader.”

“Won’t they try to kill me?” I ask, remembering Isa’s warning.

“To touch you, is to forfeit their life, Helena. I have made that publicly clear to everyone, including Jazin. *Especially* my brother. You never have to fear him again.”

The tightness in my chest eases a little, but it’s not enough for me to relax completely. “You’re just one person against so many. I can’t stand the idea of you getting hurt because of me.”

Maliq’s mouth tightens. “Is it because you care for me, *jahira*?”

“Jahira?”

“Lover.”

“Oh. What do I call you?” I ask, evading his question.

“Zahtan.”

I make a face at him and he laughs. The sound warms me more than his body, makes my heart take flight. “Quit teasing me. I want to know.”

His expression shifts to something serious that has my pulse picking up speed. “‘Mine.’ That is what I am to you and what you are to me.”

CHAPTER 29



*H*elena

I got fucked by a dragon and lived to see another day. Just like I'd hoped.

And Maliq's magic healed me. Just like he'd said.

At first I thought he was jesting, saying his magical cock would heal my injuries by fucking me into a coma. That wasn't the case. After having sex with the dragon lord, I absorbed some of his shifter abilities, one which is regeneration. My leg has never felt better.

My heart has never felt such turmoil.

Unfortunately, no amount of magic can heal that wound.

I look over at the horizon, avoiding Maliq's gaze for the hundredth time. The sun has already begun its descent in the sky. I'm more nervous than I've been all day. Terrified, if I'm being honest.

When Maliq and I left this morning in search of the artifact, I was apprehensive to be alone with him. Not because he'd hurt me or anything ridiculous. It was more that I worried he'd talk about our night together, forcing me to think about it.

He hasn't yet. Thank the gods.

Traveling has been a great distraction but that's about to end once we make camp for the night. Hence my unease. It stems from various worries that are tangled together, creating a colorful tapestry of neurosis.

I guess losing my virginity has turned me into a poet. Hmm...

There are so many things I want to discuss that have nothing to do with

our shared intimacy. My first concern is how to prevent myself from shifting into a dragon until I'm ready. There's no denying my magic worked in borrowing Maliq's, but now that I have it, I'm not sure how to control it properly.

However, my greatest concern is the *aldemir servet*. It's supposed to expose all of my lies. And there are *a lot*. Can I avoid this without raising Maliq's suspicions? If I have to go through with it, what'll the hordesman do to me once he finds out the truth?

I have to leave before any of that happens. This thought pains me more than any others and because of my visceral reaction, it scares me more as well. I'm not giving up on Amara. That'd be the same as stabbing myself in the chest. However, I'm no longer willing to hurt Maliq more than necessary.

If there was a way to return his magic back to him and still save my sister, I would.

I briefly close my eyes and press my lips together to smother a groan of frustration. Despite my silence, the dragon lord flicks his gaze to me. I continue staring straight ahead, but I can still see him from the corner of my eye. Even if I couldn't, I'd still feel him watching me.

Like he's done all day.

I'll admit I'm a coward. Whatever courage I walked into the Horde's camp with has deserted me. I even brought Sid along for this trip in case I had an opportunity to seek his counsel. Now that my main goal has been accomplished, I'm not sure what advice the demi-god can give me. Assuming he hasn't returned to the heavens... I just want someone to comfort me.

Other than Maliq.

Although, he's the only one I want close.

"When the sun disappears completely behind the mountain, we'll make camp for the night," he says.

I nod, my stomach churning. With nerves, guilt, and... awareness. My attraction to Maliq has only grown since last night. Now I know what it's like to be with him, to be touched by him. Be fucked by him.

And I want more. In every sense of the word.

More kisses. More caresses.

But also, more than just sex.

More emotion. More affection.

Like I told him during the wedding, I want more of everything.

The sun drops behind the mountain range like a stone sinks to the bottom

of a river, giving me little time to gather my composure. I've had all day to prepare, but I doubt there will ever be enough time to harden myself to Maliq's presence. To the sound of his voice or the feel of his touch.

He halts his mount and I do the same. The hordesman is by my side in a flash like the day we met, only I don't need his help like I did then. Or maybe I do, but just not in the same way.

I slide from my horse and land with an ease that wasn't there before. Then I look up at him and smile. The expression wobbles on my face as tears prick my eyes. The male studies me, his gaze piercing me, peeling back the flimsy armor I've shielded myself with.

I take a step back so that his hands don't make contact with my skin. "Thank you. I think your magic has helped with my coordination problem."

"Magic can't be the solution to every problem."

Gods, don't I know it.

"Dinner time?" I ask. My voice is a note higher than usual and I clear my throat to try again. "I'm hungry."

Maliq's gaze searches mine for a moment. Then he smiles at me, making my breath hitch. "You're always hungry, Helena."

"I don't know who I need to speak to in order to get 'second dinner' as an approved practice. But after we get back home, I'm definitely going to ask."

"I'm the one you'd need to come to for such a request."

"Oh, forget it." I smirk and wave a hand in dismissal. "You'll deny me right away."

He reaches out and skims the side of my face with his knuckles. "I doubt there's anything I would deny you, *kalina mei*¹. Not now."

My heart expands in my chest, making it ache. I avert my gaze so he won't see the pain that's sure to be in my eyes. "Maliq..."

He steps closer, taking my chin in hand and lifting it until I'm staring up at him. "Why do you run from me? Are you frightened that I'll take you again?"

"No," I say.

"No?"

"I hadn't considered that."

He scoffs. "You hadn't considered that?"

"Are you going to repeat everything I say?" I ask with a frown.

"I've done *more* than consider it. I've imagined it, fantasized about everything I want to do to you, everything I want you to experience." He uses

his free hand to grab mine, splaying my fingers against his hard cock. “Every moment I’m not inside you is agony.”

My jaw drops. Despite my mouth hanging open, I can’t catch my breath.

“Say something, Helena.”

“I lied.”

His expression darkens, but his eyes flash with gold. “About what?”

Everything.

“I *am* scared,” I whisper. “But not for the reasons you think.”

Maliq releases his hold on me to gently take my face between his large hands. He tilts my head back, staring at me with such tenderness that I blink back tears.

“Don’t you know that I’d never hurt you, *jahira*?” When I nod, he asks, “Then what are you afraid of?”

“The future. My former master still lives and everyday he gets closer to leaving his temporary stasis. I worry not only for myself, but for the Horde. For *you*.”

The dragon lord squints down at me. “I’m insulted that you don’t think I’m strong enough to protect you from a vampire, or anyone who threatens you.”

“And the Horde? You can’t take my side over them.” I blow out a breath full of frustration. “I’d never ask you to do that. But even if you did, it wouldn’t be fair. Your people are right not to trust me. I was and always will be a risk as long as I’m blood-bound.”

He stares at me and I hold his gaze, watching his unspoken thoughts swirl in the depths of his eyes.

“The idea of leaving you...” I briefly close my eyes and lean into his palm. “It pains me, Maliq.”

“Let us not speak of this. Once we retrieve the artifact, we can revisit this conversation.”

“All right.”

In the deepest parts of my soul I wish we could, but I’ll be gone. Back where I started. Except with a broken heart.

The evening passes swiftly. At least it seems that way. Most likely because I know these are my final moments with the dragon lord. Keeping this in mind, I enjoy them to the fullest.

We talk for a long while, careful to keep the subjects neutral. His laughter echoes in the trees more times than I can remember and I smile at him until

my cheeks hurt. If I could imagine a perfect life, this would be it.

Me and my dragon.

Maliq takes me into his arms later on and I go willingly, more than ready to leave my troubled thoughts behind in pursuit of pleasure. Only, he doesn't initiate sex. I assume it's for my benefit, since he was more than ready earlier.

And his cock is still hard as it presses against my hip.

"Sleep, Helena," he says, his words drifting down my neck. "We rise early."

A twinge of disappointment stabs at me and I'm quick to shove it away. Another night of passion with Maliq would be wonderful, but it'll make it that much harder to leave him.

"Very well. Good night."

I close my eyes and exhaustion does the rest. Although, at the feel of Maliq's hands on my skin, I'm alert. He drags his fingers over my shoulder, along my arm, and across my lower back. I dare not breathe when he touches the mark there.

"*Azi verla nit,*" he whispers in the dark. "*Trik salmar biraz mili zot teriq, ner kalina drogo. Vur hezar, Asili, ler beni zat orto min yonik teri. Luro khai, majo zertal. Serti eht, majalia mersi veter².*"

Maliq slides his hand to my belly, splaying his hand across my middle. "*Serti eht, joli mersi veter. Serti eht, khati lenon veter. Nevah vir len kiska³.*"

He presses a kiss to my temple. "*Bali et, Zahtana. Pazar mir lovah stae olek.⁴*"

CHAPTER 30



*H*elena

The entrance that leads deep into the mountain looms before me like a giant maw waiting to swallow me into its belly. My imagination takes over, conjuring all sorts of dangerous outcomes, despite Maliq's reassuring presence. Why did the artifact have to be underground?

I point at the opening. "This is it."

The dragon lord scrutinizes the area and sniffs once. "I smell vampire."

"As far as I know, they're the last ones to see the relic in person."

I inhale deep, putting my temporarily enhanced senses to the test. The scent of a vampire tickles my nose and I wrinkle it in disgust as I'm reminded of Desmond. The smell has a crisp yet acrid quality to it. The exact opposite of Maliq, who's earthy and intriguing.

"Stay close to me," the hordesman says. "We don't know what awaits us inside."

"That won't be a problem. Shouldn't we bring a torch or something? It's dark in there."

Maliq turns to me with a smirk playing about his lips. "You'll see well enough with my magic flowing through your body."

"Oh, right." I shake my head. "I'm not used to having these abilities."

"I'll go first."

I nod vigorously. "Of course you are."

He holds out his hand to me and I'm quick to take it. The signature

warmth I'm anticipating doesn't envelop me. I frown.

"What is it?" he asks.

"Your touch usually heats my skin, but that feeling is missing."

Understanding lights his gaze. "I was overly warm to you, since your human blood doesn't run as hot as a hordesman's. Right now you have fire in your veins. Again, courtesy of my dragon magic."

"When you say it, it's so obvious. Although, I miss the differences between us."

"I don't," he says. "I like you this way, with my essence inside you."

Before I can respond, Maliq strides toward the entrance, taking us inside the mountain. The path isn't well-worn and the gravel crunches beneath our feet, sounding like miniature explosions in the near silence. The rough stone walls brush against my arm as the path narrows, only for it to expand again.

We continue on. Our descent is felt when the trail steepens, winding downward, bringing us that much closer to our destination. I hope. Even with apprehension flooding my thoughts, I can see clearly. Not as good as if the sun were shining, but it's not too far off. This lessens the tension lining my shoulders a little.

As we navigate the unknown, there are times when Maliq has to duck because the ceiling drops in height or we have to squeeze through tight passages. That's when it feels as if the weight and massiveness of the mountain is bearing down on me, pressing in at all sides. I keep my focus on the goal of finding the egg, both dreading and anticipating its discovery.

After what feels like hours of following a twisting, turning path, we enter a large chamber. The walls are covered in strange symbols and designs that look freshly drawn. The air is humid here, the warm mist coating my face and arms. In the center of the room is a pool of turquoise water.

That's boiling.

Steam rises and the gurgling sound fills the space as bubbles continuously rise to break the water's surface. In the midst of this roiling liquid sits a golden egg. The artifact glows, lighting up the area around it, as if lit from the inside.

I can only stare at it in awe. Despite being no longer than a foot in length, the artifact's presence envelops the cavern, radiating an ancient power. As if it's the very heart of the mountain.

"It is said that a dragon lord from long ago carried the relic into battle against the vampires," Maliq says, his soft tone reflecting his reverence, "but

he was severely wounded and lost his grip on it. The egg, carrying the essence of dragon fire within, burned through the earth's surface. For hours it descended, burrowing deep in the mountain, until Asili halted its path by placing it in a magical water. Where it would stay, waiting for its new master."

"It's beautiful."

Maliq shifts his gaze to me. "Yes, it is."

"Why is it so important? Can you finally tell me?"

"It contains dragon fire, the eternal flame given to my kind by Asili. I don't have the ability to create it without having the egg in my possession."

I scrunch my face in confusion. "You have to physically hold it?"

"No. It needs to be in a secure location amongst the Horde. The Zahtan from the legend I told you about was prideful, taking it with him to taunt his enemies. Only dragon fire is strong enough to melt through the stone that protects vampires. I've always wanted it to further protect my people."

"Oh, I see." I reach for the leather string around my neck and untie it. After removing the strand from the dragon scale, I stare at it. "This matches the artifact in color and luminosity."

"When I retrieve the egg, we'll know whether or not it's actually part of the relic."

"What are we waiting for?" I purse my lips. "I'm sure if you've noticed, but patience is not a virtue I possess."

"Be still, Helena. Asili's magic dwells here." Maliq closes his eyes. "I can feel it calling to my dragon."

I wait. Probably for a whole minute, which feels like an hour. Then I march toward the water. By the time I reach the water's edge, the horseman's gaze is on me, drilling into my skull.

"Helena..."

"It's warm," I say with a nonchalant wave. "You're right about me having your dragon abilities. I think this water would boil me alive without them. I'm guessing that's why the vampires couldn't retrieve the egg and left it here."

I wade into the pool and it's like I've stepped into a large bathtub. The hem of my dress is soaked, the material darkening to a deep gray, but the relic is not more than two feet from me. By the time I'm standing over it, the water laps at my knees.

"Be careful," Maliq says.

The warning in his voice has me hesitating. But only for a moment. When I make out a tiny gap in the scales covering the egg, I reach for it, pushing the lone scale in its rightful place amongst the others.

My scream echoes in the chamber before my vision darkens to nothingness.



“You have entered a trial by fire, human.”

The voice is all around me, but also thrums through my veins as though we’re a single entity. Other than the masculine sound, there’s nothing except a never-ending darkness that has my mind flailing, trying to make sense of what’s happening to me.

“Who’s there?” I ask.

“I am The Dragon Lord, the father of all that flies, ruler of the earthen sky. And who are you?”

“Helena, ruler of nothing.”

A sound sweeps over my consciousness, light and airy. A small bit of laughter. “I can see why Maliq chose you.”

“He did?” I ask, guilt flooding me.

“Yes. Now tell me why you chose him. Lies cannot withstand my divine flame, human. It’ll burn through every deceit, leaving behind truth in its purest form. Maliq will know yours.”

“I needed to obtain his dragon magic.”

“For what purpose?”

“That of my vampire master.”

Feelings of sympathy swirl around me, but they’re followed by a cold judgment. “You lied to Maliq.”

“Yes. I had to lie, or the dragon lord would’ve killed me.”

“You believe he still might?”

“He’ll certainly try.”

Another chuckle, only this one has an edge to it. “Try? You are delusional for such a clever human. Do you truly think he’ll let you keep his magic?”

“Its effects are temporary.”

“You think that won’t matter, given your future plans?”

“If Maliq knew of my intention to return to the vampires, he would do everything in his power to stop me. If he knew... I’ll leave before he finds out.”

A pause, and then, “Will you use my magic for good or evil?”

“Both. I know who I am and what I mean to do. Love is my guiding force.”

“Does that include harming my children?”

“I have no wish to hurt anyone from the Golden Horde,” I say. “I would die for them. But my loved one waits for me at the Crimson Castle and I will not tarry.”

“You truly mean all that you say. I did not expect this from you. Indeed, I thought the human heart was a fickle thing, easily shaped by whatever pressures came upon it.”

“Perhaps. And what about the heart of a god? Does it only contain the truth, or is there mercy to be found there as well?”

“Child of the earth, you will not experience any wrath from me. Not when your cause is honorable and just.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“It means you’re now a child of the earth and sky. My kin.”

“Erm... Thank you?”

“May my fire warm you on your loneliest nights. May my gift of flight keep you soaring. May my strength infuse your bones, igniting your blood, and my scales coat your skin for protection. Now and always.”

CHAPTER 31



*H*elena

“Wake up.”

Maliq’s voice drifts past my ears, equal parts concern and irritation. It’s the latter that has me forcing my eyes open. The dragon lord is directly in my line of sight, his large frame hovering over me where I lie on a blanket of grass, the relic clutched against my chest. The darkness of night surrounds us and for a moment I think I’m back in that dream again, the one where I spoke with the sky god.

“What happened?” I ask, my voice scratchy.

“A great many things were revealed.” Maliq’s gaze, already molten gold, swirls with such intense emotion that I gulp. “*Many* truths,” he says.

“Oh.”

At the narrowing of his eyes, I roll away from him and get to my feet in one fluid motion. A quick scan of the area reveals that we’ve returned to the base of the mountain, only this time the stars greet us, instead of a breaking dawn.

Maliq rises and folds his arms across his chest. I nearly flinch at the hostile energy flowing from him.

“My conversation with Asili... it wasn’t a dream?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “By touching the relic, you initiated the *aldemir servet*.”

“How do you know?”

“After you stopped screaming, I heard everything you said to Asili.”

“All of it?” The question is nothing more than a wheeze as the air inside my lungs leaves me. I stand there choking on words of denial that rise in my throat.

“Yes,” he snaps.

“I can explain.”

Maliq makes a slicing motion with his hand. I jump back, instincts protecting me from a chance at being struck. He glares at me, making my already pounding heart race even faster.

“Not another word,” he says. “I have no wish to add another lie to the collection you’ve already told me. It’s not enough that you’ve stolen my magic, but now you want to steal my honor as well?”

My mind spins as I try to recall the conversation with Asili. Yes, I lied, but if Maliq would only let me explain...

“Please,” I say, holding out the artifact in supplication. “Just listen to what I have to say before you dismiss me.”

Maliq snatches the egg from my hands, making me wince. “There’s nothing you can say to undo the betrayal you’ve caused,” he says. “Your words hold no meaning to me, just as your presence holds no value. Not any longer.”

If a heart can literally break, mine does in that moment. I lift my hand to my mouth to stifle a sob that builds in my chest. I was prepared for the hordesman’s distrust. I even anticipated his rage, but I wasn’t ready for his lack of mercy.

“Please give me a chance to explain. I’ll tell you everything if you’ll only listen.”

Maliq shakes his head. “There’s nothing you can say to repair the trust you broke. If you only knew what I was willing to do for you, the risks I was willing to take...” He releases a curse. “All so you could run back to your vampire? No, *rima*. I won’t listen.”

“What are you going to do to me?” I ask, unable to hide the pain in my voice.

I rise to the balls of my feet, ready to run. He’s stronger, but with his dragon magic inside me, I can match him in speed. I think.

“Yes, dragon lord, what are you going to do with my thrall?”

I spin around, seeking out the owner of the familiar voice. Desmond stands there, not ten feet from me and Maliq. Jazin is there also, his throat

gripped by my master.

“You play a dangerous game, vampire,” Maliq says.

Desmond scoffs. “From what I overheard, the human did everything I asked of her. I’ve already won so there’s no need to compete.”

“Let them go,” I say to Desmond. “Please.”

He lifts a brow. “You would plead on behalf of a savage?”

I would do anything to spare Maliq more pain. “Yes.”

“Helena, this is most unbecoming of you, my dear. Quite disappointing,” the vampire says. “Once we return home, we will have a little chat about this. And about your... insubordination. I liked you so much better when you were under compulsion.” The vampire sighs. “Come along. The dawn draws close, and you know how much I abhor the sun.”

Maliq stiffens when I walk over to Desmond. The movement is nearly imperceptible, but I’ve learned how to read the dragon lord. He’s a part of me that I’ll never be separate from.

It makes his hatred toward me all the more painful.

I look from the vampire to Jazin. The hordesman meets my gaze, his full of confusion and unease. “I’m so sorry it had to be this way,” I whisper. “I never meant for anyone to get hurt.”

He nods slowly, his gaze having lost none of its wariness.

“Let him go, Desmond,” I say. “I’ll do whatever you want, if you’ll spare his life.”

“Really?” When I nod, the vampire’s lips pull to the side. “With you no longer under compulsion, things will be a lot more interesting between us...”

I suppress a grimace. “If that’s what you want.”

“You should’ve heard the things that hordeswoman was saying,” Desmond says. He tightens his grip on Jazin’s throat and my palms grow sweaty. “Do you know how hard it was to hear about you acting like a savage, adhering to their customs and lifestyle? So primitive. I shudder to think on it.”

Maliq cocks his head. “Hordeswoman?”

Desmond nods. “Oh, yes, my little ally. She was most eager, even if not very useful. It’s not as though I wanted my thrall to be poisoned, or left for dead and eaten by wolves. I believe the female was overly zealous in her hatred of you, Helena. Or she was blinded by her lust for her king.”

“What was her name?” the dragon lord asks, his voice deceptively calm.

Desmond angles his head in Maliq’s direction, his crimson gaze sparkling

in the dark. “I didn’t ask for her name because it wasn’t important. Don’t take a single step in my direction, or I’ll snap his neck. ”

“I scented you around the camp, vampire.” Maliq narrows his gaze. “Along the riverbank and then again in the forest. Why didn’t you take the human and be gone?”

My master scoffs. “My hands were tied until the hordeswoman showed me proof of your coupling. After that, I fully intended on retrieving my thrall.”

“The bloodstains on the dress,” I whisper.

“Now you know everything, dragon lord. I really must be on my way.” Desmond lowers his hand from Jazin’s throat and shoves the male forward. Then he snakes his arm around my waist, yanking me to his side before backing up several paces. “How does it feel to know that she spread her thighs for you while thinking of me?” Desmond runs his tongue down the side of my neck and I grind my molars. “How does it feel to know she was always planning to return to me?”

Golden eyes swing to me and I nearly wither under the dragon lord’s fierce stare. Yet he remains silent. If it wasn’t for the scales creeping along his forearms and down the side of his neck, I’d think Maliq was in a trance.

Or maybe he’s just so disgusted by me that he can’t even bother with words. But I do care enough to try and ask for something he has no inclination to give me. I don’t say my request out loud, unable to gather enough courage to speak.

“Please, forgive me,” I mouth.

Even if Maliq were to accept my apology, I might never forgive myself.



“We’re home, Helena.”

I halt just outside the large double doors leading into the Crimson Castle. This might’ve been my residence, but it was *never* my home. Amara is the only place of welcome I have left in the world.

“You’ve avoided answering my questions for long enough. Where’s my sister?” I ask.

Desmond’s mouth pulls into a frown. “For someone who tried to kill me, you’re quite impertinent. Don’t think I’ve forgotten about your attempt on

my life.”

“What about Amara?” I fist my hands, digging my nails into my palms to ground myself. “Is she alive? Did you enact revenge on her after I left?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

“Tell me,” I grit out.

“She’s alive.” The vampire smirks at me. “But only if you do as you’re told.”

Relief washes over me like a great wind and I nearly smile at Desmond, but catch myself at the last second. He and his kind are responsible for my plight, the meager existence that I referred to as a life. Until I met Maliq.

That’s when I knew what it truly meant to live.

And love.

What I feel for Amara is just as powerful but very different. I’ve never felt as though my heart were two distinct pieces, both of them working toward keeping me alive. Can I survive without one?

Desmond grabs my arm and hauls me through the entrance. The cold marble halls greet us, contrasting greatly with the natural environment I’ve come to know while living amongst the Golden Horde. I’ve just arrived and I already can’t wait to escape with my sister.

We pass by several vampires. They stare at me with loathing, similar to the way Maliq’s people did when I first arrived. Unlike the hordesmen and women, these creatures of the night want to kill everyone in opposition to them. That includes me, more than ever.

“Lieutenant.”

We turn to face Vorigan as he makes his way to us. The captain of Marcel’s army is dressed in his uniform, the gold medallion on his chest catching the fire from the sconces and reflecting it back at me. It reminds me of Maliq’s eyes.

My heart squeezes in on itself, making my chest ache.

“Captain,” Desmond says with a quick bow. “How can I serve you?”

“I’ve come to oversee her preparation.”

“Preparation?” I ask.

The captain shifts his crimson gaze to mine. “Yes, preparation. Did you think Marcel would take you as is, smelling of horse, dirt, and...” He sniffs. “Savage.”

“I didn’t think about it at all,” I mumble.

“It’s not your place.” Vorigan turns to look at Desmond. “I’ll take over

from here.”

My master’s lips thin. “What does the Dark One want with my thrall?”

“He wants the dragon lord’s magic,” Vorigan says. “Did you honestly think you were going to be the one who drank from her? Our lord has been impatiently waiting for her return. The power inside your thrall is going to strengthen our coven like never before. This is why I’ve been tasked with her care.”

The pale skin of Desmond’s jaw tightens when he grinds his teeth. For a moment I think he’s going to challenge his superior officer, but my master nods. “Very well.”

Vorigan takes my arm and his brows gather. “You’re quite warm.”

“It’s from the dragon magic, no doubt,” Desmond says.

“It better be. I don’t want to be the one to tell Marcel that this thrall carries a fever.” The captain shifts his attention to me. “Obey me or you will suffer before I present you to my lord.”

I nod even though I have no desire to be in the company of either vampire. However, Vorigan is my sister’s master, the one vampire in this place that has the answers I seek. That doesn’t mean he’ll give them to me.

Desmond watches me as Vorigan leads me away, the crimson in his eyes bright like gems. I don’t look back. Once my sister is safe, I will kill my master.

And rip his head off. Just like Maliq told me to.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask.

“To my quarters.”

“Is Amara there?” When Vorigan shakes his head, I blow out a breath. “Where is she?”

“Don’t speak again until we’re alone.”

The cryptic response has me pressing my lips together. I hold no hope that he’ll tell me everything I wish to know, but presenting myself in a favorable light can’t hurt my cause. Like a dutiful thrall, I remain quiet until he shuts and locks the bedroom door behind us.

The room is similar to Desmond’s quarters with the red drapery and stone flooring. The only major difference is the size. Vorigan’s room is twice as big, with double the amount of furniture. Being a captain certainly has its perks.

“Is my sister well?” I ask.

Vorigan quirks a brow. “Do you have dragon magic?”

“Yes.”

“Then she is safe. For now.”

“What does that mean?”

He walks up to me and it takes everything inside me not to retreat. I’m not invincible, but I’m no longer the defenseless human. At least not while I have Maliq’s abilities.

“It *means*,” the vampire says, emphasizing the word, “she is safe as long as Marcel gets what he wants.”

“What do you want?”

“For you to prove your claim. Shift. Breathe fire. Something that’ll keep Amara out of harm’s way.”

I throw up my hands. “I don’t know how.”

“Have you tried?”

“Well, no.”

He gives me a pointed look. “Now is the time.”

“I don’t know where to begin.”

The vampire runs his hand through his midnight locks. “I think I have an idea.”

He walks over to the desk along the far wall and returns to me with a candelabra in hand. After extinguishing the candles, he lifts the object, placing it directly in front of my face.

“Blow.”

I mutter to myself about the pressure I’m under and how it’s not conducive to my performance or concentration. Vorigan doesn’t strike me for my insolence like Desmond might’ve in the past. This vampire has an amount of patience I didn’t think existed in his species.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. The stillness in the room aids my focus and I slowly block out all of the sounds. The beating of Vorigan’s heart. The footsteps receding down the hall. My shaky breaths.

After inhaling deep, I channel the energy in the pit of my belly and guide it upward. And out. My exhale leaves me in a steady stream of hot air and there’s a whoosh, a transference of heat.

“Darkness be merciful.”

Vorigan’s whisper has my eyes flying open. The three candles perched on the candelabra are lit, the flames flickering merrily. I dart my gaze to the vampire’s. His crimson eyes are wide, full of shock and... relief?

“I did that, right?” I ask, tilting my head at the candles.

“Yes. Your sister might survive after all.”

“What do you mean—”

I shut my mouth right before someone knocks on the door. The vampire grins at me and taps his ear. I suppose he wasn't expecting me to have heightened senses. To be fair, neither was I.

“One moment,” he calls out.

He walks over to the desk to set down the candelabra, and then blows out the flames. “We wouldn't want those to stay lit. Or else we might burn down the castle.”

I scrunch my face, my gaze lingering on his back. Oblivious to my confusion, Vorigan unlocks and opens the door, revealing a female vampire on the other side. She holds up a neatly folded garment. It's a pure white, without a single imperfection.

“I've brought the dress you asked for, captain.”

“Thank you,” Vorigan says, taking the item.

“Do you wish for me to bathe the thrall?”

The inquiry has me clenching my teeth and my fists. A sharp pain has me wincing and I drop my gaze to inspect my palms. Black claws have appeared on my fingertips in response to my anger.

My mind makes a connection, one that should've been obvious before this moment. Emotion is what triggers my abilities. It's the reason Maliq's eyes always changed colors and why scales sometimes appeared on his skin. Just now, I was able to light the candles and that was due to my fear for Amara's life if I didn't prove that I have dragon magic.

I store this information away, knowing it'll be needed in the near future. Once I find my sister, I won't hesitate to use every bit of magic inside me, depleting myself if necessary. All I have to do until then is bide my time.

For someone who hates waiting, that's easier said than done.

“The thrall will cleanse herself unassisted,” Vorigan says. “You may leave us.”

The female vampire bows her head. With her hair framing her face, she slides her gaze to me. It scrutinizes me in a way that has me glaring.

Once Vorigan and I are alone, the male turns to me. “What else can you do?”

I shrug. “I don't know. Until now, I never tried using these abilities.”

“Understandable.”

Compassion from a vampire? Impossible.

My gaze narrows in suspicion. “Is Marcel going to kill me?”

The captain leans back on the desk, planting his palms on the shiny surface. He meets my gaze, letting me see the honesty within. Like compassion, that is not something I ever thought I’d witness in a vampire.

“He might. The *thirst* can be hard to control,” he says. “It’s addicting to begin with, but then adding in the transference of power between species?” The male shakes his head. “It could override his intentions to keep you alive. For the next mission.”

I can’t stop myself from groaning. “It’ll never end.”

“No, it won’t. This is what it means to be human.”

“I can’t accept that.” My anger expands in my chest, heating me inside until tendrils of smoke leak from my nose. “I *won’t* accept that.”

Vorigan’s calm demeanor doesn’t change, despite my poorly concealed rage. “Your sister warned me you’d be like this.”

Every intense emotion leaves my body from one breath to the next. I blink at the vampire, still unsure I heard him correctly. “What did you say?”

“Amara fears for your safety and she was right to do so. For the love of darkness, you need to learn to hold your tongue. Or you’ll get us all killed.”

“Us?” I place a hand on my forehead before letting it fall to my side. “Maybe I do have a fever.”

Vorigan smiles at me. “No, thrall. You heard me.”

He pushes from the desk and strides up to where I stand in a stupor. Vampires, like the rest of the non-human species, live for a long time. It’s even possible they’re immortal, but I’ll die of old age before I can confirm. Whatever the case may be, this male has walked the earth for many years. There’s an ancient power that surrounds him in a way that demands respect. Vigilance.

“Listen closely, Helena. Everything I do is for Amara. I’m only divulging this secret because you care for her. I wasn’t sure of that until today.”

“Humans can be loyal,” I mutter in irritation.

“Indeed. However, after learning about your penchant for trouble, I assumed you might not return with the dragon lord’s magic. That would make things... difficult for my thrall, and I couldn’t have that.”

“Wouldn’t return?” I squint up at him. “Compulsion would’ve assured my return was imminent.”

“Ah, but you weren’t under Desmond’s control when you left.”

I gasp. “You knew?”

“Yes. So, imagine my surprise when you did come back. That alone was enough for me to know you truly cared for your sister.”

“Why didn’t you expose me?” I ask. As soon as the words leave me, my intuition whispers across my psyche. “You did that for Amara. Marcel would’ve killed me if he knew I had free will.”

Vorigan nods.

“Where is she? You still haven’t answered me.”

“Marcel has her to ensure you cooperate.”

The pain that flashes through his crimson eyes has my pulse racing. “Then we need to do whatever it takes to save her.”

“Let the preparation begin.”

CHAPTER 32



*H*elena

The entrance to the throne room is framed by tall, imposing wooden doors. Vorigan leads me through with a firm grip on my arm and my white gown flowing about my ankles. My hair has been left loose and my only adornment are the jeweled tassels on my shoes.

The air changes once we walk fully into the space. Although it still carries the faint scent of polished wood, it's more fragrant with the smell of flowers. The courtyard in which the throne sits has no ceiling and allows for its occupants to view the stars unobstructed. Stone walls and marble flooring are still present, along with scones that provide enough light to keep the darkness at bay.

In the center of the room, a raised platform supports a majestic throne made of black obsidian. The throne is embellished with carvings along the armrests, with red velvet cushions and a high backrest. Above the throne, a banner featuring a golden crest with a crimson sigil emblazoned on it hangs from the ceiling.

The final decoration in the room is Amara in a cage right next to Marcel.

Vorigan tightens his grip in warning when I turn in her direction.

“Remember what I said,” he whispers, his voice so low I can barely make out his words. “Don’t fight Marcel. The challenge will only excite him and endanger your life all the more.”

“I understand.” I slide my gaze to him. “You need to remember what *I*

said. Amara is all that matters.”

“We are agreed.”

A resolute feeling settles on my shoulders like chain mail, covering me with protection and preparing me for battle. The gown I wear flows in a trail of white behind me, the only bright color in the courtyard. I’m dressed like the ultimate sacrifice.

But the Crimson Castle has no idea that I’m the ultimate threat.

The vampire sitting on the throne rises to his feet when I’m in the middle of the floor. His mouth lifts into a smile, but there’s no warmth. Only dark anticipation.

“Welcome back, thrall,” he says, his voice ringing out. “It’s a relief to see that the savages didn’t kill you.”

The vampires in attendance, mostly the soldiers in his army, laugh and smirk in my direction. I maintain my placid expression. Nothing they say can hurt me, not when I know the truth. These creatures of the night are the real savages, the ones who steal blood and magic from the innocent.

“Lieutenant, present your thrall to me,” Marcel says.

Vorigan takes a step back and bows to his lord before disappearing into the crowd. My master is by my side in an instant, his cold grip on my arm unwelcome. He ushers me forward and I obey, despite how much my instincts warn me to flee. One look at my sister was enough to secure my focus, to solidify my reason for being here.

“My liege,” Desmond says, executing a bow. “She is all yours.”

My master holds out my arm so that my upturned wrist is being offered. Marcel’s blood-red eyes shoot to my skin and he licks his lips. I suppress the disgust that rises within me at the thought of him drinking from me, taking Maliq’s magic and using it for his own nefarious deeds.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” Marcel says. “Lieutenant, keep her upright. I want her blood flow unrestricted the entire time.”

“My lord.”

Desmond comes to stand behind me. He grips my shoulder and wraps his other arm around my waist securely. I stiffen in his embrace, not only to show my disdain for him, but to fortify myself against Marcel piercing my skin.

His fangs lengthen as he leans closer and bows his head, his cool breath wafting over my skin, making it prickle. I don’t know how long this particular vampire has been alive, but the ancient power of him washes over

me. It reminds me of Maliq's energy, except this feels like a brush with death, dark and cold. In contrast, the dragon lord is light and heat.

The moment Marcel's fangs sink into my flesh, I grit my teeth to keep from screaming. Not only in pain, but due to the invasion, the violation of it all. My blood ignites within my body, simmering just below the surface. I concentrate on that spark and channel it, leading it to my center to compound and grow.

The vampire groans against my wrist and his bite deepens, bringing a fresh wave of pain to me. I grunt. Desmond tightens his hold on me when my body sways into his. The strength of Maliq's magic is waning. I can feel it, know this with all certainty.

I flick my gaze to where my sister is and my heart stutters at the horror written all over her pretty face. She grips the bars, her knuckles white, with tears streaming down her cheeks. Even from across the way, I can still make out her anguished sobs.

"I love you," I mouth to her.

She nods her head, her lips trembling. Vorigan stands beside her with his arms folded. The moment my gaze finds his, he dips his head. Only slightly, but it's all the confirmation I need.

The energy I've been gathering within my chest continues to churn, making me burn from the inside. It doesn't hurt, but it's hard to contain. I conjure feelings of hatred for the vampires, fear for my sister, and my need for justice. Then I let it all flow through me.

Fire gathers in my lungs, my fingernails become sharp, and smoke drifts from my nose. Desmond's body stiffens behind me. I cover his hand on my waist with mine and dig my claws into his skin.

Right before I burst into flame.

Marcel's scream mixes with Desmond's. The noise nearly deafens me and I wince, my entire body shuddering. Shouts ring out all around me and I force myself to assess the situation, but everything is happening all at once. The only way for me to navigate the chaos is to let my magic consume me.

If there's a dragon within, she needs to take the lead.

I shove Marcel away from me and he hits the ground, encased in fire, his limbs flailing wildly. Two of his soldiers run to his side, desperately trying to put out the flames. Smoke fills my nostrils as my clothes burn away and peel from my unblemished skin. Desmond's body now thrashes in earnest, his shouts for help all the louder, but my hold never wavers.

He strikes me in the back of my head. Stars fill my vision, blinding me. With a growl, I spin in the vampire's arms to face him. He stares back at me with burns covering the entirety of his body and flames licking along his skin.

"Death is too merciful a punishment for what you've done," I say. "But it's the only way I can be free of you."

His eyes blend in with the fire all around us and they widen when I take his face between my hands, my claws resting on the bits of flesh still present. A quick twist. A loud snap. Then I toss Desmond's head to the ground where it joins his body.

The skin of my lower back stings like someone dragged a blade over it. But the sensation vanishes just as quickly. The blood-bond is as dead as my former master.

Vampires surround me. I drop into a crouch, ready to fend them off, only to find their attention is elsewhere. With them distracted, I flick my gaze to the cage on the far side of the courtyard. Amara is free, with Vorigan to protect her.

The flames covering my naked body die down when relief sweeps through me like a gentle breeze. Only to flare as a large shadow covers the ground where I stand. I lift my head and search the night sky, my gaze sharp.

Realization hits me a moment before his roar fills the air.

The sight of a golden dragon lighting up the darkness with fire has my heart pounding in my chest like the thundering of hooves. Maliq releases another stream of dragon fire and the Crimson Castle blazes further. The vampires call out to one another and scatter, gathering their archers atop the bastion and lining the castle walls.

I search for my sister one last time. With her gone, my priority shifts to survival. And taking as many vampire lives as I can during my escape.

A steady stream of arrows soars through the air. There are so many that they block out the moon, dimming its light. If not for the flames engulfing the castle, the arrows would be untraceable with human vision. My eyes see them clearly.

And the threat they bring to Maliq.

My skin ripples with his magic, despite Marcel depleting me of some and me having expended another portion to protect myself. If Maliq plans to destroy the Crimson Castle from the outside, then I shall do my best to wreak havoc from within.

Fire roils and seethes inside me. Until I release the energy. An arc of flames lands on the floor, highlighting each marble tile before melting it.

A roar sounds above and I smile. If I could join him in the air I would. However, the unknown keeps me grounded. I don't want to be a hindrance to him, in the middle of a battle, no less.

Sweat beads along my hairline as the effort to harness and control dragon magic weakens me physically. Dots enter the sides of my vision and I blink them away, refusing to let my body's frailty dictate the strength of my attack.

A shout of triumph, louder than the flames crackling around me, catches my ear. I swing my gaze to the vampires in that direction, watch them congratulate one another, and then I raise my head, frantically searching for Maliq. Only to see him plummet downward.

An explosion tears me apart from the inside.

My grief and rage burst forth, the rush of them coursing through my veins as if I am completely made of fire. My muscles quiver as they bulge and stretch, becoming stronger and more powerful with each bit of growth. The sound of my bones cracking and popping joins my scream as my body reshapes itself, elongating and thickening to support my new form. Iridescent scales cover me entirely, a protection from both the elements and my enemies.

Ignoring the transformation and the shocked expressions all around me, I push off the ground. In a single leap I'm airborne, my massive wings pumping to keep me flying as I climb higher and higher. The wind rushes past me. Exhilaration fills me. The dragon magic within my body is content, at peace with me in this form.

I am the farthest thing from tranquil when I locate a golden figure lying on the forest floor, not too far from the castle gates. My heart pounds furiously, like a drum of war heralding a death march. It's all I can hear as I make my descent.

Once I land next to the dragon, my stomach twists at the sight of the arrows piercing his scales. Blood travels in rivulets from the numerous wounds and I cock my head, listening for any sign of life. Ragged breathing whispers along my senses. It's faint but enough to reassure me.

I crouch beside Maliq's body and nudge him with my snout. His groan of pain, along with his scent washes over me and I jerk back. This dragon doesn't smell like my hordesman. I inhale once more to confirm that Jazin lies before me.

Confusion swirls in my mind. Why is he here? Where is Maliq?

A shiver of warning snakes down my spine. My gaze darts from side to side, trying to locate the threat. It comes in the form of vampires as they break through the trees, surrounding us on all sides. I take up a defensive position.

Not only to save my life, but to protect Jazin.

He came here and endangered himself, and I will not leave him to fall. Not when the magic of dragons churns within my soul. Not when it's the honorable thing to do.

My attack is sudden, executed in a projection of fire. Snarls and hisses follow, along with the sounds of bark and leaves burning. One vampire out of twenty yells in anguish as his body incinerates. I release a roar full of challenge, sending shockwaves through the air and causing the ground to tremble at my enemies' feet.

The vampires respond by launching themselves at me with fangs bared and swords in hand. I dodge their attacks, digging my claws into the grass and using the traction to pivot. One powerful flap of my wings sends a gust of wind that causes the soldiers to falter. It's not enough to stop them, but it's enough time for me to gather fire in my chest.

I expel the flames, engulfing several vampires in an inferno. The survivors quickly regroup and come at me again. Metal slices past my scales, wrenching a roar of pain from me. The soldiers close in and fear threatens to drown me.

My legs and wings shake with exhaustion, and the fire within me burns without the same ferocity and level of heat. I won't give up, not when I have to stay behind for Jazin.

But I can't hold them off forever.

My next attack is a frenzy, a combination of sheer will and hatred for the vampires. Each one that falls is replaced with another, until I swear I'm fighting against every one that resides in the Crimson Castle.

I crush a vampire between my jaws and fling it into the trees. Using my tail, I swipe at another, the impact fracturing his ribcage.

Jazin groans and the sound catches my attention.

My roar echoes in the forest for all to hear when I catch a bloodsucker stabbing him with a blade. Then I promptly set the attacker on fire. Flames pelt the ground all around me and Jazin, joining the ones I already created, originating from up above. I lift my gaze to search for the source.

Maliq.

CHAPTER 33



*H*elena

The dragon lord sets the world on fire.

Everywhere I look, there are flames. They race through the trees like a living entity and devour everything in their path. If I wasn't impervious to the heat, I'd fear for my life.

Maliq lands beside me, his giant claws sinking into the charred earth, but not before decimating the remaining vampires. The trees continue to burn all around us, bodies litter the grass like fallen leaves, yet I can't look at anything except the golden dragon towering above me. Even with us both in this form, he's still so much larger than me.

His gaze finds mine and the rage inside has me turning my head. I'm a huge dragon, a creature of might and strength, but I can't bear to look at the one who weakens me. My shift begins. If I didn't know any better, I'd think Maliq caused it.

I curl in on myself with my eyes closed as my bones and muscles return to their original sizes and my scales recede to become skin. The process is uncomfortable, not to mention strange, and I sigh when it's over.

With trembling limbs, I get to my feet and scan the area. Maliq has shifted as well and strides towards me, his hands balled into fists by his sides. My nakedness is a minor concern compared to the hordesman's wrath.

I refuse to cower, no matter how much unease crawls along my psyche, triggering my instincts. Instead, I lift my chin at his approach. He stops just

shy of trampling me, his chest heaving, his eyes more golden than I've ever seen them.

He grasps the sides of my neck, his thumbs lightly resting on my jaw. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine."

"I scent blood on you."

Maliq runs his hands along my arms, down my ribcage, and over my hips. I bite my lip to keep from saying something I'll regret. Why would he care about me now? He had his chance and he didn't want me.

"You have a gash on your thigh." He gently traces the area of skin just outside the wound and looks back to me. "My magic should heal this, but I still want Yurik to examine it when we return to the camp."

I take a retreating step, putting myself out of his reach. "I appreciate your help with the vampires, but I'm not going back with you. I have to find my sister."

After spinning on my heel, I race in the direction I saw her and Vorigan traveling while I was flying. The fire all around me grazes my legs and feet, but I don't feel its burn. However, something hotter than the flames grabs hold of me.

Maliq's arms encircle me from behind. He presses me against his body and I shove at his hands, but that just causes him to grip me tighter. The air in my lungs comes out as a wheeze.

"Let me go," I say between clenched teeth.

"Never."

"Zahtan, I'm warning you—"

"Is that so?" The hordesman brings his mouth to my ear. "While I'd enjoy nothing more than accepting your challenge, we have to leave before the vampires' reinforcements arrive."

I thrash against his firm grip. My skin glides over his and my nails dig into his muscles, but nothing I try gets him to release me. My growl has smoke streaming from my nose and claws appearing on my fingers.

"If you bite me," he says, his tone sharp, "I will bite you back. Now cease this rebellious behavior. You're only provoking my temper and making my cock hard."

I go completely still. The length of him presses into my backside, pulsing with heat. I squeeze my thighs together when my sex clenches. Memories of our time together flood my mind and I dismiss them.

“Let go of me,” I say. I manage to keep my voice even despite the tendrils of attraction weaving themselves around me. “My sister is out there and needs my help.”

“I need you, *kalina mei*¹.”

“No.” I shake my head, too afraid to believe what he’s saying. “Please, Zahtan.”

He brings a hand to grip the front of my throat, his thumb caressing the side of my neck. “I will send my best trackers after her. If they can’t locate her, I’ll request the help of the lycans. Their sense of smell is greater than my own. Come what may, I will find her for you.”

“Truly?”

Maliq nods, his lips brushing my ear. “Listen closely, Helena. My brother’s magic might heal him, but it won’t stop him from dying if his injuries are too severe. I must get Jazin medical attention, but I can’t do that and chase you at the same time.”

I bow my head as shame fills me. In my haste to get away from the dragon lord and the pain he brings with his presence, I forgot about Jazin in his wounded state. Whatever his reasons, the hordesman came to the Crimson Castle and helped me. I’m not sure I would’ve escaped without him providing a distraction.

“I’ll go with you, but I won’t stay,” I whisper.

“So you say.”

“So I *know*.” When Maliq releases me, I spin to face him. “Don’t touch me anymore.”

He glares at me. “I won’t give my word for a promise I have no intention of keeping.”

The male walks over to his brother and I follow with a loud sigh. By the time I reach the pair, Maliq has Jazin on his feet, with his arm around his shoulder. My stomach heaves and I slap a hand over my mouth when the dragon lord pulls the arrows from Jazin’s body.

“Don’t make me carry you like a newborn babe,” the dragon lord says to his brother.

Jazin smiles, but it’s more of a grimace. “I might like it.”

“You’re a fool.”

“Maybe,” Jazin says.

Maliq grunts. “It’s either that or the blood loss.”

I rearrange my hair to cover my breasts and lace my fingers, keeping

them directly over the apex of my thighs. It's the best I can do under the circumstances. I recall suggesting Maliq cover himself with leaves and the idea sounds ridiculous now. No wonder he stared at me as if I was a simpleton.

"What has you smiling, *rima*?" Jazin asks.

A blush works its way onto my cheeks. "Nothing."

Maliq thumps his brother on the chest. "Keep your eyes to yourself or risk losing your sight."

Jazin grins at me before averting his gaze. "Jealousy, Zahtan?" He makes a clicking sound with his tongue. "That is most unbecoming of a warrior."

I fall into step beside Maliq, using his large body to block mine from his brother's sight. I think. "Zahtan doesn't feel jealousy. He'd have to actually care to experience that emotion, however irrational it is."

Maliq spears me with his gaze. "Enough, both of you. Save your energy for walking, not useless, idle prattling."

"If he didn't care, why did he come to Crimson Castle?" Jazin asks me, while pointedly ignoring the threatening look from his brother.

I shrug, not understanding why he needs me to clarify something so obvious. "He came to save you, of course."

"Interesting."

"Jazin..."

Maliq's low growl has me dropping my gaze, but it doesn't stop me from voicing my question. "Jazin, why *were* you there?"

"To save my Zahtana."

I frown. "I don't understand what that means."

"Jazin, if you speak another word, I will make it so you'll wish you were dead," Maliq says.

I embrace the silence. There's nothing left to say, except things that will bring tears to my eyes and pulverize my already broken heart.

We travel quickly, despite Jazin's injuries. The darkness doesn't inhibit us, enabling me to see the details on every leaf and blade of grass. I'm not sure how long I'll have Maliq's abilities, but if he doesn't keep his word concerning Amara, I'll shift and fly far away from here.

It's difficult to be around the hordesman. Even though we're doing nothing except walking, I can scent him. Sometimes I inhale deep, just so the essence of him feeds my senses all the more. From the corner of my eye, I can clearly see his body and the way it moves with predatory grace. His hair,

loose and flowing, sways along his back, making my fingers twitch with the need to touch him.

I have to get away from Maliq before I'm too weak to resist him. Not that he wants me emotionally, but physically, he won't deny me. However, I doubt I could be intimate with him and not walk away more damaged than I already am.

A low rumbling reaches me and I place my hand on Maliq's arm. "Do you hear that?"

"That is the sound of my warriors approaching."

"Oh."

"Stand behind me."

I frown at the command, but I'm too physically exhausted and emotionally drained to do anything except obey him. Besides, any protest on my part would indicate I want to parade my nudity, which I certainly don't. It's bad enough that Jazin has seen most of my body.

The thundering of horses sweeps over me before I can see the first warrior. The group rides straight to Maliq and stops. Yurik and Terim amongst them.

I duck my head, wishing I could disappear.

The dragon lord says several things in his native tongue. Orders to the warriors, if I were to guess. Two of them walk over and take Jazin between them. Then the males assist him atop a horse and lead it away.

A different male guides another horse to Maliq and hands him the reins. I watch everything, peeking around the dragon lord. Terim catches my eye and I grimace. However, the warrior simply nods in my direction. It's not a dismissal... more of an acknowledgment. Or even a show of respect. I brush off his action as nothing more than him being civil, despite the awkward circumstance I find myself in.

The group of hordesmen leave, most likely returning to camp. With it being just Maliq and I, my nervousness lessens. Somewhat. The hulking male in front of me is enough to work my emotions into a dither.

He turns around and looks at me expectantly. I return his stare with a raised brow.

"Do you require assistance?" Maliq asks.

I shake my head and approach the tan gelding. It whinnies softly and I hold out my hand, letting it sniff my palm. Once we've established a connection, I whisper my thanks, and hoist myself atop the animal.

The side of Maliq's mouth lifts. "You've learned."

"I had a decent teacher."

"Decent? You insult me."

His gaze drops to the space between my legs. I gasp and cover myself.

"Why do you keep me from looking at your cunt?" he asks. "Not only have I seen it before, but I've tasted it, feasted on it. There's no need to hide yourself from me."

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Don't say things like that."

"Like what? The truth?"

"It makes me uncomfortable."

The male's brows snap together. "You shouldn't feel that way. Not with me."

"Especially with you."

He shakes his head before mounting the horse. His thighs surround my hips and his chest is close to my back. He reaches around me to grip the reins and I swallow deep at his nearness. I'm achingly aware of Maliq and every part of him that touches me.

After urging the horse forward, he places his lips next to my ear. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you feel uncomfortable around me, Helena?"

I blow out a breath. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I do."

"That's not my problem."

He wraps an arm around my waist and yanks me to him. My backside now presses snugly against his cock and I can feel each of his breaths against my spine. His chin brushes my shoulder and I suppress a shiver.

"It may not be your problem, but it's certainly going to become one if you continue keeping me at a distance," he says.

"Zahtan, I plan on running as far as I can get."

"And I'll chase you. To the ends of the earth, if necessary."

I fold my arms and do my best to ignore the way my heart beats faster in my chest. "How long until we get back to the camp?"

"A few hours. Rest, *sajir aya*², you can continue battling me later."

I huff.

The warmth of Maliq's body and the gentle rhythm from the horse's gait lulls me into a minor state of relaxation. It's difficult to be completely at ease without knowing my sister's whereabouts, but I trust Vorigan with Amara.

He can protect her better than I. Unlike me, his abilities won't fade with time.

Time passes and the quiet continues. Part of me wants to ask Maliq why he and his brother were at the Crimson Castle to begin with, but that would invite him to question me. And I'm tired of lying. However, he doesn't deserve the truth inside my soul, the place where I hurt, and might not ever recover.

"Are we almost there?" I ask.

"My lair is close by."

I turn to look at him over my shoulder. "Your lair? I thought we were going to the camp."

"The conversation I want to have with you will require privacy. That can be secured in my lair."

"I'm not going to your sex cave."

His brows rise. "My what?"

"Sex. Cave. For someone with enhanced hearing, I swear you're deaf." I go back to facing forward. "We don't need to talk about anything. Especially not in a place that you've probably fucked countless other females."

Maliq's body goes taut against mine. I bite my lip and inwardly groan. Not only did I sound jealous, but by doing that, I let on that I care.

"I've never allowed another female into my lair. Until I met you, none were worthy enough to enter."

"You wanted sex. That's why. Don't deny it."

"I won't. I wanted to fuck you, but I also wanted to kiss you, claim you, make you mine in every way."

My nipples pebble and my core spasms at his words. What is it about Maliq that draws me to him? How come I can't stop him from taking control of my body?

I still want him.

I still love him.

I'm an idiot.

CHAPTER 34



*H*elena

Maliq brings the horse to a stop and dismounts. Before I can slide down after him, he reaches for me and grabs my waist. I stare up at him with a frown.

“I could’ve done that myself.”

“I wanted to touch you. It’s been killing me to wait this long.”

“Maliq, don’t.”

His eyes blaze with something I can’t decipher. I can scent his lust for me, but it’s more than that. Anger? Frustration?

He takes my hand and leads me inside. The unspoken words between us cloud the air like mist covers a lake. I wish I had the courage to demand answers the way he does with me.

Memories of my time with Maliq in this place swamp me, weakening my resistance to him. It was the most amazing night and I don’t regret it. Being with the hordesman opened my eyes to many things.

Many pleasures.

“You’re remembering, aren’t you?” he asks me softly.

I pull my hand from his and walk over to the pile of furs. Selecting one, I wrap it around my body, shielding myself from him. Then I plop unceremoniously onto the floor.

“Is there any food in this place?” I lift my chin and sniff the air. “I think I smell something edible.”

Maliq makes his way to a chest and pulls back the lid. The scent of apples

makes my mouth water. “Will this do?” he asks.

“Yes, please.”

He tosses me two apples and I catch them with ease. “Your reflexes have improved.”

I shrug. “It’s temporary.”

“That’s not what Sid told me.”

The bit of apple in my mouth slides into my throat, choking me. I thump my chest and dislodge the fruit. “Excuse me?” I wheeze.

“Your companion, Sid, the one sent to you by Asili. He told me that the sky god gifted you dragon magic.”

“Dragon magic?”

“Are you going to repeat everything I say?”

“Yes.”

Maliq’s lips twitch. “You will always have the abilities of a dragon-shifter.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The *aldemir servet* is designed to expose truth. The things you said to Asili convinced him that you were worthy of dragon magic.”

But it wasn’t enough to convince you to give me a chance.

I drop my gaze and fiddle with the apple. “I see. What else did Sid say to you?”

“He cursed at me. Such a foul-mouthed being. Reminds me of you.”

“That’s fair,” I mutter.

“Sid told me about your sister and how the vampires coerced you because of her.”

I press my lips together upon hearing that. As much as I want to know why he’s saying all of this to me, I don’t ask. It’ll only force me to relive my heartbreak and I don’t think I can bear to have him tell me how much I’ve betrayed him, regardless if it’s true.

“Your companion, more like a *champion*, given the way he defended you, made me realize you didn’t choose your vampire master over me,” Maliq says.

When I don’t respond, he takes a step in my direction. I hold out a hand and look directly at him. Surprisingly, the dragon lord adheres to the silent request and halts.

“Don’t come any closer,” I say.

A muscle flickers along his jaw, but he doesn’t argue with me. However,

his energy shifts, becoming more intense. I give up on eating. It's too difficult when he watches me, making my stomach churn and my heart beat dangerously fast.

"Say something, Helena."

I throw up my hands. "What do you want me to say?"

"That you forgive me for my misunderstanding."

"I don't forgive you, but I don't blame you either. It was an impossible situation in which there was no favorable outcome."

Maliq's expression darkens. "You should've told me."

"I tried to, but you wouldn't listen."

"That is something I deeply regret."

A pang shoots through my chest at the remorse in his voice. "It's better this way." I wave a hand in dismissal. "Even if we'd come to some understanding, there wouldn't have been a way for us to be... together."

"Explain."

He doesn't yell at me, but my eyes widen at the sharpness of his tone. I avert my gaze and sigh. Everything about this moment is agony. Hearing Maliq admit he was wrong, in addition to the other caring things he's said today, chips away at my defenses. If I don't repair them, I'll be in his control, with no way of happiness other than what he gives me. That's not truly living.

"I know you tried to argue otherwise, but Isa said your people would turn against you because of me," I say. "I couldn't let that happen."

"Do not speak her name to me. It is a curse and befouls the mouth." When I frown at him, Maliq continues. "That female lied. She is the one who tried to poison you and left you to die in the woods."

I cover my mouth with a shaking hand. "No."

"Believe it. She confessed and has been dealt with accordingly."

The way he says 'accordingly' makes me want to vomit. When I've gathered my composure, I drop my hand to my lap and lace my fingers. "She was my friend. Why would she do that to me?"

"She saw you as a threat to the Horde and thought I was under your spell."

"My magic doesn't work like that," I say with a hollow laugh. "If it did, things would've turned out so differently."

"Tell me," he says.

I shake my head. "It's too late for that. All I care about is Amara's safety

and starting a new life.”

“I’ve already seen to it. My warriors are searching for her at this very moment.”

“Thank you. And for helping me with the vampires. I know you were there for your brother, but we wouldn’t have survived without you.”

“I wasn’t there for him.”

My breath hitches at the implication, but I’m quick to rid myself of false hope. If there was a reason for Maliq to be at the Crimson Castle, other than Jazin, I don’t need to know it. Like Yurik always says, I’m not privy to Horde secrets.

“Did you hear me, Helena?”

“Yes,” I snap. “We’re done talking now.”

“Far from it.”

He strides over to me, his steps quick and sure. I scramble backwards while holding the hide against my body. It encumbers my movements and Maliq has me by the shoulders in seconds. He hauls me to my feet so fast that I fall into him.

My eyes narrow. “I have nothing more to say to you.”

“I have plenty to say and you’re going to listen.” He takes a deep breath and releases it slowly. “I went to the vampires’ fortress to find *you*. Not my brother. Not to conquer my enemies in the name of revenge.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Jazin knew he’d misjudged you when you risked your life for him. If you hadn’t intervened, that vampire would’ve killed him. My brother went to the Crimson Castle to bring you back. To me.”

Maliq drops his head, resting his temple against mine, his lips beside my ear. “Jazin knew how much I cared for you. Even before the demigod revealed your secrets about your sister. Even before he knew of my plans to follow you. Jazin wanted to make things right between us, not only for how he treated you in the past, but because I planned to make you my Zahtana. My queen.”

“Please stop,” I whisper, my voice cracking with emotion. “You can’t mean any of this. You’re just saying it so you can be rid of your guilt.”

“There is much I have to atone for, but I’m not lying to you.”

I rip from his hold, backing up several paces. “This has gotten out of control. I can’t...” I cover my face with my hands and groan in frustration. “I need to be alone.”

“I’ll give you anything except that. Tell me what you need from me, Helena, and it’s yours.”

His voice drifts over me like a gentle breeze, cooling my irritation. I purse my lips. “Don’t use your horse magic on me. I’m not some mare to be gentled.”

“My... what?”

“It’s the way your tone becomes something alluring. It encourages me to do what you want, even when I’m uncertain if I should. Stop it.”

He smiles at me and I glare in return. “What are you worried about?” he asks. “What do you think I want from you?”

“No matter what it is, it’ll hurt me.”

The truth falls from my lips before I can retract it, floating in the air, making me wince.

He shakes his head slowly. “You’ll learn that I’ll always take care of you,” he says, “but first, you’ll have to trust me.”

I scoff. “I don’t.”

“Let me prove it to you.”

“How?”

“I’ll show you that I know you more than you think, that I know what’s best for you.”

I cross my arms and squint at him in suspicion. “If you say sex, I’m going to set you on fire.”

He laughs, long and loud. The sound warms my chest. I press my lips together to keep from smiling. Seeing Maliq happy affects me deep in my soul.

“What’s best for you at this moment is to have control,” he says, his tone serious once again. “You were subjected to the will of a vampire for so long that you desired freedom. Now that you have it, you need to enforce it. Over your circumstances. Over *me*.”

I stiffen. His words strike a chord somewhere in my intuition, truth thrumming with every syllable he speaks. I want a life that’s mine, not beholden to anyone, unless I will it to be so.

That includes him.

CHAPTER 35



*H*elena

“Go on,” I say slowly.

“Will you do what I ask?”

“Only if you remain where you stand.”

Maliq inclines his head. “I give you my word.”

“Very well. What do you suggest?”

“I want you to touch yourself, Helena.”

My brows snap together. “Excuse me?”

“Take control of your pleasure. Use it to empower yourself. Do whatever you desire. I won’t do anything except watch. Unless... you give me permission.”

His request takes me aback, but the thrill of excitement that courses through my veins can’t be denied. The idea of making him suffer from wanting me is a revenge too sweet for me to ignore. Let him see what he rejected.

I lift my chin and meet his gaze before letting the material slide down my body to pool at my feet. Maliq has already seen me naked, yet he looks at me as though he can’t believe what he’s seeing. As though I’m unreal.

His gaze sears every inch of my skin and the longer he stares, the harder my heart pounds in my ears. I slide my hand down my belly and he follows the movement, his eyes sizzling with lust.

“That’s it, *jahira*” he says, his voice tight. “Right there.”

I dip my fingers between my legs and as soon as I make contact, his eyes darken with need. But true to his word, he remains stationary. I gently brush myself back and forth, caressing my clit with feather-like touches, and keep my attention on Maliq despite wanting to close my eyes and revel in this feeling.

His hands clench into fists as he watches me and my pleasure is heightened by the intensity of his gaze. "I love seeing you stroke that pretty cunt," he says on a growl. He fists his cock and my sex spasms, my breathing going thin.

Every sweep of my finger over my swollen flesh sends powerful surges of arousal through me. I hold back my whimpers, still not letting go completely even though my orgasm looms. There's a vulnerability in sexual release that I'm not quite ready to embrace.

He breaks the silence to give me one final instruction: "Finish it."

I come with a soft cry. My hips buck as pleasure radiates through me, my moans of bliss echoing throughout the room. With one final stroke, I nearly collapse. Maliq takes a step toward me and I glare in warning.

"You have no idea how beautiful you are right now." He swallows deep. "My fire burns for you."

The exhilaration of my release ripples along my skin, leaving me feeling alive. More than any other moment prior, except when I found bliss in Maliq's embrace the first time. This freedom to control my own needs and wants only adds to my euphoria. I'm not beholden to anyone's desires except mine.

But I desire Maliq.

I walk up to him and kneel, looking up at him in challenge. His eyes widen in surprise, but he makes no move to stop me. When I reach for him, running my fingers along his cock, he groans softly. His eyes carry a fire brighter than anything Asili could conjure.

He watches me with fascination, as if he's never seen anyone display such confidence. I remain kneeling before him, determined to take control of this situation and prove to him that I'm not afraid of his power or dominance. That I have my own.

I grip his cock and he hisses a breath. With him firmly secure in my hands, I slide the head of it into my mouth, tasting a bit of saltiness. His eyes close and he lets out a low moan of pleasure as I run my tongue over the length of him, teasing and sucking at my leisure. His skin is warm and

smooth beneath my touch, his body vibrating with want.

My intentions become bolder as I experiment with new techniques and sensations. He moans louder now, gripping the wall behind him for support. Sensing his hunger for release, I increase the speed of my movements until his hips thrust forward, driving his length deeper between my lips.

Finally, with one hard pull of my mouth, Maliq groans as his orgasm rocks through him; the male shuddering with pleasure and gasping for breath. I smile up at him, empowered by what I did to him, what I made him feel.

“Touch me,” I say. “This is my choice, an extension of my freedom. But you’ll only do it until I tell you otherwise.”

Maliq responds to my command without hesitation, his hands exploring my body as I stand before him. His touch is eager, demanding, and I can feel the heat radiating from his skin.

He moves his hands up to cup my breasts and lightly brushes my nipples. His lips trail a path of kisses down my neck and collarbone before he moves lower. Then he flicks out his tongue, lightly tapping each hardened peak, eliciting an involuntary moan from me as my pleasure builds.

He slides one hand between my legs and I become lost in a sea of sensations that ripple through me with every movement he makes. He expertly manipulates my body until I am gasping for breath, struggling to keep up with the intensity of pleasure that is coursing through me.

“I need to be inside you,” he says, his voice taking on an animalistic growl.

I need him too, now more than ever. If I end up regretting this moment, I’ll remind myself that it was my choice.

"Helena, I can't tame the beast inside me for much longer."

I caress his cheek, taking in his tortured expression, and nod my assent.

Maliq grabs my waist and spins me. I gasp at the feel of him pressing his claw-tipped hand against my lower back. He follows that touch with a light kiss.

“No one marks what is mine,” he whispers against my skin, right where my mark used to lie.

With one powerful thrust he fills me completely and sends bright sparks of pleasure rippling through my body. I plant my hands on the ground and turn to look at him over my shoulder, needing to see his face as he fills me. Becomes a part of me.

Maliq's eyes burn with desire as he withdraws and drives into me, deeper

than before. I can barely keep up with the intensity of the pleasure coursing through my veins as he takes complete control. His hands grip my hips tightly as his thrusts become more demanding, pushing me to the edge of ecstasy.

His body moves against mine in a primal rhythm, pushing and pulling at me as if we were entangled in an unseen dance. I moan in pleasure and delight, on the brink of something incredible. Just when it feels like I can't take any more, he pulls away slightly and looks down at me. His gaze is intense and filled with raw hunger for my body.

Fire bursts from his skin, enveloping him completely. Awestruck, I stare, even as my release taunts me. The heat from me rises, a combination of dragon magic and passion, and it has flames appearing all over my body.

Maliq begins to move again and this time it's an inferno in every sense of the word. The fire between us, a manifestation of our joining and our pleasure. I drop my head and let my hair curtain my face, unable to do anything except be consumed.

“Come for me, *jahira*, so that we may burn together.”

My body obeys him and I scream, my cries echoing all around us. Maliq joins me in bliss with a shout, his cock swelling inside me, enhancing my orgasm. Together we descend from the ultimate high and slowly return to reality.

He withdraws from my body and sweeps me into his arms. After placing me on the furs, he gathers me in his embrace with me resting on his chest. I close my eyes and let the serenity of the moment flow over me. This feeling is all I've ever wanted.

“Helena, the first time I saw you, I thought you were a goddess or some other beautiful creature sent to tempt me. The way you stood in the sunlight with pure joy emanating from you made me want to discover your secrets, to understand how you could be so full of life. I saw this again when you danced on the way to the riverside and laughed with wild abandon.”

Maliq places a kiss on the crown of my head. “When I'm around you, I understand what it means to truly live, to experience happiness that goes beyond the satisfaction derived from my obligations as Zahtan. With you, I can just... be. Helena, when you stole from me, you took more than my magic. You stole my heart.”

Words gather in my throat, combining with the emotions already present, halting any response from me. This has to be a dream. Any minute now, I'm

going to wake up and Maliq will disappear, along with his soul-stirring confession. Devastation will pale in comparison to the agony that awaits me when I wake.

He pulls back to look down at me, arresting me with his golden eyes. “What I want to know is how do I steal *your* heart? How can I become a male worthy of your devotion? I offer you my loyalty and all that I am, if you’ll have me. If you’ll choose me. ”

“Maliq...” I take his face between my hands. “I chose you the moment I gave you my body. That was within my power, no matter what pressures I faced. I knew it then and I know it now: you’ve always had my heart.”

His eyes widen, and from one breath to the next his mouth is on mine. He kisses me until I’m certain this is reality, until my lips swell and my need for him reemerges, stronger than before. I cling to him, pull him to me until his body is flush with mine.

He breaks the kiss, his chest heaving and his gaze bright. “Will you stay with me, rule by my side as my Zahtana? I advise you to say ‘yes’ since any other answer will be rejected.”

“Will the Golden Horde approve of me?”

“Yes. There’s no doubt in my mind. Jazin has already spread the word of your courageous acts. By now the story will have reached every ear in the camp. Our people will do more than accept you, Helena, they will follow wherever you lead.”

I bite my lip as thoughts of my sister rise to my mind. “What about Amara? I can’t ignore her place in my life.”

Maliq makes a soothing noise and caresses my cheek. “First we must find her. Then we will devise a plan.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“It is.” When I squint up at him, he laughs. “My future lies with you. That will not change, no matter what tomorrow brings.”

CHAPTER 36



Helena

“Don’t make a sound,” Maliq whispers in my ear.

Sleep deserts me, leaving me discombobulated for a second. My eyes fly open and I scan the cave, finding nothing immediately threatening. Right when I’m about to ask him what’s going on, the scent of vampire hits my nose, making it wrinkle. Maliq gets to his feet and slinks toward the entrance without making any noise.

I do the same. If the soldiers from the Crimson Castle have come here looking for a fight, they’re going to get one. One of the fire variety.

The dragon lord turns back to look at me and glares in warning. I make a face at him.

“Helena?” comes a female voice.

My heart swells in my chest and my breaths quicken. I break into a run. Maliq mutters something and intercepts me, throwing both arms around my waist.

“Amara?” I call out.

“Stay where you are, vampire,” Maliq says. “If you enter this lair, you will find nothing but death.”

“Yes, it’s me,” my sister says. “I’m here with Vorigan. We’re alone.”

“I’m coming.” Then I turn to the hordesman. “Let me go.”

He shakes his head. “We will go together. *With* clothing.”

I’m of half a mind to sprint past him, but I have no desire to greet my

sister while naked. Maliq hands me a hide to wrap around myself and I tuck in the corner while he dons a pair of pants. He takes my hand and guides me to stand behind him.

“It’s not that I find you unequal,” he says. “I only wish to protect you.”

I place a kiss on his cheek and smile up at him. “I know.”

He leads me outside, his gaze darting back and forth, his claws appearing. Maliq is right to be cautious, but I’m too eager to see my sister. And the minute I do, I run to her.

Amara releases a sob and envelops me in a hug. “I knew we’d find you here.”

“How?” I ask between the tears clogging my throat.

“Vorigan and I saw you defend the fallen dragon,” she says. “I guessed that you’d want to see him returned to his people since you were willing to put yourself in danger to protect him.”

“Are you all right?” I run my fingers through her hair, tucking a strand behind her ear. “I’ve done nothing but worry every day we’ve been apart.”

“Me? You’re the one who was sent to the Horde. At least I had someone watching over me.” Her gaze flickers to the vampire and a blush rises to her cheeks. Despite the darkness of the early morning hours, I can still see it. “It’s a miracle you’re alive,” she says. “After I saw you burst into flames, I nearly lost my mind.”

“Dragon magic.” I shrug. “It makes me impervious to fire.”

A sly grin spreads across her face. “I figured.”

I take both of her hands in mine. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes. It was hard being at the Crimson Castle without you.” She takes my face between her hands and presses her forehead to mine. “But I knew you’d come back.”

“That’s because I love you.”

She lifts her head and smiles at me. “I love you too. Now tell me how this...” She gestures to me and then Maliq with a wave of her hand. “... happened.”

I tell her everything. The things I learned while living among the Golden Horde, such as their culture and customs, and how to ride a horse. She doesn’t interrupt and occasionally nods her head to let me know she’s paying attention.

The entire time the males watch us, listening intently.

“It’ll be so much better once we leave this place,” Amara says.

Maliq stiffens. In response to the dragon lord's sudden air of menace, Vorigan shifts into a defensive stance. I lift my arms, one in each direction.

"Stop."

My sister's eyes go wide. "What's going on?"

"You think to take my Zahtana?" Maliq asks, his voice deceptively calm.

Vorigan shakes his head. "Careful, dragon lord."

"Oh dear," Amara murmurs.

"We can discuss this later," I say to the hordesman.

He grunts. "There's nothing to discuss. You're not leaving, not with the next Zahtan growing in your belly."

My sister throws her arms around me. I hug her back and glare at Maliq over her shoulder. "Is it true?" she asks.

"Is *what* true?" I ask, my question meant for her but aimed at the dragon lord.

Maliq nods. "I can scent it on you."

"She's definitely breeding," Vorigan says. "That makes her dangerous to be around. Come here, Amara."

I blink at the hordesman. "I'm *what*?"

"Pregnant," Amara supplies with a smile. "That was fast."

I keep an arm around her waist and turn to face the vampire. "I would never harm my sister. You insult me by suggesting such a thing."

"I wasn't talking about you," Vorigan says, his gaze on Maliq. "A dragon lord is notorious for protecting his queen when she's in such a condition."

My sigh is loud in the night. "For the love of fuck, that's enough. No one is a threat to anyone. We're all family here. Got it?"

The vampire shrugs. "For now."

"I'm so happy for you," Amara says to me. She sniffs and tears begin streaming down her cheeks. "This is what you wanted, right?"

I look at Maliq, seeing the pride and joy underneath his protective air. "Yes. However, I didn't think it'd be this soon. I mean, we only has se... Never mind."

"Then you have to stay," she says. Amara nods for emphasis and her expression shifts from joyous to resolute.

"Where do you think you're going?!" I nearly shriek. "We can't be apart. Not when I just found my way back to you."

My sister gazes up at me with tenderness and understanding in her blue eyes. "You have a life now. Just like the one you used to dream about when

we were little. I won't let you give that up for me. Not when I love you too much to see you miserable, and you would be without him."

I burst into tears. Maliq has a stricken look on his face and makes his way over, but I wave him off. He stops, looking pissed at me for requesting distance.

Amara makes a soothing noise and embraces me. I weep openly against her shoulder, my heart breaking in my chest. "We've never been separated," I say. "Not even when the vampires kept us prisoner."

"I know."

"Where do you want to go?"

"There's something I need to tell you."

The seriousness in my sister's voice stops my tears. I pull back just enough to look at her. "What is it?"

"There's a colony of humans. Vorigan says it's where we were taken from. I want to go there."

"For what?" I ask. "To be around other humans? I'm right here."

She shakes her head with a sad smile appearing on her lips. "No, I want to see if our parents are still alive."

"Oh."

"Don't you understand? Your destiny is to be here where your future lies, and mine is in the secrets of our past, where our lives began. I have to know one way or the other."

I groan. "I recognize that voice. You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"I've tried to convince her," Vorigan says, "but she refuses to listen. I've never met anyone more stubborn."

Maliq dips his head in my direction. "My Zahtana is worse."

"Thank you for that," I say with a glare, but it lacks any real heat. I look at my sister, taking in her face, memorizing the sound of her voice. "Amara, will you come back to me, once you know for sure what happened to them?"

"Yes. I have to meet my niece or nephew. Right?"

I burst into tears. Again. "Right. You promise?"

"With all my heart."

"See that she does, vampire," Maliq says to Vorigan. "Because if the human does not return, I will send the entire Golden Horde after her."

Vorigan raises a brow. "I have no desire to make an enemy of you."

"Good," I say. "Remember, we're family."

"You keep saying that," the vampire says.

I shrug. “Well, it matters.”



Vorigan leaves with my sister before the sun rises.

Maliq holds me while I cry, well *after* the sun rises.

Eventually I fall into a restless sleep, but even while I miss Amara, I can't stave off the demands of my body. When I wake, we're no longer in the dragon's lair. The familiar items within the hordesman's hut comfort me and I smile.

This is my home now.

I turn in Maliq's arms and snuggle against his chest. “Good morning.”

“Good *evening*. You slept the day away.”

“Oh, I didn't realize.”

“I didn't mind having you in my bed without interruption. For once.”

He kisses me, long and unhurried. By the time he pulls away, I'm panting, and more than ready to finish what he started.

“Someone wants to speak to you,” Maliq says. When I frown in confusion, he grins. “You don't want to keep him waiting. Your companion is very impatient. Reminds me of someone I know.”

I punch him in the chest. It's playful but the male grunts, making me smirk. “Who are you talking about?” I sit up, holding the fur to my chest, and tilt my head to listen.

“If you don't retrieve me from this satchel, I shall unleash my divinity on this place,” says a voice. “And it won't be with the intention to bestow a blessing.”

“Sid!”

I slide from the bed while Maliq laughs softly behind me. After quickly getting dressed, I run to the other side of the hut and retrieve the demigod from the bag. He still looks the same, his runic eyes staring up at me.

“Took you long enough, human. Or should I say dragon now, eh? You went through with it, just like I knew you would.”

“I couldn't have done it without your support,” I say. My brows gather and bite my lip. “If I was successful, doesn't that mean you should be in the heavens now?”

Sid grins up at me. “I couldn't leave without saying good-bye. That's just

bad manners.”

“Oh, right. Because you exemplify all that is polite and proper.”

“Absolutely.”

I bite back a retort. “When are you leaving?”

“Why? Will you miss me?”

“Of course. Well, maybe not the debauched conversations, but everything else.”

Sid’s little mouth falls open. “But those were the best times we had. I shall remember them fondly.” The rock’s eyes slide over to where Maliq sits on the bed. “Will you miss me too, savage?”

The dragon lord shoots him a look of exasperation. “If I ever want to be insulted and reprimanded to the fullest extent, I’ll think of you. Not fondly, but I’ll think of you.”

The demigod laughs and I smile widely. “Did you really curse at the dragon lord?” I ask him.

“I did more than that,” Sid says. “I gave him whatfor. He deserved it after judging you harshly and I wasn’t going to let him get away with it.” He lowers his voice, although I’m sure Maliq can still hear him. “If he ever gives you trouble, you call on me. All it takes is a prayer and I’ll return.”

“To smite him?” I ask.

“If need be.”

“Oh, Sid.” I press a quick kiss on his ‘cheek.’ “Thank you for being a true friend.”

He smiles at me. “Be off with you now. The Horde waits.”

I shift my gaze to Maliq. “What is he talking about?”

“You will see in a moment,” the hordesman says.

“What did I tell you about me and waiting?” I huff. “You know that never bodes well for me.”

I look down at Sid and my indignation vanishes. He’s... gone. The runes have returned to their original design without any signs of life shining behind them. If I hadn’t cried so much in the last few hours, I might weep. Instead, I place the rock on a nearby chest, my gaze lingering on it until Maliq rises.

He walks over and takes my hand, kissing the back of it. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. I knew our relationship was going to be temporary. I just didn’t realize Sid would become more than a companion to me. He’s my friend.” I clear my throat before I burst into tears. “So, the Horde?”

“Come with me.”

Maliq leads me to the door and I stop as soon as I step outside, my gasp filling the night air. Everyone belonging to the Golden Horde stands there, each person holding a single red rose. Even Balansi.

“What did you *do*?” I murmur to Maliq.

He brings his lips beside my ear, his tone matching mine. “I told them that you are kalina mei. And that makes you their Zahtana.”

“What does that mean?”

“Kalina mei is Durak for ‘my fire.’ As a dragon, there’s nothing more important to me than dragon fire. As a hordesman, there’s nothing more important to me than you.”

“Oh.” I blink back tears. “And the roses?”

“The people want to welcome you, offering the flowers as a symbol of their claim, of their acceptance.”

“How do I say ‘thank you?’”

“Dobro ti.”

He stands up straight and voices a command in Durak. One by one, every single member of the Golden Horde walks up to me and hands me a rose. I take them, making sure to thank every individual with a smile while trying not to wail like a baby. The procession takes a long time and in the middle of it I have to hand the extremely large bouquet to Maliq in order for me to accept another bundle of them.

Yurik walks up to me and offers me his rose with a grin. “Asili has made you a member of our family. I shall come up with another name to call you since ‘*rima*’ no longer qualifies.”

“You will call her Zahtana,” Maliq says.

The shaman grins at me before bowing his head. “Zahtana.”

“Thank you,” I say. “Not just for this, but for your kindness.”

“It is my honor.”

The older male walks away and I turn to Maliq. “Is that all of them? I don’t want to ignore anyone and accidentally insult them.”

Maliq frees my hands and adds the flowers to my huge pile. “There is one more.”

I look around, finding us alone. “Who is it?”

“Me.”

The male presents a rose to me, but unlike the rest, it’s yellow. “You are the only one I’ve ever given a rose to. And you will be the last.”

My hand shakes when I take the flower from him and hold it to my chest.
“I don’t know what to say. This is beautiful...”

“A gift for a gift.” He takes my hand and pulls me into his embrace. “I want to hear the words you spoke to your sister.”

“My sister?”

“Are you going to repeat everything I say?” he asks. When I nod, Maliq continues. “Very well. I love you.”

Understanding hits me like a ray of sunshine, making me smile. “I love you.”

“So you say.”

“So I *know*.”

Maliq stares down at me, his gaze golden, bright with emotion. “You keep saying that.”

“Well, it matters.”

Love always matters.

Of course it does.

NOTES

CHAPTER 6

1 Little warrior

CHAPTER 8

1 Something that is said cannot be undone, until it is fulfilled with the coming of the sun.

CHAPTER 10

1 Maliq, where is she?

CHAPTER 17

1 Do not seek out what does not belong to you.

2 I apologize, great Zahtan. I didn't realize the human female was only available to you.

CHAPTER 18

- 1** Get in the bathtub before I do something I regret.
- 2** Asili, spare me this human and my affliction of her.

CHAPTER 19

1 Little warrior

CHAPTER 20

- 1** Seize her.
- 2** Remove her.
- 3** Get her the fuck out of here.

CHAPTER 21

1 The Zahtan is none of your concern, outsider.

CHAPTER 23

1 Little warrior

2 Do you like that, my fire?

3 Soon, these beautiful lips of yours are going to beg me. First to come. Then to suck my cock, before I use it to fuck you.

4 We will speak of this later.

5 It can't wait. Not when I fear for the human's life. My petition must be heard.

6 While I listen to Terim sing your praises. And do my best not to slit his throat.

7 Enter.

CHAPTER 24

1 Little warrior

CHAPTER 25

- 1** Enter, Balansi.
- 2** What's wrong?
- 3** There's blood on this garment.
- 4** *Virginal* blood.
- 5** Are you certain?
- 6** What else could it be?
- 7** Burn it. Say nothing to anyone.

CHAPTER 26

1 “To fuck such a cunt is to touch perfection. Asili grant me the patience needed to keep from taking her. Here. *Now*.”

2 Go with the gods.

CHAPTER 28

1 Lover.

CHAPTER 29

1 My fire.

2 “I know what lies here. The very thought of someone marking what belongs to me fills me with rage, hotter than any dragon fire. But hear me, Asili, I will hunt this vampire until his only option is to face me or embrace the dawn. Either way, he *will* burn. Until this happens, my female is not safe.”

3 “Until then, my child is not safe. The future of the Horde is not safe. And I cannot rest until I’ve protected what’s mine.”

4 Sleep well, Zahtana. For tomorrow I declare war on the Crimson Castle.

CHAPTER 33

1 My fire.

2 little warrior

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ABOUT MIRANDA



Miranda Bridges began sneaking romance novels as a teenager and did not confess to reading them until she became a legal adult. After years and years as a voracious reader she woke up one day with a story in mind. She decided to write it down in order to silence her imaginary friends, but they've grown in number and have gotten louder. When she is not reading, writing, or drinking coffee she is taking care of two princesses who are of a reading age. Needless to say Miranda is still hiding romance books around the house, but now some of them have her name on the cover.

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