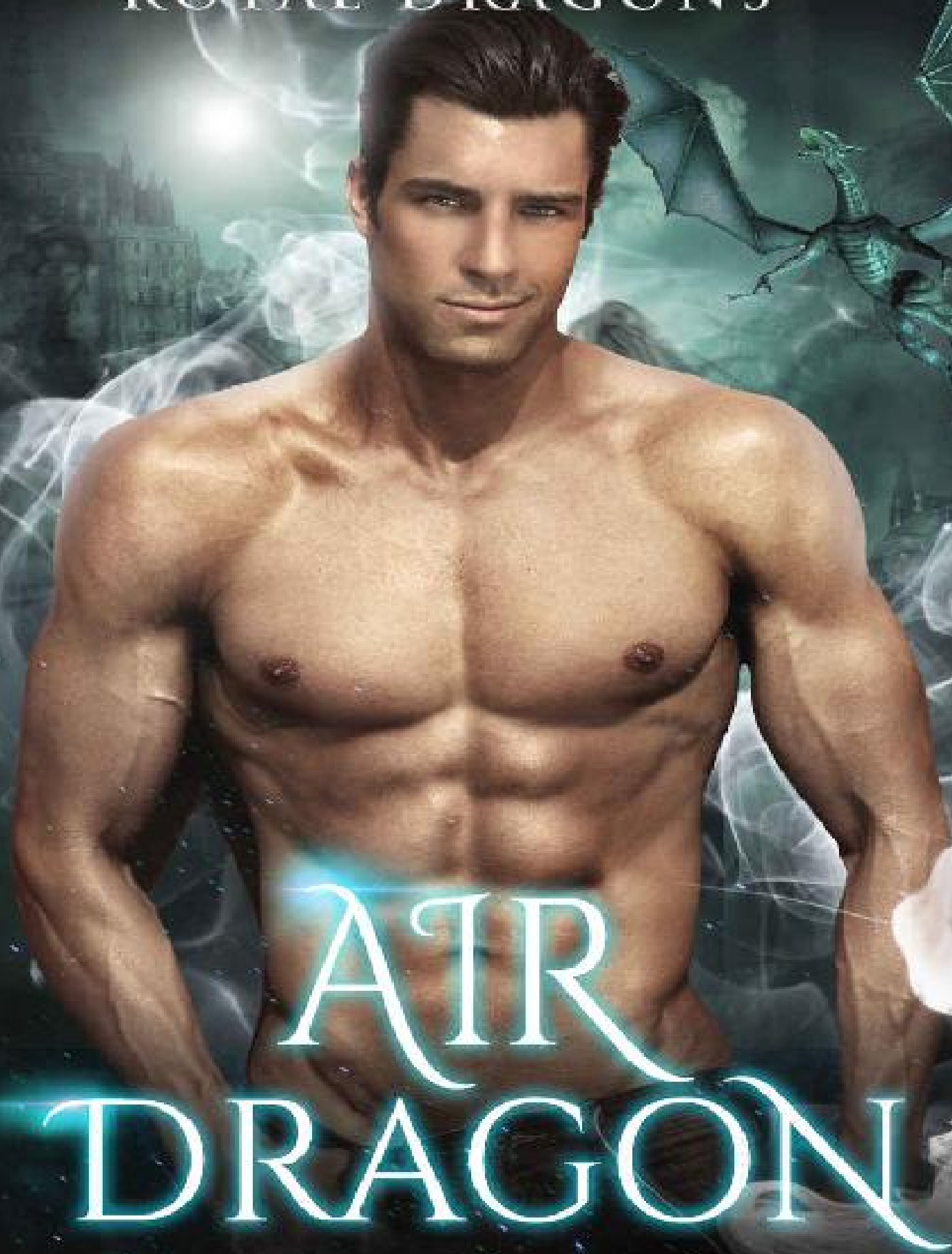


ROYAL DRAGONS



ATR  
DRAGON

ENEMIES TO LOVERS FANTASY ROMANCE

SANSA MOON

# AIR DRAGON

*Single Dad Shifter Romance*

*Royal Dragons Book 2*

Sansa Moon

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## Chapter 1 - Maize

Maize hiked up her skirts, her feet pounding through the forest undergrowth. Her breath was hitched from her running, sweat beading down her back, making the thin linen of her undergarments cling to her overheated skin. She didn't know how long her flight had lasted; all she knew was that the castle she had escaped from was still at her back. She knew this because the slanted sunlight, scattering through the canopies overhead, guided her in a straight line away from it.

Away from the unbearable torment of it.

She had to slow. Bending forward with her hands bracing against a tree trunk as she gasped for air. Her hair had come loose of its braid, the ribbon lost somewhere along unknown trails, blonde locks falling around a pretty face that now seemed a burden rather than a blessing.

If he hadn't found her pretty, perhaps he would have left her behind rather than whisk her onto his horse and bring her to his cursed dwelling.

Bastard.

He had ridden into the sanctuary that had been her home for over two decades with a host of men, but he hadn't been the one to give the orders. He had been too clever for that, hiding his true rank of lord in the guise of a simple lieutenant, but she knew now that he had been the one ordering the general to put flame to the building. And that he was the one who wanted the mistresses and their wards punished.

“Round them up,” his general had shouted. “Get them moving!”

And all the while she should have seen the gleam of anticipation in the lord's eyes, watching the chaos he had unfolded break into a panic. She knew the anticipation must have been there, since she had seen it shine so brightly the first

night he came to her chambers in the castle, the expression telling her how he reveled in having the upper hand.

“My dear,” he had greeted her, his voice hoarse and grating. “How are you finding your new accommodations?”

She hadn’t answered him.

She still didn’t know to what purpose he had chosen her out of all of the other mistresses and brought her there. She suspected he knew her identity somehow, suspected he knew she was close friends with queen Blair. It was the only sound reason she could see for him capturing her while dispersing the rest of the mistresses and sending them on the run.

She had questioned why he didn’t simply kill them all but thought that perhaps he wanted witnesses. He wanted the message spread of what he had done. He wanted the people to fear that they might be next and, in spreading such fear, to undermine the rule of king Hugh.

When people began to feel unsafe in their own homes, unrest was stirred.

But for all the months she had spent at his castle—assured that she was his honored guest, though everyone had seen her for the prisoner she was—she hadn’t been able to whittle the truth out of him.

It hadn’t helped that she had been shackled by invisible chains from the moment he grabbed her.

He must have seen her use her magic to try and defend the sanctuary as she had reached out with everything in her, gathering the streams of elemental magic that was forever flowing through her surroundings in order to try putting out the fire that already raged through her home. Her insides were still scarred from the effort it had taken her, and yet, with her powers at their peak, his first touch had bound them tightly, tightly. Making it perfectly clear to her that he was a truly skilled sorcerer.

Adding insult to injury, the room he had brought her to had been further enchanted to keep her magic at bay, keeping her from conjuring. She could feel the bonds tucked deep in

the walls as though they were physical ropes wound around her wrists. This had told her that he most likely had to be touching her to have a hold on her, which had given her at least some comfort. No matter how powerless she had become, there was the chance that she might break free and, as long as she kept herself away from him, she might be able to fight back.

He'd left her room that first night with a sweep of his robes, dissatisfied that she wasn't more forthcoming. After all, she wasn't being kept in a dungeon, now was she?

"I'm not exactly free though, am I?" she had countered.

He hadn't replied.

The second night he had brought a decanter of wine.

"Drink," he'd encouraged, that gleam back in his eye.

She hadn't dared refuse him and, at the first sip, she knew the wine was laced with even more enchantments. These bindings cording themselves through her blood itself.

"You wish to be free of these chambers," he'd commented before he left the room again. "That will require a level of trust between us."

"Yes," she'd agreed, since gaining some semblance of his trust might, at least, provide her the base means of plotting her escape.

If he allowed her to roam the castle, she could be able to find the door out, whereas if she stubbornly kept to the pride that was telling her to fight him with everything she had, the chance of getting away from him grew narrow. Better to submit at see a clear path to possible escape.

"This is our seventh month together," he had told her one evening. "Did you know that?"

She had feigned innocence, as though she hadn't counted every single night and every single day she had spent in the castle. "No, my lord. I didn't," she had said.

“We know each other a little better, I should think,” he’d offered. She had merely nodded. Over the several months he had visited her, their conversation had loosened with each new decanter of wine they shared, and yet she still did not know his name. He had not asked for hers, making her suspect ever more strongly that he already knew it. That she had been chosen not randomly but with intention. She sometimes worried she had even been the reason the sanctuary had burned down but couldn’t linger in such thoughts.

As little as she knew of him, one thing was growing evident: he wanted her for a mate.

“I have been a kind and generous host, have I not?” he asked, that gleam in his eyes that made her want to squirm with discomfort.

“You have,” she agreed with ease. She had grown the habit out of self-preservation. Any time she deigned to talk back or disagree he would simply rise and leave the room, sometimes not returning for a few nights. Once the potion had taken hold, she had been allowed out of her room to walk the castle hallways. The place was run down, empty. A hollow where once a home had been. But her quiet exploring of dark and dank spaces was put to an abrupt halt on the days after he’d not visited her. She would be kept under lock and key again. Reminded that she should behave or suffer his punishment.

“Do you understand now why I brought you here?” he had asked, and when she refused to accept him, refused to agree that she was his and he was hers and they were to be bound forever, he had simply left her in her room for six days and nights. No freedom of movement, no food or water. Hope waning with every passing hour.

It had left her with little chance of getting any information out of him as to the motivation for his attack on her home without first compromising herself.

As she didn’t want him near her, obtaining even a trace of insight had proven impossible.

He disgusted her.



A vile, loathsome dragon, more like a scaled snake, perpetually coiled and ready to strike. Made all the smaller and unimpressive for it.

How glad she was to be running away from him.

The thought made her straighten up, air back in her lungs.

She wasn't away from him yet.

She tried in vain to rouse her inner dragon, searching frantically for that connection that had once been so simple to find, but it had been pushed to lay dormant along with her magic. Though she had now missed at least one serving of the potion, it clearly wasn't enough for the connection to reform itself. She longed to stretch her wings, but more than that, she longed to conjure. Her magic had been like a white light tracing the golden glow of her inner dragon. For all her life, there had never been one without the other, and lacking both was like losing the very core of her being.

In all her lifetime, she had never felt so lonely.

She hugged herself for a moment, the sorrow like smoke between her ribs. But there was no time for despair.

*You've come this far, she told herself. Keep running until you reach a road or a stream, something to follow where you're bound to meet someone.*

The reminder was a stark one. It had been all she could think about when she put her shoulder to the side door of the castle and breathed her first lungful of the morning air. To find others, to secure herself shelter.

She gathered up her skirts again, about to set off between the thick trunks of the evertrees when a melody reached her. It was the soft drill of a flute and seemed to drift on the air, one note at a time, dancing gently with the breeze. It swirled about her head, teasing her ears until she had to close her eyes, frozen to the spot.

She recognized it.

She had heard it played every night in the castle right before...

Before the lord came to her chambers.

Her eyes opened, sharply. Her stare focusing on the shade between trunks. Then on the trunks themselves, determining they were thick enough to hide a man.

Had he seen her? Or was he trying to lure her because he had yet to discover her?

She stepped close to the tree that had so recently supported her, pressing herself against it, but she felt a tug around her two hearts that was strong enough to bring tears to her eyes. As though the melody was reaching deep within her, spreading a sense of melancholy. At the castle, it had made her feel lonely, had made her long for his company in the minutes before his arrival. Now, all she could focus on was the weight in her chest, the longing. She knew there was only one remedy, and it was to find whoever was playing the flute, lace her fingers with his, and walk with him wherever he so wished...

She wanted to resist it. Deep down she knew she mustn't give in. But the melody was calling to her, cajoling her. It never had before. This time, he must have enchanted it somehow. The tug was growing painful, squeezing her hearts.

*Stop*, she thought in vain. *Stop it, please. I don't want to.*

But she couldn't keep her feet from moving in the direction they were being pulled. As she took a step forward, rounding the tree trunk, an arrow suddenly buried itself deep into its bark. The thing juddered an inch away from her nose, her eyes rounded with the shock of it.

Her head began to clear, the tug around her hearts gone, but she doubted it had anything to do with the arrow. Rather it must have everything to do with the melody stopping. Now that he had her in his sights, and weapons to threaten her with to boot, he seemed to no longer think he was in need of the instrument's powers.

She would show him how wrong he was if he thought she was going to be threatened into following him. That she wouldn't put up a fight now that enchantments weren't part of their interactions anymore. She would show him who she truly was.

She turned to the sound of approaching horses, opening her mouth to call her tormentor every foul thing she could think of so that he would put the next arrow in her chest and be done with it, but the words stayed on her tongue.

Before her, seated on a magnificent stallion, was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. He was so stunning she even forgot about the threat she had been running from, losing herself in the ice blue of his gaze. His lips were full, his cheekbones high, his face itself so perfect it looked sculpted. Dark locks hinted beneath the hunter's cap he wore, but the cap itself was decked out in precious stones and gold threads, marking him as royalty.

The precious stones and gold threads were echoed in his hunting clothes, the cut of them accentuating his tall frame, his strong shoulders, his slender hips, and muscular thighs. But they didn't look very comfortable, or very conducive to hunting.

Unless he was hunting trees.

The thought made her mouth quirk in a smile, which made his left eyebrow quirk up in a question.

She realized she knew better than to irk a highborn whose temperament was unknown to her, so she got rid of the smile. With a glance to the arrow, she curtseyed low, the way she'd been taught at the sanctuary in preparation for a life at court. A life that she had opted out of. Straightening back up, she said, "Your majesty. I don't mean to be presumptuous, but was that arrow aimed at my head?"

The quirk was back on her mouth no matter how hard she tried to rid herself of it. Daring to glance up, she caught his expression. His eyes had narrowed, his brows furrowed. He shifted a little in the saddle, self-conscious enough to recognize firing arrows at unsuspecting women wasn't exactly

endemic to good breeding. This was at least a good sign that he wasn't about to fire a second one.

"I thought you were a deer," he excused himself.

She straightened up, eyes going to the man on horseback at his side, deducing he was a royal aide of some higher rank. He was shorter, slenderer, wearing finery that spoke of that high rank. He appeared to be a younger dragon, his eyes a deep brown, his hair a sandy blonde. He wasn't unpleasant to look at but moving her gaze back to the king she couldn't help but melt a little again.

His beauty was all kinds of distracting, her mind lingering on his thick eyebrows, the cut of his cheek, the curves of his lips. She'd never reacted to a man like this before. It was both bewildering and exciting. And a little aggravating. After all, he'd just shot at her.

"Well, as you can see, sire, I'm no deer," she said. "Nor fowl nor any four-legged animal worthy of your sport."

"No, clearly not," he agreed, the quirk to his left eyebrow back. He observed her keenly, gaze traveling down to her bare feet. "Indeed," he muttered. "Wherever are your shoes?"

She had to decide. Was she going to trust him, or not? She was a woman alone in a forest with two men who might look at her plain linen dress, hear her story of having been brought far, far from anyone bearing any knowledge of her, and decide she made for better sport than the animals they were after.

Men turned beast much too easily when given the opportunity, she was well aware of that.

"Highness," the aide said, a firm note in his voice. "The lady appears to be in distress."

It was generous of him to title her a lady since she was far from dressed as one. She could tell the prince—not king, as denoted by the aide addressing him as highness—was thinking the same as her, unimpressed by her garments. He didn't seem all that inclined to share in his aide's generosity.

Rather, he looked apt to retrieve the arrow from the tree and turn his horse around, leaving her where they found her; the arrow having more value than a strange woman lacking footwear on what was proving a chilly morning.

For all that beauty, she could see the hardness of his hearts as clear as day. Why did every prince have to be a haughty mess? Not that she'd met that many. In fact, she'd only met one and he had proven himself not quite as much of a mess as she'd first thought him to be. And after completing his trial, winning the heart of his queen and fighting off a threat to his entire kingdom, he was now ruler and Keeper of the House of Fire.

The fact that another prince was now before her meant she had been brought across the border and into a neighboring kingdom. She hadn't contemplated the possibility that she'd been brought to a place outside of Elemys. To figure out where she might be, she observed the men before her. There was no banner displayed on the aide's horse, but as the prince was wearing white and gold, she made quick work of deducing he would belong to neither the House of Earth nor Water as they dressed in green and in blue respectively.

Coming to such a conclusion meant that the man before her must be the prince of the kingdom of Aeris and heir to the throne of the House of Air—the home of winds and storms. No wonder he seemed haughty; he'd been born to soar higher than any other dragon.

He exchanged a look with his aide, who quirked an eyebrow at him in a meaningful way she couldn't discern. It seemed to be an encouragement for the prince to behave himself, and it had the desired effect as the prince's gaze moved back to hers. In the following moment, there was a warmth in them that heated her from the top of her scalp to the tips of her toes. A smile split his face, dimples appearing in either cheek, the expression immediately disarming.

In fact, it shook her how disarmed she was, watching him shift casually on the horse's back to slide off, landing on both feet in a way that spoke of ease and confidence but without the overbearing entitlement of a moment ago. It was

as though the haughtiness had never been there, as though it had been all in her head, her impression of him colored by her expectation of anyone dressed the way he was typically turning out to be an absolute dick.

“Forgive me,” he said, placing a hand over his hearts. “Of course, I can see you must be in some sort of trouble or why would you be out here alone, dressed as you are?” Was there the hint of sarcasm there? She narrowed her eyes as he approached, taking a step away from him, the arrow vying for her attention. “Oh,” he said, shaking his head as he reached a spot that was close enough for him to grasp it and pull it free of the tree. “A misunderstanding.” He waved the arrow in the air as though it had made the choice of where to fly itself. “The heat of the moment. I was eager to...”

“Kill something?” she filled in.

“Bring home a prize,” he corrected.

A pregnant pause followed in which she thought she detected the aide wanting to make some form of a comment, but he refrained and opted for introductions as he said, “I am Irvine, royal aide, and you are addressing prince Greer, future monarch of the kingdom of Aeris.”

So, she had been right. It was gratifying to know that all those hours spend pouring over books at the sanctuary in order to make a good impression at court hadn’t been entirely wasted.

The prince’s smile somehow turned brighter, as though his name alone should afford him her good graces. He needn’t try so hard. She was finding it increasingly difficult to see any fault in his demeanor whatsoever, the dimples distracting her mind into oblivion. If *she* could get into *his* good graces, she felt all her pain and suffering to get to this moment would have been worth it. Was this what love felt like? It couldn’t swirl itself into a heart this quickly, could it?

“Will you accept my apology if I rid us of this offending object?” he asked, tossing the arrow before she had a chance to respond.

The gesture made her budding devotion keep from blossoming as it seemed the prince had at least one fault. No amount of superficial charm would be able to conceal true conceit for very long. She wondered what would happen if she scraped the surface. Would she still find beauty, or something putrid? Was he simply used to getting his way, with his title and that face? She shouldn't trust him implicitly, she decided, but she would place herself in his hands, nonetheless.

The flute had stopped playing its mesmerizing melody the moment he appeared.

That had to mean something.

"My name is... Mae," she offered as a half-truth since the lord who had taken her must be known to the prince. She still couldn't be certain that they weren't in cahoots, or at least, that the lord didn't feel secure enough in his access to the royal favor that whatever he saw fit to do on the grounds of his estate wouldn't garner retribution from the court. "Lady Mae of the Seven Isles."

Lying about her title was a gamble, but she needed to be treated as an equal or risk being handed over to the authorities for safekeeping. This would most likely mean she would be sent on her way with a blanket and a loaf of bread, and as she didn't know how long it would take for her powers to return to her. It felt altogether more dangerous than being invited to an unknown prince's court.

"The Seven Isles," the prince repeated. "That's quite a way to travel with no shoes."

"Perhaps the lady should be offered a horseback," Irvine remarked tartly, making the prince stiffen at what was clearly a correction of the prince's tactlessness. "To rest her weary feet," the aide added, his meaning far from lost on her.

The prince could tell. He must realize that she was considering what type of future monarch needed to be reminded of what his manners ought to be. Something dark swept across his beautiful blue eyes, like a memory of past hurts that meant he had little tolerance for being questioned,

but in a moment the expression was gone, and the deeply convincing care was back in his gaze.

This time she wouldn't be quite so easily persuaded, though.

She was going to have him show her his true mettle before giving into the thoughts that kept appearing whenever their eyes met. Thoughts of him lifting her onto the horse, wrapping his arms around her, taking her to his castle, keeping her safe until the man was apprehended and then...

"My lady Mae," he said, reaching out his hand to her. "May I please offer you my horse and a room at my father's castle for however long you may need it?"

The smile was back on his mouth, the gentle mirth filling his gaze once more, and never had anyone looked so self-assured that they could cater to her every need, even beyond what she herself knew them to be.

She returned the smile and, by way of answering his question, slipped her hand into his.



## Chapter 2 - Greer

Greer's feet hurt. He'd worn his new hunting boots, not expecting he'd be doing much walking, but he kept his complaints to himself. He knew the look he'd get from Irvine if he voiced them in front of the "lady"—he was far from convinced that was her true title—so he'd keep quiet until they were back at the castle. She was riding straight-backed, as though used to the saddle, but of course that didn't have to mean anything by way of proving her status.

She might have grown up around horses for a whole slew of different reasons. Her father might raise them, or work the stables, or be a coachman. Due to circumstances that were well beyond Greer's control, it was of little consequence.

The truth was that the only reason Irvine saw fit to speak to him in the manner he had was because Irvine knew the prince needed the nudge, needed the reminder that every woman he met might be the potential key in the lock he was facing.

Well, the proverbial key, anyway.

The lock was of his father's making and had been given to him in the form of an ultimatum: to find a female to mother his motherless son. His father had named it as Greer's first and last trial. In other words, finding this woman was the means by which he would prove himself worthy of the crown. Of course, Greer suspected the trial had been chosen by the king more out of concern for his grandson than anything else. An incentive for Greer to step up as a father and bring Grey, his son, a sense of balance or some such nonsense. But Grey was Grey. He had lost his mother. Nothing and no one would every balance out the vacuum left by her.

Viola.

Thankfully, the king had failed to stipulate whether a bond had to form between Greer and this proposed, unknown caretaker. A detail which made the process a little easier. They wouldn't have to be mated, as far as Greer was concerned.

However, she had to be a sound mother figure and form a true bond with the child, so, of course, that put a bit of a dampener on things. Mothers were typically shaped into mothers by giving birth, weren't they? Knowing into whose hands to place the responsibility for his son's upbringing wasn't a task he took lightly and finding a childless mother who could fill the shoes of his lost mate made the task all the heavier.

She had been a wonderful mother.

He loved his son, but Grey had never been easy to build a relationship with and, after Viola, there had been an airless void between them that had made it nigh on impossible to meet on common ground. And so Grey roamed the castle while his father stayed out of his way.

Greer sighed.

Due to the pain in his soles, but also because Irvine was right in reminding him that there was no point in not trying to charm every woman who crossed his path. However nonsensical, he had to try.

And that meant trying even with the ones who looked like they'd recently crawled out of a cave.

Could that be it? Was she spending most of her time in dragon shape? Was that why she had such a wildness about her?

"Tell me, my lady," he said, "what parts of the Seven Isles do you call home?"

"The southern parts, your highness," she replied.

It was gratifying that she was addressing him in a more polite manner, but he couldn't shake the feeling there was a lot more to her than met the eye. Those bare feet must have a story behind them, yet she hadn't offered that story freely. It told him she didn't know if she could trust him or not, which made his royal heart bristle, though he kept the sensation out of his expression. She shouldn't question his honor. The very act was dishonorable.

"Which parts of the southern parts?" he pressed. "It's a rather vast plot of land, wouldn't you agree?"

“I would, your highness,” she nodded. “The very tip of the most southern part of the Isles.”

“Which isle?” he asked, finding her choice of description strange indeed.

“The most southern isle, of course, your highness,” she replied, looking at him over her shoulder as she was riding in front of him and Irvine.

Greer slowed his step, the motion prompting Irvine to hold his horse in a little, understanding that Greer wanted to attempt a more private conversation. Greer lowered his voice as he said, “I don’t know about this.”

“Please hold your judgments until we’re at least out of the forest,” Irvine muttered. He was a decade younger than Greer but acted like a grumpy elder most of the time. Greer supposed he had good reason. Being personal aide to a prince who had lost his mate, on top of trying to keep the heir to the throne on track for the past century and a half, had required all the tricks in the book.

Greer was aware he was a handful. He simply had no desire to be anything less.

“She looks like a cave dweller,” he remarked. Irvine cocked an eyebrow. He couldn’t dismiss the observation; it was on point. “The Seven Isle kin dress in silk, not linen. If she fell out of a carriage and had to make her own way, wouldn’t she at least dress as her people do?”

“Silk rips easily,” Irvine said. “She might have traded a pendant or a lock of hair for simpler attire, if hers was ruined.”

“A lock of hair?” Greer huffed. “Who would trade clothes—actual, useful possessions—for something so pointless?”

“Someone who’s a romantic at heart,” Irvine said, the irony not lost on Greer, who was as far from a romantic as could be. “They may have wanted a token to remember her by.”

Greer rolled his eyes.

“She probably had a purse of coin,” he muttered. “Pardon me,” he added, directing it at Lady Mae as he picked up his pace again, catching up to walk next to his horse before continuing, “but we were just debating your rather interesting attire.”

Mae kept her gaze straight ahead, the fields that rolled their way up to the castle beginning to glimpse through the trees, golden with ripening wheat.

“Focus is back on my lack of sensible footwear I take it,” she commented, one corner of her mouth quirking in another of those hints of a smile. He didn’t know why it set him strangely at ease that she seemed to have a sense of humor, but it did. If she could only open up, perhaps he wouldn’t have to station guards outside her door. At least not as many guards.

“You must admit it’s odd,” he prompted.

She had a rather pretty face, he had to admit. With a bath and after a brushing out of those golden locks, she might even be rather attractive. He wouldn’t go so far as to call her beautiful, but she was certainly agreeable. Especially when that little quirk of her mouth and the soft glitter that appeared in her green eyes added a certain air to her that was charming.

She seemed sure of herself, and to his mind, people who were sure of themselves made the most loyal subjects, mostly since they weren’t constantly assailed by fear. He hoped she wouldn’t prove him wrong in his assumptions and waited for her response to his prompt, eyeing her face to look for any change in her expression, any hint that she disliked him calling her out.

He would know if she was lying to him. He could always tell. Irvine might offer up an argument to the contrary, but if there was one thing Greer knew it was that he could trust his head. His logic served him. Irvine would call it shrewdness, but Greer had learned to ignore his aide when it came to such matters. Where Irvine sought to see the best in others, Greer knew to wait until others revealed themselves to him.

And she was about to.

“It’s a rather harrowing tale, I’m afraid,” she said.

“Let me guess,” he offered. “Highway robbers?”

“Not quite.” Her smile faltered. He furrowed his brows, knowing immediately that she was holding back because whatever she needed to tell them would shine a different light on her predicament. Was she worried they wouldn’t believe her?

“Whatever it is, you can tell us,” he assured her. “You have my word as future monarch that no harm will come to you, no matter what it is.”

Her smile was bleak when she offered it. “Thank you,” she said. “But it’s rather a bit more complicated than that, as I can only assume it will be a tale involving a member of your court.”

His heart sank. What did she mean?

“A highborn stole your shoes?” he asked, dumbfounded.

At least it made her smile brightly at him, huffing a laugh as she shook her head. “No,” she said, smile waning again. “They stole *me*.”

“They stole *you*?” he repeated, unable to make sense of the words.

“From my home,” she said. “Whoever he is, he came riding with his men and after burning the... house to the ground, he took me on his horse and brought me to his castle. Or what you want to call it. It was very big but not very grand. Run down and... awful.” She trailed off, her face becoming stony, but tears soon sprang in her eyes no matter how she tried to remain stoic against them.

He looked away from her then, brows in deep furrows. “Who would be capable of such atrocities?” he asked Irvine.

“Any number of dragons would,” Irvine said.

“Kidnapping a woman after burning her house down?” Greer demanded. “Any number of dragons in my father’s court would be capable of it?”

Irvine gave a short nod to the affirmative.

Greer couldn’t believe it. The men who had surrounded him for all of his life were fine, upstanding members of the court, of society at large. None of them would ride into a neighboring kingdom and take from it what wasn’t theirs, like common robbers. Burn and pillage like pirates on the high seas. Why would they even need to? Aeris provided them with everything they could possibly want or desire. The proposition that they would ever need to take anything from anyone sounded ridiculous. Unless...

He ground his teeth. There was only one reason he could think of, and he didn’t want to linger on it.

He turned his gaze back on Mae. “Are you quite sure?”

“Highness,” Irvine said, a reproach there, but Greer didn’t care.

She was accusing what he could only assume at this point were her betters. No highborn would point their finger at another so she had to be from a class entirely set apart. He didn’t need to hear her accusations if he chose not to. He could even have her put in a cell for them. She looked as though she knew what he was thinking, fear mixing with something else he couldn’t quite define. It wasn’t disappointment, was it? Why would she be disappointed?

“You gave me your word no harm would come to me,” she said.

Oh.

So he had.

“I’m simply trying to understand,” he offered, though it was a feeble excuse for doubting her testimony. “Did you get a name?”

“No.”

“See his face?”

“Yes.”

“Can you describe him?”

“He was tall, with a hooked nose and dark hair,” she said, head turning back to him as she reined his horse to a stop. “His teeth were very clean, and his clothes were very fine, which is how I know he’s highborn. His manner of speech, of movement, of trying to force his will, all of these details spoke of someone of the upper classes. He...” She trailed off again.

“Did he... violate you?” Irvine inquired mildly. “If so, the sentence is death.”

The question made the hairs on Greer’s neck stand up. The mere implication was too haunting. What kind of man would drag a woman from her home only to force her into a carnal union? It made him sick to his stomach that such things even occurred.

“No,” she thankfully mumbled, gently urging the horse into a walk again. “Not bodily, but in every other way. He diminished me. He fed me a potion that had put my inner dragon into slumber. I can’t reach her.”

Greer stared at Mae.

Interfering with another’s inner dragon by way of magic was high treason. For such a crime, the perpetrator would be put to rot in the Nest—a cage placed at the highest point in the kingdom where the winds would rage around them until their breath left their body.

“I don’t recognize anyone by that description,” the prince murmured.

“He may have disguised himself,” Irvine suggested.

“Yes, I suppose so,” the prince agreed, gaze drifting from the aide back to the straight-backed woman riding next to him as he remembered; there was more at stake here than his pride.

“I’m terribly sorry this happened to you,” he offered magnanimously. “I’m ashamed such an event was instigated

by someone I thought loyal to everything our crown stands for.”

“And what is that?” she asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“Servitude. In every sense of that word,” he stated, believing it with his whole being. “This kingdom is meant to feel a safe place to live, no matter your parentage.”

She looked taken aback, but gathered herself together, schooling her expression into something tight that he couldn’t read. “Interesting,” was her only comment.

“You think it sounds too good to be true,” he huffed.

“Yes,” she stated without hesitation. “I do. Since all I have felt since being brought here is unsafe.”

“I can assure you that your situation is an anomaly,” he bit back, trying hard to keep his temper in check even though it was flowing wild through his veins.

“You seemed surprised anyone in your court would be capable of such things,” she remarked.

“And?”

“And that tells me that perhaps you don’t know your court as well as you think you do,” she said. “And if you don’t know your court then how could you know your country? Unsavory things happen everywhere. Just because it’s not fashionable or acceptable to speak of them doesn’t make them any less real or present.”

He turned to properly face her, raising one finger as he said, “Now, listen here—”

“Behold,” Irvine interrupted as they had reached the tree line. “The city of Atherea.”

The encouragement was for them to raise their gaze and look at the view now stretching before them. They all stopped, the horses held in, as they looked out over those rolling hills to where they dipped and revealed the happily situated citadel, its stone buildings surrounding the towering castle in its middle. The castle rose ten stories high, its façade



dressed in white stones off the cliffs that Aeris was famous for. With the golden light of the sun hitting its west wing, the stones glittered, making the castle a true sight to behold.

Greer was gratified to see the look of soft awe on Mae's face.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

"Thank you," Greer smiled.

"Did you quarry the stone?" she asked, her bite back in her tone.

He gave her an impatient look, then came to a decision. Without hesitation he reached up, braided himself and swung himself onto the stallion's back, seating himself behind her. The horse didn't flinch, too used to Greer to balk at the sudden movement. She, however, did react, stiffening as his chest met his back, then glaring at him over her shoulder.

"How about we speed this up, my lady?" he asked pointedly, reaching around her to grab the reins, putting his heels to the side of the stallion, and encouraging the horse into a gallop.

Greer noted how she grabbed onto the horse's mane, leaning forward to aid the animal. She was a practiced rider; he hadn't been wrong about that. She was rude, however, and outspoken, which made him suspect she hadn't been raised in a very noble household. All households on the Seven Isles were noble, so either she was a true rebel against her upbringing, or she was lying.

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People moved out of the way when they rode through the city streets, more so due to the hooves of the horses and the risk of getting trampled than that they recognized their prince. In fact, most commoners had no idea what he looked like. How could they when they were always at the very back

of the castle courtyard for all public appearances, or even cheering beyond the gates of the castle itself? It wasn't their fault. He'd never blamed them for the ignorance. He was very benevolent that way.

"We should take the northern gate, your highness," Irvine said.

"Why?" Greer inquired.

"Well, if she was indeed stolen by a courtier, then chances are they'll recognize her," Irvine said.

"He speaks true," Mae agreed, seemingly already gleaning where this might be heading, which was rather annoying since Greer didn't.

"And?" Greer asked.

"And the northern gate will have the most cover from any spying eyes in the castle. We'll sneak her in that way and, well, I was thinking..."

"I shudder to ask," Greer said, Irvine giving him a look.

"We spoke of the man taking her using a disguise. Why shouldn't she be able to disguise herself to capture him? That way she can move about the castle and possibly identify the man responsible," Irvine said.

"Oh," Mae made a noise as though she wasn't entirely onboard with the turn this had taken. Greer wondered what she'd been expecting. "I don't know..."

"You'll be perfectly safe," Irvine assured.

"Of course," Greer agreed.

"Not only will you be disguised in a way the man will never even think to consider," Irvine went on.

"Indeed," Greer nodded, as though they had already discussed this plan between them.

"But the prince will keep you by his side and will offer any protection you might need," Irvine finished.

“That is correct,” Greer smiled, but a frown soon creased his brow, as he turned his eyes on his aide. “I will do what now?”

“It’s foolproof,” Irvine nodded. “We dress the lady up as a maid. Make her in charge of drawing your bath, turning down your bed, you know, easy tasks—don’t worry, my lady, we won’t make you scrub any bedpans—and solve the mystery of this wayward courtier before week’s end. No highborn will pay attention to a servant. And you have the perfect excuse to keep her close at all times.”

The last was said with a meaningful raise of his eyebrows. Greer finally understood what the plan was really about: having a good reason to get to know the lady and see if she might be that proverbial key after all. It wasn’t a bad approach to a true conundrum, Greer had to concede as much. Of course, he wanted this reprehensible man—responsible for such horrific deeds—apprehended and punished, but completing the trial had to be first on his agenda. Decorum demanded it.

How would it look if the prince wasn’t eager to claim the crown as his own?

Not only would it reflect poorly on him as a future monarch, it would reflect equally as poorly on his father. And that was the very last thing he would ever wish for any choice of his to do.

“What say you, my lady?” he therefore asked.

Mae still sat in front of him, her upper body turned around so that she could look from him to Irvine and back again. Finally, her eyes rested in his, as though trying to figure out what he made of it all. He gave her an encouraging raise of his eyebrows and finally she smiled.

He admitted to her face lighting up in fair ways as she did so, her green eyes warming in a way that made his skin heat with practiced expectancy. It seemed his body thought he would now lean in and claim her mouth as his, as though that was what her smile was encouraging.

He shifted in the saddle, getting a hold of himself.

She was for Grey. Not him.

“Thank you,” she said. “For believing me.”

*I believe your story for I doubt anyone would go to such lengths to make such a story believable, he thought. But I also know there are details missing.*

Perhaps with her in a maid’s uniform, he would get the chance to prod deep enough to get a confession out of her. He would have to make her trust him first, though. And at that thought, he kept his smile firmly in place, and there it would stay. She wouldn’t poke his impatience again.

## Chapter 3 - Maize

“Not like that,” he groaned impatiently, and she stilled her hands, letting them hover over the covers of his bed, which she had just attempted to turn down. It was her third try, which she assumed was the reason for the impatience. She kept from fisting her fingers in building frustration.

“How then?” she asked.

“You can’t expect me to turn down my own bed in order to show you how to turn down a bed.” He pressed one hand against the side of his face in exasperation. “I need a drink.”

She glared at his back as he walked up to the fireplace, having a seat in the armchair placed before the merrily crackling fire she had lit for him, putting his feet up on the footrest with a soft sigh. She focused back on the bed, thinking there were only so many ways one could turn down the sheets when he sighed again.

This time pointedly enough for her to look over at the chair. Its high back hid him from view, and she narrowed her eyes at it.

“What?” she asked.

“I *said* I need a *drink*,” came the reply.

“Oh. I didn’t realize that pouring was part of the job description,” she excused herself, heading over to the table hosting a decanter of wine and a collection of glasses.

“I’m trying to help you,” he said, once she brought the wine over.

“Is that what you’re doing?” she asked, handing him the glass.

“Yes, in fact it is,” he stated, shifting to face her. “If you are to pass for a maid with the rest of the servants you need to at least learn the basics. If at all capable.”

“I am capable of turning down a bed, my lord,” she said tartly. “Only not to your very grand specifications. Though, to be fair, telling me you want them ‘just so’ is hardly specific enough.”

“Please don’t nag me,” he muttered, waving a hand at her to go back to the task of the bed.

At that gesture, she did fist her fingers, looking to the ceiling briefly before leaving his side. He was insufferable, though absolutely breathtaking, which was infuriating because, every time their eyes met, her heart lurched forward as though he was able to caress it with his gaze. Most words out of his mouth made her want nothing more than to press her hand over it and silence him.

She couldn’t inform him how she was domesticated beyond his ability to comprehend the word. He sat in his chair and had others perform tasks for him; she had spent most of her life in the servitude he so happily toted as the virtue of his kingdom. At the sanctuary she had learned more than dancing and singing and plucking an instrument. She had learned to hunt, to clean, to organize herself. And before then she had learned from her mother how to utilize magic soul-deep and ancient.

He had no idea what she was capable of, and what was the most frustrating was that she was capable of it at levels he couldn’t even dream of touching. And yet she had no option but to bite her tongue; her magic was out of her reach.

She wouldn’t speak of it until she could demonstrate it. She wouldn’t reveal her true identity before then, either. She couldn’t. Not with the man out there, somewhere, walking the hallways she was now expected to walk. Keeping her identity hidden felt like a safety net. He wouldn’t be able to overhear some whispered conversation where her name or her abilities were mentioned.

“Forgive me,” he said, the note of earnestness taking her off guard. “I’m tired. It’s been a long day and while I set out to catch a prize, I wasn’t expecting to bring something

living back to the castle. Or that a man from my own court would have such an ability for cruelty.”

“Ability,” she huffed softly, but felt herself mellow somewhat. “I guess that’s as good a word as any, my lord.”

“Will you sit with me?” he asked, shifting so that his head poked around the back of the chair, allowing his gaze to meet hers.

“Is that something your maids usually do, your highness?” she asked, unable to keep the smile off when he looked at her so invitingly.

“Please,” he insisted, giving the chair next to him a nod.

“I haven’t managed to turn down the bed yet,” she remarked.

“It can wait.” He smiled, disappearing out of sight as he leaned back again.

She hesitated, but she was bone tired herself and the cushions of the chair looked too inviting to decline. As did the warmth of the fire. If only she could’ve had a glass of the wine to go along with the conversation, she would’ve felt a little more like herself and a little less like this Mae character she’d been forced to make up. Mae who had no magic, no connection with her inner dragon, no real home. Mae who was nothing more than a victim in the eyes of this prince, when Maize had once wielded a bow and arrow and saved the life of a different prince.

She squared her shoulders.

Mae was all the things Maize was, she reminded herself, approaching the chair and having a seat in it.

The way he could switch so easily between moods was mildly unsettling, she had to admit as much. She was relieved that he’d invited her into his home, into his rooms, but she had a niggling feeling that he was observing her as closely as she was observing him.

His opening question told her how right she was when he asked, “You’re a bit of a mystery, aren’t you, Lady Mae?”

“I don’t think I’m that much of a mystery, my lord,” she replied.

“You say you come from the Isles, and yet the lilt of your voice tells me you’ve at least spent some time in the east.”

She thought for a moment, wondering what a web of lies would get her in the long run. The trouble with creating one was that one usually ended up tangled in it oneself, and even if the threads stuck somewhat close to the truth, she’d never been frightfully good at remembering the finer details.

“Come now,” he smiled, self-satisfied at thinking he had her figured out already. “You can tell me.”

This simple encouragement made her strain against telling him anything. If he already saw cause to mistrust her, then why should she strive to gain his trust? She could tell he wanted her to open up to him, to stroke his ego, make him think that he had her wrapped around his little finger the way he probably had every other woman in the castle securely craving his favor. To him, it didn’t matter if their craving was earnest or a display as long as it told him he was adored. And with her, it was the same basic principle of not wanting the truth. Instead, what he wanted were words that corroborated his slowly forming impression of her.

All she had to do was figure out what that impression might be and play into it.

It was a good thing she was forced to spend time in his closer vicinity. Not only was it the safest place for her to be, but it also gave her the chance to curry his favor in the same manner any other lady of the court would.

For all the prince’s bluster she still wasn’t convinced he would turn his back on someone that brought him support, swords or riches. Especially someone who might be bringing him all three. In such a context, she was painfully aware of her worth, and even though the valor of the Aeris court clearly



called upon a man to shield a woman in need, the man called upon to do the shielding wasn't any man—he was the future monarch. She needed to learn how important his crown was to him. What did it mean to wear it? Did he view it as mere decoration for a royal scalp, or did he truly believe in what it represented? Duty, loyalty, honor. All the traits a king should possess.

The way he ordered her around made her severely doubt it, but she was mature enough to know that her impression could be wrong. She was going to have to attempt an open mind. He had asked her forgiveness for his bluntness. She had to give him that. If she could get him on her side then perhaps, once it came time for the prince to choose where to place his loyalty, whoever her kidnapper was wouldn't matter because the prince's loyalty would be to the virtues of his court.

“My foremost caretaker was from the city of Mouv,” she said.

It wasn't entirely untrue. Blair—who had taken over responsibility for Maize after her mother died and had brought Maize to the sanctuary—had been born in Mouv. Maize had thought of trying to get a message to her powerful friend but kept worrying about how it would look. It might create tension between the two kingdoms and that was the last thing Maize wanted.

“I don't mean to make you feel uncomfortable,” he said.

“I'm not.”

“I can tell you're uncertain of how much information to share about yourself.”

She hesitated, but finally had to go with honesty as the best policy. Even if she didn't share everything during their first private exchange, she could at least be a little more forthcoming. Especially since he seemed to read her easily enough. “I'm sure you can understand why.”

“You don't believe I'll protect you.”

“I believe power gives a certain privilege and privilege understandably provides a degree of entitlement,” she said.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I don’t know whether your honor will declare that your duty and loyalty lies with me—a stranger to you and a non-citizen to your shores—or with this man who belongs to your court. He may be someone you’ve known for a very long time. For centuries. Someone who has been a friend to your father. Will such a man be punished in the same way as any other man would?”

“I see,” the prince nodded, growing thoughtful. “I’ll admit that the thought hadn’t crossed my mind to question or reconsider the necessity for the man to be made an example of. Whoever this man is—no matter their standing or previous ties to the crown—due punishment will be doled out for their crime. No one is above the laws of this land, my lady. Neither pauper nor prince.”

She raised her eyebrows but had to smile at how sincere he had grown during his speech. It sounded as though this mattered to him a lot more than she would have expected, which meant he did care for his kingdom.

“Not even a little, your highness?” she asked. He mirrored her small smile, making her stomach ice at the show of soft appreciation for her sense of humor.

“Not even a little,” he held firm. “If I begin to step out of line, then how can I expect anyone else to respect it? My father has always been adamant...” He trailed off. “Well,” he then said. “Would you like some wine?”

“I’d better not,” she said. “In case someone comes knocking. In fact, I shouldn’t be sitting down.”

She rose to her feet, straightening out the plain but clean linen dress she’d been given as part of her uniform. It was light green. She knew it brought out her eyes, that it showed off her curves, which she had once been informed by a well-meaning gentleman were quite inviting. She’d chuckled at the comment then, but at the moment, she’d rather it wasn’t

too far-fetched to apply to her. She wondered what the prince's impression of her was.

"I still know very little about you, Lady Mae," he said, the sound of her shortened name reminding her that she was, for better or worse, a liar. He had shown her kindness so far, even though he could be impatient and petulant. Didn't she owe him an offering in return?

"I'm no lady," she admitted. He raised an eyebrow at that. "I was born to a woman of some renown, but it was her... craftsmanship that people lauded her for. Not her name. My father left when I was still in swaddling. I have no recollection of him and, as my mother is dead, I don't have his name either. I am an orphan, my lord. And I was taken from a sanctuary."

His brows furrowed.

"On the Seven Isles?" he asked.

"No," she said. "A sanctuary just across your border with the kingdom of Elemys."

He stared at her. This was consequential, and of course, she had known it.

Both Elemys to the east and Rogoros to the south—to which the Seven Isles belonged—were important allies to Aeris. While Elemys was home of the bloodline of kings tied to the House of Fire, Rogoros hosted the bloodline of kings tied to the House of Earth. To the west spread the kingdom of Fawha with its thousand lakes, home to the House of Water. The four houses having hosted and cared for the elemental magic that kept the peace and prosperity of each kingdom for thousands of years, most of them entirely without friction.

If there was anything anyone might think to do in order to threaten the stability of the alliance, it would be to commit unwarranted and violent intrusions onto the neighboring kingdom's lands.

Someone could very well be intentionally stirring trouble.

"Why didn't you say so?" he asked.

“I don’t want to add to any pre-existing tensions,” she said earnestly.

“There are no pre-existing tensions,” he snapped, getting to his feet to face her. He looked as though she had slapped him. She hadn’t meant to. She had only wanted to offer up a kernel of reality to swipe at the fantasy she had created around her person.

“I didn’t mean to say—”

“Of course not,” he interrupted, his tone short, telling her he wasn’t of a mind to hear any more of what she had to say. She found his changed attitudes deeply unfair.

“I didn’t,” she underlined. “It wasn’t an accusation.”

“I’m sure,” he said, sounding nothing but tart.

“Nor was it meant as a presumption on how your court functions,” she tried.

“Certainly,” he nodded. “Why would you presume to know how our court functions? You are, as you said, not a lady.”

She gritted her teeth against the slight, against the coldness in his gaze.

“Quite right,” she said. “I am not.”

“You are excused,” he dismissed her.

She drew a breath to say something in return but stopped herself when he moved away from her. He walked slowly up to the fireplace, his back to her and his focus on the flames. She shook her head at him, then headed for the door. The bed was left as it was, the offered wine forgotten—she would rather be anywhere but in that room.

What a complete ass.

The door opened as she reached for the handle. The guard outside had heard her footfall and let her out without so much as a glance at her. It seemed the guards fixed their gaze on one spot on an opposite wall to where they had been stationed and it remained there for the entirety of their shift.

She had noticed it earlier during her brief tour with Irvine, accompanied by a not as brief bout of instructions of where she could and couldn't go, what she must and mustn't do.

She hadn't informed him she was already well-informed on the ways of court life.

Walking down the hallway she tried to shake her irritation with the prince.

But what had swayed him from being open and inquisitive to becoming so closed off again? Had it been the possibility of her not falling over herself at the effectiveness with which his court was run, or had it been her divulging that she wasn't highborn?

Determining it was most likely the latter, she huffed.

What an utter snob.

There was nothing more off putting than a princeling who thought himself above the general population of his kingdom. She had seen a princeling like that before and though his heart had been opened like a flower by Blair, the flower had always been there, ready for the right person to tease its petals into compassionate glory.

Prince Greer had no such petals within him, and no amount of teasing would coax the same compassion and consideration out of him that Blair had manifested in prince Hugh.

For all Greer's beauty it really was nothing but skin deep. She had scraped the gilt surface and all that had met her was solid iron, unyielding and already firmly formed over centuries of teachings. His father must be a stiff and unfeeling ruler to have produced such an heir.

She hadn't heard many stories of the kingdom of Aeris, but to her it had always seemed closed off from the rest of the kingdoms, happy in its riches, having few subjects leave and allowing even fewer the chance to settle within its borders.

*Figures, she thought to herself. Of course, they don't want any foreign intrusion. They don't want anyone to learn the truth of whatever the oppression is. There's no happiness*

*here. There's sure to be riches, but those riches are surely not divided amongst the people. The king is hoarding it like an earth dragon guards its treasure.*

She huffed to herself, walking down a broad hallway. She'd already taken more turns than she could remember, and each hallway looked mostly like the one before. She was going to get lost, and she didn't care.

The white stone of the castle's façade was found throughout its interior as well. Floors, walls, ceilings. All carved or inlaid with gorgeous, flowing patterns that mimicked the flow of wind that any airborne dragon knew well from flying through the skies. She finally began to slow her step, taking her mind off her mulling to trace her fingers along the widest pattern carved into the walls: the North wind.

She couldn't help but smile at the intricate love that had so clearly gone into every last inch of craftsmanship. It was a magnificent testament to the diligent power of the house of Air, as well as to its northern kingdom.

A cough from behind her made her freeze mid-step.

She lowered her arm, taking her touch away from the wall to turn around and face whoever had snuck up on her.

It was a child.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," he parroted, staring at her with enormous, brown eyes.

He looked very young, his stature half of her height, his oval face still far from an adult. He had dark brown hair in need of a haircut, his slight frame was dressed in simpler clothes, but since they were made from grey velvet, she concluded he was definitely the son of a courtier.

"My name's Maize," she said, biting her tongue at forgetting her cover. "But you can call me Mae," she hastily added. "What's your name?"

"Grey," the boy replied.

The attire suddenly seemed deeply unimaginative. She cocked an eyebrow, then offered him a smile. He was holding a half-eaten apple. “Where’d you get that?” she asked.

“The kitchens,” he shrugged, having a big bite. “Want one?”

“I do, actually,” she said. “I missed dinner.”

She’d been too preoccupied getting shown around and told the ropes by Irvine to even think about eating anything. It had been a very busy day, to say the least. And still he hadn’t taken it upon himself to show her how to fold down the bed ‘just so’.

She ignored the annoyance with his highness that the thought rekindled, letting it die down as she walked up to the dragonling, squatting down to get her eyes at the same height as his.

“I’m not sure I’m allowed in the kitchens,” she admitted to Grey.

“You are if you’re with me,” he smiled broadly, having another big bite of the apple before chucking the core carelessly against a wall.

She frowned at him as he turned and headed down the hallway. “You can’t leave that there,” she remarked. He didn’t even slow his step. She narrowed her gaze at his back, straightening up, saying, “Hey, mister. That’s not very kind to someone like me who has to clean up your mess after you.”

He stopped, turned to her, gave a shrug. When he didn’t move to pick it up, she sighed softly, performing her duty under the steady gaze of the boy. She picked up the apple core, approaching the boy with as stern a frown as she could muster. She didn’t want to get in trouble for poking his ego, but someone had to.

“I don’t think I want to go to the kitchens anymore,” she said, holding the core out to him.

“I’m not touching that,” he said, making a disgusted face. “It’s trash.”

She leveled him with a look. “It is your trash, Grey,” she reprimanded.

“Do you have any idea who my father is?” he asked.

And there it was.

“No, I do not,” she admitted.

The boy smirked, but then his smile faded. She furrowed her brow as he took a step back. He’d grown rigid, his arms at his sides, fingers moving as if of their own accord. His eyes rolled up, lids blinking uncontrollably.

She felt astonishment as she realized what was happening: he was conjuring.

The boy had magic.

There was a soft breeze that rose as if out of the floor itself. It was cold, swirling itself around her ankles. She thought it seemed it was in response to her tracing the North wind on the wall, but of course that was just her brain making up theories.

The air grew more freezing by the second until, as suddenly as it began, it all stopped.

The boy was breathing laboriously as he slumped against the wall next to him. She thought it was from exertion, but realized, from his widened eyes, that more than anything it was from fear. Real fear.

She frowned at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ll throw the apple away if you, please, promise not to tell on me.”

“Tell on you?” she asked, at a loss. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Don’t tell father I have magic. Please. He’ll lob my head off. He swore that anyone using magic would ‘meet a swift death’. That means lobbing their head off, I know it!” the boy cried, bottom lip wobbling with the terror rising at the mere thought.



She moved up to him, kneeling in front of him again, taking both his hands in hers. She caught his gaze, wanting him to understand that she was earnest. “No one is going to lob off your head,” she promised. “I won’t tell. I swear it. But... who is your father?”

Of course, the moment she looked a little closer at the boy’s face she knew exactly who his father was: Greer.

The prince had a son.

She wasn’t entirely sure how that made her feel, not that it should make her feel anything. It was simply strange to think of him as having a child. What sort of father was he if his child expected such repercussions? Not that she had any father of her own to compare with, but surely a father should listen and guide and be a place of safety? Grey seemed to believe his father would actually order his execution. How could that be? For all of the prince’s flaws, she couldn’t see him as someone who would be so imposing on a young dragon that they would think themselves in such danger.

And where was the prince’s mate?

A soft pull of disappointment formed near her hearts at the thought that Greer was already mated. The thought of his gaze made an all too familiar tremor run through her and to distract herself she focused back on the boy.

“Never mind,” she dismissed her previous question, reaching up to help the boy wipe at his tears. “It’s good to have a cry, isn’t it?”

“I’m not meant to do that either,” the boy said with an even harder sob, burying his face in the crook of one arm.

“But you’re allowed in the kitchens whenever you want,” she said lightly, wanting to offer a reminder that clearly not everything in the world was off bounds to him. “And I’m still starving,” she added. “Would you escort me there? Put in a good word for me with the cook?”

He removed his arm, sniffing, tears still wetting his cheeks, but he was visibly calming.

“You’ll like her,” he stated. “Her name is Willafred. Sometimes I call her Fred just to tease her. She doesn’t mind it.”

“She sounds like a good sport.”

“She is!” he nodded eagerly, reaching out and slipping his hand in Maize’s as they started walking down the hallway, his fear of a short minute ago entirely forgotten at the thought of showing off a new acquaintance to his old one. “She lets me taste the pie before she serves it to father and grandfather.”

“I like her already,” Maize declared. She paused, then asked, “Grey, how long have you had magic?”

“A while.” He shrugged, reaching up and tracing the North wind on the wall. She wondered if it was a habit or if he was mimicking her; either way, the gesture made her smile at him.

“And why can’t I tell anyone?” she asked. “Are you forbidden from doing magic?”

Grey nodded. “The whole kingdom is,” he said.

Her hearts were growing heavier by the second.

How could magic be outlawed when magic was a part of the royal bloodlines? When it had served to keep the peace for centuries? When it was one of the inherent traits to any king seated on a throne? When it was imperative for their succession that they connect with the elemental magic tied to their House and prove they would wield it for the greater good? It sounded ludicrous, and yet...

She had been given a potion that had served to suppress her magic.

Was this ban on magic within the borders of Aeris the reason? Or at the very least, a part of it?

“Why is it forbidden?” she asked.

Grey’s lower lip began to wobble again, though he kept his eyes on the hand of his that was still tracing the carvings. “Because of mother,” he replied.

Maize didn't want to press him any further and left it at that, but her thoughts were slowing to a crawl, her mind feeling foggy with the understanding that something terrible must have happened to Grey's mother. This understanding made Maize feel all sorts of discomfort as she'd just felt such envy towards a most likely dead woman.

Though it was a resounding blow to learn that Greer had somehow let his connection to the elemental magic of his ancestors wither on its vine for lack of attention, part of her could understand it. When she lost her mother, she hadn't conjured for nearly a year. The devastation had been too acute, the wound made fresh whenever she even attempted to do the spell work so deeply associated with her mother. However much empathy she could have for the prince, she still felt immense gratitude that not only was her magic suppressed within her, but she'd refrained from telling anyone she possessed it at all.

Strange that the potion had proved an inadvertent blessing. She did not direct her gratitude toward her captor, however, but rather the stroke of luck that her subsequent escape hadn't brought her straight into a different cell.

Of course, if she'd had access to her magic, they wouldn't have been able to capture her to put her in the cell to begin with.

How ironic that as much as she'd questioned herself for lying to the prince, this now made her the harbinger of a secret so great it might make him hate her should it be discovered. The thought was far from a balm for her already weighted mind. What exactly was she getting herself into here?

She wondered why magic was forbidden. She'd never heard of such a thing. Was this complete ban new? Had whatever had befallen the future queen happened recently?

She would have to find out, but she could also see how she would have to go about it in the most subtle way possible. She couldn't ask Greer, that much was clear. If he put up barriers around her simply commenting on his court, then he

wasn't going to want to discuss the events that brought about the death of his future queen.

In fact, she wished she didn't have to go back to his rooms at all, remembering how he had overreacted to her innocent questions. There was no way out of it, though. She would need to see him the following morning, bright and early, to get him ready for the day.

Or, if she wanted to be impatient about it, she could go see him right now.

The fact that she'd met his son might count for something and, though it felt silly, she wasn't convinced she'd be able to go to sleep thinking the prince was displeased with her. Too much was riding on keeping in his good graces and she felt, through Grey, that she had unlocked a part of the prince she hadn't even contemplated searching for; the prince had suffered and there was every reason to believe that his behavior was rooted in that suffering.

Besides this was the simple fact that his impression of her had to be shaping itself into a disagreeable one. Since their first meeting, she had proven herself argumentative and opinionated. Traits which she would never apologize for had the circumstances been different, but as things now stood, she knew that she had to amend this impression.

As her impression of him had mended somewhat.

If him looking at her with that accepting warmth again was a byproduct of her making amends, then so be it.

She smiled at Grey, letting him lead the way to the kitchens.

She spotted a tray of sugared apples and went about asking Willafred if she might bring some to the prince. As far as she'd learned from her confinement, sugar was a staple treat in the kingdom and though she wasn't used to sugared fruit, she'd thought the sugared apples proved a delicate treat. Willafred enthusiastically agreed that she should bring him some as they were her favorite.

“Thank you,” Maize said as Willafred loaded a plateful. She went on to serve Maize a delicate fish soup with freshly baked bread, getting Maize’s praise with every fresh spoonful she put in her mouth. It was like the seaside on a plate, all sunshine and warm breezes.

Maize contemplated bringing Grey with her to see his father but decided against it. He seemed genuinely afraid and there was no point in pushing whatever buttons the boy was sure to represent for the prince.

This is about making amends, she reminded herself sternly.

There should be no hint of a confrontation.

She left Grey in the capable hands of the cook—who seemed exceedingly used to the presence of the young princeling and sincerely didn’t mind—Maize took the plate of sugared treats with her and steered her step back to the rooms of the prince.

## Chapter 4 - Greer

“You didn’t deduce anything about her at all?” Greer asked, sending a frown Irvine’s way. “I’m disappointed in you, Irvine. You spent the whole afternoon with her. I was certain your observational skills would lead you to form some sort of conclusion.”

“Perhaps I would if she had opened up to me,” Irvine said. “It seems you had better luck with that.”

“She felt obligated,” Greer shrugged. “She’s still playing her cards close to her chest.”

“Is that why you overreacted?” Irvine asked. “Because you would rather she didn’t play them quite so close to her chest?”

Greer glared at him, then said tartly, “She questioned the functionality of the court.”

Irvine raised a shoulder in a shrug that spoke only of disagreement, however mild he was trying to make it. “It sounds as though she tried to explain that she didn’t in fact question anything. She was making an observation of how her kidnapping from our neighbors might have dire consequences. It was a sound observation at that, considering what you’ve gone through. The threat we thought was dealt with...” Irvine trailed off when Greer shifted in his chair.

Greer let the fact that the fire was burning low distract him. He had refused to stoke it himself, and Mae had left the room before getting the chance to. It was most irksome.

Irvine finished, “It seems she has a good head on her shoulders. Isn’t that exactly the type of woman you are looking for? The type of mother that Grey needs?”

Greer huffed.

“If she was that, then she should be mindful,” he remarked. “Not speak out of turn at every opportunity.” Irvine didn’t respond. Greer glared at him again. “Out with it.”

“I don’t believe she spoke out of turn,” Irvine chided gently. “And if the circumstances had been different, and you hadn’t felt so hit by her words, you might have offered her the *truth*. You might have let her know how close to it she was.”

Greer was about to ask him to hold his tongue when there was a knock at the door right before it opened. Mae walked through it, curtsying low, a plate of sugared apples in her hands. Greer thought fleetingly how she shouldn’t have to be the one bringing him gifts. Irvine was right. She didn’t know the full story and since such was the case, her words hadn’t been meant to irk him or poke at half-closed wounds.

He had been unfair.

“Your highness,” she said. “Let me apologize for having angered you earlier. I’ve come to...” She paused, glancing up at him, eyes trailing to Irvine. “Oh,” she said, straightening up. “Forgive me, I’m intruding.”

“I was just leaving,” Irvine assured her.

He bowed to his prince, offered her a smile and headed for the door. Once it closed behind him, Greer realized he had left Mae standing with the plate in her hands. He usually didn’t think twice, would expect her to simply know to find a spot to put the plate down on her own, but he felt too conscious now. Conscious of how she wasn’t a servant and wasn’t a lady. Conscious of how he didn’t know quite what to make of her. And of how this kept throwing him for a loop in ways he hadn’t been thrown for loops for quite some time.

“Here,” he said, taking the plate from her. “Let me.” He put it on the table between the armchairs in front of the fireplace, hoping she would take the hint and reclaim her seat from earlier. “Thank you,” he added. “I very much enjoy these.”

“Me too,” she smiled, not sitting down.

Perhaps he had made her too uncomfortable with his continued display of his lack of patience. He supposed instead of gestures he would have to reciprocate properly with words,

which was why he said, “I shouldn’t have rushed to conclusions. I’ve never been very good at listening.”

“That’s all right,” she offered, even though he knew it wasn’t.

“No,” he said, but his tone was gentler. So was her expression, true forgiveness there. Perhaps they would be able to see eye-to-eye after all. “Please, sit,” he added by way of invitation.

She did as he asked while he walked up to the decanter, pouring them each a glass of wine. It was the peppery kind from the south, grown on the warmest hillsides in the four kingdoms. It even tasted sun kissed. He wondered if she’d ever had it before, if she’d ever had any wine at all before. He wondered a great many things about her.

He brought the glasses over, having a seat and placing hers on the table alongside the plate.

She hesitated until he gave her a nod and a smile in encouragement, raising his glass to her. She returned the smile, taking her glass and raising it as well.

“Thank you,” she mumbled, having a sip. She seemed to enjoy it in a way a wine drinker would, with anticipation of its sweetness. “This is from the south,” she observed, having another sip. “I haven’t tasted anything like this in...” She caught herself, as though thinking better than broaching the subject of her confinement again.

“How long?” he prompted. “Do you know how long you were kept?”

“Just shy of a year,” she said.

“A year?” he asked, taken aback. “And none have come searching?”

“I think they believed me dead,” she said. “Burned with the building that was set aflame.”

Something in her expression, a hint of wistfulness, made him draw conclusions. She had told them that she had been cut off from her inner dragon—a fate worse than death.



And so he observed, “You are of fire kin.” She nodded. “It’s been a long time since I met a fire dragon,” he admitted. “We’re rather secluded here.”

“So I’ve heard,” she said. “Why is that?”

“I doubt anyone even remembers why,” he replied. “It just happened that way, I suppose. The people, believe it or not, are happy to live here. They’re provided for. They see no reason to leave and so, I suppose, my father has seen no reason either. He’s done very little traveling over the past two centuries or so.”

“But you have had fire dragons visiting,” she remarked, as though to imply otherwise would be ridiculous.

“Yes, but it’s all a rather dull affair when it’s state business.” He smiled.

“Ah,” she said. “No fire in their veins?”

“No displays of power,” he filled in, but his smile remained, making sure to let her know that, of course, he would never expect a spectacle. “Have you spent much time with any air kin?”

“No,” she said. “It’s rare that they appear across the border. I take it for the reason you’re giving—they’re happy where they are. I hear as the heir to the airmagic you can make a dragon soar higher than even the winds themselves can take us.”

His smile widened at the note in her voice. It was one he’d heard before, of soft longing and true curiosity. No other dragons saw the Earth from the very depths of the skies the way air dragons did, but as heir to the airmagic, he was the one dragon who knew what it meant to ride the air without any wind beneath his wings. It allowed him to go higher than any other. To view the world from a height where houses and rivers were no longer visible and shades of color was all there was.

“Then you hear true,” he said, producing excitement in her gaze as though he had just presented her with a precious gem. Then he stiffened, remembering the set of rules created

for everyone's safety ten years prior. "Of course, these days there's not much of that happening," he added.

"Oh?" she asked, reaching for an apple slice, having a nibble. "Why is that?"

He clenched his jaws together, wanting to avoid the topic with everything in him. He had a sip of the wine, staring at the fading embers of the fire he'd failed to stoke.

"If you're a fire dragon you must know all there is to know about putting flame to a piece of wood," he said. "This one is in need of rekindling," he added, nodding to the hearth. She paused and he realized too late that she might be reading a different meaning into his words—as though he was using the fire as a metaphor for what he truly needed from her—making him hasten to clarify, "I mean that literally."

This produced another small smile of amusement, and he relaxed at having saved face.

"Were you never taught how to make a fire?" she asked.

"Of course, I was," he replied. "But it's a very long time ago and since then others have built and managed mine for me."

"Literally, I take it," she smirked.

"And figuratively," he admonished, lifting one shoulder in a shrug.

"That's not very conducive," she remarked. "You have to tend your own fires. You can't leave that up to others."

"Why not? It seems to be working quite well."

"Oh, I'm sure," she said, obviously intent on keeping the peace.

"Is there anything to tell you otherwise?" he asked.

"Well, I met someone just now who seemed..." She trailed off, nibbling her sugared apple before meeting his gaze. She shook her head, regretful, yet clearly wanting to say what

she had almost divulged. She was seeking his permission before even speaking it.

“Seemed what?” the prince asked.

“Never mind,” she shook her head.

“No, go on.”

“It was a slip of the tongue,” she insisted. “It’s not a fit topic.”

“How my subjects feel about me is never an unfit topic,” he remarked. “It’s imperative that I know exactly what they’re thinking.”

“Difficult to know exactly,” she said.

“Well, as close as draconianly possible, then,” he smiled, hoping it would be casual enough to put her at ease even though his every tendon was tight as a bow string. “Please. I’m asking you to share it. I don’t wish to quarrel.”

“Well...”

“I swear it,” he stated, and, in that moment, he meant it.

The question was if he would still mean it in the following moment, or after hearing what exactly had been said about him.

“If you insist,” she said, still hesitating for another handful of seconds before she finished, “I met someone who seemed... frightened of you.”

This took him aback. It was the last thing he’d expected to hear. Had she said she’d met someone who found him argumentative, stubborn, and quick to temper he would have owned those character traits, mostly because he felt they all served him in their own way. But that he invoked fear?

“Nonsense,” he shook his head. “Why would they be frightened of me?”

“Because apparently you’ve threatened violence if anyone steps out of bounds,” she replied. “Heads being ‘lobbed off’, as they put it.”

“I have never said any such thing!” he exclaimed, throwing his hands out so that the wine spilled over the edge of his glass, splashing onto the carpet. He sat back, bringing the glass to the arm of the chair, staring at its contents in sudden contemplation.

Had he said such a thing?

“What was their transgression?” he asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, if they were so afraid of their head getting lobbed off, they must have committed a severe transgression. They must have ‘stepped out of bounds’, as you put it.” He raised his eyebrows. “What did they do that caused them to fear such dire consequences?”

She seemed to weigh her words for an inordinate amount of time before she finally said, “I made a promise never to tell anyone.”

“For Heaven’s sake,” he couldn’t help but exclaim. “These are my subjects, and this is to be my kingdom. Any promise made to any of them is, in effect, a promise made to me, and I give you permission to break it.”

A look came over her face that he couldn’t quite discern, though it seemed almost grim, as though she knew he wouldn’t like what she had to say but she was making the decision to force him into accepting whatever it was, since he was twisting her arm to break her promise for him.

“They feared they might have magic, my lord.”

The word made his chest tighten in the most awful of ways. Led placed itself around his hearts, slowing their beating until he felt he could hardly breathe. He fisted his right hand, bringing it to his mouth, trying to catch hold of the storm in his chest but it refused to comply with his wishes. Then again, he was out of practice. He hadn’t connected with the side within him that could tame storms and still them into utter calm for nearly a decade, his bloodline’s airmagic not having been brandished and his internal access to it closed off on hinges rusted shut.

She was observing him keenly.

“Who told you this?” he countered.

“Someone who hasn’t been allowed to explore that side to himself at all, my lord.”

“I should hope not,” Greer muttered.

“Someone who would have magic running through his veins without any other discourse but accepting it there, seeing as he is *your* son.”

Greer stared at her, then shook his head, rising to his feet. This was taking a turn all right. “I’ll thank you not to speak of it.”

“I don’t need your thanks then,” she said, rising as well.

He put the wine glass on the table, not wanting to spill any more of its contents, but he didn’t take his eyes off hers. Was she really going to give him a handful of minutes of respite and then get right back on the proverbial horse? They’d already settled one score and here she was, eager to create a new one. Did the woman enjoy arguing? Was she a debater at heart, seeking walls to bash her head against wherever she went?

“I’m saying I will not speak of it,” he clarified. “You’d do well to—”

“He’s just a boy,” she interrupted him, Greer’s hackles rising.

“I know what he is, Mae,” he said.

“I didn’t mean to pry, and he didn’t tell me much, but he seemed genuinely terrified of retribution. For having gifts that are part of his lineage, the same way they are for you.”

There was a plea in her tone that should have appeased the rage building in Greer’s chest, but nothing could manage to stave it off once it started. It was a defense against the sorrow hiding right beneath his skin, always present in every moment and too easily awakened. Once that sorrow was

roaming, it was very difficult for Greer to rein it back in again, and so he never let it get that far. This would be no exception.

“My lady,” he tried.

“I’m no lady,” she cut in. “But I have a knack for understanding people. I’ve traveled and met many different types in my time, your highness, and I can tell you that Grey doesn’t deserve the treatment he’s currently getting.”

“What treatment is that?”

“Left to roam the hallways on his own. No playmates, as far as I can tell. No caregiver, even. He seems to spend a lot of his time with your cook in the kitchens.”

“She’s very good with him,” Greer attempted a rebuke, but it didn’t even slow Mae down.

She continued, “Who is guiding him? Who is there to take him by the hand when he needs it most? Who tucks him into bed at night?”

“Well, there are... people,” Greer said slowly. “A woman by the name of Hael who—”

“She was nowhere to be seen,” Mae interrupted again. “The young prince is out walking the hallways at night by himself. Unsupervised. And feeling unsafe, my lord. I think that’s the most important thing to consider here. He believes you would punish him for possessing the magic of your bloodline by chopping off his head, for goodness sakes.”

“I would *never*—” he began, but again she cut in, speaking over him.

“How little have you told him of where he comes from?” she demanded. “Of what he is to become?”

“Oh, he knows what he is to become,” Greer said.

“And yet he believes he has to repress the airmagic in his veins?” she prodded.

“Yes,” Greer snapped.

She seemed to take the impatience to heart, taking a slight step back as though she truly hadn’t meant to provoke

him. And she hadn't. He had insisted. But he didn't want to hear it. Any of it.

"I'd thank you not to tell me how to raise my son," he said.

"He is your heir," she countered. "And as far as I can tell he's not being raised to believe that he is."

"Enough!" he exclaimed.

"No, it's far from it," she disagreed. "I have no idea what has made you cut yourself off from your birthright, but to do it to your son is cruel. And to make him think that he'll be punished for something he hasn't been taught how to control is even worse. It's *neglectful*. Grey mentioned his mother, and —"

"Leave," Greer stopped her.

The tightness in Greer's chest was chaffing around his hearts, the sensation hot and painful. He could feel the tears rise and knew they were from shame more than anything else. He didn't want Mae to witness them.

"Now!" he bellowed, turning from her so she couldn't see his face.

"I will leave," she said. "I will go so far as to leave the castle, if it pleases you. I've made a day's wage. I'll take the coin, and a cloak, and I will be on my way back home before daybreak."

"Fine," he grumbled. "You're no prisoner here."

"May I have a horse?" she pushed her luck.

"No," he replied, the tears at least drying before reaching his cheeks.

He still wanted her to go and so kept his gaze off her.

She lingered for another little while. He could tell there were more things she wanted said, but she hadn't lied when she had told him she was good at reading people since she held back from further commentary. At last, she gave up on him acknowledging her and left the room.

The door clicked shut and he let out his held breath.

*Weak.*

The word appeared in his head, but the image that accompanied it was that of a woman's face as she threw her head back and screamed in pain. The blood drained from her, her skin went cold underneath his fingers, and there had been nothing that he could do to save her.

*Useless.*

The pressure in his chest made him feel as though his ribs were caving in. He sunk back down onto the armchair, heavy with the tremors running through him at the memory. He hadn't let it into his mind for so long. He'd managed to stave it off by distracting himself, by keeping himself busy, by staying clear of the child who reminded him more of what he'd lost than what the child should represent to him. His son was a vision of a past long since gone rather than the possibilities of the future.

*There are no possibilities,* he grumbled in his mind, gaze resting on the plate of sugared apples.

He knew his son adored them. He remembered the first time they'd shared one. He was so little back then, but his affinity for sugared apples so obvious. How long ago it seemed now.

*Neglect.*

Greer got to his feet at the word, this time spoken in Mae's voice, like a whip at his back.

*I'm no good for him,* he thought firmly. *I'm no good for anyone now.*

He stared at the ash in the fireplace where the logs had been left to simply burn through. He didn't like the metaphor, but it was apt. He didn't stoke his own fires. He left that to someone else. And they'd been doing such a good job of it that he'd forgotten how.

And now this woman had stumbled into his path... Well, he had almost shot her for stumbling into it, but he had



missed, hadn't he? That could mean something. So could the fact that, for the first time in over ten years, he had been told off for putting a distance between himself and his own blood.

She was right.

Damn it if she wasn't.

Grey had been left to fend for himself. Greer had always excused it with the thought that the boy had a castle to explore, soldiers to play with, guards to watch him and kitchens to feed him. He'd thought it would be good for Grey to spend time with those outside of court rather than how Greer had spent his childhood strapped to his father's side, but of course Grey's powers would start to manifest. And that they had started already was a testament to how strong they were within him.

Had his father known? Was that why he wanted Grey to have a mother?

Well, if that was what was required, then apparently there was now a woman within the castle walls who cared a great deal for Grey and who was ready to defy a prince to speak up for his well-being.

"Damn," Greer muttered, turning his eyes on the closed door through which she had exited.

She was the key after all. She would allow him to complete the trial, to accept the crown, to finally have full control of the airmagic. Everything he had waited for. Through her, he could provide for Grey and appease his father in one fell swoop.

He really needed her to stay.

It took him another minute of contemplation to walk up to the door, not even blinking at it opening before he could touch the handle. He pushed down the urge to ask the guard at the door if he had ever played hide-and-seek with Grey. His son would be his next focus; right now, he needed to get to the servant's quarters, and he needed to get there quickly.

He knew the route, but still managed to take two wrong turns, wondering how in the heavens he couldn't know the

way around the castle. He was unwilling to recognize the simple answer being that he hadn't really strayed far from well-trodden hallways for the last century or so. He'd loved to explore the winding staircases and deepest hallways as a child, but as an adult it seemed he'd gotten stuck in grooves he hadn't realized had formed beneath his feet.

Time to break free of at least one of them.

He found the narrow staircase leading down into the servants' quarters, a few heads turning as he reached the lower corridor and headed down it. There were no windows down here, and the walls were blackened by the torches burning in heavy sconces. It looked rather bleak, he had to admit.

He found the head of the servant staff behind her desk. Her name was Lilah. Eyes round with surprise, she got to her feet the second he stepped in her small and neatly kept office.

"Your highness," she breathed. "I trust everything is all right."

"Yes, of course, Lilah," he smiled. "I'm looking for someone, and I was hoping you might bring me to her room."

## Chapter 5 - Maize

The room she had been given was smaller than the one she'd had at the sanctuary, but she didn't mind. It was private, rather than shared, and she'd thanked Irvine for his thoughtfulness. Though she had supposed it had also been meant as a precaution, since the fewer of the servants that were given any cause to detect something off about her, the better.

Of course, none of those things mattered now, seeing as she was leaving the room before even getting a chance to settle into it.

She'd thought her rash proposition over and was finding it more agreeable by the minute. She should go. This place was hostile. It was better to take her chances on the roads and make her way back to Elemys than stay here and risk severe punishment once she had reconnected with her magic. She would be less safe with it than she was without it. Even with no horse, she felt she would rather walk back across the border than linger here for longer than was absolutely necessary.

Once she reached Elemys, she could send a raven to Blair and ask for her help. As long as she wasn't in Aeris when she did so, she would risk no friction between the kingdoms. She could see clear as day how she would be brought back to the castle of King Hugh and, once there, how she would be given a room and a meal.

She would have good company and might even find a place at court. She could take Blair up on her offer and become the castle crone. After everything that had transpired, it sounded like a good life to her when it never had before. The idea of sturdy walls of a well-constructed home surrounding her had felt narrowing to her. The sanctuary had at least let her do things many women never got to do, affording her a freedom unknown to most. But now stability had an appealing ring to it.

But what about Grey?

The thought of leaving him was less appealing. Though she'd barely spent an hour with the child, she felt responsible for him. He carried a weight on his shoulders and there was no one around to help ease it off them. He didn't seem to even know exactly what his magic was. How could he when he'd been taught to fear it?

The wrongness of it made her anger rise.

Greer was making a mistake keeping Grey from connecting with the airmagic tracing his veins. It was far from holding the same power as the king, who was Keeper and therefore the vessel of the airmagic on earth. He wasn't merely capable of manipulating the air to do his bidding—he was its very source. And with it, came immense responsibility.

Grey was the heir to such a responsibility and yet Greer saw fit not to teach him. It was insanity. And indeed it was neglectful, not only of Grey but of the people he was set to one day govern. She wondered that the king hadn't intervened.

She was surprised by a knock at the door, and even more surprised as Greer stepped into the room.

“Your highness,” she said, tearing her eyes off that handsome face to lower her gaze to the floor as she curtsied.

What was he doing there? She couldn't imagine he ever spent any time in the servant's quarters. When she raised her gaze again, the look on Lilah's face where she hovered behind the prince in the doorway told Maize she was all shades of right in her presumptions. She was about to question his choice to barge into her room unannounced after he had commanded that she leave his but bit her tongue. Hadn't she done the same to him a mere half an hour or so earlier? Though she had brought sugared apples and, as far as she could see, he came empty handed.

She got ahold of her indignation, eyes resting on his startlingly blue ones. Even in the dim light of her room, his ice

blue irises shone as though lit from within by some ethereal light, an urgency in them she hadn't seen there before.

"Mae," he spoke her shortened name.

"Maize," she corrected him, thinking there was little point in holding onto her shadow identity if she were moments from exiting the castle for good anyway.

All she got as a reaction was a quirk of one brow. "Thank you, Lilah," he said. "You may leave us."

The woman lingered for another moment, but then did as request, pulling the door shut behind her. Maize had gotten the impression the woman was waiting to see if he was holding it together for the sake of appearances and would lose his temper at any second. Losing his temper seemed to be a very big part of his personality, that much Maize had concluded.

*I can handle him,* Maize thought to herself.

He seemed jittery. He wasn't used to having these sorts of confrontations, she imagined. Had he come to give her the piece of his mind that he'd clearly held back when he'd sent her from his room?

"My bed," he said. "It's still not turned down."

She couldn't keep the smile off her mouth, though she pursed her lips together to keep it from growing wide at the unexpectedness of that declaration.

"I think we've established I can't be of any help to you there," she said. "Unless you choose to show me how it's done."

She realized there was a different meaning that could be gleaned from that choice of phrase, a mild innuendo that still made her blush.

"I don't mean..."

She trailed off before further incriminating herself.

A minute ago, she had been ready to go to Lilah and collect her wages, ask for a cloak, and head for the border.

Now, with him in front of her and those full lips turned up in a smile that made his blue eyes warm from deep within, the thought felt unshapely and out of reach.

She wanted to stay.

Not only because of the effect the man before her kept having on her, but for Grey.

He needed her.

Unless Greer was about to prove himself a miracle and tell her that everything she'd said had hit home and he would lift the ban on magic with immediate effect.

She didn't hold much hope for that happening. Not when he so clearly had lost touch with his own innate magic a while ago.

She wondered what had happened to him. To his mate.

"I don't think I've ever met anyone to whom I've had to appeal for forgiveness quite as much as you," he said.

"Somehow I find that hard to believe," she replied, offering him a smile to take the edge off. He didn't seem bothered by the comment, his gaze not leaving hers.

The room was growing hot all of a sudden, but even with the effect he had on her taking proper hold, making her hearts race with anticipation at the thought getting to spend more time in his closer vicinity, there was one more thing that she wouldn't budge on.

"I'm not sorry that I brought it up," she said.

His expression grew taut, as though he was debating whether to let her go on with her questioning of his decisions, or whether to walk out of the room and remove himself from the situation entirely. She did wonder what he was doing there. It couldn't be that her words had struck a chord, not with something as ingrained as this aversion to magic. So, had he shown up for a different reason entirely? Was he there with some ulterior motive at the back of his head?

The questions prompted her to ask, "Why are you here, your highness?"

“Because Grey should have someone like you in his life,” Greer replied.

That was not at all what she would have expected to hear.

“Oh,” she said.

“He’s been left to his own devices ever since his mother... Ever since she passed,” Greer got the words out with difficulty. Was he still in love with Grey’s mother? Had she been Greer’s true mate? The questions tumbled through Maize’s head, and she blinked at them, keeping her focus on what Greer was telling her. “She was killed saving my life,” Greer said.

Maize stared at him, the racing of her hearts slowing down with this revelation. The sorrow was palpable, like he brought it with him wherever he went, tucked away, but had now released it into the room. It surrounded him like an aura and, in it, was all that suffering she had concluded he must have gone through. Suddenly it was very real and very present.

“What happened?” she dared to ask.

“There was an attempt,” Greer replied slowly. “Someone broke through the crowd when we were hosting a delegation. The great hall was filled with people. It was difficult for the guards to keep up, and the man saw his chance.”

Mazie let out a soft breath. “The attacker used magic.”

The prince nodded gravely. “Viola threw herself in front of me. The spell hit her instead of me. She was dead in seconds.”

Mazie wished she could feel nothing but sympathy, but there was a streak of defensiveness immediately braiding itself through her growing understanding of his reasons for banning magic.

“It wasn’t the magic that killed her,” she said, unable to keep herself from stating the obvious. “It was the person who wielded it.”

Greer shook his head, looked away from her, unwilling to have this discussion. But when she looked at his tight jaw, the restlessness of his fingers as his thumbs kept running along his nails, the stiffness of his shoulders, she realized that he was afraid.

Losing his mate had left him terrified of anything like it ever happening again to him or to anyone else. Perhaps especially anything like it ever happening to Grey.

This insight softened her, made her defensiveness ease out of her as she thought of the young princeling. The boy needed someone to step in. Someone had to remind Greer what his magic used to mean to him. She knew how deeply the elemental magic ran within the veins of those tied to it. She'd seen it firsthand with King Hugh. Greer shutting that side of himself off was madness and the end results could very well be catastrophic, especially if he wouldn't let his son explore that side to *him*.

Naturally she couldn't be quite so forward with the subject. It would take time, she realized. She would have to be patient. The prince was more broken than she had initially thought, but it had to be he himself who put him back together. She couldn't do it for him, or she'd risk breaking herself against him in the process.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," Maize said. "I can't imagine what that must have been like for you. Or for Grey."

"Thank you," Greer replied.

"It's just words," Mazie said, noting the perfunctory note in his response. "They don't mean much when I didn't know Viola. When I barely know you." She dared a smile and, though it took a moment, he returned it. "It must have made you feel..."

"Pointless," he filled in.

She furrowed her brows, hoping he would elaborate without prompting, but when he didn't, she said, "Did you come here only to ask my forgiveness, because you have it. And though I won't apologize for speaking up for Grey, I am



sorry that I was so blunt about it. No, I am. He did mention his mother in a way that let me understand... Anyway. I'm sorry."

"So, we're both sorry," he concluded. "What now?"

"You asked me to leave."

"Oh, I have to articulate that I would rather you didn't?" He said it with a lopsided grin that sent goosebumps of want across her shoulder blades, as though his fingers were tracing their way across her skin. It was amazing that he could stir a reaction in her with one simple look, but the acceptance in that smile was addictive.

He wanted her to stay.

But she did want to hear him say it after he ordered her so crudely to leave him.

"Yes," she replied. "I think so."

"Then, Miss Mae, would you do me the honor of remaining at the castle?"

"I will," she said.

"Good," he said.

"I am," she assured. "Very good. At more things than you could even imagine."

A glint appeared in his gaze that was suddenly teasing in the most suggestive of ways. Then he cut the charm, as if catching himself, and looked away from her. "Excuse me, a force of habit," he said.

"I'm sure." She smirked, getting his eyes back on hers, but she wasn't going to play this game. He was too used to winning it for her liking, and she was too unused to playing it. She felt she barely knew the rules, and hadn't he already won her over? What was the point in pretending he hadn't? Had she won him, was the question.

Or perhaps it was rather if he was or wasn't still in love with the woman he lost.

"Tomorrow," he said. "I would like to take you somewhere."

“Where?” she asked.

“I’d like for it to be a surprise, if you don’t mind,” he said. “Grey should come along, too. It will give you a chance to bond with him. And he with you.”

“And you with him?” she asked.

“Yes, that too,” he agreed. “It’s very important that he understands he is to control his powers.”

She furrowed her brow at that, questioningly. “How do you mean ‘control’?”

“Keep them hidden,” Greer replied.

“Hidden, my lord?”

“Yes, of course,” Greer plowed on. Maize’s hearts thudded ever faster in her chest as it dawned on her that she had secured precisely zero change. “You’re right, Grey’s magic is innate to his person. It’s not something he can choose to rid himself of or simply not engage with. If he does that, we’ll most likely have a disaster on our hands, wouldn’t you think? He must learn to do what I do.”

“And what is that, your highness?” Maize asked.

“He must learn to repress all thoughts of utilizing his magic in any way, shape or form,” Greer said.

“But surely he must be allowed to shift?” she asked.

“Yes, yes, of course,” he replied. “Shifter magic is different from the manipulation of the air itself. It’s that sort of magic—the elemental magic—that posits the danger. That may lead to the sort of magic conjured by spell work, potions, and sigils.”

She kept her face neutral.

“My lord,” Maize murmured, feeling his beauty fray around its edges the more he spoke. How could he be this narrow-minded? How could he allow one event—however harrowing it might have been—to affect the lives and livelihoods of millions? Their customs and way of life must be

completely upended with this ban in place. What was he thinking? What kind of monarch did he expect to become?

“What of the moment of transference?” she prodded cautiously. “Will your father pass the airmagic onto you?”

“He will.” Greer nodded. “And when he does, I will be its Keeper. I will not transfer that burden onto Grey.”

He would keep control of it, was what he was saying. Maize felt a worry begin to gnaw at her. Fear was a devious beast. It nibbled little pieces of one’s soul until it had devoured more of it than one realized. It could change a person to their core, and it sounded as though Greer’s mistrust of magic had created that exact type of rot within him. He sounded lost to the truths of the world they lived in. The truths of the elemental magic he had been born into.

The question was if he would ever be able to find his way back again.

“I see,” she said. “And how am I to guide Grey into controlling his powers?”

“You’re the one who lectured me on how he hasn’t been taught how to connect to them properly,” Greer remarked.

“Yes, but I do not possess elemental magic. *You* do.”

The prince observed her for a moment, then tilted his head to the side with a meaningful raise of his brows. “You’re right,” he said. “I will speak to him tomorrow and then you and I will devise a plan of how to best go about it.”

“And what if I would strongly advise against it?” she asked.

“I would tell you to listen to the dragon who is in possession of the magic being discussed,” Greer replied. “And if you would rather leave, you’re free to go. I would just rather you didn’t.” He offered her another blinding smile, bright enough to send electrical currents through her bloodstream. She didn’t want to go. “I shall see you in the morning,” he then said, heading for the door. “Bright and early. Or we leave without you. We shall wait for you in the courtyard.”

He paused for the door to be opened for him but, of course, there were no guards outside of it to facilitate the aid to his exit. When he realized it, he chuckled softly, reaching for the doorknob and pulling the door open. He was shaking his head at himself as he finished, "I have a good feeling about this."

With that, he was gone.

The door closed behind him. Maize's eyes rested on the spot, her hearts hammering.

She didn't want to go, but it was now perfectly clear to her that she was going to have to find a way to leave. A better way than with half a coin and a worn cloak, that was for certain, but a way out of there, nonetheless.

She would stay only for long enough that she could make certain Grey wasn't coming to any harm, to help him reach for understanding and balance.

And if they found the man who took her, she would happily see him brought to justice, but how could she stay any longer than that when her true self was forever going to put her at risk of persecution?

She began to undress for bed. She had been given a nightgown and the bed, though narrow, was soft and clean.

She was determined that she would not be lying awake thinking about Greer's easy mirth, the way it made his eyes light up. She wouldn't think about the waves his hair fell in, making her want to bury her fingers in them. She definitely wouldn't think about his mouth or the way he sometimes sucked his lower lip between his teeth whenever he grew thoughtful.

She wasn't going to think about this prince who was so far out of any realm of possibility that spending a night in his bed would mean getting one night only, and though she wouldn't think any further on it, she already knew one night wouldn't provide nearly enough time to touch every part of him.

No. She wasn't going to think about it. Not at all.

Because she was going to have to make a plan for the journey home and secure her exit sooner rather than later.

Another castle to sneak out of.

That was all this could be.

Unless...

Unless she could make Greer see the errors of his ways.

She looked down at her hands, clenching her fingers slowly, trying to find the sensation in her veins that felt like embers on the wind as the magic came to life within.

There was nothing.

She thought of Grey. She felt an affinity with him as she understood the confusion he was suffering, the lack of insight leading so easily to frustration. It was imperative that he was taught how to deal with it, but eternal repression...

To put such an expectation on him, it was certain to only bring on deeper issues. Grey couldn't be anyone or any less than who he was. Greer had to realize this, he had to see it.

She just had no idea how to facilitate it. Not when the prince's grief was still blinding him, not when he was keeping himself cut off from his own magic the way he was.

If she were to change his mind, she would have to find some way of reaching into him, to loosen his need for control, to make him face the fear.

She had an idea of exactly where to take him, as long as he would agree to go with her. An ancient place, a meeting point, where the magic of all the elements flowed freely. She had never visited it herself, but she knew it lay within the borders of his kingdom. Four points of convergence appearing one within each of the four kingdoms.

Hopefully Greer wouldn't object to the idea of traveling there. It couldn't be far.

She remembered the look he'd given her when she'd inadvertently flirted, the smiles they'd shared, and forced her hearts to stop their fluttering with quiet delight.

This wasn't about her.

It was about him, about his son, and the future of this kingdom.

And, ultimately, the future of hers as well. Perhaps Greer was right, and he could contain the airmagic within himself without using it, but she doubted it. The elements wanted to converge. They were drawn, one to the other, and containment could cause ruptures. It wasn't logic guiding Greer—it was fear of misuse.

She had to make him trust the magic again.

What was happening to her?

Why did she feel as though she wanted to scrape harder, see what lay beneath the layer of iron he dressed himself in?

"I don't even know if he deserves it," she muttered, stubbornly burying her face in her pillow.

She was still willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

## Chapter 6 - Greer

Greer corrected the golden pin in his silk cravat, tugged on the lapels of his embroidered silk jacket. He'd chosen to wear gray rather than white. Though the place he was taking Maize hardly provided any dust to blacken his finer clothes, he'd thought it might be a nice gesture, seeing how his son had a preference for the color. Hopefully, the boy would perceive the gesture for what it was: a show of care towards him.

Greer felt a little nervous about spending time with his son. He hadn't managed to have dinner with Greer in the past month and whenever they did get a chance to sit down together, they were typically separated by the immense stretch of the dining hall table. He had thought of placing Grey closer to him, but they were expected to sit facing each other, each occupying one end, and he couldn't see any way to make a change and stick to propriety. And so, he had left it. But it was time to make a few changes, it was time to at least try to reconnect with Grey.

Maize had been right in many things, but the prevailing one was that Greer was as responsible as anyone else for the shaping of his son. He would partake in it from now on. Make certain that shaping was done right.

What did a child like to talk about? If he was honest, the question had perplexed him for most of Grey's life.

Toys, he supposed. What toys did his son prefer? It startled him to realize that he didn't know. There had been a time when he did.

*Neglect.*

He shut the word out of his head as it roused tension that felt ready to snap at a moment's notice. When Irvine brought Grey down to the courtyard, Greer was already waiting for them by the carriage. He'd asked for the walnut four-seater that had taken the craftsmen six months to fashion. Grey had never ridden in it, and Greer congratulated himself

when the boy's eyes lit up with the realization that today was the day.

"Hello, father," Grey greeted, smile faltering momentarily.

"Hello, Grey," Greer replied, offering a smile to appease. "We're wearing matching colors today, I see."

Grey didn't seem to know how to respond to that. "Can I climb up?" Grey asked, pointing at the driver's seat.

"You may climb *in*," Greer offered, since no son of his was going to be seen sitting next to the driver, possibly losing his hat along the ride. It could get quite windy along the cliffside, which just so happened to be where they were headed, and since Grey had no way of telling the wind to keep itself away from his head...

No, it was not advisable that he ride anywhere but inside the carriage.

Grey looked about to protest, but then gave a nod, squared his little shoulders and did as he was told. He disappeared into the carriage just as Maize appeared on the steps of the castle.

She was wearing her plain linen dress again, though Greer had hoped she might choose one of the finer dresses he'd sent to her room. Now that she was technically moving up from simple maid to the caretaker of the future king's heir, she should be allowed to dress the part. She wouldn't draw more attention to herself in dresses that were clearly not those of a courtier, or so he had thought.

He didn't comment on her choice or ask her if she was worried, she wouldn't stay conspicuous if she were to choose different attire, offering her a smile instead. Their conversation the night prior had eliminated any doubt he might have held that she was the person he'd been meant to find for Grey. Now, to complete the trial, all he needed to do was ensure she formed a bond with his son and that the bond was rooted in her understanding of what her role as Grey's caretaker was going



to be. She'd stayed, which must mean she had accepted Greer's expectations of his son's compliance to the law.

There was to be no magic.

The mere word made goosebumps spread over his arms in a soft wave, but he shook one hand impatiently to rid himself of the sensation.

For the better part of a decade, he had kept himself in check. He had barely even shifted into dragon form, feeling it better to stay grounded. He hadn't reflected on this choice for years, it had become habit, but as Maize slipped her hand into his to let him help her into the carriage, he wondered what it would be like to soar high with her.

To show her exactly what the airmagic could do.

To take her to heights than she'd never reached before.

Her gaze met his, as though she was thinking the same. He let go of her hand rather abruptly. He would not be tempted, and she might protest the way he saw fit to do things, but she would comply or pack her bags. He would hold firm on that.

She liked to question him, that much was for certain, and he knew he needed it. Hadn't understood how much he had to have the pushback until she was standing before him, providing it.

But she'd better not try to dissuade him from keeping the magic from Grey, or again attempt to change his convictions of how it was better for magic stay out of the kingdom all together. He would not be swayed and nothing she said or did could manage it. He hoped she could see that all she would do if she were to move against this conviction was cause further arguments between them. And he felt they could both do without them.

And he really wanted to be done with the trial.

It would mean that he would finally become Keeper.

He would at last be in complete control of his ancestral responsibility. He would decide what happened with it, when it

was used, if it was used, and how it was used. The thought made him feel a little calmer.

He climbed into the carriage after Maize, having a seat opposite her and Grey.

She was observing him, but he merely offered her another docile quirk of one corner of his mouth and turned his gaze out the window.

She had come into his life an escapee and there she now sat, clean and prim, ready to join his household and care for his son. It was strange the turns life took. She had chosen to stay when she could just as easily have gone. Was it out of a sense of obligation? Gratitude that he had saved her, taken her in when she was shoeless and homeless? He told himself it was all very well. Shouldn't she be grateful? Shouldn't there be a sense of obligation to him?

But when he watched her turn her gaze on Grey, giving the child a wink that produced a broad smile on the boy's face, Greer wondered if she hadn't stayed out of obligation to the innocent dragonling on the seat next to her rather than the prince opposite.

For some reason the notion was both gratifying and mildly grating.

Though he was happy his son was smiling, he wished he was the one being smiled at.

It wasn't jealousy because he wasn't that petty. It was more a strange sort of longing.

Then Grey spoke, providing a nice distraction from Greer having to examine himself too closely.

"Where are we going?" Grey asked.

"Yes, where are we going?" Maize seconded.

"Still a surprise," Greer smiled. "I think you'll both like it."

They reached the most beautiful part of their route thirty minutes later, the sea stretching towards the horizon where its reflection met the blue of the sky. The wind whipped

up, making the carriage shake from side to side. Grey's eyes went wide with the suddenness of the change from the ease of the forested road to the drama of the oceanside drive, but Maize hooked her arm with his and brought out another smile.

She had a very calming effect, Greer concluded with satisfaction.

He was growing increasingly sure of his choice.

Maize asked Grey all sorts of questions and Grey eagerly answered them all. His favorite animal, color, food, fruit, song. Their back and forth was impressive and Greer noted how these mundane topics were what Grey was most eager to discuss. It gave him an idea of what to ask whenever they had their next dinner. Grey's exchange with Maize seemed apt to go on forever when Grey switched it around, becoming the one to dig into Maize's favorite things.

Greer continued to listen in silence; eyes turned out the window.

Her favorite animal: deer. This made him smile, though he didn't acknowledge her, wondering if the joke was intentional or maybe she was in earnest. Her favorite color: blue. He couldn't help but conclude she must like his eyes then. Her favorite food: soup. Any soup, apparently. Her favorite fruit: apple. Preferably sugared, she added, which made him turn his gaze onto her.

"That's very fitting," he commented as the carriage was drawing up to their destination.

Grey's eyes were going wide again as he realized, looking up at the enormous mouth of the cave outside the carriage windows, exactly where they were.

"The sugar mines?" Grey exclaimed. "Thank you, father!" he added, throwing himself across the carriage to hug Greer tightly, his small frame pressed against Greer's in an embrace.

Greer patted him gently on the back, frowning at the smile on Maize's face. It was just a hug. They had hugged before. Perhaps not in the past year, or two, but they used to

hug all the time. How long had it been? Greer realized he didn't know. Was that bad? Did that make him a bad father? But he'd been busy learning how to rule a kingdom. He wasn't simply a father; he was also a future monarch. Surely there might be leniency to be had from that fact.

"The sugar mines?" Maize asked.

"They're quite the treat," he quipped, smirking as she rolled her eyes.

The carriage door was opened by the footman. Grey jumped out and Greer sat back to let Maize take the lead. It meant the footman helped her down rather than him putting himself in a position to offer her his hand again. It felt safer that way, rather than things getting muddied.

Greer had asked Maize to stay for Grey's sake, and to appease his father, that was all there was to it. The fact that the sunlight caught on her golden locks and made her green eyes lighten in color until they looked gilt around the edges were details that had nothing to do with it. Nothing at all.

He realized he was staring at her where she was waiting for him outside the carriage, her eyes resting on him, an encouragement there for him to follow in her wake. Right. Getting himself out of whatever spell she had just cast, he did as she was prompting and stepped onto the fine sand that made up the large driveway outside the entrance of the mines.

The air was salty from the sea breeze, though the mines didn't overlook the water. The day was going to be hot and dry, the kind of weather he most enjoyed. He assumed Maize did as well, wondering what she would look like with the power of the fire dragon within her lighting up her veins.

Then he remembered she still hadn't been able to connect with her dragon. It made him sad for her. He may choose to control how his dragon expressed itself, but it didn't mean he wouldn't feel lost without it.

And as he and Maize made a slow walk of it up to the mouth of the cave hosting the mines, he watched Grey. Watched how he ran on ahead, turned around and came back,

unable to contain his excitement. And he wondered how connected Grey felt to his inner dragon.

“It’s for his own good,” he said.

He didn’t need to elaborate. Mazie knew what he was referring to. “I know,” was all she responded with. She wasn’t going to pick a fight over it then. That was progress, at least.

“Mine as well,” he added.

She kept quiet and he got the feeling she didn’t quite agree with his assessment but that she was choosing to keep it to herself. He couldn’t decide if it was a blessing or a warning that, at some point, she was going to choose to share that opinion and he was most likely not going to like it.

“Is this place special to you?” she asked.

He hesitated, unsure of how much to share, until he finally said, “It was special to Viola.”

“How so?”

“She loved the carving patterns created by the miners when they retrieve the sugar,” he said. “She thought it looked like a citadel stacked on top of another citadel. Endless tiny houses as far as the eye can see. She used to bring Grey here before...”

“He hasn’t been back since?” Maize asked. Greer shook his head slowly.

“I thought it would be a good place,” Greer said. “For him to remember her while getting to know you better.”

There was a narrowing of Maize’s eyes that he couldn’t quite read. Was she welcoming of this setup, or wishing she had asked sooner so that she could have rejected it rather than choosing to join them?

“What was she like?” Maize asked, quietening his concerns.

Her hand placed itself on his arm as she sought to steady herself when they reached the carved steps taking them up to the entrance.

“Kind,” he said the first word that came to mind. “Patient,” he added, offering her a bit of support even though he got the impression she actually didn’t need it.

Had she reached out only to touch him?

He glanced at her, but she kept her gaze on the steps, her skirts hiked up in her other hand. Perhaps she didn’t want to trip and that was the extent of it, but her fingers gripping his arm still made him acutely aware of her nearness.

She was smiling and the explanation for the expression came as she said, “She sounds like the opposite of me.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I wouldn’t go that far,” he reassured, looking up at a yell from Grey, who had snagged a toe on the steps and fallen forward.

“I’m all right,” Grey called down to them.

“Slow down,” Greer laughed.

They caught up with Grey at the top of the steps, but he raced on ahead again, across the white marble that had been put down at the mouth of the cave to form a more agreeable entrance and further into the mines themselves. They followed him, the marble soon giving way for tightly packed sugar crystals. They glittered entrancingly in the light from a hundred enormous chandeliers that hung down from the vaulted ceiling.

Greer hadn’t been back since Viola was still alive either and had entirely forgotten how the view of the mines took one’s breath away.

They stretched from the entrance so deep into the caves that one couldn’t see the end of them. Sugar stalactites rose from the floor and dripped down from the ceiling to meet in the middle in hourglass shapes. Each of those closer to the mouth of the cave had been touched by the miner’s tools, the carvings making them appear as the citadels stacked on citadels that Viola had likened them to. And all of it was stark white, with cream and lightest yellow breaking through in certain parts, which meant the sugar would carry a caramel note.

“This is incredible,” Maize breathed. “It’s beautiful.”

“This type of sugar can only be found here,” he said. “It’s a national secret.”

“And you’re entrusting me with it?” she asked.

“I am. And if you betray it, I will have to come after you,” he said. “Don’t make me.”

She paled, but he smiled to set her at ease. Was she still so unsure of him? She returned the smile, but moved away from him, removing her hand. It had lingered for quite some time, or so he thought. He was used to women being drawn to him, but she hadn’t simply fallen at his feet so a touch that lingered must mean something. He was suddenly curious to find out what that something might be.

“There’s a certain scent in here,” she said, breathing in deeply. “It’s sweet and... there’s something else.”

“It’s the salt from the sea air.” She looked at him again. “It’s what makes this sugar so special. The winds around the cliffs...”

He trailed off as it seemed to dawn on her exactly where they were, a smile splitting her face at the realization. “The white cliffs of Aeris,” she said. “Are they made out of sugar too?”

He laughed. She did as well because of course they weren’t, or his father’s entire castle would be too. Their gazes rested on each other’s at the momentary respite from any tension at all between them. It was a new space they were carving out for the other, stemming from their acceptance of this being the beginning of something hopefully permanent. He wished with some fervor that it would last for longer than this trip. And that she would come place her hand on his arm again.

“Hurry up!” Grey called.

He had run ahead along one of the footpaths made from packed sugar crystals that wound their way around and between the enormous stalactites.

“Coming!” Maize called back, reaching for Greer’s hand to have him steady her again as the path before them dipped, taking them to the floor of the cave where Grey was impatiently waiting. “I can see he takes after you in more ways than one,” she teased.

“His magic,” Greer changed the subject.

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know,” Greer stopped her. “But we should discuss it. He used it?”

He assumed this was the case or she wouldn’t be so much on Grey’s side. He had proven himself vulnerable somehow to bring out her mothering instincts.

“It came over him. He wasn’t being naughty or breaking any rules by choice,” she said, soft defense of the child there. “And it was more that I felt it than saw it,” she said. “He made the wind appear where, before, there was not even so much as a draft. He made it rise out of the floor.”

Greer contemplated this. “That’s remarkable,” he said.

“Yes, it is,” she agreed, a bit of a bite to the words, but she didn’t push.

Greer knew that she must be aware how it was rare for a dragon as young as Grey to be able to connect with his core magic in such a way, she didn’t need Greer to point it out to her. And had the circumstances been different, Greer would have been proud of his son, but now what he felt more than anything was dread. His son was powerful, even at younger than thirty years of age. If he didn’t learn to control himself, there was no telling what might become of him. Of them all. Whether the day came when he was made Keeper of the airmagic or not. Would Greer be able to keep the title and the responsibility away from his son forever? Greer was beginning to think he probably wouldn’t.

The day would come when Grey would expect to be made king. No king ruled forever, no matter how many millennia he might expect to live. New times called for new blood and these times were those new times. King Hugh had



completed his trial a handful of years prior and the rest of the princes were sure to follow suit within the next few decades. The old era giving way to a new one.

“I feel I’m fumbling in the dark,” Greer admitted.

“Most parents feel that way,” Maize said. “Most anyone who’s set on a path to guide others feel that way. You just have to trust that you know what’s right.” She paused as they reached the cave floor, letting her hold on him go. “Do you trust that you know what’s right, my lord?”

The question was a simple one, but one with grave significance.

He had always trusted himself before, but with her appearance, many things that he had taken for granted had been illuminated by an entirely different light.

The men he surrounded himself with had a shadow in their midst and the probability seemed real that, where one shadow dwelled, many followed. His court needed more illumination to chase the shadows out of darkened corners, that much was certain.

He had thought himself a decent father, but her interactions with Grey were reminding him of how something was lacking in how he related himself to his son. He had lost his will to chase after those moments of easy comradery they had been able to share while Viola was still alive. He wanted to chase them again. How had he not understood how much he missed his child?

He had accepted the motions of his life without giving it a second thought. Even as his father declared the trial, he had taken it in stride, not expecting that it would upend anything. Rather thinking that it would secure him a sense of completion as he took the airmagic into himself, to keep and safeguard.

But the doubt creeping in regarding his court and the version of a father he had assigned himself was making doubt creep into his idea of the version of a monarch he envisioned for himself.

What king would he be to his people if he didn't fully trust in his own ability to sow order, nurture respect, and promote faith in his rule?

But to Maize he said, "Of course I trust that I know what's right."

He fired off his most winning smile to underline exactly how much he meant it, but she didn't return it. A soft crease appeared between her brows, as though she could see right through him. She kept having that sort of reaction, even when he thought she might cave and simply blush for him again.

"Would you let me take you somewhere after we're done here?" she asked. "Chance would have it the place isn't far at all. We can even walk there if you'd like."

"Okay," he said, uncertain that he wanted to go anywhere if he didn't know where it was beforehand. She didn't offer any more information, however, and seeing as he'd just brought her on a trip to a surprise location, he didn't feel it very fair to begin to question her on where she was taking him.

When Grey called again for them to hurry their step, they heeded him and walked in his footsteps, not saying much more.

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"But I want to come with you," Grey insisted.

"It's better that you come next time," Maize told him gently, helping him settle in the carriage. "Irvine will bring you safely home," she added, giving a nod to the aide who had joined them halfway through the day.

He'd ridden from the castle merely to ensure their lunch was delivered to Greer's exact specifications. A duty Greer knew Irvine loathed and saw as excessive, which was why Greer never missed an opportunity to have him perform

it. Irvine would pay him back in kind by making him perform a task he loathed and around they went in a rather productive game of task assigning.

Irvine was on horseback. He couldn't stand to ride in a carriage as it made him deathly sick to his stomach. Greer gave him a nod, Irvine returning it, clearly already plotting what task to have Greer perform once he was back at the castle.

The thought made Greer smile, directing it at Grey.

“We will see you at dinner,” the prince promised.

Grey eyed him suspiciously and Greer frowned at what the expression suggested: that Grey was expecting him to break his promise. But before he could comment on it, Maize closed the door of the carriage and Grey disappeared from sight.

Did his son not trust his word?

It seemed absurd. He had never gone back on a promise to the dragonling, as far as he knew.

The carriage pulled away and Greer watched it leave with an odd sense that his world was tilting out of place. He was beginning to look at things from a new perspective, but all the things were a little unfocused because of it. He couldn't quite focus on any one in particular yet.

Was it Grey providing this newness—or Maize?

Perhaps it was both.

“This way,” Maize said, walking across the sands toward the grassy slope. It would take them up an incline and, once its peak was reached, it would afford them a splendid view of the ocean, with the glittering white cliffs of Aeris underneath their feet. The cliffs stretched for miles along the shoreline in either direction and, from the sea, they were an impressive sight to behold.

“You do realize I've seen the cliffs before,” he remarked.

She smiled. “We’re not going to see the cliffs,” she said. “Well, we might see them, but they’re not the main attraction.”

He wanted to say something truly corny about how he was very curious to learn what exactly she thought of as the main attraction, but thankfully he managed to bite his tongue. Deep down there was growing curiosity at the mystery. He rarely let someone take him by the hand and lead him, especially with a proverbial blindfold, but something about her made him excited about the forthcoming reveal rather than him having reservations. There was no part of him that wanted to stop and demand she tell him where they were going. He hadn’t felt like that since...

Since Viola.

“I didn’t think you’d spent much time in these parts,” he broke the silence.

“I haven’t,” she replied. “I haven’t spent any time in Aeris at all. But this particular spot is renowned.”

He furrowed his brow.

“Renowned? And I don’t know of it?” He couldn’t keep the incredulity out of his voice because it sounded far-fetched. “The only things around here worth visiting are the cliffs and the mines.”

“You would think so,” she said, another smile on her mouth.

“I’m not sure I like this,” he muttered and, finally, she laughed good naturedly, reaching for him again, threading her arm with his.

“I hope that you will,” she said. “I think it might help.”

“Help?”

He stopped, letting his arm fall along his side, leaving her to let go of her hold on it. She gave him a look. “Trust me,” she said. “I don’t mean it in a diminishing way. Besides, it’s not like I could ever offer any help to the great and mighty prince of Aeris. Could I?”

He gave her a look back but had to smile at her calling him out on his hypocrisy. He'd invited her in to care for his son, hadn't he? He should trust her further than one clearly misconstrued comment. "No, you can't," he said, but his smile was disarming enough to tell her he meant nothing by it. "All right, perhaps you can offer a little," he admitted.

"You said we should make a plan of how to teach Grey the lessons he needs to learn in order to connect with his powers," she said.

"I didn't say—"

"There's a very fine line between balance and imbalance," she said. "How are you to claim the airmagic for your own if you're out of touch with yourself? How are you to tell Grey how to behave around magic, or how to connect with his inner dragon, if you won't lead by example?"

"I am not out of touch with my inner dragon," Greer dismissed.

She stopped then, tilting her head to the side. "How long has it been since you shifted?"

He glared at her.

"Did Irvine put you up to this?" he asked.

"Irvine has had no hand in it," she assured. "How long?"

"I can't remember," he muttered.

"And yet you feel certain that your connection is as strong as ever?"

"Yes, I'm certain," he replied, unable to keep a sour note out of his tone.

"All right then," she said. "In that case, where we're going is going to feel like nothing more than a breeze on your skin."

"What does that mean?" he asked, but she started walking again without offering a reply. "What is this place you're taking me?" Still no reply.

He lingered, gaze drifting to the view of the ocean, the feel of the winds off the vast body of water caressing itself around his frame. It seemed inviting enough, but she was hinting that whatever the place was, it might not feel as forgiving. A part of him wanted to go back, but another part was too curious to do anything but follow in her footsteps.

She was waiting on the cliff's edge ahead, the winds whipping her skirts around her legs, tussling with her hair, making it fly around her face when she turned to look at him. There was a trace of expectancy there, and, he thought, hope. What was she hoping for?

Then he felt it.

It was like the charge the air got right before a thunderstorm. A current running over his skin, making every hair stand on end. He thought it would be momentary, but the current grew stronger for every step he took, until he joined at her side and felt it like a soft pulse up his spine, into the base of his skull.

It was a call, wordless but pronounced all the same.

The magic of the earth and water, fire and air, swirling around him at this spot of convergence.

He had heard of them, but how could he not have known there was one right here. Did his father not know? Or had he chosen to withhold it? Why would he?

Perhaps such a revelation had to be earned, and Greer clearly hadn't earned the right to tap into the absolute bliss that the sensations he was experiencing was putting him in.

He closed his eyes, reached out his hands to the dancing winds, let them tug and roll around him. He hadn't heeded them in so very long. Had ignored his ability to join in the dance because he didn't want to fumble one step. One fumble could mean the difference between everything remaining as it always had been, and complete chaos.

But here he felt the worry of what might happen slowly evaporate.

With each new tug, with every roll of the winds around him, he began to remember.

He drew a soft breath of the salty air, filling his lungs to the brim, his inner dragon greeting him as though roused from a deep sleep. It moved through his veins like a warm summer breeze, and he had to smile, turning his eyes on Maize.

She was gazing out at sea, dejection all over her face, and he realized this trip had been as much for her as it had been for him. Only the outcome hadn't been what she'd wished for it to be.

“Your inner dragon isn't responding,” he concluded.

“We didn't walk all this way for my sake,” she deflected. “How do you feel?”

He offered another smile, then began to remove his jacket. Her eyes grew round in the most satisfying way and, by the time he started working the buttons of his tunic, she had looked away from him, though he detected the hint of a blush on her cheeks. It wasn't that he was surprised that she was attracted to him—most women were, and if they weren't, he would soon find some way to charm them, win them over—it was that he wondered whether she was admitting it to herself.

He wanted to free her the same way she was freeing him.

Once the pieces of clothing he wanted to save from ripping during the shift into dragon form were removed and he was standing in his undergarments, he caught her gaze again. She returned his smile this time, waiting for him to respond properly to her earlier question.

“Well?” she asked.

He didn't hesitate. He took a step forward, leaning into the wind until he was falling, falling off the cliff toward the roar of the ocean at the foot of them, the wind in his ears, howling its welcome all around him.

## Chapter 7 - Maize

Maize leaned forward, eyes wide, as she watched Greer fall toward the frothing surface of the ocean. The waves were crashing, sending cascading clouds of spray into the air. The wind was playing a never-ending game of chase around her form, pulling on her dress, lifting her locks into whirling patterns before her eyes as if to thank her for bringing Greer back into its embrace.

He disappeared from sight and though she knew what was about to happen she still held her breath with anticipation.

A second later, the mountainous shape of a white dragon shot into view, mighty wings spread wide as it claimed her line of sight before rising fifty feet into the air. She tilted her head back to watch as it descended. There were golden details scattered across its scales, its talons gilt and glinting in the sunlight.

He was unsurprisingly beautiful.

He lowered his head to her—a sign of respect.

She beamed up at him, reaching her hands up to place them against his snout. Tendrils of gold traced themselves through the skin around his nostrils. She ran one finger along one of them, fascinated by the details of him. She'd never seen anything like it. As though whoever chose to paint him that way had blown flecks of gold all over him.

“You’re very pretty,” she commended, the warmth of a smile appearing in his ice blue eyes.

He turned his head away from her—an invitation. He wanted her to get on his back.

“I’ve never ridden another dragon,” she said.

By their kin, a dragon riding another dragon wasn’t considered within the realms of decorum by any stretch of the imagination. It could happen if necessity called for it, but very



rarely was it done. No dragon would ever think to stay in human form if another dragon had shifted.

She felt odd for being unable to have her dragon shape join him in his flight, and though she'd started out disappointed, now she felt perplexed at the magic of the place not working in her favor. She hadn't wanted to hang her hopes on it entirely, but the lack of response had rattled her more than she had thought it would.

She had brought them there for Greer's sake but, of course, the pull of the idea had been that it might help rouse her inner dragon. She had wanted it to work. She had been eager at the thought of experiencing flight together with an air dragon. To have Greer assist her in climbing to impossible heights and to see the curvature of the world, backdropped by the vastness of the night sky all around it.

He stayed where he was, the invitation remaining.

She couldn't see any reason why she shouldn't accept. In fact, if she couldn't join him in dragon shape, then this was as good a compromise as any other. She wondered if he would afford her the view she had in her head. If it would look like how she imagined it, or if it would be different. Even more breathtaking than any image she could ever conjure.

She reached up, putting her foot against his front leg. Brazing herself she pulled herself up and slid herself into place with one leg on either side of his neck, shifting her weight until she thought she was in a position that would put the least pressure on him she finally stilled.

She was ready.

He moved his head, looking up at the blue of the sky.

She did as well, her heart lurching with expectancy at the thought of flying above the clouds again, looking down at the glittering ocean beneath them. She didn't care if he didn't go higher than she was used to. She didn't even care if all he did was do a run along the surface of the ocean. She hadn't flown for nearly a year. She just wanted to be airborne.

As though he could read her mind, he gave a hard flap of his wings and they rose into the air. They left the cliffs behind as he got them soaring higher and higher. She clung to him, the wind in her hair, though this time instead of idle play it was streaking it back, out of her face as he picked up his speed.

It took moments for the landscape map of the kingdom to spread below them, everything suddenly miniature. It was one of her favorite parts of flying—the views, unencumbered and straightforward. Nothing was hidden, nothing was concealed. In the air there were no obstacles to get over or go around. Well, apart from the occasional storm cloud, but typically she would simply go through it.

She smiled, leaning back, reaching her arms out. He must have felt the movement because he dipped forward, diving for the ocean surface far below, sending a thrill into her stomach that made her whoop. She was laughing when he straightened back out, sailing smoothly on the winds for a little while.

She leaned forward. “Higher,” she said.

He turned his head, those startlingly blue eyes meeting hers, another smile in them before he looked straight ahead again. And did as requested.

He beat his wings, beginning the climb.

She had another thrill run through her, this one originating in her chest.

It wasn't only from what she was about to experience thanks to him, but because of the thought that he was only doing this because of her.

As stand-offish as he had come across during their first meeting, as stubborn and unyielding as he had seemed the night prior, here he was shedding his armor completely.

This was the real him, underneath the superficial gold and the tightly held iron exterior. She had managed what she'd set out to do. She had reached through.

That thought filled her with hope.

Not only for Grey or the kingdoms, but for herself as well.

If he could only open up to the idea of what magic was, at its core, not this distorted notion he had of it, then she could stay. She could get to know Grey. And Greer. They could have actual conversations, rather than arguments. She might get to show him who she truly was, too. Would he want that?

She reached for him more than once throughout the day and he'd been right there. At first it had been unconscious and then she had begun to do it with full awareness of what touching him did to her. Once she began to notice, it was difficult to stop herself. It was as though the urge took over, her hand seeking his arm of its own accord. She thought of the times their eyes had met, of the way he would let his gaze roam her face, thinking perhaps he saw something there that appealed to him.

Would he find her pretty?

Was that even on the table, or was this all about Grey for him? Did he want a caretaker for his son, and she seemed to fit the bill after speaking up for him? Was that all there was?

The blue of the sky was thinning.

Her heart was soaring, even without looking back down to see exactly how miniature the world had become. The air was thin, but she could tell he was providing her with enough of it to breathe without difficulty, gathering it before her mouth for each breath. The act seemed intimate enough to send a tremble through her. Not only him connecting with his magic for her, but her life in his hands and him caring for it without pause.

The blue gave way for black as the night sky appeared beyond it, her eyes widening as she took in the sight. She knew that the night sky was always there, and the blue of day only veiled it from sight, but to have it so markedly demonstrated was astonishing. She felt as though she could reach out and touch each and every star.

Then he made a sharp turn, gliding along the height he'd reached, and she looked down at their home below.

Aeris was still bathed in sunlight, and there was that familiar wonder as she could see far beyond the four kingdoms to those belonging to distant shores. Some of them lay in the shadow of night, twinkling merrily with their distant lights.

She raised her gaze to the sun, glowing its heat through the blackness, and the moon hanging in the sky like a large gray ball, farther away than her mind could comprehend and yet seemingly so near.

She took another breath, letting it sink in that right now she was far above the trials and tribulations of the kingdoms, wishing briefly that they could stay up there for longer. Perhaps forever. They could make a home for themselves among the stars, wrap themselves in stardust, hide themselves in the moonlight.

But as though he wanted to remind her of the people they would then be leaving behind, he dipped forward again, sailing slowly downward in a descending spiral.

She leaned forward then, holding onto the smooth scales of his neck, enjoying them glinting whenever they caught the sunlight. He was a truly handsome creature. She thought she felt a stir of agreement deep within, and along with it came a flare of joy, as she thought the agreement was coming from her inner dragon. At last, a sign that she truly wasn't gone for good.

*Wake up, she thought. Come back. I need you.*

But she had only missed two doses of the potion so far. It had been steadily fed to her for over ten months. She didn't expect its effects to wear off quite so easily. In fact, part of her wondered if she didn't need some sort of remedy to cleanse her bloodstream of its effects.

They were nearing the surface of the ocean at breakneck speed and just as she thought he was actually going to dive straight into it with her still on his back, he moved his

wings into a different position, using the air to put the brakes on before he glided along the surface instead.

The salty breeze was delightful, as was the soft spray of the waves on her face. She wasn't fond of water—he must be aware of this—but she didn't mind being near it. It was going in it that made her inner fire dragon draw the line.

Of course, she was still sleeping.

Perhaps a bath in the ocean would stir her.

Maize contemplated letting herself fall in, but only for a second before discarding the thought. She wasn't a strong swimmer. The ocean had never seemed welcoming to her.

Instead, she let Greer bring them back to the cliff, where he slowly set down. His wings beat the grass until his paws were firmly planted on the ground, at which point they stilled, and he folded them back against his body. She turned, bringing one leg over so that she could slide herself off his back, one foot against his leg once more before she jumped to the ground.

“Thank you,” she said, turning her head away when he began the shift.

It was impolite to stare, especially as he would end up standing before her naked at the end of it. The soft cracking of bones finished, but she still refused to look at him.

“Would you hand me my clothes, please?” he asked.

She could tell he was enjoying himself. Defying the soft heat in her cheeks, in the moment thankful that she wasn't lighting up from within with her self-consciousness, she walked over to where he had piled his clothes. She picked them up, drawing a soft breath before turning to face him.

“There,” she said, holding them out to him.

She refused to let her eyes wander down his muscular torso, following the V of his hipbones to where his manhood was on full display. She kept her gaze steadily on his, her hearts hammering in her chest. She refused to falter for even a

second, even though she knew she must be blushing bright red.

He smiled, showing her some ounce of mercy as he didn't demand she actually walk up to him and hand him the pile rather than make him move from his spot. As he approached, she wondered if crossing the distance between them herself wouldn't have been preferable to waiting for him to reach her.

Did he feel anything for her? Did he look at her and quake to the soles of his feet, the way she did whenever she looked at him for too long?

Finally, she pulled her gaze from his, unable to not waver as he came to a halt in front of her.

“Thank you,” he said, voice sweet as he took the clothes out of her grasp.

“My pleasure, your highness,” she curtseyed, still not looking at him.

He chuckled, making her insides feel like jelly and her knees grow weak.

Apparently that damn flight had affected her much more than she'd thought it had. Seeing him in dragon shape had clearly been too much for her simple brain to process and now she was falling all over herself, just like any woman at court surely did whenever he paid them even the slightest attention.

That thought made her cross her arms over her chest defensively.

He would know. Men always knew when women wanted them without any restraint. She had to restrain herself. This was pure desire, and she reminded herself harshly how all it would get her would be a night with him, perhaps two, and then she'd be discarded.

She was to be Grey's caretaker—nothing more.

Well, perhaps one more thing.

She straightened her back with the determination to push Greer just a little further, now that she had him in this place. He'd been surprised that he didn't know of it, but she only knew of it because her mother had been one of the most powerful sorceresses to ever work her magic in Elemys. The knowledge of such a holy place, one of spiritual renewal and connection, was passed from king to king only at the moment of transference.

Her mother had been in perfect tune with all the elements and had discovered each point of convergence through her traveling the kingdoms. Maize had been a century old when her mother had determined that she had inherited her mother's gifts. Immediately, Maize had been encouraged to explore the world around them, to discover her own connections, and to forge them into chains and links that would help guide her through life. The stones circling the fire, the logs burning, the flame and the air feeding it—the connectivity between elements had begun to paint itself into how she viewed the world.

Her magic had provided a bond with her mother, even after her mother passed away, but grief had made Maize come close to forsaking it.

“I lost someone too,” Maize said, facing Greer, who was pulling his jacket back on. “My mother,” she added. “Grief can become a blanket that covers everything. It feels safe under that blanket. Warm and snug. You don't have to venture outside and face the cold because you have something that will shield you. And that something is a reason—a very good reason—to stay right where you are. For a long while, I hid under that blanket and I thought I would never come out again, but then a friend...” She trailed off as she thought of the patience Blair had used to bring Maize out of her deep depression. “She reminded me that I don't live for others—I live for myself.”

“Viola died to protect my life,” Greer cut in. There was no sharpness, merely an observation of the truth of his situation.

“And guilt can very easily be mistaken for grief,” Maize remarked.

He didn’t look away, but she could tell he wanted to. He wanted to stop this topic before it could go any further. It was a good sign that he didn’t say anything else. He merely watched her, silent and grim. She understood the message perfectly. She was to speak her mind and, if he disagreed with her, she was never to speak it again.

If this was all he could give her, she would take it.

Hopefully her words would be carefully enough chosen that they would hit the spot she was aiming for and begin to open him up to that truth he had chosen to ignore for much too long.

“You think I’m blanketing myself from living my life?” he asked.

“Aren’t you?”

“You’ve known me for one day,” he remarked. “You think you understand me this well that you can tell me who I am?”

She had to smile. He was right, but so was she. “I’m far from telling you who you are, my lord,” she said. “I’m just pointing at something you’re doing that I can tell is hurting not only you, but your son. And what of your people?”

He clenched his jaws. “What of them?”

“Have you observed them? What this ban on magic means for them?”

“We provide for them,” he said. “They don’t need magic for that.”

“Do you truly believe that?” she asked. “Because if you do, I can’t see that there’s anything else to discuss here.”

He didn’t respond, merely eyed her for a long moment before scoffing softly. “Sorcery and spell work bring chaos,” he said.

“People bring chaos,” she countered.



“Exactly. And it’s been quiet since the ban took effect,” he stated.

“Has it?” she asked. “Or has there been a lack of movement? The air in your kingdom is stagnant, my prince. Can’t you tell?”

He shook his head at her, looking ready to contest that statement, the wind whipping his dark locks about his handsome face. But then he let go of whatever argument he had been about to make, and instead said, “The people are safe.”

It was her turn to shake her head again. “You said the same thing yesterday. You know what my reply to that is. Simply because safety seems to be the lay of the land doesn’t mean there are dangers hiding in the shadows. You must know this, or you wouldn’t be so stubbornly ignoring that the shadows are even there.”

“The man who took you...” He trailed off, but sighed, relenting. “The man who invaded your kingdom and burned down your sanctuary. I believe it had been coming for a good while. I believe...” She furrowed her brow and he pressed on, finishing, “I believe it’s the same man who was behind the attack that took Viola.”

She felt it like a blow. It made such sense of his attitude. It had all been a defense mechanism to avoid having to deal with this, deal with Viola’s death, deal with his guilt and this sudden reappearance of a threat he might have thought taken care of.

“Did you not apprehend the one who cast the spell that... took Viola?” Maize asked.

“We did,” he said. “And he assured us he had worked alone. Even the most potent truth spell couldn’t make him betray if he had been working with or for anyone else. I thought it was a closed case.”

She took that in. The implications of what had happened to her were reshaping themselves, though she couldn’t understand why the man had been so adamant that

she should accept her as his mate by allowing him into her bed. Was it all political? Was it all to do with her ties to the throne of Elemys? Or was it to do with her ties to the elemental magic of the realms?

She was about to reveal her full identity to Greer when she reconsidered. If she told him who she was, then he would have no other option but to draw conclusions of what she could do. Would he approve of her being the daughter of a sorceress and capable of much more chaos than anyone within the borders of his kingdom could hope to accomplish? Would it frighten him? Make him pull away, clad himself in that iron that he had finally shed, revealing the softness beneath it.

It was the last thing she wanted when she could tell he was at last free of it.

“You don’t have to hide from it anymore,” she said. “You can’t. Whoever was behind Viola’s death... he’s back. He’s coming to finish whatever it was he started back then. He might be coming for Grey next.”

At that implication, Greer’s eyes widened, which did him credit. Anything happening to Grey was sure to devastate him.

“You will have to face the first and last trial at some point—” she began, but he surprised her by interrupting her.

“I already am,” he confessed.

She waited for him to elaborate but, when all he did was glance away from her, she said, “What is it?”

She was getting the very distinct impression that it involved her, which meant that she wasn’t entirely surprised as his elaborated confession told her exactly how right she was.

“To find a mother for Grey,” Greer said, glancing back at her in such a sheepish way that she found it hard to get angry at the manipulation. Had he manipulated her? Perhaps with this trip, but before then? She had met Grey by chance, after all. She had chosen to speak on his behalf. She shook her head slowly at the strange circumstances, but then she had to chuckle.

“A mother?” she asked.

Greer lifted both shoulders in a shrug. “A caretaker,” he offered. “Grey is... Grey. He’s never been easy for me to reach through to. We would have our moments, but... He was more hers than he was mine.”

“Isn’t that all sons?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I was always close with my father. I had hoped to be the same for Grey but, more often than not, I feel I come up wanting. I don’t know what his needs are, so I can’t meet them.”

“I think that’s you being unfair to yourself,” she said. “You knew to bring him here, didn’t you?”

“I suppose so,” Greer said, a smile playing on his mouth again. “Is this why you were brought onto my path? To be a truth-speaker?”

“Perhaps,” she said, a broad smile splitting her face as she grew self-conscious again. “If you want to stand up to this threat you’re facing, there’s no better way than to take them off guard. They will not expect you to conjure.”

He cocked a brow at that. She felt hope surge within her as he let that statement take hold, the truth of it undeniable. Then he gave a slight nod. “You’re right,” he said.

“Of course I’m right,” she replied matter-of-factly. “And this place...”

He nodded again, looking around at the plain space around them: a grassy hill beneath the burning sun, the ocean stretching before them, and around them swept the whispering winds of his kingdom.

“It’s the perfect place to reconnect,” he said.

She nodded, hoping he would take it as an incentive to give it a try.

He did. Closing his eyes he faced the sea and along with it the wind itself, rushing in from across the waves. She watched as it played with his clothing, with his hair, the same

way it had her, and then noted the shift as it happened. It was subtle, but distinct, especially since she was looking for it.

The air around him grew still, the wind asked—or commanded—to rush past without touching him.

A small smile began to play on his lips as he raised one hand's fingers ever so slightly. In the following moment a gust nearly knocked her off balance, making her have to plant her feet more firmly against the ground. "Hey," she said, but they both laughed.

Freedom.

She could sense it all around him.

The release that he was experiencing as he stopped pretending to be something he wasn't. The airmagic wasn't his to possess quite yet, but he still had the threads of it through his bloodstream and the wind responded accordingly. He could manipulate it at will and before her eyes she watched as the sky began to darken. He was tugging rainclouds to the shore. Before they reached them, a swirling whirlwind began to dip down, its tongue reaching for the waves below.

She took a step back, amazed and slightly alarmed at the sight.

She'd never seen anything like it.

She knew she was safe. Standing inches away from him, there was nothing to fear from the wind, and yet she had the urge to step closer. She kept it down, didn't give into it, but she moved her attention from the sight before them and to his face.

His expression was one of deep relaxation. He was in his element. In the middle of it, in fact. She thought of reaching for him, tapping into some of it, wondering if that might not zap some life into her own latent powers. But she didn't dare.

She longed to join in. Everything in her wanted to feel the connection he was experiencing, where everything seemed a part of everything and she, while conjuring, became the center of it all.

The eye of the storm.

The wind was whipping around them from the movement of the whirlwind still far out to sea. Just as its coned shape was about to touch the surface of the water, the shape of it began to evaporate and as the clouds rolled back out to sea, stillness ensued.

He lowered his slightly raised hand, letting it relax along his side as he opened his eyes.

“Thank you,” he said. “I wish it was as easy as this.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, hearts sinking in her chest. “It is easy. You’re choosing to make it hard. On everyone, including yourself. Whoever is staging an attack on your kingdom, don’t you think they might have had your aversion in mind? That they’ve manipulated you into it and you’re playing right into their hands? Without magic, you’re leaving yourself wide open. Please.”

She reached out, grabbing one of his hands in a tight hold, needing him to listen.

At the touch of his skin against hers, a jolt went through her.

She froze at the air in her veins, breathing on the faded embers of her own magic.

She pulled her hand away as though his touch had stung her, taking a step back, growing self-conscious, but there was no hiding the soft glow that had appeared in the veins of her wrist.

He noticed it, stepping forward, clasping her hand again. His gaze was fixed on the spot and, when she tried to tug away, his hold tightened.

“Stop,” he instructed, reaching up his other hand to trace the veins with his fingertips. “She’s waking.”

And chances were high that her inherited powers—her mother’s legacy—would awaken also. If he could tell that she had access to that sort of magic... She didn’t want him looking

at her as though she should be cast out of the kingdom, as though she was the real threat.

“Let go,” she tried feebly, but the truth was that however little she wanted him to see her, the real her, all the more she wanted to feel like herself again.

“No,” he said simply, grasping her other wrist in a looser hold, making her face him.

It felt as though she was ripping in two. One part of her desperate to stay, to do everything in her power to ensure that she would be allowed to; the other part yearning to stretch her wings, to conjure, to be whole again.

How was she supposed to accept that she would have to forego part of herself to stay by his side?

She couldn't.

It was hopeless.

But in the following blink, her inner dragon was present within her, its power melding itself with her blood as it fired its way through her, lighting her up from within.

She saw his eyes round with wonder. It made her feel beautiful, accepted. She didn't want it to end. That connection she'd felt at their first touch remained, enhancing the burn within her, bringing it into a blaze as it breathed through her. It was unlike anything she had ever felt before. She knew she was powerful, but joined with him in this way, she felt as though she could wreck the world. Or save it.

He looked the way she felt—in complete awe.

Before she could stop herself, she stepped forward and he mirrored the movement as though there was nothing else for him to do but to follow her in whatever she chose. Her hands moved to the sides of his face and his moved to hers the second before their lips joined in a deep kiss. The touch of his lips on hers made her close her eyes, the sensations that spread through her making her feel as though she was soaring higher than he'd brought her.

She was among the stars themselves, floating.



## Chapter 8 - Greer

The heat of her was moving through him as though it was warming his inner winds. It didn't burn, except for under his fingertips, and even then, it was pleasurable. He was completely wrapped up in the sensation. Losing himself, moment to moment, in the taste of her. Like blackberries warmed by the sun. Her tongue was willing and pliant, her body pressed against his until he remembered the circumstances and broke the kiss.

Holding her at arm's length he caught his breath, as did she, their eyes met. Hers were hungry, eager for more. He knew his expression reflected her desire, but this was crazy.

"Wait," he said when she pushed against his hold, wanting to get closer again. "I don't want to—"

"You're not," she assured. "I know it can't be any more than what it is. I don't care."

She was flooded with want. He'd seen the look many times before and usually he wouldn't have any qualms about giving her what she was craving in the moment, but truth was that he did care. He cared about what this meant for them moving forward, and so he said, "But I do."

She furrowed her brow, relaxing under his hold. Then she seemed to remember the information he had shared, her eyebrows rising. "Ah," she said. "Because of the trial."

"Because of Grey," he corrected, hoping that it was the truth, still unsure of what his main objective was.

She didn't seem to buy it, crossing her arms over her chest and quirking her head in a way meant to question the statement.

Did he trust himself to know what the right thing was?

Couldn't all of the things be the right thing? Couldn't he want what was best for Grey and simultaneously want the trial completed? Couldn't Greer want her to stay on regardless



of her feelings or lack thereof where he was concerned? Couldn't he want to trace fire into her veins and kiss her until she was burning hot beneath his touch?

He swallowed.

Weren't all of these things possible when neither was mutually exclusively the right thing?

"I don't know why I feel like I'll lose you," he murmured.

It was the truth. That was what it felt like. If he touched her again, he feared she would evaporate, like mists as the sun rose above the treetops. He didn't know her, and yet he knew that she was one of the better things to cross his path in quite some time.

She drew a soft breath. "I want to stay," she said.

There seemed to be a promise there. He wanted to pull it from her lips, make her articulate it, but he was frightened of what she'd tell him. He didn't want to hear that she couldn't live in a place without magic. He still felt too strongly that what he needed for his own peace of mind was to keep things as they had been, to not rock the boat he had built in the wake of Viola's death. If magic was used, then the sorcerer would be punished for it. The law of the land was as great a protection as any wielding of magic could be. He had to trust in that.

He had to trust that it was the right thing.

"Then stay," he mumbled, unable to keep his hands from sliding over her shoulders to her neck, up to the side of her face again as he stepped close to her. "Say that you'll stay."

She looked as though she had questions. Questions of whether this was for him or Grey, for the trial and the kingdom, or for a future he never would have expected he might want for himself. He didn't know. All he knew was that the taste of her was still on his tongue and he wanted his fill.

Before she could answer, he brought their lips together again.

This time the kiss was ferocious, the attraction he had bottled up and compartmentalized blazing through him. How had he ever thought her no more than fairly pretty, when she was mesmerizing? Golden hair and green eyes that melted through his defenses as though they didn't even exist. How he'd tried to tell himself that he didn't want her, but he'd wanted this, he'd wanted her in his arms from the moment she stopped short because of that arrow.

That stupid, runaway arrow.

She made a noise against his mouth, her hands on his hips, sliding up his back as she pressed herself to him.

He wanted to lay her down on something soft. He wanted to run his hands over her heated skin, touch every inch of her, bring her to life within. She should be sighing his name as he kissed her neck, her hands in his hair. And his fingers would find exactly where to put the right amount of pressure to bring more noises from her.

He shouldn't.

But he was too far gone. There was no going back when she was kissing him the way she was, when she wanted it as much as he did. He could tell from how she was trembling beneath his hands, the way she was moving against him, with him. He would take it slow, make her feel how much he desired her.

“Come here,” he murmured, taking her hand, and pulling her with him across the grass. He'd set his sights on a dip where the hills began to roll into the incline that would take them to the mines. She didn't hesitate in her step; she didn't tug on his hand to show she wasn't willing. No, she was tight on his heels, one hand in his, the other gripping his arm tightly.

He could sense her eagerness. It transferred into him, egging him on until he chose a spot by a leaning evertree. It was secluded enough. No one would come across a pair of lovers in the grass when the curves of the hills and the dragging branches of the tree worked to keep their lovemaking from view.

The thought made him pull her flush against him, his fingers in her hair as he kissed her, tongue playing lazily with hers. Her scent everywhere, earthy and inviting. He was aching to sink himself deep into her, wondering if she was experiencing the same level of yearning.

He didn't have to question it for very long as she began to sink down onto the ground, pulling him with her as she parted her legs to fit him between them. She tugged at the skirts of her dress, getting them over her knees, her breathing hard against his mouth as he broke the kiss. He rested his forehead on hers, eager to feel her touch on him as she unabashedly made quick work of the button on his pants.

He groaned as she stroked him, from head to hilt, eager and rough. She wanted him inside of her, already squirming as her free hand reached between them, loosening her undergarments.

Then she moaned softly, and he realized she was stroking herself. She leaned her head back, biting her lower lip, hips rolling against her own touch. It was enough to make him burst. He took his eyes off her face, burying his head between her breasts, and wishing he could free them. Her dress was too tight. He had to make do with biting at the fabric.

She gasped softly, her hand moving in quicker strokes along his cock while he could tell she was coming to her own touch, their eyes meeting. He couldn't wait. He moved his hips forward, finding her ready for him as he entered her.

Her mouth fell open, her body stiffening with pure pleasure and he got to feel her tighten around him as she came.

One of her hands went to the back of his neck while her other moved to his hip.

He caught her mouth with hers, sucking her lower lip between his before kissing her deeply again, starting to thrust. At first gently, then picking up his speed as he wanted the friction. He was already on the brink, so turned on by her that he could hardly contain himself.

The feel of her was like velvet smoothness against his skin, the heat of her creating sensations previously unknown to him.

She parted her legs further, giving him even deeper access, her eyes on his as he came hard. He stopped his movements, resting inside of her, out of breath and far from satisfied. He wanted her naked under his hands, he wanted to caress every inch of her. He had been with many women before her. He had taken them and let them take him in every way imaginable, but this... It was as though she was a part of him, and he was a part of her. The glow he produced in her veins was matched by the softened sensation within him, like goosebumps that wouldn't quite go away.

He pulled out of her, but only to get to his feet to undress himself.

This time she watched him.

It made him smirk. The appreciation he had seen in her gaze the moment they first met was now there tenfold.

What was it she liked about him?

She hadn't felt this open before.

Not until he embraced the magic inside of him.

The thought of flying with her in dragon shape by his side made his cock begin to harden again. He couldn't exactly deny that this was more than base attraction. He was falling for her, and he was falling fast.

"Come here," she encouraged when he'd removed the last of his clothes.

He sunk to his knees. She sat up, lifting her hair out of the way so that he could more easily undo the lacing of her dress. The knot wouldn't budge at first, making them both chuckle. Finally, he managed it. She slipped the dress off her shoulders, and he watched as she removed it completely. She pulled her undergarment over her head, leaving her naked as well.

She was glowing all over.

He couldn't help but stare.

"You're beautiful," he said.

The fire in her veins reminded him of the gold that veined itself all over his dragon shape, through every scale. Though she was much more impressive with every vein lit up from deep within. Her inner dragon must be truly powerful.

He reached out, tracing one glowing vein from her clavicle down to the curve of her breast. Then he leaned forward, taking her nipple between his lips and tilting her back again as he licked and nipped at the tender skin. She was trembling again, but when she reached for herself, he beat her to it, pressing his fingers between her folds while his thumb went to work on her.

Her hands found their way into his hair, her body responding in the most satisfactory of ways as she began to groan loudly. He wanted to feel her around him as she came again and so he made her lift one leg, resting it against his shoulder as he pushed himself inside her. This time he set a quick rhythm immediately, making her claw at his back and bite at his neck, hips meeting his as she tightened around him.

He couldn't stop himself from following her, moaning against her neck as he came with a few more hard thrusts.

What an unexpected turn of events. The shyness with which many women took to his company had never been a character trait of hers, but this was far beyond that. This was giving herself to him unabashedly, letting him take her without holding back. He kissed her neck, thinking he could stay right there with her for the rest of the day, kissing every inch of her.

He raised himself on his arms to look down at her. Her chest was still heaving from the exertion, her eyes hooded with lingering want. He sunk back down on top of her, kissing her deeply until she wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his back, telling him she wasn't going anywhere.

It made him smile against her mouth.

He'd known her for no more than a day and a half and already he found it difficult to imagine his life without her.

Could an infliction of the heart take hold that fast?

The feel of her heated skin underneath his hands told him it could.

“You’re formidable,” he murmured in her ear, making her huff a laugh.

“You say that to every conquest,” she murmured back, but he shook his head, pulling back to look at her again. He moved one hand, stroking his fingers through her tangled tresses, tenderness rising through him.

“You’re not a conquest,” he said.

“Then what am I, my lord?”

“I think you can call me Greer.” He raised his eyebrows meaningfully, making her smile in the most endearing manner, her eyes softening.

“Greer,” she said.

How was it that he had set out to complete the trial, find his son a decent caretaker, and had somehow ended up here? In her arms, he felt as though he should let go of the past.

That thought made a fist clench itself around his heart, and he couldn’t stop himself from shrinking from it. He pulled out of her, sitting up. She noted the change in his mood, but she didn’t say anything as she sat up as well, simply slid a hand across his shoulders. It was comforting in ways he hadn’t known he needed.

He closed his eyes, feeling the wind respond to him as he reached for it with his mind. It swirled itself around his wrist, up his arm, like a coiling snake. It moved up into his hair, dragging gentle fingers through his locks, the airmagic tracing through it. The present was in that sensation, and he was beginning to see how the future was as well. He’d feared its obliqueness, but perhaps the unknown didn’t need to be so disconcerting. At least not with someone by his side who seemed so certain of how to handle it.

“We should get dressed,” he said, but reached for her hand, lacing their fingers together.

“We should,” she agreed, though she sounded like she didn’t want to, which made his hearts feel light.

She was not going anywhere. She was staying by his side. She felt what he felt, he was certain of it. They had met for a reason, they had bonded. She was his and he was hers.

True mates.

He squeezed her hand a little harder but didn’t feel the need to declare it.

Surely, she already knew.

He reached for her undergarment, handing it to her. But then her mouth was on his again, kissing him, making him fall back in the grass with a laugh of surprise as she got on top of him.

“There’s time,” she said, kissing her way down his chest and he had to concede.

There was all the time she wanted.

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They slept during the carriage ride home, both exhausted, but happy to sit curled up next to each other. Her head resting on his shoulder, his cheek against her hair. Their hands were interlaced throughout the journey. And all he could think before drifting off was that he was bringing home his future queen.

He couldn’t wait to introduce her to his father.

The king had been traveling but had been expected back for the past few days, meaning the castle was holding its breath and busied itself with preparations. Once the carriage drew into the courtyard and Greer had rubbed the sleep from his eyes, he knew instantly that the day had arrived.

There were garlands of wildflowers hanging above the door of the castle. They were only placed there in celebration of the king's glorious return home.

"Don't be nervous," Greer told Maize as they walked up the steps of the castle. "He really is a very kind man."

"I'm sure that he is," she said, but he could tell she was jittery. "Shouldn't I go change?"

Greer contemplated the hours it would take her to get ready and felt he had no patience for it. They didn't need to stand on tradition. They weren't the traditional sort of couple, were they?

"You'll do," he smirked, getting an elbow shoved in his side for his insolence.

They entered the great hall, where the entire court was gathered for dinner. Rather than sit at long tables in the great hall or wait for dinner to be served in the dining hall, the courtiers were milling about, eating where they stood. There was a general chatter, the good humor afforded everyone by the king's return permeating the room. It seeped into Greer as well. He was happy his father had come home unharmed, especially after such a mission. Greer hoped the king had been successful, and by the looks of the smile on his father's face, he had been.

The king was wearing his riding fur, white with grey details, and underneath it his riding clothes, which were plainer than his normal royal attire, though the rich detailing of their silk embroidery still put him well above any of the lower classes. Greer had inherited his ice blue eyes from his father, but where Greer was dark haired like his mother had been, his father had light brown hair. They were roughly of the same cut, however, and his father stood tall and broad-shouldered among his most loyal. He threw his head back and laughed but interrupted himself when he noticed Greer approaching with Maize by his side.

"Son," the king greeted, arms wide in encouragement of an embrace. "Please, come and greet the Lady Shannon on



visit from Fawha. She just arrived alongside your uncle. We took separate routes home. Come, come.”

The king gestured for Greer to take the lady’s hand and he did, kissing it dutifully. They had met before and she still carried the same graceful beauty that she’d shown five years ago. She smiled, showing perfect rows of white teeth, and he returned it. Her black locks were braided in the latest fashion, her stunning dress showing off an appealing shape, but it was her eyes that were most remembered by those who met her as they were so dark brown they were bordering on matching the black of her hair.

“Highness,” she greeted. “A pleasure to see you again.”

“And you, my lady,” he assured. “Father,” he continued, turning to the king with some sense of urgency. “How did you fair?”

“Successfully,” the king declared, taking no note of attaining Greer’s complete focus. “The message we received proved true and there was the promise of a minor uprising along the border when we reached it, but we suppressed it.”

“What sort of uprising was it?” Greer asked, momentarily forgetting the introductions he was supposed to make between his father and Maize.

“What do you mean ‘what sort’?” the king replied. “The unruly sort.”

“No, I mean what class of subject instigated it?” Greer demanded.

“Now, listen here,” the king said, clapping a hand on Greer’s shoulder, steering him aside. “Don’t speak to me like that after I’ve been gone for the better part of a month. What’s gotten into you? You are embarrassing me in front of Lady Shannon that you take such a commandeering tone with me, as though I don’t know what ‘sort’ of uprising I just helped stop in its unruly tracks.”

“Forgive me,” Greer said. “There’s been a development. An important one. One that might shed some

light on the unrest we've been seeing.”

“We?” the king cocked an eyebrow. “Last time I remember, you huffed and puffed and told me I was exaggerating. You told me that going out to the places where such things were brewing would only encourage more people to express discontent. That it was better to leave it and let it peter out.”

“Yes, I know what I said,” Greer admonished. “But... things have changed. My point of view has... shifted.”

“Oh?” the king asked. “And what is this development that has managed to change my son's mind?”

“Well, I would like to—”

“Greer.” His name was said in the hearty way his uncle Arran always adopted whenever they'd been parted for a greater period of time, stepping into the space of the father and son duo as he slapped Greer on the shoulder in greeting. “Seems you've done a not too shoddy job of keeping the throne in the place it's always been while we were away,” Arran teased. “Well done. Better not let it move an inch to the right or there will be utter chaos.”

Lord Arran was shorter than his brother, with double the muscle. He wore his dark brown hair slicked back into a ponytail, his beard trimmed to perfection, and he typically had a wicked twinkle in his brown eyes. He was wearing leather head to toe, as was his custom.

“Hello, uncle,” Greer said with a smile. “Good to see you're still wearing the same clothes you left in. Never were much for airing out your dirty undergarments, were you?”

“Oh, you little ass,” Arran laughed. “It's good to see you.”

They embraced, Arran pounding Greer on the back hard enough to bruise, as was his way. Greer made a pained noise and Arran laughed again. “Take it like a dragon,” Arran encouraged, making Greer shove him away playfully.

“There's hardly any other way for me to take it,” Greer replied. “Especially since... Father, there's someone I would

very much like you to meet.” He paused, turning to where he had left Maize standing, but she wasn’t occupying the spot anymore.

He frowned, looking around for her, a little perturbed when he was unable to find her in the surrounding crowd.

Where had she gone off to?

## Chapter 9 - Maize

Maize shrank back behind the pillar she'd sought refuge by, keeping herself out of sight as Greer's eyes sought her. Her hearts were hammering like they wanted to break her ribs, her fingers trembling against the marble of the pillar as she leaned against it for support. Her legs felt as though they would give way at any moment.

The man was there.

He had embraced Greer, laughed with him. They weren't merely friendly—they were family.

Greer's uncle.

He was the captor, he was the lord on the horse, he was the one who had come into her room every night for nearly a year and tried to make her his mate.

She couldn't think. Her mind was weighted down with the facts before her. How could she challenge Greer's loyalty to his father's brother? A dragon who had been with him his entire life; a dragon whom he was clearly close with. What chance was there that Greer would even believe her if she accused the lord?

Greer's trust was a fragile thing and she seemed to have gained it, but if she did even the slightest thing that might shake it, she was certain she would sever it. Damage it, perhaps beyond repair. It wouldn't only affect her, but everyone around him too.

"My dear," a lady's voice asked next to her, and she jerked, staring at the woman as though she'd stuck her with a needle. "Are you quite all right?" the lady added, a hand at her chest as though she was now equally startled.

"I'm fine," Maize lied, realizing she couldn't stay in the great hall without drawing attention to herself. At least not if she was merely standing about, hiding in the corners.

She contemplated what her next move should be, looking around for something useful to occupy her hands. Something that let the gathered know she had a purpose to being there and, preferably, a purpose in heading for the doors and exiting the room. She decided she should dare walk over to the next pillar, even though it meant her movement might be spotted by the lord.

He wouldn't hesitate if he laid eyes on her. He was clever enough; she'd learned that during their conversations where he'd snaked his way around topics without giving much away about himself. He would take her before anyone even noticed. He would bring her back to his castle, put her back in that cursed room.

Her veins lit up with fear and fury in equal measure, her inner dragon growling in soft protest.

No, that wasn't going to happen.

She would kill him first, consequences be damned. Or, if it came to that, she would die trying.

She wondered briefly if she was able to shift. The power within her was far from back to what it had been a year ago, but still she was relieved beyond words that her inner dragon had finally been roused. They were one again, its heat warming her insides in the most consoling of ways.

It didn't mean that her inherited magic was back.

Would she be able to conjure?

She hadn't even tried yet. She should find a secluded alcove far away from any guests, or retreat to her own room and attempt it there, but there was no time. The lord was right there, possibly on the brink of detecting her. She had to know now if the magic had sparked its way back into her veins along with her inner dragon, or if the link was still broken.

She looked around the space for something small to focus on, something that wouldn't draw any attention, finding a nail punched into the stone wall. It must have carried a painting or tapestry at some point, but now it hung empty and forgotten. Twisted as it had been pounded into the stone.

She focused on it.

Focused on the air between her and it.

On the unseen that existed in that space, too small for her eye to see, on how it connected with the energy of all things. She could sense it, could almost make out the shape of the nail even where it was driven into the stone.

She closed her eyes, sweat beginning to pearl on her brow as she concentrated.

She cleared her mind of anything but the shape of the nail. Forming her wish that the nail should be pulled out of the stone, fall to the floor. Visualizing it happening over and over. The stone releasing its hold, the nail coming loose, pulling free, falling. Hold releasing, loose, free, falling. Again, and again.

Until her head began to hurt, and she released the breath she was holding, opening her eyes again.

The nail remained where it was, stuck in the stone.

She sighed.

It was clearly going to take a little longer, though her veins were glowing golden. It offered some comfort.

“What’s wrong with your skin?”

She turned her head to Grey, who was frowning at her. “Nothing,” she replied. “It’s my inner dragon saying hello.”

His frown merely deepened. “That doesn’t look like an inner dragon.”

“Oh? And what does an inner dragon look like?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “I don’t glow, so... not like that.”

She smiled, squatting down in front of him, taking his hand in hers. “Your inner dragon sends goose bumps up your arms, doesn’t it?” He nodded. “It rushes through you like the winds off the sea, doesn’t it? Makes your stomach tingle?” He nodded again. “Mine heats my blood up,” she said. “Yours is

tied to the air and mine is tied to fire. See?” She reached for her inner dragon, her veins illuminating again.

This time his brow unknitted itself as he watched, then reached out to poke her arm.

She chuckled. He was so unapologetic. She knew that he got that from Greer, but on Grey it was adorable. And could be a useful trait to have, tied to the equally unapologetic self-trust he possessed.

“Would you like to practice?” she asked.

“Practice what?”

“Listening to your inner dragon.”

“I’m not supposed to,” he shook his head.

“Grey,” she said. “Yes, you are. Your father says so too. Trust me?”

She straightened up, reaching out a hand to him, eyebrows raised. He hesitated.

“I’m supposed to greet my grandfather,” Grey said. “But he’s speaking to father, and I don’t want to interrupt.”

“I think that’s smart,” she reassured. “Let them catch up and then I’m sure your grandfather will come and see you before bedtime.”

“Will you be there too?”

“For bedtime? If you’d like,” she nodded, even though her hearts were thudding away at the mere thought. As long as she kept quiet and kept her head down the king would probably barely notice her. She would be fine.

Grey was the perfect excuse for leaving the room. If Greer found them and asked her why she hadn’t stayed to meet the king, she could tell him something that wasn’t a complete lie. Because she really was tired of seeing Grey struggle with such an innate part of himself. It was time she found out how much he knew of the basics. He had conjured right before her eyes, but it had seemed involuntary. As though the magic took over him rather than the other way around. He was strong,

though. And once he was one with his dragon, he would be even stronger.

She didn't look over her shoulder as she ushered Grey to the doors. She kept her gaze straight ahead, avoiding eye contact with those she walked past but making sure that she looked like she knew exactly where she was going.

Which, in fact, she did.

She would bring Grey back to Greer's rooms and wait for the prince to return there. They would put Grey to bed, and she would tell Greer where Grey was at regarding both his inner dragon and his connection with the airmagic. And then she would say her goodbyes and head back home.

She should have gone that morning. It had been foolish to linger.

Part of her wanted to call the lord out, point a finger, make Greer aware, but a bigger part was terrified of what it would mean. Not only for her, but for Greer as well. She couldn't do that to him or to herself. The uncle hadn't violated her physically. At least that was something to comfort her since he didn't seem the type to force himself on a woman.

*He's a menace*, a voice from deep within whispered, and while she knew it was true, she couldn't listen to it calling for retribution.

*He'll come for me*, she thought. *He has the king's ear. It will be my head on the chopping block. I have no real proof.*

She couldn't expect Greer to go against a trusted and loyal member of his court based solely on her testimony. Could she?

*He believes you already*, the voice urged.

But it was different now. This wasn't a barely named courtier, this was someone in his inner circle.

She walked with Grey through the impressive hallways, bidding farewell as she went. For a brief second, she had thought that she'd been meant to wander them for the rest of her lifetime. That she'd been meant to end up in this place,



and everything that had happened to bring her to Greer had happened to secure their shared future.

She had seen him open himself up to the idea too. Hadn't she? When she was in his arms, when he was everything that occupied her every sense, then he'd looked at her and she had seen it. He'd been willing and he'd been ready to change, to accept.

Magic.

The guards closed the doors behind her and Grey, as ever, and she brought the child to the window, unlatching it to invite the wind in. Or for him to do it, whatever was most compelling. Whatever made Grey reach out and search for the connection. The feel of the wind could be a strong incentive, but it was possible he had a strong enough sense of it within him to manage that first lone spark, setting a chain reaction in motion. She knew the sensation well. It was like holding lightning in a bottle the first time you succeeded in creating it.

"Do you know what to do?" she asked Grey.

"What's going on here?" She turned to the doors just as they closed behind Greer. "I saw you leave the great hall with Grey? What happened? I was about to introduce you to my father," Greer said, then focused on his son. "Hello, Grey."

"Hello, father," Grey nodded.

"How was the trip back?"

"All right, father," Grey smiled. "Irvine let me have as many sugared cherries as I could stomach."

"Oh, did he?" Greer asked, returning the smile, but killing it when he focused back on Maize. "What are you doing?"

"I'm asking Grey about his magic," she said. "And then I'm leaving. It's time for me to return home."

Greer's brows furrowed.

"To Elemys?" he asked, as though the answer could be anything else.

“What?” Grey asked, turning those big brown eyes up at her. “You only just got here.”

“I know,” she said, taking Grey’s hand in hers as she leaned forward to get herself eye level. “And I’m sorry. But there’s something important that’s calling me back home.”

“What’s so important?” Greer asked, his tone traced with the bitterness she had been fearing might take hold.

She couldn’t tell him that her freedom was what was so important, that it was under threat again because the person who took her was also his blood, so instead she replied, “There’s a delicate matter I need to discuss with a friend.”

His face softened a little, as though he thought that delicate matter was him. “And then you will return,” he concluded.

She swallowed, then shook her head slowly. “I can’t.”

“Grey,” Greer said, “would you please go find the cook and ask her to prepare a big plate of pancakes with her sugared strawberries?”

“Can I have some?” Grey asked, eyes lighting up at the mere implication.

“As many as you want,” Greer promised.

“This is the best day ever!” Grey yelled, bounding to the doors and, as they opened for him, disappearing through them. They closed quietly behind him.

Greer leveled her with a stare so inquisitive that she wondered if he couldn’t actually read her mind. She got the very strong impression that he was focusing his entire being on reaching into her brain and plucking her thoughts one by one, like flowers for a bouquet. Except he wasn’t. What he was doing was waiting. He wanted answers.

She wanted to give them to him, but she simply couldn’t see how.

“Tell me,” he prompted. “Is it the man? Did you see him?”

She bit her lower lip, then nodded.

“Tell me,” he repeated. “Who is it?”

“Someone close to you,” she said, a tremor running through her at the change his face underwent.

There was the iron, there was the gold, and he was in complete control. No slipping was to occur, no emotions were to be expressed. This was to be treated as official kingdom business. Of course, it was. She wouldn't have thought otherwise.

Except she'd hoped...

“Who?” he demanded.

“The man in leather,” she said, taking a step back when Greer took one forward, looking as though he wanted to hit something. His hands fisting, his eyes blazing.

“What?” he asked.

“I'm sorry,” she mumbled, tears rising in her eyes. “I didn't want to tell you.”

“To put it plainly, you were just going to leave?” he asked. “Run away home? Leave me with a traitor as close to me as my father? The man in leather is my uncle, Maize. My flesh and blood. And you're telling me that he is the man who has betrayed everything our House stands for? That he...”

Greer trailed off as the understanding dawned, undoubtedly cold and crisp like a winter morning.

His uncle might have had a hand in the death of Viola.

His uncle.

Anger on his behalf took the place of her fear and instead of shrinking she stepped forward. She wanted to support him. She wanted him to know she wasn't a coward. She hadn't meant to run away. She had wanted to protect him, to let him have his status quo.

She had thought that was what he wanted, that what had happened between them couldn't possibly outweigh that.

She had misjudged him.

She felt ashamed.

“I’m so sorry,” she repeated. “I was scared.”

He was by her side the following moment, his arms wrapping around her, pulling her to him. She buried her nose in the fabric of his jacket, drawing in a deep breath. She knew his scent. It had remained all over her skin since their lovemaking and even though they’d only spent an afternoon together, it brought her immediate comfort.

“And you’re absolutely certain it’s him?” he asked.

“I’d know his voice anywhere,” she said. “I swear it.”

He held her even more tightly, saying nothing. His mind must be racing and there was nothing she could do to ease the torment.

“I don’t understand what he stands to gain,” Greer murmured.

“I do,” she said, eyes caught on the golden thread of Greer’s jacket. “Once I’d earned the right to leave my room, I was in the entrance hall once, and I heard him speak of the treasury.”

“The citadel’s treasury?”

“I didn’t understand the context then. It was in passing, not in conversation with me. I thought it was regarding his own finances but... I wonder...”

“If he wasn’t discussing something far more sinister,” Greer filled in.

## Chapter 10 - Greer

Maize put a few more logs on the fire, stoking it as Greer watched from his armchair. He couldn't keep a small smile off, neither could she.

"I'll have to teach you how to do this someday," she remarked.

"But you're so good at it," he returned, getting a cocked eyebrow as a reply.

The levity was abandoned once she claimed the other armchair. There was no wine this time. Neither of them was in the mood.

"I'm still not certain how it all connects," Greer admitted.

"Me neither," she agreed. "What type of man is your uncle?"

"Honestly, I thought I had a clear understanding of what type of man he is, but I clearly do not have a clue," Greer replied.

He couldn't help but feel dejected at this turn of events. Uncle Arran had been there through thick and thin. He had never faltered in his support, never gone back on his word, always appeared one of the most reliable men in the king's court. There was true affection between the brothers. Why would he be a part of something like this?

"Has it all been an act?" Greer asked, shaking his head at it. "My whole life? My uncle putting on a mask?"

"Didn't you?" Maize prodded gently. "Haven't you stepped into a role as well? In court? Your laugh is different when you're on official business. I noticed it in the mines when you greeted the miners, and then again when you entered the great hall earlier."

"It's not very different," Greer tried to object, but he knew she was right.

From a young age he had felt it necessary to cloak himself, to keep himself agreeable, to smile and charm. When he got a little older, he found himself using his looks to get others to open up to him simply because it was so easy. His title didn't hurt. But none of them had ever really known the real him.

"I feel like such a fool," he grumbled, dragging one hand over his eyes, squeezing his temples briefly. He detected a headache coming on.

"How could you be foolish to trust your own uncle?" Maize asked, a reproachful note there.

"Perhaps if I hadn't, I could have prevented it," he mumbled. "All of it." Then he realized the implications of what he'd just said and raised his gaze to hers. "Not that I wouldn't want to have met you," he said. "Viola and I, we loved each other. We really did. But I've never... I haven't felt..."

He couldn't find the words, but she reached across the table between them, her hand on his as she said, "Me neither."

That calmed him somewhat.

"If your uncle is after the gold in the treasury, why hasn't he made a move in so long?" Maize asked.

"Perhaps, when things went so awry the first time, he lost his nerve," Greer suggested. "Decided to lay low."

"That would make sense," she said. "What if..." She trailed off, her hand grasping his a little tighter. "What if Viola discovered him?"

"But the attempt was directed at me," he frowned.

"What if it was a deterrent," Maize said. "A display of power to make her keep quiet."

"And she died for it," he concluded. "Rather than watch me die. Because... it can't have had to do with the succession. Killing me would leave Grey the heir. Claiming the riches of the kingdom, however..."

“Would your uncle be capable of such a thing?” Maize asked.

Greer sighed softly. “I don’t believe we can put it past him, can we?” he replied.

“No,” she agreed quietly.

His hearts felt as though they were exploding in his chest.

Everything was beginning to line up. Questions he’d carried with him were becoming statements. Viola spotting the sorcerer that day before he did, acting instinctively, as though she’d had her eye out for something like it manifesting. She’d been tense for a few weeks, easily startled. If she’d been threatened or warned that she better stay in line, then it made all the sense. It was difficult to comprehend that his uncle’s objective would have been for Greer to die if Viola hadn’t blocked the spell. Was Arran capable of such a thing?

The man Greer had grown up with? The man who had taught him how to ride a horse, shoot an arrow, appreciate wine and, to a large extent, the company of women as well? No, Greer couldn’t see that man capable. Not even close.

But the man who had crossed the border, burned down a holy building, driven its inhabitants from their home and taken one of them against their will? Yes, he most definitely could see that man capable of it, and worse.

He rose to his feet. He couldn’t simply sit here and do nothing.

“Greer,” Maize said, getting to her feet as well.

She could see he was upset. He could tell she was about to try and talk him down, but he shook his head at her, turning from her to head for the door.

“Greer!” Mazie exclaimed, following him.

The doors opened and he marched through them, Mazie tight on his heels.

“What do you hope to accomplish?” she asked.

“I’m going to kill him,” Greer said. “So, quite a lot.”

“You can’t,” Maize said. “You’ll be executed.”

“I would like to see them try.”

“He’s your father’s brother.”

“Indeed,” Greer bit, rounding a corner, ignoring her when she reached for his arm and took a tight hold of it. Her attempts at slowing him were futile.

“Your father will not stand for you laying a finger on him,” she insisted, but he had no intention of listening, no matter how reasonable her argument was. “We don’t have enough proof! Greer!”

Finally, he slowed. She placed her hands on both his arms, made him face her. Those green eyes were glistening with concern, but he was calming. “How can we get proof? There is no proof to be had, is there?” he asked.

“What if there was?” she asked. “What if we devised some way of exposing him for what he really is?”

Greer eyed her. “Set a trap?”

She nodded. “You know him,” she said. “I know you feel like you don’t, but you’ve been around him all your life. And I’ve spent time with the other side of him. Disguise or no, I learned a thing or two. I learned how to stall, if nothing else, and the fact that he was that patient with me...”

Greer suddenly remembered the holes he’d detected in her story. There they were again, glaring at him. There was something she wasn’t telling him.

“Why was he so patient with you?” he asked.

He could tell that she grew self-conscious, even though she tried to act casual about it. Was she going to lie to his face? He wasn’t sure he could stomach it.

“Because,” she said slowly, “there’s something about me I haven’t been forthcoming about.”

He rested his gaze on her. She’d grown serious, but there seemed to be relief on her too. That she was finally about



to share the truth. “What is it?” he asked.

“I’m friendly with the court of King Hugh,” she said.

He stared at her, not entirely taken aback, but also surprised that the revelation hadn’t been more crucial than that. Though, of course, it was a motive if anything.

“Why wouldn’t you tell me?” he asked.

“Because I’m friendly through their castle crone,” she said. “I’m friendly with many who wield magic on a regular basis, Greer. I didn’t want you to judge me for it.”

“Of course, I won’t judge you for it,” he said, though he knew why she hadn’t felt comfortable sharing it. It would have marred his ability to trust her had she told him first thing, he couldn’t deny that. She had been right not to tell him. “Forgive me,” he added. “I’ve allowed myself to remain blind for a long time. Guilt is... a beast all its own.”

She reached up, pressing her hand to his cheek, tenderness in her gaze. “You did the best you could,” she reassured him.

He wondered if it wasn’t more than he deserved, but there was no point in lingering on it.

“Let’s find Irvine,” he said. “He’s very good at seeing the bigger picture. He knows the citadel inside and out. And he’s known my uncle almost as long as I have. He’ll be full of sound advice.”

“Do you trust him?”

“With my life,” Greer stated.

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“Have you lost your mind?” Irvine asked. “Bring this to the king, don’t make it into some plot behind his back. Do you have any idea what will happen to us all if things go awry?”

Greer exchanged a glance with Maize that told him she was all for pushing forward. He gave a little nod, she returned it.

“Oh, what is this that is happening? Silent communication after spending a day together?” Irvine asked.

Then it seemed to dawn on him that their relationship had evolved along with the hours of that day, his eyes rounding, eyebrows shooting up. He bit his tongue, forcing his face back into a neutral expression as he took his eyes off them, as if suddenly abashed over his unwanted insights.

“My life is complete,” he muttered under his breath.

“I beg your pardon?” Greer asked, Irvine shaking his head.

“I’m very happy for you both,” he said, “but I take it this means you are on the same team and adamant about forming some sort of plot against your uncle.”

“He’s the plotter,” Maize remarked.

Irvine seemed to want to bite his tongue off, but still he asked, gaze on Maize’s, “Are you certain?”

“He couldn’t mask his voice,” she said. “Or he forgot about it. Or he was too arrogant to think I would ever escape from his clutches. Yes, I am absolutely certain.”

“Because it’s the gallows for us if we don’t manage to properly implicate him as a traitor to the crown,” Irvine clarified. “Your father allowed you to implement this ban on magic that you so strongly insisted upon because he loves you and knew you felt deeply unsafe,” he added to Greer. “But if you go against his brother on a whim, he will not look so blithely on such an extreme course of action. He will execute you in order to prove to his subjects that no one is above the law, and he will leave the airmagic to Grey.”

“I know,” Greer said.

And he did. His father had been immensely patient with him. It would break his hearts to place Greer before the people and have him killed, but his foremost loyalty was to the

duties of the crown. Servitude in all things. Personal feelings weren't allowed to take up any space.

“Wait, my father didn't allow me to implement a ban on magic because I felt unsafe,” Greer said with a frown at Irvine, who raised his eyes to the ceiling before looking back at Greer meaningfully.

“Are you ready to hear the hard truth, or do you still need mollycoddling?” Irvine inquired.

“I've never needed...” Greer tried to protest, but it trailed off because he couldn't in good conscience push for it.

What else had he gotten completely wrong? Over the past day he felt his entire worldview had been rocked at the foundational levels. Had he really been lying to himself for this long and about so many aspects of his life? Of himself?

He realized that five years ago... three years ago... even as little as one year ago all of these questions would have made him fall apart. They would have pushed him into that role he had assigned himself, putting his emotional armor in place, letting him reject even attempting to answer them. The fear of what those answers might be had driven him from himself, farther and farther. And once he lost touch with himself, he had lost touch with Grey as well.

*I'm sorry, he sent a silent apology to his son. I won't fall apart anymore.*

And stating as much to himself allowed him to focus on what was at hand.

“The kingdom is under threat,” he said. “There will be no more mollycoddling.”

Irvine smirked at that. “Very good, your highness,” he said.

They spent the better part of the evening discussing possible strategies and when the clock on Irvine's mantel piece struck midnight, they all looked up from the notes he'd been taking.

“It’s late,” Maize observed unnecessarily. “I think we have enough,” she added. “Don’t you?”

The two men nodded their agreement.

“Tomorrow,” Irvine said.

“Tomorrow,” Maize and Greer repeated in unison.

“Are you certain you’re ready to face him?” Irvine asked.

Maize nodded. “I’m certain. It will be under the guise of an equal,” she added. “It simplifies things.”

“What should your title be?” Greer asked.

“A duchess, perhaps?” she suggested. “Someone prominent enough to be seated next to him at the table.”

“Sounds sensible,” Irvine nodded. “The closer you can get to him and the longer he is exposed to your presence, the more certain we can be of him taking the bait. He’ll recognize you, but your title and fine clothes will throw him for a loop. With any luck it will get him to slip. He’ll begin to prod into your true identity, and we’ll have cause to question him as to why he would think you’re name and title should be anything but what you’ve given him.”

“We must be careful,” she said. “I do believe that if he feels cornered, he will lash out. He has powerful magic, let’s not forget that.”

They both nodded gravely again.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Greer promised, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her to him where they were seated on a sofa.

“I know,” she said, resting her head against his shoulder.

Irvine observed them for a moment, a small smile on his mouth, then rose to his feet. “Time for bed,” he prompted.

They couldn’t have agreed more.

Once they were walking the hallways again, Greer reached for her hand. He didn't want to see her back to her room. He wanted her to stay with him, fall asleep in his arms, wake up in his bed.

“Would you like to—?”

“Yes,” she interrupted and in the next moment she was close, lips claiming his.

## Chapter 11 - Maize

His mouth traced a path from her shoulder to the base of her spine, kissing her skin along the way, sending goosebumps up her back and down her arms. Her eyes were closed as she enjoyed the sensations he was producing. The softness of his mattress was a definite upgrade from the grass of the cliffs, the gentle candlelight helping to set the mood. Everything was slower, more mellow, as though they were both tired and still too drunk on each other to go to sleep.

She smiled into the pillow as he kissed first her right ass cheek, then her left.

The ache for him was calling for her fingers, but she wanted to see what he would do. He didn't disappoint as he slipped his hand underneath her, pressing it against her sex. She bucked against the touch, and he held his hand in place, shifting his fingers so that he could slip them between her folds and get to work on her even as she rolled her hips against them.

"Yes," she breathed, feeling the tension of the evening begin to dissipate.

His fingers picked up their speed, her thoughts losing all cohesion as she groaned into the pillow. He made the orgasm climb the same way he'd climbed to unknown heights with her on his back and soon she was floating back in space again.

She'd barely had time to come down before the head of his erection teased its way into her, her wetness helping him glide deeper than before and they both gasped once he was buried to the hilt. His chest connected with her back as he slipped an arm underneath her, pressing it against her breasts and holding her in place as he thrust into her again.

She moaned his name, fingers grasping fistfuls of the sheet underneath her. She was practically digging the back of her head into his left shoulder, craning her neck with pleasure as he picked up his speed.

She was going to come again and this time the orgasm rocked her entire body, making her feel as though the entire universe was condensing itself down to fit in her veins, in her abdomen and point of ecstasy.

She didn't hesitate to buck, signaling she wanted him to roll off her. He did, soft frown on, but when she moved to straddle him, the frown released into an expectant smile. She licked her lips, sinking down on top of him, taking him into her again. She rested her hands on his chest as she began to roll her hips around him, gaze on his. His expression began to melt, his mouth falling open as his hands went to her hips.

He felt so good.

He sat up, wrapping his arms around her, face against her neck as she rode him faster, harder. His moaning was telling her she was doing it right, that he was close to coming and when he started to softly pant, she made him lie back down so that she could speed up even more. Sliding herself up and down him, her own pleasure surging within her, rising with every new moan she drew out of him until finally his fingers clenched tightly on her hips and he released within her.

She reached down, keeping him inside of herself as she touched herself, quickly following him to his peak, throwing her head back as the universe expanded into blinding light.

She slipped off him, both of them looking up at the ceiling, catching their breath.

Her nipples were still hard and clearly they were inviting because he couldn't keep his eyes off them, reaching out and tracing the right one with his fingertips. He rolled over on his side, closing his mouth around it, producing a soft noise from her.

“If we could stay in this bed and pretend nothing else mattered,” he grumbled, licking and biting her breast until moving onto the other one, giving it the same treatment as he placed himself between her legs again.

She was ready for him, trembling with it, and when he entered her again, she felt as though nothing else did matter.

They could stay here. It was their right now that they had found each other.

He buried his face against her neck, she wrapped her arms around him, and they moved together as one, bodies in perfect sync. It was strange to think that yesterday he had been a stranger to her. She had rarely felt closer to anyone.

*True mates*, her mind whispered, but she ignored it.

It would be much too good to be true.

They peaked together, both shaking in each other's arms as they enjoyed the aftermath, not wanting to let go of the other. Finally, he rolled off her again, but pulled her to him, one arm wrapped around her shoulders.

They were quiet for a little while, then he said, "I'm sorry for what my uncle did to you."

"It's not your fault," she said.

"But isn't it?" he asked. "If I had noticed it sooner? If I hadn't been so wrapped up in fearing what happened to Viola would happen to Grey..." Putting words to the feeling gave him pause, but there it was at long last—the honest truth. "I shut him out because I was afraid," he murmured. "The thought of losing him petrified me. It made me feel... as though I should take him with me and run far away from the destiny that we've both been assigned. I couldn't keep Viola safe so how could I hope to keep him safe?"

"I can't imagine what that must have felt like," she said. "What it must still feel like. But you can't control everything, Greer. Even if you went far away, you wouldn't be able to make absolutely certain that Grey was safe at all times. Unless you locked him in a tower. And you don't want to do that, do you?"

He had to smile. "No, I most certainly do not want to do that."

"All you can do is love him, Greer," she said. "Make him feel loved and seen."

"Was that what your mother did for you?"



She nodded, swallowing as she grew choked up at the thought of everything her mother had done for her.

“What was her name?” he asked.

She couldn't tell him, however much she wanted to. She couldn't reveal that she was born of magic as well as fire, not like this. She'd been lying about her powers this whole time and she hadn't even come clean when she brought them to the point of convergence. It could have been the perfect moment and she'd let it slip out of her hands. She didn't fear judgment for her powers anymore, she feared rocking that fragile trust of his.

“Her name was Evangeline,” she said.

It wasn't a full lie since it had been her mother's middle name, but she still felt the half-truth smart as though she had stuck her finger on a thorn.

“Where did you grow up?” he asked.

“Outside of Ravensroost.”

“Where is that?”

She hesitated, wondering if she should distract him away from the topic of her or whether she wanted him to know as much as she could share. It was beginning to feel untenable, this deception she had to engage in. Perhaps it was better to tell him now. He wanted his uncle to pay for his treason as much as she did. And though Greer had shown himself to be quick to anger, he'd also shown that he could be as quick to forgive. Especially if there had been a good reason for the transgression.

All she could think about was his face when he had questioned her about Greer the evening prior, demanding to know what transgression the person who claimed to fear him was guilty of.

Perhaps she hadn't spun a web of lies, but she had set herself up for a great many misunderstandings of her intentions.

“Ravensroost is not too far from the citadel,” she said. “It was once home to a great sorceress.”

“Ah,” he said, busy tracing her palm with one finger. “We have a town like that,” he added. “But the mages and sorcerers have long gone from this land.”

“Did they leave because you outlawed their livelihood?” she asked.

“Yes,” he sighed.

“Will you lift the ban?” she inquired, keeping her tone as even as she could.

He grew quiet. He was turning the question over in his mind, she knew that much, but she didn’t have an inkling of what he was going to answer. It seemed neither did he as the silence stretched.

“We’ve lived with the ban for so long,” he said slowly. “I don’t know what the kingdom would look like without it.”

He was still afraid, she realized. Still harping after that control.

“Irvine said the ban was put in place in order to make you feel safe,” she remarked gently.

“That may be so,” he replied. “But it’s grown into a rule that is for everyone’s safety.”

She propped herself up on one arm. “Do you really believe that?” she asked.

“Yes, of course I do,” he said, watching her face with a small crease between his brows. As though he couldn’t believe that she was questioning him on the subject. “I’ve seen what the ban has done for the people. There’s less lawlessness with magic being put under restrictions than when it wasn’t.”

“But... people need to express—” she began, only to be interrupted.

“They may still shift,” he said, propping himself up on his elbows as well. “I don’t persecute them. But magic left to its own devices grows unruly. Do you know how long I must

train to be allowed to take over the airmagic of my ancestors? No matter how close to it I am, how much I feel like it's a part of me, I'm only ready when my father tells me that I am. He knows better, and I trust his judgment. It is the same for the people. They cannot be allowed to use magic at their own behest. Not unless they prove to me that they are responsible enough to wield it and they've yet to do so. Like you said: it is not the magic, but the man or woman who are careless with its power."

She opened her mouth to reply but didn't have a good enough response to his argument. She was taken aback at how much sense it made to her.

"Well," she tried. "Why didn't you say so to begin with?"

"I would have if you'd let me," he replied. "But you didn't ask, did you? You just went on to assume that I didn't have any deeper reason behind the law, didn't you? My father would never have let me put a law in place unless I could first convince him of its usefulness. Perhaps it was also to support me in a time of deep grief. And it is true that my fear... My fear has kept me from engaging with my own magic. I have felt unsafe. The law helped me feel more in control and certainly my father was aware of that, but it's far from as simple as just that."

She wanted to offer commentary but again found herself at a loss for words.

"I'm sorry," she managed, a smile spreading on her mouth.

"For?" he asked. "Underestimating me?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I did underestimate you."

"I'm nearly three centuries old," he said, a scolding frown on. "Please allow me some credit."

She laughed, folding one arm across his chest and shimmying closer, putting her chin on her hand as she gazed up at him.

“You’re very beautiful,” she said, making him laugh as well.

“Flatterer,” he chided.

Reaching up, he brushed a few stray strands out of her eyes, stroking them back behind her ears, tucking them.

“Tomorrow, make sure to stay out of the hallways,” he said. “Keep to these rooms. I will send a seamstress to dress you. If you’re to be a duchess, you must have the gown to match the title. And jewels.”

She bit her lower lip, knowing that her eyes shone at the mention of decorations. She’d never been a very material sort of person but looking at all the different boxes of jewelry that Blair had acquired since she was made queen, it was difficult not to get hypnotized by the way the light danced through the precious stones.

“I was trained for court,” she divulged, his eyebrows rising.

“You are a font of surprises,” he remarked, but there was a smile in his eyes. “Where?” he added, curiosity tracing the word.

“At the sanctuary. It’s a place where girls are sent to receive lessons in everything and anything they may need to know to secure a mate,” she said.

“Oh, is that so?” he asked, his fingers sliding down the side of her cheek.

“But they teach us other things as well. Things that wouldn’t necessarily secure you a mate in Elemys if that mate is as tradition bound as most,” she offered.

“Such as?”

“Such as hunting,” she replied, mind made up to share as much as she could about herself before the night was over.

“Hunting?” he asked. “Hunting what?”

“Deer, mostly,” she said.

“Using what weapon?”

“Bow and arrow.”

There was no hesitation on her at all, but at his expression, she swallowed, hoping she wasn't crossing boundaries that shouldn't be crossed. If she were, it would tell her his mettle once and for all. She couldn't be with a man who wouldn't allow her to be who she was. It was why she had decided against a life at court, after all, and she wasn't about to hang up her bow and pretend she had never held an arrow simply to keep up appearances.

“Astonishing,” he exclaimed. “You know how to shoot? Have you ever killed anything?”

“Plenty of things,” she nodded, beginning to relax as his face spoke only of his delight and none of any rejection on his part.

“And here I was just two days ago almost putting an arrow in you,” he mumbled.

“Yes, I'm surprised you missed,” she said.

His eyebrows rose high at the insult. “What?” he asked.

“You weren't very far away from me and yet you not only missed the mark, but you couldn't tell a woman from a deer,” she said, shaking her head at him.

“And what mark have you hit that was farther away than you were from me?” he demanded.

“A *deer*,” she said.

He held her gaze until they both chuckled.

She folded herself against him, closing her eyes.

First, they would finish things with Arran and then, when Greer had dealt with that betrayal and felt safe from it again, she would tell him the truth about her magic. About how her abilities, in many ways, matched his because her heritage from her mother made her a gathering point for all elemental magic. She may not be the root, but she was the water that could make the branches bloom.



## Chapter 12 - Greer

Dinners at the castle began in the great hall at five o'clock sharp. At a quarter to five, Greer knocked on the door of the guest suite where Maize had been set up. She had been getting ready for the better part of the afternoon. Hair braided, dress tucked and laced, shoes polished. A courtier might need a few hours to get ready, but a duchess needed a few days, or so Irvine had told him.

As such was the case, Maize had been assigned the help of two maids who had never been introduced to her. Irvine had seen to everything, both maids convinced Maize was a faraway guest she was about to claim to be.

Greer held a blue rose behind his back, thinking it sentimental, but unable to resist when his walk to her wing took him through the castle rose garden. The blue roses were a sight to behold, or so he had been told, and since it was her favorite color...

The door was opened by Irvine, who was waiting in the sitting room for the duchess to make her grand entrance.

"I've been waiting for half an hour," Irvine remarked. "She was supposed to be ready early so that we could talk things through one final time, but apparently..."

"It's fine," Greer waved the imposition away.

Irvine noted the arm still behind his back. Greer gave him a look to leave it alone. Irvine merely smiled obligingly and reclaimed his chair. He lifted the book he'd put down, doing a very good job of ignoring Greer, who observed him intently until he relented. "It's a rose," he said.

"Lovely," Irvine said, turning a page.

"You really are the most annoying part of my day; did I ever tell you that?" Greer asked.

"Constantly and with some glee, your highness," Irvine replied. "But it's those little daily annoyances that make us

realize our pleasures,” he added without looking up from the book.

Greer was about to respond with a remark so scathing it would blot out the truth of Irvine’s words, but he was stopped by the doors’ opening. The sound of heels on the wooden boards of the floor caught both men’s attention before Maize—Duchess Eva—came into view, heading through the doorway dressed in a pale blue silk dress with crimson velvet trimmings. She was a sight.

Greer tried not to stare but couldn’t help himself. It wasn’t that she didn’t look herself, it was that she looked more herself than ever before. As she had been made for this exact occasion, such a gown, such jewels. They glistened around her neck as though they had always been there. Her blonde locks had been brushed back and arranged in intricate tiny braids, her cheeks had a tiny bit of blush on them and her mouth had been painted a deep crimson red.

“You look stunning,” Greer finally got out.

“By your silence, I assumed I’d stolen your breath, highness,” she replied so informally, he blinked, but then he remembered her rank. It was perfectly acceptable for her to be more relaxed with tradition as her title afforded her the social status as close to royalty as anyone not born or mated into it could get.

The maids tittered in the doorway at her remark, and he leveled them with a look that immediately silenced them. It made him smile at them, as their respect for him had been underlined. The smile made them relax, returning it.

“You’ve done your duty well,” he commended them. “I thank you both.”

One of the two blushed as crimson as the trimmings on Maize’s gown, both of them curtsying low before hurrying past to the door, leaving the room and seeming relieved to do so.

Maize looked from Greer to Irvine with her nose practically stuck in the air, then she smiled, relaxing out of the



persona and becoming Maize once more.

This was going to work.

He brought out the rose, bowing lightly as he offered it to her. She smiled, accepted it, brought it to her nose and inhaled the sweetness of its scent. He'd known she'd like it. She snipped off the stem and slipped the flower into her braids, fastening it within their intricate patterns.

"I will speak with my uncle," he said. "I will see if I can coax a confession out of him if he understands that I have reason to suspect him of wrongdoing. I won't tell him everything, and I won't even be blunt about it," he assured her when she began to protest. "Please," he added. "I want to give him a chance to explain himself. If he acts as though nothing at all is wrong, or if he doesn't take the bait, then we will think of what our next steps should be, but I have to speak to him face to face."

"Okay," she said. "Be careful. Don't let him touch you."

"Why would he touch me?" he asked.

"It's how he..." she trailed off, then finished, "It's how he put me to sleep. When he took me."

"He's been breaking the law right under my nose for a decade," Greer said, still coming to terms with the reality of it.

And yet he trusted Maize implicitly. There was no reason for her to lie. And he knew her well enough now to know that she never would. Not to him, not after what they'd already shared. He did feel as though she was still holding back, but he was having a hard time putting his finger on exactly what it was she was holding back on. She had given herself to him so completely. Surely, she was agreeing to be his.

He would be proud to escort her into any room in any castle, that much he was certain of.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

“You keep asking that,” she laughed, but she grew serious in the next moment. “I am,” she stated, sliding her hand on top of his so that he could bring her down to the great hall at his side.

*Where she belongs*, he thought to himself, wishing he could introduce her to everyone as their future queen.

But all in good time.

Music met them at the top of the great steps leading into the castle’s entrance hall. To the left of the entrance doors of the castle were the doors of the great hall, both of which this evening stood open for easier access. As it was the first dinner after the king’s return, the entire court had gathered to show their respect and to celebrate that he had been successful in his quest for justice. It seemed to them as though he had quenched whatever rebellion had been spreading whispers of unrest along the kingdom’s borders.

Whispers that had been started by his uncle, Greer had no doubt.

What was the man’s endgame? Why would he want to rouse the lower classes, make them feel unseen and unheard, if he was to abscond with the gold that was the kingdom’s entire security against famine, against ruin, against darker days than anyone had seen since their current king took the throne? What did he stand to gain from an uprising?

Greer looked at Maize as they began to walk down the stairs. Her hand on his was steady, her face was arranged in a mask of indifference. She wasn’t impressed with the gathered highborn, she wasn’t looking anyone in the eye that didn’t wear at least as heavy jewelry as her. She was playing her part well.

Of course, she had learned from spending time at King Hugh’s court.

Greer felt the lack of knowledge he still had of her like a sudden stone in his chest, but he brushed it aside. What mattered tonight was his uncle and putting an end to whatever terror he had brewing.

The courtiers had all stopped their milling and were now watching his descent with Maize. Those on the stairs bowed or curtsied low, as did the rest once they reached the floor of the entrance hall. They created a wave of the gesture as they walked to the doors of the great hall. All he could focus on was how she was about to meet his father for the first time.

He wanted them to get along, even though she was clad in a different persona. It was strange that he was the one getting nervous where she seemed to be completely calm and collected. She was about to face down her oppressor, after all. It must mean she did feel safe in the knowledge that no harm could come to her within the castle walls. It warmed Greer's hearts and he almost leaned over to peck her cheek, catching himself last minute and focusing his gaze ahead than on her profile.

His father was seated on the decorative throne of the great hall. It was less comfortable but grander than the one in the throne room, where his father conducted most of his official business and met with the people on whatever grievance they brought before him. Greer could see his father shifting. He would want to get to his feet sooner rather than later, the customary mingling before dinner always tedious for him.

Greer straightened his back when he caught sight of his uncle occupying the space to the left of the throne, Lady Shannon next to him. Arran held a glass of sweet wine in one hand, looking casual and non-committal, as though he had no great interest to be there. Lady Shannon was speaking so perhaps that was the true reason for his uncle's bored expression, but it was still grating enough to make Greer bristle at the mere sight of it.

*Liar, Greer thought. You would not plot against the crown if you didn't wish it had been you who was wearing it.*

Why couldn't his uncle have been satisfied with all that life had already afforded him? Watching the man's face Greer felt the first pang of doubt. This was someone he had trusted with every last secret, every fear and insecurity. Was he truly

capable of what he was accused of? What if they were wrong? What if Maize was mistaken?

But when he looked back at her, he felt the doubt evaporate.

*No, he thought, focusing back on Arran. No, she's not in the wrong here. He is.*

Then he noticed the sudden shift in his uncle's gaze when his eyes landed on Maize. It was subtle, but he rolled his shoulders back, straightened his posture, his fingers gripped the glass a little tighter. And his focus was suddenly no longer drifting over the heads of those gathered, but rather placed entirely on the approaching party.

*By the heavens, Greer thought to himself. He's as guilty as they come. He recognizes her.*

"There he is," the king said, gratefully rising to his feet to greet Greer and Maize upright. "Where did you disappear off to last night?" he added. "I had hoped to debrief you."

"I know, I'm sorry, father," Greer replied. "I had to go meet this beautiful vision of a brilliant woman as she arrived through the north gate. Father, this is the Lady Eve, Duchess of Ravensroost."

"Oh," the king said, turning his attention on Maize. "I must say I prefer to be informed of guests joining us," he added, Greer taking the jibe in stride. "Ravensroost. That is situated in Elemys if I'm not mistaken."

"It is, sire," Maize confirmed.

"My goodness," Lord Arran said, making all of them turn their heads to him where he stood. "A Duchess from the small township of Ravensroost? How delightfully... odd."

He thought he had caught her out in a lie, just as they had planned.

Good.

She had the upper hand as long as he believed he was the one having it. He wouldn't see how he was being manipulated right into their carefully laid trap. Greer wanted

to punch the man across the jaw but restrained the urge. Instead, he put on the charming smile he was quite famous for and said, “Uncle, Lady Shannon, please, come meet the lady.”

“With pleasure,” Lord Arran purred. “But my dear, you have nothing to drink,” he added, mock-surprise on his handsome face. “Come, let me bring you something. Would sweet wine suffice?”

“Thank you, my lord, but I’ve not quite acquired the taste for it.”

“Really?” the lord smiled, bringing his own glass to his lips. “Pity.”

“Arran,” the king snapped. “Introduce yourself properly to the lady.”

“A thousand apologies,” the lord bowed. “I am the king’s brother, the future king’s uncle, and lord of the Lower Lands where I reside for much of the year. I am Arran, my lady.”

“Pleased to meet you, my lord,” Maize said, letting him take her hand and kiss her knuckles gently.

Greer could hardly hide his disgust, reaching out and grabbing Maize’s hand to make his uncle stop touching her. “To table?” Greer asked his father, who immediately perked up.

“Indeed,” the king agreed. “To table!” he bellowed, offering his hand to Lady Shannon who gratefully accepted it, appearing rather glad to be away from Arran.

The hall had immediately begun to drain of people, the court highly familiar with how impatient their liege got if he had to wait a moment longer than necessary to sit down and be served the first plate of the evening.

When Greer and Maize reached the entrance hall, Maize took her hand away, making Greer stop and turn to her, questioning frown on.

“I was meant to be escorted to the table by your uncle, remember?” she asked.

“I don’t want you anywhere near him,” Greer growled. “I no longer desire to hear his side of things. I am convinced already.”

“This is to convince your father,” she said. “Trust me. I can do this. I will provoke him into giving himself away before the end of the night.”

“Do you promise?” he asked, making her smile.

“I swear it,” she said.

He hesitated for only a moment longer, knowing she was right and feeling, with every fiber of his being, how he wished she wasn’t. How he wanted her in the chair next to him at that table, at a safe distance from the man who had stolen her.

“I shall see you in there,” he said.

She gave a nod and was swallowed by the crowd.

## Chapter 13 - Maize

She gathered her heavy skirts in both hands, as she walked against the stream of people still leaving the great hall. For the past few days, the idea of running had kept entering her mind. All she had wanted while trapped in Lord Arran's makeshift cage had been to get back across the border to Elemys, where she could be safe. Once she was in Greer's care, she had thought more than once of leaving, of going back home. By the great flame, she had almost acted on it.

She had thought Greer was the one afraid, that he was the one grappling with grief and guilt, when she was stuck in the exact same place thinking herself the reason that the sanctuary had been targeted. That she was to blame for everything that had befallen those she thought of as family. That she had brought rage and fury down on them for harboring her, for providing her a safe haven and freedom to be who she was. That her possessing the magic she did had been the cause.

She had even wondered if Arran had taken her because he was a fanatic as dedicated to Greer's view of the world as his nephew was and that he had suppressed her powers because of this, craving her for a mate because of some twisted power trip he was on. But now she thought differently, because she had looked him in the eye and seen ambition there.

He craved something, but it wasn't to subjugate her. It went far beyond her. She was a mere cog in some greater scheme and if it was the gold or if it was something else entirely she was determined to discover him.

And she was determined to do it tonight.

He was too dangerous to let slip through their fingers, too conniving and well-connected to have roaming the citadel, lighting little fires as he went.

She realized that she wasn't afraid. Standing before the lord again, she could see him for what he truly was. A failure.

He was about to fail in what he had set out to do and she was going to be his undoing. It made her feel empowered to the point of glowing, but she kept her powers under control. The last thing she wanted was for him to know exactly how much the effect of the potion had worn off.

She had tried to conjure again that afternoon before the maids came to help her dress, but there had been very little success. It was as though there was still a wall between her and the sensation that always accompanied the moment of conjuring. She could feel it, restless, straining to reach out for her, assist her as it always had, but its effort not quite reaching all the way. Like fingertips almost meeting.

She moved through the open doors of the great hall and came to a halt when Lord Arran was suddenly blocking her way.

“Lady Eva,” he smiled, his cheeks dimpling in the same way as the king. The same way as Greer. She kept the glower down, replacing it with a smile in return. “I thought Greer was escorting you to the table.”

“He was,” she said. “But I thought I dropped a pin from my hair. It’s dear to me. You didn’t see it as you were leaving?”

“No,” he shook his head. “No pins on the floor as far as I could tell. Might I offer my hand?”

He held it out, palm down, bidding her to place her hand on his.

*Don’t let him touch you, she thought. That’s how he got you last time.*

Instead of placing her hand on top of his, she rested it on the sleeve of his embroidered jacket.

“I have very sweaty palms,” she said, keeping the smile on. “Truth be told it was why I made up the excuse of the pin. To relieve the prince of his torment.”

“That was very thoughtful of you,” Lord Arran said, guiding her back into the entrance hall, letting the ebbing flow of courtiers lead them to the dining hall.



“Do I know you from somewhere?” she asked. “I can’t quite place you, but your face... It seems quite familiar to me.”

“I don’t think we have met, my lady,” he replied, moving his arm, getting her to drop her hand from it as he placed his against the small of her back to usher her to the table.

It made her almost twist herself away from him, but she forced herself to stay still.

There was a building need inside of her to pass along the torment he had put her through. She wished to bind him, deep down within him, so that he could never cause any more harm. Stop the flow of his powers with the weight of the earth, the heat of the fire, the swell of the water, the gust of the wind. Combine the elements, let them work for her because whatever his connection was, it was not that. He was not in tune; he was not in balance.

But, of course, she could not.

And so, she stayed where she was—under his touch—until claiming the chair next to him at the immense dining table.

The dining hall had a high ceiling, its glass panes painted with beautiful images of the House of Air’s reign. The walls were covered with enormous tapestries carrying images of the same theme. They helped quieten the noise of chairs being pulled out and the chatter of the gathered. As there were at least two hundred courtiers at the table Maize realized the tapestries were an agreeable touch.

Lord Arran sat back in his chair, turning his head to her with a look that spoke of a predator at ease with having secured its next meal.

She supposed she was meant to be the meal.

It gave her deep satisfaction to think that he had another thing coming.

The food was served. Roasted wild game of every kind was brought in on tray displays, arranged in postures ranging

from exuberant to prostrate, as though they were happy to be served up for a dragon's dinner.

Maize had always thought it a little silly to make a dead animal look animate, but on the other hand, her inner dragon had always enjoyed it. She'd taken down big game in her time and the fowls, hogs and deer that were being served up were no match to the bear she'd once wrestled with. She'd let it go, but not before besting it.

*I will best you*, she thought, sending a smile Lord Arran's way.

Her eyes met Greer's across the table, resting them there for a few seconds, seeking encouragement and getting it in the form of a small nod. It was time to set the trap.

"I took an interesting route while on the journey here," she said.

"Indeed?" Lord Arran asked, tearing a piece off the henning bird on his plate.

"Past an old castle," she said. "It was severely run down, but there was a certain beauty to it, I thought. I was thinking of procuring it. Restoring it to its former glory."

His smile lingered, there was no pause to his chewing.

"That, my dear, sounds like a bad investment," he said. "Old castles are drafty as it is. This one sounds positively freezing."

"I don't mind about that," she said. "As a fire dragon, I quite enjoy the cold. I can survive in it for days. I can survive without food and shelter for quite a long time as well."

"Can't we all?" he shrugged, reaching for his sweet wine.

"You enjoy your wine, I see," she commented, making her turn a frown on her. "Oh, I don't mean it as a criticism," she laughed, placing her hand on his arm again. "I simply meant it as an observation. I prefer the peppery kind myself."

"Do you?" he asked, as though he was questioning that proposition.

*Yes, I was drinking your disgusting sweet swivel for the months you held me captive, you unbelievable dick,* she thought. *That does not mean I have a taste for it.*

She removed her hand from his arm, eyes on his profile as he went back to eating, and suddenly there was the softest spark within her. It was as though her anger was a whetstone that was being struck. The sensation was intimately familiar to her even as it had been missing for so long.

Magic.

The connection was reforming, as though in self-defense against the slightest possibility that it would be leashed again. The reaching within her brushing fingertips as it was almost able to take a stronghold. She would never let go of it once it did. She would guard it against any interference.

Her eyes went to Greer and the happiness that had bloomed within her began to wither.

She was going to have to tell him. She was going to have to show him what she could do and how she could do good. He might be right that magic needed boundaries, but he was wrong in thinking those boundaries needed to blot it out of society entirely. There had to be some trust in the people making the right choice if given it. She had to make him see.

But first she had to make Lord Arran confess.

“Are you a rider, my lord?” she asked.

He put the bone he’d been gnawing down, turning to her again with the most ironic expression. “Of course, I am,” he replied.

“Do you travel extensively on horseback?” she inquired.

She hoped to push him into speaking of his aversion for magic. That it would lead her into the correct line of questioning. Was he a fanatic leaning into the laws of the land, or were his motives something vastly different? Perhaps even the opposite.

“In fact, I do,” he nodded. “Does my lady?”

“Not extensively, no,” she said. “I prefer to fly.”

“Ah,” he nodded. “Yes, noble in its own right, though I always rather enjoyed feeling at one with an animal. Nothing like letting a horse stretch across an open field.”

“I agree,” she said. “Although stretching one’s wings is difficult to beat. Would you perhaps want to take a turn tomorrow?”

“With you?”

“Yes, of course,” she smiled. “We can put our inner dragons to the test.”

“Tell me, my lady, do you have magic?” he asked.

Her hearts begin to beat wildly in her chest as her eyes met his. There was a warning there, along with a challenge. He could see right through her, and the worst thing was that the plan was flipping in his favor. She had meant to make him feel in control without letting him be in control, and here he now was claiming it for himself.

“Magic?” she asked.

“I get a sense that you do, you see,” he said. “I’m very good at getting a sense of my fellow dragons that way. Their little hidden traits, as it were. Do you have any of those?”

“I have no magic,” she assured, not daring to even glance at Greer. He was sure to be listening in on the conversation.

“Really?” Lord Arran asked, wiping his mouth with his napkin, eyes still resting on hers in the most obnoxious way imaginable. “Give me your hand.”

He reached for it, but she pulled away from the touch, getting to her feet, watching as his eyes got something dangerously focused in them. He could see through her all right. He knew she had some inkling of what his powers were, and she could tell this made him more of a threat than ever.

“Whatever is the matter?” he asked slowly.

“Are you quite all right, my dear?” the king asked from his gilt chair.

“Mae!” Grey exclaimed and the next moment his arms were wrapped around her waist. “You look pretty,” he added, pulling away to look up at her.

His presence grounded her, made the need to strike at the viper next to her before he struck out at her slowly fade away as her gaze met Grey’s.

“They know each other?” she heard the king ask Greer, who made some excuse or other.

She was directing her energy entirely at the child in her arms, drawing strength from his presence, reminding herself there were greater things at stake. She would not be poked and prodded into reacting. That was what she was meant to do to the lord, it was not going to be the other way around.

And yet the sight of that sweet wine was doing things to her insides, making her feel ill with the imaginary taste of it. She could hear the flute playing in her head. That nightly declaration that he was arriving, that she was going to have to be on her best behavior. She had had her magic suppressed, her connection with her inner dragon severed, but on top of that, she’d also been forced to repress herself. To play the part he had assigned her if she wanted to get even the illusion of freedom.

The memory of how suffocating it had been, day in and day out, every minute feeling like an hour, made her want to scream.

“I’m sorry, Grey,” she said, stepping around him. “Please, excuse me, your majesty,” she added, curtsying briefly to the king before heading for the doors.

She needed fresh air in her lungs.

She’d thought she would be the one in control this time around. The safety net she had secured for herself had made her feel on top of any eventuality, but she hadn’t accounted for her lack of control coming back to haunt her. She’d thought she was going to face Arran and have done with it. She’d

thought she'd get her revenge and begin to heal. She hadn't realized that the wound was still so fresh that he would be able to dig his fingers in and twist them with no more than a word or two. With a look. He didn't fear her, he didn't worry about why she was there because he must think there was nothing that she could do to pose a threat to him without exposing herself.

He was right.

What had she been thinking?

Of course, he was going to bring up the fact that she had magic and her reaction had just told him that she hadn't shared that information with anyone. He was meant to believe that no one knew who she truly was so that she might fool him into trying something with her again. He was meant to see her self-assuredness as an easy target so that she could ensnare him into giving himself away. He was meant to think that she had disguised herself in order to bring him to his knees, and yet...

And yet, it was bringing her down faster than it could ever threaten him.

If he knew how to release her magic... then what if he knew how to control it?

"Fool," she murmured to herself, stepping through the door to the castle steps and the courtyard below. "How could you have been so careless?"

She hadn't been. She'd been secure in the bond she could feel forming between herself and Greer. She hadn't questioned anything, but she had taken great care of it.

She hadn't been careless. She had been powerless.

She was powerless.

But the following blink, the spark shot off inside of her again, like a reprimand.

She closed her eyes at the sensation, feeling her inner dragon respond as well, glowing herself into her veins.

Another spark, this one spreading into her limbs and a smile touched her lips as she felt it. There, right there, the connection of fingertips. Claspng hold.

And her magic flowed through her like a river of sparks, cascading into her chest, pooling through her stomach.

She was not powerless.

She would not be suppressed.

No matter what happened, the lord would never have her under the heel of his boot ever again.

“My lady.”

His voice made her swirl around. He had stepped out through the door behind her, hands outstretched as if to calm her. There was no calming her, especially with the goosebumps spreading all over her body at the presence of him. Her inner dragon growled low in warning, her veins glowing a soft golden, letting him know his potion no longer suppressed her.

“What do you want?” she demanded. “Why did you take me?”

He smiled then. “It’s all right,” he reassured. “Just come with me—”

“No,” she interrupted him, putting one hand up to stave him off as he kept stepping closer to her. “Stay away from me.”

“There’s no need for you to be upset,” he said, making a face as though he wished she wouldn’t overreact in such an unappealing manner.

It made her tilt her head. “I bind you,” she said.

He stared at her, for a moment looking as though he thought she’d meant she was binding herself to him, agreeing to be his mate at long last, but then his eyes widened, and she knew it was because he could feel her magic seeping into him.

*Through the air*, she thought, closing her eyes, fixing him in place as the binding spell took hold. *Through the earth*.

She felt all the way down past the foundation of the castle, deep into the soil, drawing energy from it and channeling it into his veins, where his magic was writhing in protest. Something dark was there with it, unsettling and strong, but it wasn't enough to stop her spell work. He was trying to move, but he couldn't.

It made her chest swell with triumph.

*Through the water*, she thought, filtering her magic through the moisture in the air and the water in his body. *Through the fire*.

She let her inner dragon heat its way through her veins, knowing she was burning brighter for it as she filtered her magic through her dragon fire. It would scald him; she knew it would. She hoped it would.

When he leaned his head back and screamed, she finally opened her eyes, but instead of resting them on her tormentor, they met a pair of widened ice blue ones.

Greer.

He was standing frozen in the doorway, staring at what was happening. Staring at her. Taking in what she was doing. The way she was harming his uncle. Through magic.

She released Arran, but it was already too late.

The binding was deep in his marrow.

A part of him now.

Arran sunk to the floor with a soft noise of pain. She watched as Greer ran up to him, kneeling next to him, calling his name before fixing his gaze on her again.

*Liar*, his eyes seemed to be saying. *You're a liar*.

The guards arrived at hearing their prince yelling for them.

She thought fleetingly that they were there for Arran, but then their strong hands grabbed her. She couldn't even fight them, the tears that had been building spilling over. Her hearts were breaking at the way Greer was looking at her.



There was the armor, hard as iron, back in place. His face was set in a mask of indifference.

“This is no duchess,” he said. “This is not even a lady. This sorceress is to go in the dungeon until the date of a trial can be set.”

“Greer,” she said, but he didn’t so much as blink.

Instead, he stepped out of the way so that the guards could take her to her new accommodations.

She had crossed a line, she had broken the most sacred agreement between dragonkin: you do not interfere with another’s inner dragon. Ever. Under any circumstance.

*But she’d had to, she thought. There is something not right with him.*

She caught one last glimpse of the crumpled figure of Arran still on the floor before she was led through the doors, away from the scene, and from any chance at explaining herself to Greer.

## Chapter 14 - Greer

“I don’t understand,” Grey said, staring up at Greer with tears in his eyes. “Why can’t I see Mae?”

“She’s not well,” Greer replied, trying to sound soothing and knowing that he was failing miserably. How could he hope to soothe Grey when he couldn’t soothe himself?

“But I can bring her sugared apples,” Grey said. “They’ll make her feel better, I know they will.”

“Not right now, Grey,” Greer said, throwing Irvine a pleading look. The aide stepped forward, taking Grey gently by the shoulders, ushering him out of the room with promises that he’d see Maize soon.

Lies.

Too many lies.

Greer rubbed his fingers into his tired eyes, across his eyebrows, to his temples. Tried to find a point of pressure that might help with his budding headache but came up short. Something told him this headache would be persistent, make a nest for itself, stay awhile.

“He’ll be all right,” Irvine said as he reentered the room.

“Will he?” Greer sighed.

“So will you.”

Greer leaned his head back, eyes closed. He wanted to believe it. Wanted to draw the comfort Irvine usually afforded. There was none closer to the prince, none who knew exactly what he needed the moment he needed it. At times even before he knew himself. No one but her.

“I don’t know,” Greer mumbled.

“Speak to the king,” Irvine suggested. “Have him stay her trial. Give you some more time to—”

“To what?” Greer interrupted. “She knowingly broke our laws. I would put myself in the Nest for what she did. She bound Arran’s powers. He hasn’t even woken up yet, that’s how deep her spell work went. There’s no telling what this will do to him.”

“Arran was breaking the law long before Maize did,” Irvine remarked.

“We have no proof of that. All we have is her binding his inner dragon.”

“In order to bind his magic,” Irvine said.

“So? We can’t take it into our own hands to decide who gets to have magic and who doesn’t? We only get to...” He trailed off, rising to his feet in frustration. “We get to put down boundaries for how magic is utilized from person to person and between them.”

“I know,” Irvine said, not that it slowed Greer down in the slightest.

“If we start binding people... I would never have even thought it a solution to the problem,” Greer exclaimed.

“I know,” Irvine repeated in such a calm tone, it began to get on Greer’s already fraught nerves.

“How could she be so reckless? What was she thinking?” he bellowed, kicking at the table between the armchairs and sending it toppling to the floor.

“I don’t know,” Irvine admitted. “Perhaps you should ask her.”

“No,” Greer said, holding up a finger in warning. “No, I will not speak with her.”

“Your highness...”

“I will not,” Greer stated.

Irvine gave a short bow and left the room, knowing better than to push. Greer ignored the sound of the door closing behind him, rolling his shoulders back, trying to focus himself on what had to be done.

He had put the laws into place, how could he possibly not prosecute someone that had transgressed against them right in front of his eyes?

His gaze landed on the dying fire in the fireplace. Annoyed at the sight he kneeled in front of it, grabbing a fresh log and adding it to the already blackened ones. Picking up a second one as the fire began to lick at the wood, he paused.

His mind had emptied of impressions for a moment. He had acted purely on instinct, and yet all it had done was bring him right back to the thinking pattern he was trying to avoid.

She had lied. She was a liar. She had been taken. She was protecting herself. But she had lied. She was a liar. She had broken the law. And as a dragon, she had taken away the very essence of another dragon. She was a liar. She had been violated first. She was protecting herself. But she had lied.

He growled, throwing the second log on the fire with a scoff, rising to his feet.

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The dungeons were perpetually cold, but he knew she didn't care about that. The cold didn't bother her. He shouldn't care if it did. He wanted her to tell him the truth, the whole truth. She was to leave nothing out and if he got even the slightest inkling that she was, he would sentence her to the Nest without trial.

The anger was burning into rage as he entered the corridor at the end of which was her cell. He could glimpse her from behind the bars. She was sitting on the cot and looked up as she heard his footfall. Realizing it was him, she got to her feet. There would be hope in her eyes, but he would put an end to it quickly enough.

He gave the guard a sign and the cell door was opened for him, letting him enter and face her without breaking his

stride. The cell door shut behind him.

“Thank you,” he said to the guard. “You’re excused.”

“But I’m—”

“I said *leave us*,” he barked, the guard obeying.

Maize had flinched at his raised voice, her eyes already glistening with tears. She could spare them. He glared at the blue rose still in her hair, a reminder of how a mere few hours ago he had been happier than he had ever been before. Believing them united, believing them to be forever. He centered himself, cutting his hearts off from his head. Logic was going to help him through this.

“Greer,” she said, taking a step forward. The look in his eyes made her stop, her hands raised as though they wanted to reach out to him were brought to rest over her hearts as her tears spilled over. “I’m so sorry.”

“Are you?”

Her brows furrowed. “Of course I am. Please, don’t be petty,” she chided.

His gaze hardened. “You do not get to tell me what to do,” he said, a warning there for her to think very carefully before speaking.

She swiped at her tears, her expression hardening as well, but she stayed quiet.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m the daughter of a woman named Isla,” she said. “You might know her better as the Blue Raven.”

He felt his hearts nearly stop in his chest at this truth. How could he have been so blind? Oh, because her magic had been hidden from view all this time. He couldn’t have seen it even if he’d been looking for it with a torch in his hand.

“I do know that name,” he said. “She was a great sorceress.”

“The very greatest,” Maize stated, pride in her voice that made him fist his hands.

It wasn't even that she had magic, could she not see that? It was that she had lied and lied and lied...

"Why didn't you tell me immediately?" he demanded.

"When?" she asked. "After you almost shot me with an arrow or made it perfectly clear to me that you were never going to change your mind about magic promoting violence?"

"I never said that."

"You implied it at every turn."

"I *agree* with you that people are to blame, but magic is the tool they use," he said. "Limit the tool, limit the person. I believe you agree with me on that."

"Yes," she said. "I do. But your uncle was going to use magic—"

"It doesn't matter!" he exclaimed. "You do not have the right to bind him! No dragon has that right. Not even my father."

"He was going to hurt you," she said.

"You do not know that," he shook his head.

"I do," she disagreed. "I know it. He was going to use me in some way to hurt you. I couldn't tell you before because I was scared of having you look at me the way you are right now, but he knows me. He must know who I am, that's why he took me. He said he wanted me for a mate, but he never tried to... He never forced me. Why?"

"He could have bound me to him at any moment, but for nearly a year he kept me locked up. I thought it had to do with my ties to King Hugh, but what if it didn't? What if... What if he wanted my magic? He knew how to suppress it. Perhaps he knew how to draw it out of me somehow? Or control it? Channel his power through me. Or even if he didn't know how, perhaps that's what he was figuring out.

"That's why he kept me hidden. Biding his time until he could use me for whatever purpose he was intending. I felt it... when I reached into him, my magic surrounding his magic, that there was something terrible... something dark..."

his convictions were there, like an infestation. He was going to hurt you. Please, believe me.”

“How?” he asked. “How was he going to hurt you?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “You have to talk to him.”

“He’s unconscious.”

She swiped at fresh tears, sudden shame entering her eyes, and she cast them down, staring at the floor as she slowly shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said again. “I couldn’t let him touch me.”

He frowned. “He tried?”

“He was going to.”

“So, it was all preemptive. You didn’t actually know that he was going to do anything to you, or me?”

She drew a soft breath, eyes meeting his again. Her lower lip trembled, but the tears had stopped flowing. She looked at him with all that warmth he’d grown accustomed to, and he wanted her desperately in his arms, but then her face hardened again.

“When he wakes—ask him.”

“He won’t be the one on trial,” Greer stated, feeling his hearts harden against her as well.

“He should be.”

He couldn’t deny that. “And he would have been if *you* hadn’t—” He cut himself short, steadying his temper. It did him no good to raise his voice, beat his chest, make her cower. That wasn’t why he was here.

“Do you swear to speak earnestly of what happened to you while you were held captive, giving sincere testimony?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“Do you swear to speak earnestly of the magic you harbor and the moment you chose to use it against another?”

She was struggling to keep the tears at bay again. He wanted to step close to her, stroke his thumbs over her cheeks, rest his forehead to hers, and promise that he would not let anything happen to her. But he stayed rooted to the spot he was occupying.

“I swear,” she said.

He clenched his teeth, giving her a nod.

“Then you shall stand trial no sooner than tomorrow and no later than one week from now.”

“One week?”

“We must wait until my uncle is awake,” he clarified. “Especially if we are to ask him for his side of the story.”

She looked about ready to reach for him again, but he walked up to the door, calling the guard back.

“Greer,” she said. “Please, don’t go.”

He felt his resolve slipping by the second, calling the guard again.

“You sent him away,” she reminded.

“Yes, I know that,” he said impatiently.

“Greer,” she said again, and though she wasn’t physically touching him, he felt as though she might as well have been. “This isn’t you. I know you. And I think you do, too.”

“It’s not a question of me knowing myself,” he snapped, looking at her over his shoulder as the guard finally appeared at the end of the corridor. “It’s a question of me having absolutely no idea who *you* are.”

She shook her head at that. “That’s not true,” she said, a plea in her tone that made him face forward again. “Greer. That’s not true.”

Her sobs followed him as he left her, and he hurried his step until he was around the corner where she couldn’t see him pause his step, leaning against the nearest wall, feeling



lightheaded. Then tears sprang to his eyes as well, making him squeeze his eyes shut and straighten up.

He knew where he wanted to go. He knew there was only one place in the castle that could bring even the slightest peace.

He steered his feet to Grey's room.

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"I like this one," Greer said, pointing to the drawing on Grey's wall.

"Thank you," Grey beamed. "It's the view from the carriage."

"From the trip yesterday?" Grey nodded. "I'm sorry we didn't take you with us when we..." He trailed off. He kept forgetting that there was no us. There was no we.

Grey observed him, then slipped his hand in his. Greer's brow creased at the gesture and Grey shrugged. "You look sad," he said. "Is it because Mae is poorly?"

"Yes, something not too far from it," Greer admitted.

He sat down on the edge of Grey's bed, Grey having a seat next to him, keeping his hand in his. Grey rarely trusted anyone. Ever since he was a child, he had preferred his own company to other children's. Greer wondered if it was his fault. He had a tendency to keep his distance. He'd always had it. Viola used to tease him about it, tell him that once he was wearing the crown there would be little avoidance of the larger crowds that he seemed so set on not engaging with.

He had told her he simply didn't like to stand on a balcony waving for the better part of an hour. He had better things to do with his time. It had made her laugh.

Viola would have liked Maize.

“What is it that you enjoy about Mae’s company?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Grey shrugged again.

Greer smiled then, remembering the inane conversation in the carriage. Not that it had been boring, simply plainer than questions that went deeper than something tangible. Something that one could smell or hear or taste.

“Do you like that she understands you?” he inquired.

Grey nodded slowly. “She listens,” he said.

“Yes,” Greer agreed. “She does.”

“And she likes sugared apples,” Grey said.

A clear sign of approval on that character trait. It made Greer’s smile widen.

“She likes you too, I think,” he said.

“Do you think so?” Grey asked, the hope in his voice cutting straight into Greer’s heart, making him squeeze his son’s hand.

“Of course, I think so. I like you,” he said.

Grey didn’t say anything to that, growing self-conscious all of a sudden. Greer tried to hold himself together, but he felt as though he was slowly beginning to crumble. He had let his guilt take him away from his son for so long that he thought his father no longer cared for him.

“Grey,” he said. “I know I haven’t been present enough after your mother passed.”

“You never talk about her,” Grey murmured, his hold on Greer tightening as well. “I’m sorry,” Grey added, hiding his face in the crook of his other arm, but Greer could tell that he was suppressing a sob.

“No,” Greer said, changing the hand that held onto Grey’s so that he could wrap an arm around Greer’s shoulders, pulling him against him in a hug. “You have nothing to be sorry about, do you understand me?”

“I should be strong,” Grey said, removing his arms, the tears flowing freely. “Like you.”

Greer shook his head slowly. “What you should be is a boy who lost his mother but who knows his father loves him very much,” he said, Grey stifling a sob but then burying his face against Greer’s chest.

Greer closed his eyes, embracing Grey and tugging him onto his lap. He placed one hand on the boy’s head, stroking his hair gently as tears sprang to his eyes when thinking of how Viola had been the one to do this when Grey was little. Comfort him, keep him safe in the knowledge that he was treasured.

“I’m sorry,” Greer said. “I’m so sorry.”

“You’ve nothing to be sorry about,” Grey murmured against his chest, mimicking him nearly perfectly, and Greer huffed a laugh.

There was a knock at the door and Irvine entered. Greer didn’t move and Irvine didn’t look as though he expected him to. He simply said, “Your uncle is awake.”

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The great hall had been set up with a long table in front of the throne. High-backed chairs lined it, even though the lords seated along it were mostly for show. They all knew that this would not take much deliberation since the sorceress had been caught red-handed using magic. Greer watched them, wondering if any of them had known what his uncle was planning. If any of them were in on it even as they sat there, smugly readying themselves to condemn a life to death.

He took his seat next to his father, sighing out a breath as he did so.

“How are you fairing, son?” the king inquired.

“I am perfectly well, father,” Greer replied. “Eager to get this over with.”

“Is that so?” the king asked.

“Yes, it is,” Greer said. “Why would you question it?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” the king said. “Just wanted to make certain this is... what you want.”

“The law is clear. You helped me write it,” Greer replied. “It doesn’t matter what I want.”

“If you say so,” the king muttered.

“What are you talking about?” Greer asked, but the doors at the end of the great hall began to open, declaring the arrival of the accused and so Greer grew quiet.

He sought that stillness within, the logical and steady, but his skin was heating, sweat already pearling on his forehead, as though she was sitting right next to him sending her dragon fire to swirl its way through him.

He could not pardon her. He had to see this through. If he didn’t, he would be a laughingstock and he would lose the trust of his own people. How could he force them to follow the law of the land if he himself didn’t uphold it?

He was going to have to condemn her to death.

She had put him in this position.

The great hall was filled to the brim with the court lined along its walls to bear witness to the trial. Their royal family had been under threat, and they were there to show their unyielding support. Greer didn’t want to look out at the gathered and feel suspicion, but that was all he could do. There they stood, as smug as those at the table, and chances were great that at least some of them were more treacherous than the woman being brought before them.

His mind kept betraying him, searching for some way out of the situation, some way where he could see due cause to release her.

One side to his brain hissed how she was a liar while the other responded with the simple fact of how she had been afraid to divulge the truth, and in a kingdom such as his, why shouldn't she have been? If it's the person who wields the magic who made it necessary to put the laws in place, then he knew her well enough to see how she would never have been a danger to him, to his father, or to the kingdom at large.

*He was going to hurt you,* she had said.

She was still dressed in the gown from the night prior though the jewels had been removed. Her hair was a little mussed, lacking the rose and he had a wish rise within him that she would have kept it. That by keeping it in her messy braids she could have signaled how things might get a little messy, but what had blossomed between them would still remain. The thought set his hearts alight with a surge of hope for reconciliation that was entirely unwanted. She looked as though she'd gotten little sleep, but when her gaze met his, he felt the warmth of his love for her follow in the swell of that hope. The emotion was so overwhelming he had to draw a soft breath.

It was as though a fog cleared in his mind, and all the work that he'd done to stay logical in the face of such an illogical event came undone in an instant.

“Father,” he said, getting the king's eyes on his. “There is something I must tell you.”

## Chapter 15 - Maize

Maize felt the weight of the finery she was wearing, the silk like a mockery against her skin. She shouldn't be wearing a gown when all it did was remind everyone present how she had pretended to be highborn. She felt like she was the viper, the poison tracing through the veins of the court, and they could all feel it. They were repelled by it. The way they all stared at her told her as much.

But then her gaze met Greer's again, and even though she knew he was enraged with her, she felt herself calm. Because there was only love in her hearts for him. She could rest on that fact. She had not used magic to harm him but to protect him.

The memory of what it had been like to reach into Lord Arran came to her as fresh as though it had happened a minute ago. The festering need within him had been slick like oil. She wished she knew what his ambitions entailed. All she had been able to ascertain was a feeling of deep displeasure with how things now stood in the kingdom. A yearning for a shift in power.

*Please,* she thought, eyes on Greer's. *You have to believe me.*

She knew what she had done was unforgivable, but wasn't magic a sound recourse if magic was to be used against the crown? Greer had to see reason. There had to be some flexibility, some allowing for context and extenuating circumstances. Arran was going to go against the crown, certainly Greer still believed that.

The doors began to open again at the back of the hall and all heads turned to watch Lord Arran, leaning on a cane with a guard helping him stand upright, hobble his way up to the long table. He wasn't taking a seat behind it but claimed a chair next to it. A front row seat to her condemnation.

She refused to look at him.

She would speak her truth, no matter the consequences, and her judges would have to hear it.

“This trial is now beginning,” declared a man in royal livery, standing behind the long tables. A herald of some sort, Maize thought, but she was unsure. Each castle court seemed to assign different titles to the same role. “Please, stay silent throughout these proceedings,” he added, and the tittering died down.

Supreme quiet settled over those gathered.

It was so still Maize thought she would have heard a pin drop, which was ironic given the excuse she’d given Arran the night before. She kept her gaze on Greer, hoping that she could rouse that compassion she had seen take hold over the past day. The open curiosity, the need to embrace every side to himself.

He was still in her veins, rushing like a gentle wind.

Was her heat not still in his?

Were they not mated already, if not officially then in their hearts?

*I love you, she thought. I would never harm you. Trust me.*

“You are the daughter of the Blue Raven, is that correct?” the king’s voice boomed, shattering the stillness, making some of the gathered jerk at the disruption. There were a few surprised intakes of breath among the ladies, which Maize thought might be more for show than anything else. None present could possibly be this aghast at the mention of a sorceress. They all had magic, in one way or another. They did not fear it.

Then again, she thought. Perhaps they do not fear the magic as much as they fear the wielder of it.

She had to respect the fact that she had broken the law and stood in defiance of the crown. She had to accept the fact that according to the views of this kingdom she was a traitor who should be executed. She had to base her case on these facts rather than her own defensiveness of her heritage.

*Mother, give me strength*, she thought.

Straightening her posture she replied, “Yes, that is correct. I am the only daughter of Isla, sorceress of Ravensroost, also known as the Blue Raven.”

“And you are guilty of what crime?” the king demanded.

“Binding all magic of another dragon,” she replied.

“Indeed,” the king said slowly. “It is a grave charge.”

“It is, sire,” she agreed. “But I had due cause.”

The king glanced over at where his brother was seated, then looked back at Maize.

“You do understand that making an accusation against the king’s brother is the same as making an accusation against the crown itself,” the king stated. “We are of the same blood. His transgressions are my transgressions.”

“Yes,” she replied.

“You still wish to present this due cause to your appointed judges?” the king asked.

“Yes,” she repeated, for the first time turning her gaze on Lord Arran.

He gave her the shadow of a smile. It sent a chill through her, a foreboding coming over her that made it suddenly difficult to breathe. Why was he wearing an expression of such calm? Why was there no defensiveness on him? Why were his hackles not up against what she had done to him? There was no accusation in his expression. Merely soft acceptance, as though he had already forgiven her.

It was an act, she concluded. He was playing the gentile victim, simply wanting retribution according to the law.

But she knew there was more.

She could feel it like a tingle underneath her skin, warning bells sounding in the back of her head.



Something was terribly, horribly wrong.

She drew a soft breath, directing her eyes on Greer's, resting them there for a moment to collect herself. There was warmth in them, and it squeezed at her hearts to realize that he was letting her back in. The relief moved through her like leaves floating in a stream. The thought of getting to have his arms around her again strengthened her and when he smiled a small smile, the clear encouragement of it along with a slight nod made her give him a nod in return. His momentary lapse forgiven as he was forgiving her the transgression she had committed. And she was to speak her truth.

“Lord Arran led a raid on a sanctuary across the border of Elemys,” she stated.

The gasps this time were sincere, and the room erupted in chatter that the herald quieted by slamming the heavy staff in his hand into the white stone floor. “Order!” he yelled until order had been restored with only the occasional whisper fluttering through the silence.

“I was a mistress at this sanctuary,” she continued. “I watched his men burn it to the ground, sending the women who considered it their home, their refuge in this world, on the run from his terror. This was nearly a year ago and the news that men from Aeris were the attackers has surely taken root in Elemys by now. Perhaps King Hugh is magnanimous enough not to reach out for discussions since the attack was a one-time occurrence, but... there has still been damage done. Setting the stage for whatever it is Lord Arran is planning. Sowing seeds of doubt in the minds of the common folk.”

Lord Arran scoffed where he sat, shaking his head at her.

“Lord Arran will get his chance to rebuff once the accused has finished with her testimony,” the king said, a note of warning in his tone for Arran to behave.

The lord said nothing else. Maize again refused to look at him. She didn't want to feel her focus slip again, that sense of terror she had felt on the night of the attack coming back, taking over. That was all it was, wasn't it? Bad memories

ving for her attention, sending goosebumps up her arms, down her spine. Telling her to be on high alert, as though another attack was coming any second.

She swallowed.

She'd lost her train of thought.

"I'm sorry," she said, searching for her argument.

"What happened to you at this raid?" Greer asked helpfully.

She looked at him again, smiling faintly and he returned it.

"I was taken," she said.

Murmuring broke out but, this time, the gathered kept it low enough that the herald didn't need to call out for them to settle down.

"Taken by who?" the king asked.

"By Lord Arran," she replied.

"How do you know it was he that took you?" the king asked.

"Because I spent nearly a year in his presence," she said. "I know his voice, his eyes, the way he moves his hands, details that can't be hidden beneath a disguise."

"So, the man who held you captive was in disguise?" the king asked.

"Yes, he was," she agreed. "He had a different nose, different hair. He wore very different clothes as well. And when he and his men attacked the sanctuary, he wasn't leading them but wearing a lieutenant's uniform."

"And what was the reason for him holding you captive?" the king asked.

"At first I did not know, but then it began to become ever more apparent that he wanted me to agree to enter into a mating bond," she said.

“And he held you for nearly a year?” the king asked.  
“Without you consenting.”

“Yes.”

“Rather deep perseverance to secure himself a mate when he could have the pick of the crop in the kingdom, wouldn’t you agree?” the king asked, and though the question could have been taken as though he was quizzical to this as her version of her captor’s objective, she felt very suddenly as though the king was on her side.

The question was leading her straight into her main argument for why she had used her magic, why she had seen it necessary and even imperative that she bind him from doing any magic of his own, and she paused for a moment.

This was it.

This was make or break.

“I believe he had an ulterior motive, sire,” she said.

“Oh? And what would that be?”

“I believe he wanted access to my heritage, sire,” she replied, turning her gaze back on Lord Arran, who was looking mildly bored.

It made her think that she was closer to the truth than he would have liked or why else would he sit there looking so deeply detached from the accusation? There was no flare of anger and still no defensiveness. If he had been hit by her words, wouldn’t he be on his feet, crutch or no crutch, demanding that she withdraw her statement and that she be sentenced according to her crime against him? Wouldn’t he be pointing out how this trial was not meant to be about him and some fabricated allegations, but rather it should be about her and the very clear attack she performed against him.

She furrowed her brow.

There were still misgivings tingling through her.

“To clarify,” the king said. “You believe Lord Arran wanted access to your magical heritage? To what end?”

“I do not know,” she admitted. “But there is not a single doubt in my mind that Lord Arran has been plotting against the crown for the better part of a decade. If not longer, sire.”

This brought a sense of outrage to the courtiers who all began shouting their disagreement. It was one thing to throw accusations of crossing borders and taking women, a whole other to throw accusations that this would somehow make him a traitor. The herald had to yell for a good minute to finally restore order and this time he added a warning that the next time anyone lost their head, there would be a clearing of the great hall and the trial would continue behind closed doors.

“I believe Lord Arran conspired to have his highness Greer killed ten years ago, but the attempt was thwarted when the Lady Viola stepped in front of the spell that would have meant his certain death,” Maize stated.

She could feel the tension in the room, but because of the herald’s sternness, the entire court kept quiet. The outrage was simmering, however. The subtle heat of it trembling the air.

“What would his motive be?” the king asked.

“I believe it has something to do with your bloodline’s airmagic,” Maize revealed.

She had gone over it again and again the night before. What could Arran hope to gain. And then she had asked herself what if he didn’t stand to gain anything? What if them thinking he wanted the gold in the treasury was simply them assigning him an understandable reason? Her mind had gone to Lady Quinn who had attacked the elemental magic of the House of Fire to restore order, as she had claimed. To somehow give the magic back to the people. And Maize has asked herself if it could be linked somehow—the objective of Lady Quinn and the objective of Lord Arran.

“Preposterous,” Lord Arran finally spoke. “I have no claim to the airmagic.”

“No, you don’t,” Maize agreed. “I don’t think you want it for yourself.”

Something sharp entered his gaze at that statement and in that moment, she knew that she was right.

“Then why would he want it?” Greer asked.

“To upend the balance,” she replied.

Lord Arran shook his head slowly.

“You have no idea what you are talking about,” he stated, but where before his gaze had carried no emotion, now it was showing a blazing hatred for what she was doing, for the truths she was voicing.

He hadn’t expected it, hadn’t thought she’d come so far in her deductions as to call him out on his own reasoning around why his actions were justified. Shining a light on that justification and labeling it what it truly was.

“To create chaos,” she stated, knowing it was pushing the button she had been searching in vain for the night prior.

The button that would make him drop all pretense in his arrogant need to set the record straight. He thought himself a savior, just as Lady Quinn had. The person to untie the knot of a corrupt system, but the knot didn’t need untying—it needed strengthening. It had been fraying in Elemys, the people left to fend for themselves, but since Hugh took the throne things had changed. The change had to come from within the system, not from a total collapse.

The question remaining was whether Arran was as power hungry as Quinn had been. She had seen herself as the rebuilder, but she had been more corrupt than any monarch she was trying to dethrone.

What was Lord Arran’s true angle?

What was he willing to sacrifice in order to reach his goal?

Then a side door behind the throne opened, the judges, the king and Greer all turning in their seats at the unexpected noise of someone entering. Maize felt her hearts sink at the

sight of Grey being led into the room by the woman named Hael. She was a squat, middle-aged dragon who looked as though she rarely smiled. This was no exception, her mouth downturned. She had one hand on Grey's shoulder, ushering him into the room.

“What is this, Hael?” Greer demanded. “Take him away from here at once.”

And then Maize felt it.

A tug in the middle of her abdomen, a brief pause, and then... a spark.

It flared brightly in the middle of her chest, then died out as she turned her focus from Grey to Lord Arran. He was on his feet, the crutch left resting against the arm of the chair. And he was smiling. There was triumph there now as with a flick of his hand he made her lose her breath completely.

He was conjuring.

How?

She went down on her knees, gasping for air.

Grey shouted her name, but clearly was kept in place or she was certain she would have felt his small hands searching for some way to support her, help her back on her feet. Greer's deeper notes were familiar, but the words were indiscernible as she felt another spark within her.

And another.

But she wasn't the one encouraging her magic to take hold—Lord Arran was.

This couldn't be happening.

Then she remembered...

She remembered the moment she had touched Greer on the cliffs, the sensation he had instilled in her, the one that hadn't left her since. Their bond had afforded them a connection unlike any she had ever experienced before. She was his and he was hers. Like one. True mates linked through

their inner dragons dancing with each other, embracing each other. Air and fire. Creating a bridge...

“No,” she got out.

She had to fight it, or she was going to be used as a channel.

Lord Arran was going to use her the way Lady Quinn had used herself to pull the firemagic out of Hugh. Arran would be pulling the airmagic out at the moment of transference to put it... where?

Then Grey's face came before her mind's eye. The door opening, him being brought into the room.

By the great fires, Arran would put the magic in the boy and if he did that, if he put it into a vessel that was not yet ready, the airmagic would go dormant and with a vessel so young, should the vessel die before it could engage in the moment of transference with the next in line to carry the title of Keeper... it would run wild.

And that was what Lord Arran wanted. To end the bloodline, just as Lady Quinn had.

She screamed, forcing herself back on her feet, but she was in Arran's hold. She couldn't shake free of him, feeling his magic fusing with hers as he locked their connection in place.

*I won't let you do this.*

The thought was crystal clear in her mind and she threw it at him without knowing if he would receive it or not, but his mouth quirked at the corners.

*He may not die, Lord Arran's voice entered her mind like a parasite. He may be strong enough to survive the descent. I will free him of the burden he didn't even choose for himself. The airmagic will go back where it belongs, and we will all be free of its oppression.*

*You have lost your mind,* she insisted.

*The elemental magic is a way to control us,* he returned, tone as gentle as though she was a child in need of

educating.

*No. It is a way through which to govern us. The bloodlines are necessary. To have those who truly understand how to wield the elemental magic, who learn how to harness it, how to keep it. It is not the magic, my lord. It is the person wielding it who is responsible for the outcome of any spell work.*

*The magic should be released back to its origins, he stated, ignoring her argument. I thought you would like the thought of it. You were always chasing your freedom.*

*You cannot fool me now that I see through you. Rendering the Houses obsolete and undoing what has been built over millennia will not provide freedom. It will bring fear and confusion. And society will be more easily guided into the shape you wish it to have. You wish to sit on a throne. That's what this is all about.*

“You’re wrong,” he said, allowing her a moment of respite from the raging storm he was whipping up within her.

But he was everything she had thought him to be only smaller, bleaker, more corrupt than she would have imagined.

“You will not hurt Grey,” she gritted out through clenched teeth as pain began to mix with the storm clouds in her chest, like lightning amassing, getting ready to release themselves against her ribcage.

She didn’t know the state of the room. She couldn’t discern where Greer was, or Grey. Where the king had taken cover or if the judges had all left. All she could see was the lord before her and the shadows surrounding him. She had sensed them there when she first reached into him, but she hadn’t understood how deeply entrenched in the darker shades of magic he was.

He had broken free of her binding spell without even breaking a sweat, that much she was certain of. He had not been hobbled nor knocked unconscious. It had all been an act. Everything about him was a lie.



*Greer*, she sent the thought out, unsure of if she could reach him but hoping, if they truly were linked the way she thought they were, the way that would tie her to his bloodline and allow Arran his moment of transference with her as a channel, that he might hear her. *Get Grey away from here. Get him safe.*

But there was no reply, and the pain was too great.

The following moment it started. She could feel it like the elements combining in her veins, tumbling over each other, as the moment of transference had arrived.

## Chapter 16 - Greer

Five minutes earlier, Greer was about to get up from his chair, attention still on his son after demanding of Hael to lead the boy back out of the room, when Grey's eyes widened.

"Mae!" he shouted, making Greer turn back to the spot where Maize was standing. Only she wasn't standing anymore, she was down on her knees, unable to breathe.

The room was in shock, murmurs spreading, while the king was rising to his feet as well, his eyes on his brother. Greer followed the direction of his father's gaze, taking in the look on his uncle's face and the focus he held on Maize.

Arran was the one doing this to her.

"Uncle!" Greer exclaimed. "Stop this now! We will hear you! Please, stop this!"

The plea came out without Greer being able to stop himself, fear climbing up his throat as Maize was turning pale. She was going to suffocate to death unless Arran released his hold on her.

His magic was intact somehow. He had withstood the binding spell. And he was as powerful as Maize had claimed. How was it possible? How long had he been conjuring? How had Greer not known?

The prince had a thousand moments pour themselves through his mind, one after the other. His uncle congratulating him on the birth of his heir; his uncle forming a strong relationship with Viola; his uncle sticking close to his family at every turn; his uncle supporting the new law because... Because he knew it would underpin the unrest he wanted to stir. He wanted people displeased, he wanted them to question the rule, wanted them to feel controlled and suppressed so that he could...

*Greer, Maize's voice came into his head. Get Grey away from here. Get him safe.*

Maize.

She had accused Arran of wanting to lay claim to the airmagic and she had been right.

Grey. Get Grey away from here. Get him safe.

Greer turned to call to a guard. He would instruct them to take Grey back to his rooms and slam Hael in a cell for her conspiring with his uncle. Greer couldn't leave the room. He couldn't bear to leave Maize alone when she was beginning to glow as bright as a star, her hair lifting of its own accord as the magic within her streamed out of her. It was all around him, surrounding him, seeping into him. Their connection tangible.

And the order he had meant to speak got stuck in his throat as he realized that his feet were stuck to the floor. He couldn't move. He tried to look over at Grey, but couldn't turn his head. His entire body was frozen in position. In front of him, standing at the long table, he could tell that so was his father. So were everyone bearing witness, their eyes wide with the shock of not only being unable to move, but with what was happening to Maize and the obvious fact that it was being done to her by Lord Arran himself.

“Uncle!” Greer shouted. “Please, stop!”

Arran merely shook his head, meeting his gaze with an expression in his eyes that Greer had never seen in them before. His uncle's true character finally allowed to take center stage. Greer felt the pain of the betrayal like a lance through his hearts.

“This has been coming for a very long time,” Arran declared. “Centuries of planning for the right heir. For the right moment of transference. You can't stop this. This was destined to happen. Exactly as the Houses were destined to form, they were also destined to fall. This is all about beginnings and endings, Greer.”

“Let her go!” Greer yelled.

“You should be thanking me,” Arran replied. “I'm the reason you ever even met.”

“What?”

“Did you think it was chance that she was running through a forest that is your most treasured hunting ground?” Arran asked. “I was with her for her whole journey, guiding her as subtly as possible. I even played the flute for her to remind her exactly what she was escaping and how easily it could come and snatch her back so that when you found her, moments later, she would feel inclined to seek refuge rather than carry on by herself.”

“Why?” Greer demanded.

“Because,” Arran replied, “she’s the key. But, you see, she had to be bonded to you for the channeling to work.”

Greer felt sick, the floor tilting beneath his feet at how he had mistrusted her. How could he have given into fear so easily? How could he have stepped into those well-worn grooves, no matter how familiar and comfortable? He had betrayed her. He had brought this on her.

*Forgive me*, he thought.

Then he saw it, like colors streaking through the air: the moment of transference. The airmagic, stark white, flowed from the center of his father’s chest, swirling in glowing strands. It reached Maize, pooling against the place of her hearts before seeping into her, melding with her.

“It will kill her!” Greer screamed, beginning to fight against the hold his uncle had on his limbs, his muscles. Straining with every ounce of dragon strength in him, making his inner dragon growl in unison. It was time to break free.

“It won’t,” his uncle said. “It won’t linger within her. She is not the vessel.”

And then, to Greer’s utter shock, the white strands that were threading themselves into her began leaving her, reaching through the air, gliding and twirling in a deceptively gentle dance, heading straight for Grey.

“No!” Greer yelled. “Leave him out of this!”

“Yes, but you see, if I were to put the magic in you then all I would be doing would be to facilitate your crowning as the next ruling monarch,” Arran said.

And Greer suddenly realized that he had been right in thinking this was only ever about the crown. Because if he succeeded in draining the elemental magic from their bloodline and stop the order of succession entirely, this would leave the throne open to him.

“Traitor,” Greer growled.

“This is *not treason*,” Arran raised his voice, sending the words echoing through the cavernous expanse of the great hall. “This is the new order.”

“Endings and beginnings,” Grey repeated Arran’s words back at him, a bitter note to them.

Arran smiled.

“Father?” Grey said, staring at the strands now inches away from his chest.

Greer struggled against his bonds, but he was powerless to stop what was about to happen and with a strangled noise of protest he watched as the airmagic began to seep its way into Grey.

Grey stiffened, his head slowly tilting back, his arms stretching out as his body accepted his birthright, no matter how unprepared it was to do so.

It would lay dormant. Grey would not have access to it for a good century. Perhaps this the only reason his uncle had chosen him. Perhaps Arran had no plans to hurt him.

*He was going to hurt you*, Maize’s statement came back to him.

Then Arran suddenly let out a scream of pain and Greer turned his focus back on him, his eyes going to Maize and realizing she was fighting back. What might she be doing to Arran to make him nearly buckle to his knees?

“I will not... release you!” Arran bellowed, regaining his balance and focusing even harder on Maize. “You can drain me of my magic, I do not care,” he added. “Take every last drop of it. If it means I succeed, I will happily give it up. You’re too late! You are all too late!”

Greer knew that stopping the transference as it was taking place might jeopardize more than one life at this juncture. His uncle was right—they were too late. But there was something he could do, because when the transference was completed, they were going to have to act fast. Especially if his uncle could be weakened. If that was what Maize was doing to him. Then that meant there was hope of stopping him before he got his hands on Grey.

That was all Greer could focus on.

Keeping Grey safe. Stepping between his son and any further damage. If Grey was to carry the airmagic, then the kingdom would have to be ruled without access to it, but as long as Grey was its Keeper at least the airmagic would stay connected to their bloodline. There would be balance through that. They would simply have to make do without for a few decades.

Grey could do it, Greer knew that he could. He could hold the airmagic and keep it steady. He wouldn't let it go to his head, which was always a risk whenever a Keeper wasn't ready to take on its immense power. But Grey would recognize it for what it was: a tool. A tool to be used modestly and with great care. And Greer would teach him how, he would teach him everything he knew, as long as he could keep his uncle from taking him. From running away with him somewhere out of reach.

Greer was not going to let that happen.

He closed his eyes and reached deep within himself, to the very recesses of his soul where every conviction lived, and he pulled on the knowledge that rested there. The knowledge that he was the son of a great man, and he was the father of an ever greater king who would someday rule Aeris with fairness and faith.

His inner dragon reached with him, and his magic surged, the lineage he was a part of declaring itself present as it rushed through him like the breeze off the sea.

He opened his eyes and with a roar he broke free of his bonds.

There were two different strands of white flowing through the air as the airmagic was still leaving his father and flowing through Maize into Grey, but now there was the hint of another strand. This one was dark purple, nearly black, and it twisted thinly in the air between Arran and Maize. She really was taking his magic, the connection Arran had formed between them allowing her the needed access, and she wasn't letting up.

Greer turned his attention on Grey.

The moment the transference was finished, Greer would grab him and get him out of there. His skin was already scaling in preparation for the shift into dragon form. He would fly as high as he could go. Higher than his uncle could ever hope to reach. He would get Grey to safety if it so killed him.

*Greer.*

Maize's voice filled his head.

*It's almost finished.*

He looked over at her, but her focus remained on Arran.

The strand of white that was transferring from his father ended as the final drop of magic left his system. It moved through Maize and then the airmagic left her as well. The dark purple strand was waning, but she held on. Greer's gaze followed the end of the white strand as it drifted closer and closer to Grey's chest.

Soon the moment would be complete.

His son would be the new Keeper.

He didn't feel it as a loss, he didn't care that the airmagic was no longer to be in his care, all that mattered was that it wouldn't do any damage to his son.

Arran bellowed, the sound enough to startle everyone who was no longer under his spell as his magic had been drained out of him. There was a collective scream of fear before the sound of shuffling as three hundred people started rushing for the doors.

There was panic among the judges as well, all of them on their feet and running for the side doors behind the throne. Some of the courtiers had had the same idea and there was a scuffling about who got to exit first.

Greer was distantly aware of the commotion as he watched Maize sink to her knees again, weakened by her bout with Arran and exposed to his fury. He must not have thought her capable of actually stealing his powers from him since she hadn't been able to bind them but steal them she had.

Arran began to approach her where she sat, head hanging so low her forehead almost touched the white stones of the floor, hands splayed as though she was seeking strength from them.

"I shall take it back, you stupid quim," Arran stated self-assuredly.

Greer was about to move forward, intervene, when he remembered Grey. What about Grey? Where could he focus if not with his son.

"Guards, stop him!" he yelled, thinking it a good compromise, turning to where Grey had moments before stood and stopping short.

Grey was gone.

Then Arran screamed, this time the agony was of a different nature entirely, one that was bone-deep and excruciating. Greer turned back to see him lift into the air only to go sailing through it, flying across half the expanse of the room and landing, still screaming, a good distance away.

And the reason was Grey.

He was standing in front of the long table, both hands outstretched, the airmagic so clearly present that Greer almost lost his breath.

Grey was much too young to conjure.

But then, he had already displayed a connection to his heritage. He had already conjured, though he'd been unaware



of how. It seemed now, with the powers fully integrated, there was to be no more hesitation or confusion.

Grey squared his thin shoulders and commanded his uncle with a quiet, "Keep away from her."

He turned to where Maize was still sunk down on the floor and kneeled next to her. She lifted her head, tears in her eyes, but she was smiling. There was pride in her gaze. She had never doubted him, Greer realized. She might not have foreseen this happening, but she would never have even considered needing to get Grey away from the danger. She would have instructed him, guided him, trusted that the airmagic was more than an ability. It was a part of Grey's person. His lineage. Of course he had connected with it already.

Greer's attention was redirected to the spot where his uncle had landed as the dragon slowly got to his feet. Greer could see what was about to happen a second before it did, and so when his uncle began to run forward, shifting into dragon shape with every step he took, Greer didn't hesitate to match him. He ran past the long table, past Maize and Grey, his bones snapping and cracking as his inner dragon took over.

The following moment he unfolded his mighty wings and met his uncle in the air.

Lord Arran was a renowned general. His skills with talon and teeth were unmatched, but Greer had magic flowing through his veins. Magic that allowed him to fight not only with his body, but with the air around them as well. He sucked the air out from underneath Arran's wings, making him drop five feet before he attacked him, talons first. He wanted his uncle to bleed. He wanted him to see the folly of trying to undo the House of Air, of going against the crown, of attempting a coup. Because that was what it boiled down to. For all his uncle's ideologies, for all his reasoning, the plain and simple truth was that he had wanted to take the crown for himself. He wanted to rule, to set the rules, to be in control.

Greer roared at the thought, swooping down and smashing into his uncle's side with his head, sending him

careening through the air and smashing into one of the white stone pillars holding up the vaulted ceiling. Tiny pieces of it came loose and rained down on their heads in protest.

Arran used the momentary distraction to launch a counter strike, pushing himself off the floor and slamming talons first into Greer's underbelly, dragging his talons across Greer's scales until Greer was roaring in anguish.

Greer vacated the air all around them, making both of them fall to the floor in a hard thud but, at least, the move separated him from his uncle's fury. Greer rolled from his side to all-fours, turning to face the other dragon. He was stone grey, streaks of copper all over him. He used to be a fierce sight, one that instilled Greer with deep respect, and now what was he? A waste. An utter disgrace.

To think Greer had looked up to him.

Arran growled softly, Greer did the same.

His uncle must know he had lost this fight. There were no moves left to be made.

But then Arran began to run towards him, Greer preparing for an impact that never came as Arran leaped into the air over him, landing on the other side of him. Staying on the floor rather than risking the weakness that being airborne had proven itself, Arran was running straight for Grey and Maize.

Greer was on his tail the following moment, but his uncle had a head start.

Greer growled loudly, a warning for Arran to stop, for Grey and Maize to watch out.

But then Arran stopped short, Greer coming to a halt as well when he saw Grey and Maize were already facing the approaching dragon. Arran seemed suddenly wary, as he should be. Especially as Grey and Maize joined hands and raised their free ones, directing their joint magic at him.

He roared in frustration, but before Greer's astonished eyes, his uncle shifted back into human form. It was clear that it was against his will and once he was crouched on the floor,

concealing his nakedness as best he could, he said, “You cannot bind my inner dragon. It is against all of nature’s laws.”

“We won’t,” Grey said. “But you are of air. And as long as you remain within the borders of Aeris, you will not shift. Is that clear?”

The great lord of the Lower Lands looked as though he wanted to argue. He straightened up, hands covering himself for the sake of modesty, lifted his chin, but thought better of it. He had created his most formidable adversary himself. Grey was now Keeper and all Arran could do was accept his failure.

“Yes,” Arran murmured as reply to Grey’s question. “May I have some clothes?” he added, nodding down at himself.

“No,” Grey replied firmly. “You are to spend several nights in the dungeons and think about what you have done.”

Greer could see Maize struggling to keep a smile down. He was experiencing the same thing, his mirth mingling with slight awe at the level of maturity his offspring was showing.

“And no treats,” Grey added. “Especially sugared apples.”

“All right, Grey,” Maize stepped in, placing one hand on Grey’s shoulder. “I believe he understands. Guard,” she added, but realized that the guards had absolutely no reason to heed her orders. She bent down and whispered something in Grey’s ear.

“Guard!” he yelled. “Take this disgrace of a dragon to our smallest cell.”

Two guards moved forward from their stations by the side doors, heeding the order without question.

Arran looked apt to protest but was smart enough to keep his mouth shut.

Grey’s gaze met Greer’s and the princeling asked, “Are you very hurt, father?”

Greer shook his large head, moving up to him, leaning his head down to get his forehead against Grey's. Grey stroked the scales on either side of his face before pulling back, a smile on.

Greer felt Maize's hand at his flank, checking his wounds, and swung his head around to look at her. She was frowning, light concern in her gaze when it met his, but then she smiled and pressed a kiss to his muzzle.

“So,” Grey said. “Am I king now?”

## Chapter 17 - Maize

Greer held up his hands to make the chatter of the dining hall quieten, everyone's eyes on him. The crown sat securely on his head, placed there an hour earlier during the coronation. The answer to Grey's question had, of course, been no. But Grey was, for better or worse, Keeper of the airmagic, which had presented them with a bit of a novel situation planning for how best to break the news to the people.

They had decided on a public declaration, explaining everything that had transpired, introducing Maize as their future queen in the process. It had all been stressful and high pressure and Maize and Greer had both been exhausted by the end of it.

A month had passed and here they now sat at the head of the dining table, Grey to Greer's left and Maize to his right, while his father sat next to Grey. He was smiling more, at ease with handing over responsibility to his son and grandson. He was eating a great deal more too. And spending all his mornings in the sun garden, always happy when Maize would join him, and doubly happy when Grey was with her.

"I would like to make an announcement," Greer said. "Next month there will be cause for more celebration. Your queen and I will host a bonding ceremony to rival any previously hosted in any of the four kingdoms and you are all invited."

The room erupted in cheers and early celebrations. Congratulations were fired at them from every corner of the room. They laughed, smiled, accepted them. Sticking close together, as they'd grown a habit of doing. Irvine teased that they were growing too attached and soon he would have to pry them apart, otherwise how were they to fly like that?

Later that evening, Greer snuck out of bed to put another log on the dying fire, making her smile.

He came back to her outstretched arms, running a hand from her neck over her right breast, along her side and down to the heat between her legs where he'd already made himself comfortable twice. Her smile broadened at him still not being satiated.

Neither was she.

His erection was hard against her thigh, and she shifted so that he could move himself between her thighs. He didn't hesitate before he thrust into her, getting her to wrap her legs around his waist as he took her, this time quickly, slamming into her until she lost all knowledge of where she began and he ended. She was groaning in his ear, holding on tightly, grinding herself up against him to meet every thrust.

He slid a hand under her ass, lifting her so that she was straddling him, his mouth finding hers as she continued grinding down on him. He moaned, a tremor running through him which told her that he was close.

She rolled her hips around him, and he made her lie on her back again, taking charge, mouth still on hers. Their breathing was stuttered, their bodies sleek with sweat, and she bucked against him. Taking her mouth from his, she arched her back as she came hard around him. He followed, mouth on her left nipple, then her right, hands following before they both slowed, stilled.

She smiled against his cheek before giving it a peck. He moved to lie next to her, running his fingers from her temple down the side of her face, getting her eyes on his.

"Love you," he said.

Her smile broadened. He couldn't stop saying it and it was endearing unlike anything she'd experienced before. "Love you too," she replied.

"Did you hear the declaration?" he changed topic.

"Yes, and I love you too," she smirked.

"Not that declaration," he frowned at her, then smiled. "The one where I've told the kingdom I'm easing the ban on magic."

“I did hear that, yes,” she nodded. “I helped you write it.”

“You did,” he agreed. “But I do not believe you were present for the actual official declaration.”

“I was busy planning our bonding ceremony.”

“Indeed,” he nodded. “But as you weren’t present, I still wanted to ask if you heard anyone speak of it? Perhaps in glowing tones?”

“Glowing tones?” she repeated, raising her eyebrows.

“The people are very pleased,” he explained. “I wanted to make sure that you know that. Since you were a part in ensuring their pleasure.”

She smiled. “Thank you. That’s very thoughtful of you. I have not heard anyone speak of it glowingly, I must admit, but I did hear someone mention the part about the permission to exercise magic as it relates to the traditional celebration.”

“Yes, I’ve heard many speak of that part too,” he said, eagerly. “They are very happy about it.”

She rolled her eyes at him. It was as though he had never instigated the ban at all. He was soaking up the gratitude as though he wasn’t the root cause of what had caused ingratitude to begin with. It was a character trait she found both frustrating and dear at the same time. There was an innocence to his self-absorption. It had been his defense mechanism for so long it would take time for him to step away from it. But she was certain he would. He had already begun with all the time he was spending with Grey.

“Did you speak to Lady Shannon before she departed?” she asked.

“Yes, briefly.”

“Was she all right? She’s not bringing back horror stories for prince Malcolm, I hope.”

“She promised my uncle’s actions wouldn’t reflect poorly on her overall impression of Aeris,” Greer replied,

sounding convinced the lady had been earnest in her assurances.

“Good,” Maize said, shifting to place her head on Greer’s chest. “The last thing we want is some sort of kerfuffle with the House of Water. Especially since there was a so called uprising averted at their border. Was there even an uprising? Did your father ever learn the truth of that?”

“I don’t think so,” Greer said. “Perhaps it was men and women hired by my uncle kicking up a fuss. They never left Aeris, so at least that’s something, but they were making noise of crossing into Fawha as refugees. Which would have been nearly as bad. As though Aeris was home of a king gone so far astray his subjects fled from his rule.”

“Yes,” she said. “But there were people upset about the ban.”

“I’m easing it,” he exclaimed. “I’m not abolishing it completely and they are going to have to accept that.”

“I know,” she soothed, propping her head up on her hand to meet his gaze. “It’s for the best. Some restrictions are healthy.”

He smiled then. They’d been seeing eye to eye a lot lately. It was nice.

“Did you hear back from Blair?” he asked.

“Not yet,” she replied. “But I’m certain they will attend.”

“Of course, I was just curious.”

“If they were going to mention anything about the attack on the sanctuary and how your trade agreements now stand?” she asked, raising her eyebrows meaningfully. He shouldn’t act all innocent when she knew he was angling for information.

“Yes, that,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Stop fretting,” she said. “King Hugh would have sent you an official letter if anything was amiss. It’s been a year.”



“Yes, but still. One can never tread too carefully when it comes to invading other kingdoms. Or appearing to,” he said.

She smiled then. That was a fair enough observation, but he needn't worry. King Hugh was a patient and understanding type of ruler. And Blair was like her second mother. There would be no bad blood between the Houses of Air and Fire as long as they had something to say about it. And she knew that they both did have a great deal to say.

“Have you heard from the sanctuary?” he asked.

“I had a raven yesterday,” she said. “The rebuild is going well. Most of the mistresses have moved back to help.”

“Do you regret not being able to go?”

“No,” she said. “I believe we've sent enough supplies to last them throughout the months it will take them to finish. Food and wine. They will be happy.” She smiled, but grew contemplative. “To think I was certain I would live out my life within its walls.”

“Yes,” he murmured, eyes roaming her face. “Thank the heavens you were stolen out of there and brought to our forests,” he added.

“Thank the heavens,” she agreed.

They did not mention any debt owed to Lord Arran. He was to be forgotten.

“Now, I know you wished for white and gold for the ceremony,” she said, sitting up and gathering the sheet to her. “But I was considering—”

“No, this is my one wish,” he interrupted. “One. That is all I ask. The color scheme must run in my House's colors, Maize. Please.”

“Yes, but if you would just listen—”

“No,” he shook his head. “No. This one thing.”

She laughed when he playfully wrestled her back onto the bed, kissing her softly on the lips as she buried her hands

in his soft locks. “Fine,” she sighed, closing her eyes as he kissed his way down her neck. “I shall give you this one thing.”

He chuckled against her throat, and she pinched his arm before she laughed, pushing him to lay on his back as she grabbed his arms, pinning them over his head. He admitted defeat without hesitation, leaving the control entirely in her hands.

She smiled again, and he returned it as her veins lit up from deep within.

\*\*\*\*\*

THE END

## **About the Author**

I have dreamed of writing books since I was a little girl. Always reading, always imagining fantastical worlds and characters, I finally decided to publish the crazy figments of my imagination. I write about shifters, dragons, magic, and hidden worlds that I would like to visit one day...

In my daily life, I love cooking, taking long walks with my wonderful husband, following courses on new topics that I know too little about, and visiting family and friends in faraway places.

Thanks for experiencing and sharing my imaginative world with me!

# Books by Sansa Moon

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\* \* \*

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