

*Once burned, twice as sly.*

# HEARTS FORGED IN DRAGON FIRE



ERICA HOLLIS



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# Table of Contents

[Content Warning](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Discover more Entangled Teen books...](#)

[The Moonlight Blade](#)

[Last of the Talons](#)

[The Liar's Crown](#)

[Havoc](#)

[Let's be friends!](#)

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*For Dad.*

*I hope they have books wherever you are, and that you never run out of new  
things to read.*

*Love you forever, miss you every single day.*

# Chapter One

The forest air smells of dew and moss and melted snow as I take in a slow, silent breath.

The end of winter in Nivstede is beautiful, a time of new beginnings and sunlight coming back into the world, but I can't stand here and enjoy the scenery. I've gotten plenty of chances to do that anyway, spending the last week in the back of a wagon.

Each step I take is calculated, and I move only after I've examined the ground for any twigs that could snap beneath my boots and give me away.

Through the barrier of trees, two voices slink toward me like snakes slithering through the grass. They seem to come from all sides at once, dragging up and down my spine.

"Humans...humans nearby...approaching..."

"Find a place. Cover. We will keep watch."

"We must fly—"

"We stay."

My heart gives a leap. The words, raspy and rough to my ears, would sound like animalistic growls to my companions. I was already quite sure of what I heard on the path, but now there's no doubt in my mind.

*Dragons.*

Our horses looked about ready to die of fright when we first heard them, refused to move, and left us stranded on the dirt path with no one around for miles and miles. I got out of the cart and headed into the trees before anyone could even ask me to go take a look.

After all, this is what they've hired me for; this is why they're escorting me to the city of Morwassen's Pass. Now they can see that they're getting their money's worth.

I walk alone through the woods, having left the others at the wagon with a

promise that I'd be back within an hour. Scyler was against this, saying they'd much rather stick close to me with a sword in hand, but Danil and Maryse persuaded them to let me go alone.

If I showed up with a bodyguard, the dragons may think it's an ambush and lash out. Kind of funny, given that they're usually at least twice my size and far more deadly than any blade.

I stop and hold my breath, closing my eyes and listening as closely as I can to the sounds of the forest surrounding me.

In the distance, to my left, the leaves rustle, a soft and continuous sound. A tail dragging across the ground, perhaps?

The noise vanishes almost the instant my eyes open, but I peer into the woods in the direction it was coming from. Taking care to keep my breaths slow and quiet, I stare ahead, squinting, searching for something that doesn't belong.

After nearly a full two minutes, I find it.

A strange shape, nestled between the trees, statue-like and a deep shade of green, nearly blending right in.

I blink once, twice, to make sure my brain isn't simply seeing what it wants to see, and that's when I spot the unmistakable glint of a reptilian, dark yellow eye.

The shape tenses and the raspy voice creeps in from everywhere again. "Seen, we are seen...human sees!"

I raise my hands above my head and bow my head, slowly lowering myself to my knees. A pebble right under my knee digs into my skin through my trousers, but I wince and force myself to ignore it.

The most important thing to do before approaching a dragon is to establish yourself as a total non-threat. I remain on my knees and bring my hands down slowly, before placing them folded on my lap. No sudden moves. Nothing that could give off the slightest hint of reaching for a weapon or rushing to attack.

I want to look up to see how the dragon responds, but my eyes remain steadfastly fixed on the ground. I listen, a slow, familiar chill creeping its way through my body.

Footsteps so heavy, it feels like the earth ought to be shaking, make their way toward me, and ragged, shallow breathing grows louder. The air catches in my lungs and my heart instinctively knows to beat quieter. They're closer now, of that I'm certain.

Finally, that raspy voice comes from everywhere once again, “Human may look at us.”

I do as I’m told, and turn my gaze upward.

As far as dragons go, this one isn’t very big. If they remain standing on all four legs, I’ll probably be taller than they are. This strikes me as odd.

They’re too big to be a miniature species, but too small to be anything else. Their scales are a dark, swampy green, a tail twitches anxiously behind them, and four confused eyes stare me down. I search their gaze carefully for any hint of anger, readying myself to make a run for it if I have to. Their teeth are numerous, sharp as a rusty saw, and just as jagged.

My voice is low and steady. “Are you well met?”

All four of those yellow eyes widen, and their next words are a disbelieving whisper. “Dragontongue...”

“Yes,” I say gently. “Are you well met?”

“We are...” They trail off, blinking slowly. “We are tired. We have flown for days. We stop only to sleep. We wish to rest. Loud...loud, and too many people. We wish to be where it isn’t so loud.”

I nod once, deliberately, and consider my next words carefully. “So you and your companion aren’t from here?” Their muscles tense, and I hastily add, “I heard two voices.”

They shift uneasily on their legs, and their tail wraps around them the way a child would hide themselves in their mother’s long skirt. “We are...” They hesitate. “We are flying with our nestmate. We come from the far end of the woods.”

Dragons usually separate from their siblings after about a decade, when they’re old enough to be away from their parents. My heart seizes as I realize why this dragon is smaller than I expected. They’re not an adult yet.

“If you don’t mind my asking, is your mother with you?”

“Gone.” Their eyes shift to the forest floor, and their tail wraps tighter around themselves. “Food is little this season. Mother’s share was given up, given to us. We ate what was there, and Mother starved for us.”

Tears prick at my eyes, but I blink them away. Slowly, I bring myself up to my feet, and remove one of my gloves. Their eyes follow me curiously, widening when I reach out a hand. I don’t touch them, not yet; I simply stand there, hand extended, and wait.

After a moment that feels like a day, they move their head upward and nod, granting me permission to reach the rest of the way.

Their scales are rough and warm under my palm, like a stone that's been left in the sun for hours. Slowly, gently, I let my hand trail down from the top of their head to the side of their jaw. Their front fangs are at least as big as a grown man's fist.

They could rip my arm off with no effort whatsoever. But I don't pull away, and despite my caution, my fear is subsiding. I've been working with dragons since I was eleven; since I was the only one for miles around who could speak with them, I had no choice but to become a prodigy. My five years of experience have given me a good sense for when they're getting hostile and when it's safe to hang around.

"I'm sorry," I finally say. "I know how awful you must feel. I've lost my mother, too."

They let out a sigh, and I feel steam flushing up against me. "We wish to see her. But instead, we must keep moving. Search for someplace safe. Someplace with more food."

"I take it you're older?"

A nod, another sigh. "Our nestmate does not understand. He believes we will see her when we reach our new home. We won't. We cannot make him see."

"I'm so sorry." I lower my hand and look them in the eye—well, two of them, in any case. Trying to look into multiple sets of eyes at once makes me dizzy, so I pick one and stick to it. "May I ask where you're going?"

"We do not know. We will keep moving until we find someplace that makes us safe."

"Someplace with more food?"

A short, soft snarl escapes them, and I take a half step back before I realize they're not angry at me. "Home had food. It is being taken away. That is what happened to Mother. Her hoard was stolen from her."

"Stolen? Humans?"

It does happen from time to time, especially if a dragon takes the gold and gems they need from a mine.

That dragons eat the same things humans have made currency has been a point of contention between the species for millennia. Humans and dragons alike have died for gold in centuries past, and I'm sure both will continue to do so. That's where Dragontongues come in and help mediate things. It's dangerous but vital work; negotiating shaky peace agreements, defusing years-long feuds, sometimes even helping dragons relocate someplace with

more resources and fewer humans around. When it works, it saves countless lives. When it fails, the Dragontongue usually gets burned alive or torn to shreds.

The only injuries I've sustained thus far have been superficial and easily healed. I don't know whether this is a mark of my skill, or my luck, or of Nana's daily prayers finding an audience.

I'm told that several centuries ago, there were thousands like me. Now, I'm the only one I know. It's given me a fairly steady stream of work from small towns all over the coast of Nivstede, but it's never taken me this far inland before.

The baby dragon shakes their head. "Stolen by Ker'kachin."

I frown. The word is Draken, or at least it sounds like it ought to be, but it's not a word I recognize, and I don't instinctively understand it the way I ought to. "Ker'kachin?"

"Dragon—a massive dragon, bigger than Mother. No honor or pity in him. Does not act as a dragon should. He sleeps in a human dwelling and hurts them, he takes from all around him. He takes and takes from us until there isn't enough for all."

My stomach twists. "I thought dragons had no use for names."

"Normally do not. Names are for those who have earned them through great glory...or those who need them so others know to stay away. Ker'kachin is what was given to him, to mark him."

"What does it mean? Is it a Draken word?"

They tilt their head thoughtfully. "Mother says it is the old tongue...the tongue of our ancestors, before magic was a scarcity, before humans and dragons lived in the same world. Most do not use the old tongue anymore, most do not even remember it, but some words remain. Ker'kachin means *thief*."

I nod slowly. "I understand. Thank you for talking with me. The reason I came to find you was... Well, I'm with some friends down the path, and our horses sensed you. They're a bit frightened, so I came ahead to see what was happening."

"Was there trouble caused by us?"

"Oh, no—the horses aren't moving, but no one's hurt or anything."

"We will move ahead so you and your kin may keep moving."

"Thank you." I smile and bow my head slightly. "It's been a pleasure meeting you. I hope you and your nestmate get someplace safe soon."



They bow their head in return, before rearing themselves up to their full height, their wings extended. They turn to glance behind them and call out, “We leave now.”

In the near distance, from behind a large, moss-covered rock, comes a second swampy green dragon, this one even smaller than the first.

This one is so young, their tail hasn’t grown all its spikes yet, and their wings are shaky and uncertain as they furl them out, copying their sibling. They move closer, each of their four eyes shifting from me to their sibling and back again, regarding me with a mix of curiosity and nervousness. I bow my head to them, which they return in a quick dash of a nod.

They stumble over to us—they’re so uneven on their feet, they must’ve hatched less than two years ago, still only a baby. My heart aches at the thought of them living in this world without a mama. At least they have a sibling, like I have Nana.

Just before they take off, the dragon I’ve been speaking to looks to me and says, “Humans are headed inland, yes?”

“Yes, we are. We’re...actually going toward the dragon you told us about. I’m going to go talk to him and see if I can’t get him to behave himself.”

A snort escapes them, and I realize it’s the dragon version of a derisive chuckle. “Pride and bravery kill more than weapons.”

“I know,” I admit. “But I’m going to try anyway.”

The situation in Morwassen’s Pass is unlike anything else I’ve heard.

When Scyler, Danil, and Maryse first showed up on my doorstep, looking to hire me, I couldn’t believe what they told me.

Rather than the usual draconic lifestyle of taking what he needs by any means necessary and keeping to himself whenever possible, a dragon has settled right there in the city. This already made people uneasy, and they were right to be concerned; he’s taken to demanding a tithe of gold and other valuables in exchange for not turning the city into a pile of ash.

They found this out from their old Dragontongue, and when I asked what happened to him, I swear you could feel the air going out of the room. Finally, after exchanging an uneasy glance with Danil, Scyler said, “Dead. I guess he said something to offend him somehow.”

After hearing that, Nana tried to persuade me not to go. But I already knew by then that I was going to take the job, and I think she did, too. The city’s been held hostage for months now, and the king essentially told them it wasn’t his problem.

Sending me in to negotiate is their last-ditch effort to end this peacefully. If I fail, they'll have no choice but to attack, which will inevitably start a fight that could wipe the entire city off the map.

I've been trying not to think about that too much.

The baby dragon's yellow eyes look me up and down. "We wish you bountiful luck, human," they finally say.

"Lotte," I say, offering a small smile. "I'm called Lotte."

"Bountiful luck...Lotte." They say my name with an edge of hesitancy, like taking a bite of an unfamiliar food.

"Thank you. I'll need it."

With that, both dragons turn away from me, and I watch as they take a running start across the forest floor. I hug my arms and bounce on my feet, enjoying the way the ground rumbles beneath me.

Finally, the first dragon lifts off—then the second—and I'm left watching from the world beneath them as they flap their beautiful wings and send out small but powerful gusts of wind, causing the tree branches to ruffle and a few curled locks of my hair to fall out of its bun.

I grin. No matter how many times you watch it, there's nothing quite like a dragon in flight.

I stand there until they disappear above the trees, and pray that they'll find a permanent home soon. Someplace where gold is plenty, and they can eat well.

And I pray that I can get the dragon in Morwassen's Pass—Ker'kachin—to listen to me.

## Chapter Two

The sky is painted with dull shades of grayish blue and orange when we finally stop for the day, arriving at a tiny inn along the side of the road.

It's not much to look at; only three rooms for rent, with a couple gaps in the tiled roof and the overwhelming smell of boiled spinach coming from the kitchen. I wrinkle my nose and try not to gag as I walk past it, following the others up the stairs.

My companions consist of Scyler Prins and Danil Komatin, two members of Morwassen's Pass townsguard sent to collect me, and Maryse, a girl a year older than me, who is, so far as I can tell, a completely average citizen who is also here for some reason.

I like Scyler and Danil a lot. They're both nineteen, and much different from the stern and self-important guards posted around my hometown, Rosburnt.

Scyler is handsome, with intelligent eyes, perfectly clear warm brown skin, and glossy black hair, and they have an authoritative air about them that I can't help but envy. They're nice, but when they speak, people listen. I wish I had that sort of pull.

Looking at the two of them, you'd expect the broad-shouldered and strong-jawed Danil to be the sterner of the pair, but once a boyish smile appears on his fair, freckled face and you hear his snorting laugh, it's impossible to find him even slightly commanding.

But Maryse...well, I'm not too proud to admit I'm a little intimidated by a girl who barely reaches my shoulder and could probably be carried away by the wind. She reminds me of a housecat Nana and I used to have; quiet, proud, and not afraid to hiss and scratch if she's irritated. If the silence with which she responds to most of my attempts at talking to her are any indication, I don't think she likes me.

“It’s your turn to take the floor,” I remind Maryse, tossing my bag on one of the room’s two rickety beds. Dust comes off the mattress in a small cloud, making both of us sneeze.

Most places we’ve stayed have had only two beds to a room, and the budget allowed for this trip covers only a single room per night. The first couple places, I offered to share with Maryse, put a wall of blankets between us or something if that would make her more comfortable, but she declined in favor of alternating.

Scyler and Danil have had no such issues. They’re engaged and blissfully in love, and I swear they snore in perfect harmony.

Maryse presses down on the mattress with her hand, and cringes. “I may well be more comfortable than you are tonight.”

“I think you could be right about that.”

She begins to get situated on the floor, combing her fingers through her choppy, shoulder-length auburn hair. Somehow, twelve hours in the back of a wagon, with all the wind and bugs and uncomfortable terrain that implies, has left her looking the loveliest of us all. Her fair skin is flushed with the cold, but the red in her cheeks makes her look lively and active, not like me. When I’m flushed, I resemble a badly painted porcelain doll.

Maryse was the first one of them I saw when I opened my front door and found them all on my doorstep, and it took me a moment to notice anybody else. Her eyes are this gorgeous shade of green, like the hillside in the summer. It’s rather distracting.

Scyler and Danil have shared a bit about themselves as we’ve made our way west.

Danil’s talked about his childhood in Trunzlat and his training with the townsguard after he and his family immigrated to Nivstede a couple years ago.

Scyler’s told me about their siblings and the family business, a restaurant in Morwassen’s Pass, and how much their mother wishes they’d chosen a safer career.

But Maryse? She’s a brick wall.

She hasn’t told me anything about her family or friends, or what she does all day. She prefers the realm of one-word answers and responding to questions with questions. Eventually, I gave up.

Pushing up their sleeves, Scyler moves toward the candles that sit on the windowsill. Their skin has to be exposed for only those few seconds for the

chill to get to them; goosebumps begin to appear on their muscled arms before they manage to get the candles lit. Once they manage it, they collapse to sit on the other bed, finally taking their thick black hair out of its bun.

They run their hands over their face, letting out an exhausted sigh. Even in the flickering, uneasy light the candles provide, I can see bags under their eyes.

“We should get into Morwassen’s Pass tomorrow,” they say. “I say we go to bed early and hit the ground running at first light. The sooner we get Lotte in front of the rest of the townsguard, the better.”

I nod, leaning down to untie my boots. The floorboards squeak and groan with every move. “I’ve been meaning to ask, where will I be staying once we’re there?”

“You’ll be given a room at a boardinghouse in town,” Danil says. His words are deep and blunted at the ends. He’s learned to speak Stedi as well as any native, but his accent is unmistakably Turnish. I’ve heard him speak a little Turnish with Scyler, the gravelly and complex language sounding effortless in his mouth, and downright haphazard in theirs. But they’re working on it; they say they want to be able to talk to Danil’s extended family at the wedding. “Unless you’re due to meet with the dragon or the townsguard, you’ll be able to go wherever you like. Stay within the city limits and there shouldn’t be any trouble.”

“And how long do you think it’ll be until I can talk with the dragon?”

He sprawls out on the bed next to Scyler and groans as they affectionately pat his stomach. An absolute mountain of a man, this place’s beds are too small for him. His feet, still in his boots, dangle off the end. “Not long,” he says. “He collects his tithe every week.”

“Every week?” I frown, looking to Scyler and Maryse in confusion. They both simply nod. “But you said he’s been there for months.”

“He has.”

“But—but he needs to eat only once a year. He must have more than enough by now. What’s the point in taking more?”

“That is exactly what we hope you can ask him without getting yourself killed.” Scyler nods toward Maryse. “We prefer to send her in these days.”

“Seriously? Her?”

Maryse rolls her eyes at me. “Thanks a lot.”

“Sorry. I... You’re a civilian, right? I’m surprised they’re allowed to send you in there with him.”

“We know it’s unorthodox,” Scyler admits. “But he kept injuring members of the townsguard who brought him his tithe, and after he killed our last Dragontongue, there was real trouble getting volunteers. Our captain tried to engage himself and nearly lost a leg for his trouble. So when Maryse volunteered, he agreed to try it.”

“After making me sign a contract promising not to make any legal trouble if I got hurt,” she adds with a snort.

“Obviously, we don’t send her in alone,” they say quickly. “She always has a guard escorting her. At first, it was thought to be a suicide mission—but the guy who went in with her the first time figured, well, if he was going to die, he’d rather die protecting somebody. Figured he’d buy her enough time to run away when things went south.”

“But they didn’t,” Maryse says. “For some reason, he lets me come and go, and so long as he kept his hand off his sword and didn’t say anything, he didn’t mind the guard too much, either. He’ll tolerate a few others—the ones who have enough sense give him the money and get out—but it usually goes smoother when it’s me.”

“That’s...bizarre.” I scratch the back of my head, brow crinkling in thought.

She shrugs. “It works.”

“Aren’t you scared?”

“Hardly. How often do you get to see a dragon like that up close?”

My head perks up. “I didn’t realize you were interested in dragons.”

“I don’t understand how anyone *isn’t*. They’re incredible.”

Scyler lets out a small chuckle. “Some of us prefer to be interested from at least a mile away.”

Maryse shakes her head. “Oh, but then you can hardly see anything. My father and I got close to a hatchling nest once, and it was... it was absolutely beautiful.” A small smile curves her lips as she glances back to me. “Though I suppose it all must seem dull to you by now.”

I laugh. “Trust me, dragons are anything but. I can’t believe you got close to a nest, though. Mama dragons will break you in half before they let anyone get near their kids.”

“Well, okay, we got to look for only about half a minute before she came back and we had to run,” she admits. “It was worth it. Besides, they were miniatures—the babies were the size of my fist, and Mama was only two feet long.”



“Trust me, miniatures can still do real damage. I once saw one bite through a brick like it was bread.”

She winces. “Well, obviously I’m a little more careful when dealing with the one in the castle. Besides, the townsguard pays my rent as long as I keep doing it.”

“Your family must appreciate the break.”

Maryse turns her gaze away from me, the smile slipping, and her back becomes rigid and stiff. “They’re not in the picture.”

“Oh. I’m—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“I know.” She shrugs as she reaches up to unclasp the fastening on her cloak. “It’s not so dramatic as I made it sound. I live on my own, that’s all.”

Her tone is blasé, but what she’s saying is absurd to me. It’s not unusual for people her age to have jobs and help their family put food on the table—look at me. Fifteen is the age at which free schooling stops, and most people begin their first apprenticeships, assuming their family doesn’t have the means or desire to pay for higher education.

I’m the only Dragontongue for miles around, so I had no apprenticeship.

While my peers had mentors to teach them the ways of blacksmithing, cooking, medicine, or any other number of things, I was left to figure things out on my own. I worked mostly off old writings, and a fair bit of trial and error.

Nana says it’s a miracle I wasn’t killed, and she may be right.

A misstep in my early days earned me a burn wound on the back of my left arm, going from wrist to elbow, and another got me a slash scar on my calf. But that was years ago, and I learned a great deal from the injuries I have sustained. Namely, I learned that even the gentlest dragon is to be treated with a great deal of respect and a greater deal of caution.

I’m the primary breadwinner for my house, but that’s because it’s just Nana and me, and she can’t work full time anymore. It’s an unusual setup, but not nearly so unusual as a seventeen-year-old living alone and having to provide solely for herself.

In Nivstede, families traditionally stay together. Even after children grow up and get married, they live with the rest of the family—sure, they might move in with their spouse’s relatives, but they don’t go off entirely on their own.

Still, I decide not to press the issue with Maryse. I know what it’s like for people to talk. Neighbors couldn’t resist giving commentary when Mother

left, leaving her only child alone in the care of her mother-in-law.

I think my parents would've liked to have more children, but Papa passed when I was fairly young, and Mother marrying again was never on the table.

After an awkward pause, Danil sits up and looks at me. "Those dragons from earlier," he says. "You say they know the dragon in town?"

I nod. "They actually gave him a name. Dragons don't really do names. But they say he's called *Ker'kachin*." The word rolls effortlessly off my tongue. One perk of being a Dragontongue is that speaking Draken comes as naturally to me as breathing.

"Ker-catch-in?" he repeats, the syllables clumsy on his lips. "So, they met him? Did they tell you anything useful?"

"Not really. They were both very young, and they didn't engage with him for long. He stole their food supply." I bite the inside of my cheek in thought. "It's really strange. Dragons don't normally steal from one another unless they're really desperate."

"Perhaps he was desperate, then," Maryse offers. "Gold reserves are drying up. Humans would kill for what's left, why not a dragon?"

"You could be right. They also said he killed their mother."

She lets out a short sigh. "I wish I was surprised, but, well—we've seen what he'll do to guards who anger him."

"Honestly, I'm not convinced talking him down is possible," Scyler admits. "I mean, we're still going to let you try. I *want* it to be possible. But he's violent, and greedy as they come. He doesn't seem like the sort to listen to reason."

"And what's your suggestion?" Maryse asks sharply. "The townsguard isn't equipped to make an attack on him. It'd be a massacre."

I try to ignore the chill running down my spine at that thought.

"I know." They hold up their hands defensively. "Like I said, I want the diplomacy thing to work. I don't want any more human casualties."

"And what about non-human casualties?"

They roll their eyes. "I quit caring about *his* life when he started gouging us for a ransom. He deserves whatever he gets."

"Our country won't send murderers to the gallows anymore, why should it be different for him? I don't like what he's doing, either, but he shouldn't pay for it with his life. It won't bring anyone back."

I look to Maryse, surprised to hear my thoughts echoed so perfectly in her words.

“This isn’t about revenge,” Scyler says. “At this point, it’d be self-defense.”

“And damage control,” Danil adds. “He’s proven himself to be ruthless. We can’t sit around and wait for him to make good on his threats, can we?”

“I’m kind of with Maryse,” I say. “Killing a dragon isn’t like hunting a deer—they’re much closer to us than other animals, at least in the way their brains work. I mean, if a dragon is lunging at you to rip your head off, I don’t think you’d be wrong to protect yourself, but if you don’t *have* to resort to violence, you shouldn’t. They can understand reason, so why not use reason?”

“Oh, I think he understands reason,” they say. “I don’t think he cares. No offense, Lotte, I know you’re good at your job. But I want you to go into this with realistic expectations. The second he thinks he’s putting you at more risk than is reasonable, the captain *will* pull you out and send you home. You’ll be paid regardless, so don’t do anything foolish because you want to protect the fire-breathing bastard.”

The muscles in my jaw tense as I look away, collecting myself with a sharp inhale through my teeth. I get what they’re saying. I really do.

But damned if I’m not going to try. I am *good* at this, and, in spite of what he’s done, I want to keep him alive. There are so few dragons left in the world compared to generations past. The death of even a single one is a tragedy.

“I promise not to be reckless,” I say, finally meeting their eyes. Their gaze is dark brown, almost black, and as captivating as the night sky. “I promise, so long as you promise to give me a chance. Let me do this my way. I don’t want anyone getting hurt—not even him.”

They nod once. “I can’t guarantee what my captain will do, but I’m in your corner. Be careful.”

## Chapter Three

The first thing I see of Morwassen's Pass are the towers of the former royal estate, peering out above some trees ahead. The capital was moved to another city when my grandmother was a child, and the royal family went with it, but their old home remains.

I squint, trying to get a better look at the towers.

Of the three, two no longer have flags, and the one that's still there is tattered and faded. You can't see the royal crest anymore, a giant white owl against a pale purple mountain.

Ivy, overgrown and untrimmed, crawls over every stone and climbs all the way up the building. The gray stone is cracked and crumbling, the paint on the tiled, pointed roofs chipping away.

This, I'm told, is where the dragon has been residing. Most dragons prefer caves or forests or the tops of mountains, but this one has made himself at home in a crumbling palace.

If you're going to take a town hostage and act like a despotic tyrant, you may as well live like one, too.

"It looks like it's been abandoned for centuries," I say. "Not just a few decades."

"There haven't exactly been restoration efforts," Maryse admits. In the sunlight, the red of her hair is brighter, more vivid, almost maroon. It's nice. "It's sat empty my whole life. Well, until...you know."

Once we're past the city gates, our entrance into Morwassen's Pass causes the wagon to slow to a crawl.

People are walking and standing in the roads, and no one is in a particular hurry to get out of the way. I sit up straighter and turn outward, taking in the sight of somewhere new.

The streets are lined with buildings, crammed together like pieces of a

puzzle, barely any breathing room between them. Most of the shops have apartments in the floors above them, and I have to lean my head back to see the roofs of most of them.

Sometimes, if I look close enough, I see flashes of tiny wings or scales dashing into alleys or flying between buildings. I grin. A lot of miniature dragons have made themselves comfortable in cities; it's easier to pilfer little bits of gold and silver from people's houses and poorly guarded stores than from deep within the earth. I think some of them have also found they face less of a threat from people than they do from bigger dragons. There are two who hang around the general store back in Rosburnt; no one's asked me to do anything about them, so I don't. Maybe it's because miniature dragons don't need to eat as much to sustain themselves, so it's not as big a problem to lose a little gold now and then. Maybe it's because rats and raccoons are terrified of them, so they make for great pest control.

Or maybe it's because miniature dragons are just so *cute*.

Not that I'd tell them that. I said as much to one of the ones in Rosburnt, when I was twelve and didn't know any better. Once he realized what "cute" meant, he responded by lunging for my foot and attaching himself to my boot. He was too young to have all his teeth yet, so it didn't hurt, but it took ages to shake him off.

On the northeastern edge of town is the townsguard's office, along with their stables. It takes us a long while to get there, Danil and Scyler trying doggedly to get people to move out of our way.

When we finally arrive, I see that the townsguard's building is covered in a faded, chipped layer of lavender paint. Two men wearing deep purple uniforms identical to that of Scyler and Danil stand out front.

Spears in hand, they both look bored, amiably chatting to each other and looking up only when Scyler lets out a short whistle.

"You're back!" one of the men says.

We slow to a complete stop in front of them, and I get to my feet, stretching out my shoulders and back.

"This must be the Dragontongue." The other man extends a calloused hand toward me, and I take it gratefully, being extra-careful as I climb down. "I have to admit, you're younger than I pictured. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were a child."

I give him an awkward smile. "I'm sixteen."

"But she has plenty of experience," Scyler adds, climbing off their horse

and attempting to flatten the wrinkles in their uniform. It's a hopeless endeavor. "And she comes highly recommended. Lotte knows what she's doing."

"In that case, welcome to Morwassen's Pass. You should let Captain know you're here, I'm sure he'll want to talk to you."

Danil climbs down and takes the reins of both horses in his hands. He gives Scyler a peck on the lips and says, "I'll get these two back to the stables and see if Lotte's boarding is ready yet."

Scyler raises an eyebrow. "Hm, you can't fool me. You don't want to sit through the meeting."

He's turned and started to walk away, leading the horses behind him. "Sorry, darling, I could not hear you," he calls, not even pretending to turn around. "Would you mind speaking up? I'm already so far away."

They roll their eyes, but they're already chuckling in spite of themselves. "Get back here and face our superiors with me, you coward!" they yell to his retreating back. "It's what a loving fiancé would do!"

"Oops, look at that, I am entirely out of earshot, too bad, nothing I can do, oh well, bye!"

I laugh as I watch him go. "Is the captain really that bad?"

Scyler shrugs. "Eh. He's mostly okay. Good man, works himself half to death for this city. It's some of his inner circle. Most of them are pretty good soldiers, but they all want his job as soon as he retires or bites it, and it turns them into a pack of vultures. Can't get through a meeting without a posturing contest."

"Have fun with that," Maryse adds. The guard who helped me down is about to offer the same to her, but she effortlessly climbs out before his hand's extended. She looks me up and down, and then flicks her eyes over to Scyler. "I'd see to it that she gets cleaned up before she talks to anyone."

My jaw drops. "I am *right here*."

"Okay then." She looks at me. "Get cleaned up. You look like you've been on the road for a week."

"That's because I have been. So have you!"

"I'm not the one with leaves in her hair."

My hand automatically flies up to touch my mane of curls, and sure enough, a dead brown leaf has tucked itself in there at some point.

I feel myself blush, which only makes me feel worse. I don't like people to know they got to me.



Scyler's gaze is stern and steely. "Get out of here, Maryse."

"Gladly." Without another word, she collects her bag from the wagon and walks away, disappearing into the crowd on the street within seconds.

With her gone, the heat slowly fades from my face, but my mouth is twisted into an anxious pout.

"Don't mind her," they say, patting my back. "She's always been a bit of a brat. I think half the reason Captain sent her with us was to get her out of his hair for a little while." They give me a quick once-over. "I'll show you to the washroom. You can freshen up, change clothes in there before I tell him we're back."

"You all have your own washroom?" I say, a little jealous.

"Left over from when this was the capital. Mind you, the upkeep is hell—we can't really afford it. But I think some of us would literally rather die than give it up. Half the incentive they give for joining the service is not having to use the public baths anymore."

"What's the other half?"

"Free food."

I grab my bag from the back of the wagon and dig around until I find the only fully clean set of clothes in there, the one I've been saving specifically for my arrival.

Scyler and Danil advised me to look my best when I meet their captain, and, after what Maryse said, I'm especially determined to make a good first impression.

The clothes are nothing special, a simple pair of trousers and a dark green tunic that I hardly wear. It was actually my mother's first; it's one of many things she chose not to take with her when she left.

When I wear it, I look a little bit like her—I'm taller and I have a bigger nose, like my father did, but still, the resemblance is there if you squint.

I'm shown to the washroom—really a wash *building*, a small structure tucked away behind the office. According to a sign out front, unauthorized use of the baths is strictly forbidden, but according to Scyler, everyone has let a friend or relative sneak in at least once. After a brief, ice-cold splash of water and a rigorous scrubbing to get rid of the dirt and sweat on my face, and a futile attempt to get my hair under control before I give up and tie it back like I always do, I change my clothes and meet Scyler inside.

...

I don't think my posture has ever been more rigid and perfect than it is right now, sitting at the long, wooden table in the main hall.

Maps of the city and the entire country cover the walls around us, and the table is littered with carvings and stains from years gone by.

This room could seat up to fifty people, but right now, there's only a handful: Scyler, the captain of the townsguard, a few other soldiers, and me.

Scyler sits next to me—it makes me feel like they're here to be my advocate, though I've been hired already—and most of the guards take up the other chairs around the table.

The captain sits directly across from me, and I fold my hands in my lap to keep myself from playing with my fingers.

Only one soldier remains standing. He has blond hair so pale, I think he must be an old man at first glance, until I look closer at his face and see he's probably only in his twenties or thirties. He hovers behind the captain, slightly off to the side but always within arm's reach, like a gnat in full uniform.

The captain looks me up and down, like he, too, was expecting someone older and more impressive.

"You're Lotte Meer." His voice has a ragged and tired quality to it, which pairs well with the dark circles under his eyes and his grayed beard.

"Yes." I extend my hand across the table. "Pleased to meet you."

"I wish I could say the same." His skin is rough and weathered, and as he draws his hand back, I notice a scar across his palm. I almost cringe in sympathy. A slash from a dragon. "Perhaps if we were meeting under better circumstances..." He trails off and shakes his head. "No matter. I'm Captain Hessel Vikker. Everything you do or plan to do in relation to our problem, you report to me first."

"Understood."

"The next tithe has to be delivered in two days' time." He sighs and rubs his forehead with his hand, and has the look of someone who would love to collapse in the nearest tavern and drown his responsibilities in mead. "I think it would be best if you delivered it. He'll be less likely to attack if you don't show up empty-handed."

I nod. "Makes sense."

"Do you know what you'll say to him?"

"I've been thinking it over. I think it's best if I take some time to build a relationship, try to coax him into talking to me gradually."

He sighs. “We don’t have a lot of time for ‘gradually.’”

“I—I know.”

“I don’t think you do.” He holds up a hand before I can protest. “Not your fault. I don’t believe you’ve been given the full story.” He looks very, very tired. “When our previous Dragontongue was attacked, he managed to live long enough to get to the infirmary.”

“What happened?” I ask, wanting to avoid the missteps of the previous messenger.

“From what he told us, he got a bit too close to the dragon’s hoard—the dragon made a grab for him and tossed him away. We’re not sure if his intent was to kill, but his claws certainly did a lot of damage.” A grimace flashes across his face. “Never seen so much blood coming out of one man before. The medics did everything they could—tonics, potions, they brought in a couple witches to try to help—but once he lost the leg, there wasn’t much hope. The most the witches could do was ease the pain. Before he died, he was telling us what happened. The dragon, he...he upped his price. He doesn’t want gold and gems anymore.”

Scyler sits up, and a few murmurs emerge from the other soldiers. Only a couple, the blond man included, look like this is old news.

Vikker continues. “He wants a magical artifact, and he gave us three months to find and present him with one. That was two months ago. We have until the next new moon or the entire city will be burned to the ground, and we may not have the manpower to stop it. Even if we manage to evacuate everyone, that will leave us with five hundred thousand citizens with no home, no income, and nowhere to go.”

A shudder passes down my spine, and I can’t speak at first.

This is okay, because Scyler does it for me.

“What the *hell*?” Their captain lets out an astonished chuckle and opens his mouth to reprimand them, but they keep talking. “Sorry—all due respect, what the hell, *sir*?”

“Guard Prins, please compose yourself.”

“I’m composed! I’m also wondering why I wasn’t informed of this.”

There’s a grumble of agreement from some of the other soldiers, but Vikker speaks over them. “You and most of the townsguard are not ranked high enough to be authorized to handle magical artifacts under most circumstances.” He slumps back in his chair. “While you were gone, I was finally able to persuade the crown that this is a true emergency, and that I

need every soldier on this. I plan to officially brief everyone tomorrow morning.”

“So we’ve spent about sixty days with most people knowing only a fraction of the information, because of bureaucratic bullshit from the capital. *Lovely.*”

He doesn’t disagree. He just looks back at me. “You can see why I’m nervous about letting you take your time. We simply don’t have much of it.”

I nod, chewing on my bottom lip, before I suddenly remember where I am and force myself to stop. “I understand. But if I ask him to leave right away, he’ll never listen to me.”

“So you hope to earn some trust.”

“Exactly. I’ll use my first visits to try to find out more about him—where he’s from, why he’s doing this. Then, I’ll try to persuade him to leave on his own.”

He nods slowly. “All right. We had our last Dragontongue tell him to go immediately. Perhaps we moved too quickly. But remember, time is of the essence. We’ll keep looking for an artifact in the meantime, but...”

He doesn’t need to finish the sentence.

Genuine magical artifacts are hard to find these days, and harder to take. Most won’t sell for less than a royal treasury’s worth of jere, and the museums that have managed to acquire them won’t give them up for anything.

Suddenly, I understand why they hired me despite thinking negotiation is doomed to fail. It may be the better of two impossible options.

“Guard Prins,” he’s addressing Scyler now, “will you accompany her?”

They begin to nod, saying, “Yes sir,” but I cut them off.

“I’d prefer to go in alone, if I may.”

The blond soldier snorts.

He’s older and taller than Scyler, but I have no difficulty believing they could toss him over their shoulder and carry him right out of this room with little trouble.

Something along those lines seems to occur to him when they fix him with an icy stare. The appalled smirk suddenly drops off his face, and he clears his throat before saying, “You can’t seriously expect us to send a little girl into a dragon’s den on her own? She’ll never survive.”

I falter, and Scyler speaks up. “I think we should let her do this her way,” they say. “At least at first. She’s been taking jobs like this for years; she knows what she’s doing.”

“Does she?” the blond soldier asks.

“I’ve been hired to negotiate,” I say. “Let me negotiate.”

He ignores me and looks to Vikker. “Sir—I don’t think she can help us.”

Vikker looks almost as irritated as I feel. He closes his eyes for a moment before opening them again. “You’ve made your thoughts on this matter perfectly clear in the last few weeks, Lieutenant Basvaan.”

“And I still think it’s a bad idea. With all due respect, we need to be thinking about war. Real war. Negotiation won’t help us there. Strength and the element of surprise will. We ought to be making a plan of attack, planning an ambush, not sitting here listening to a *teenager* talk about how she’s going to make friends with the monster—it’s a complete and utter waste of our time and resources.”

“You’ve made your concerns known.” Vikker’s jaw clenches. “I thank you for your candor and your input, but as your superior, I am ordering you to back down. Let Miss Meer do her job. If it doesn’t work, we’ll revisit your ambush idea.”

The blond soldier puffs himself up and glares at me. I reflexively glare right back.

Vikker turns his eyes back to me. “You understand your contract will place the responsibility fully on your shoulders if you get injured? You’ll of course be given medical treatment by the city, but I don’t want to be dragged into court because you got bitten.”

“I understand. I promise, I know what I’m getting myself into. I don’t do this job because it’s cushy and safe—I have the scars to prove it.”

The corners of his mouth quirk up into something resembling a smile, and I see a flicker of respect dash across his eyes. “All right. We’ll have your contract drawn up and sent to you to sign, and in two days, you’ll bring the tithe to the dragon.” He looks to Scyler. “Will you escort Miss Meer to where she’ll be staying before you officially go off duty?”

“Be glad to, sir.”

We all stand, and Captain Vikker shakes my hand again. “I hope you don’t take my hesitation as doubting your abilities. You have to understand why I’m uneasy about this plan of yours.”

“I do.” I’m uneasy, too, but I can’t admit that to him. “I promise I’ll do everything I can to help.”

“Much appreciated. I’ll see you soon, Miss Meer.”

Scyler leads me out of the room, and I catch one last glimpse at Lieutenant

Basvaan.

He looks like he wants to pick up a chair and throw it, but with his superior right there, all he can do is contort his face into an ugly, irritated sneer, and clench and unclench one of his fists over and over. He catches me looking at him and shoots me a glare that feels almost poisonous, my gut twisting.

I don't know if he's angrier that Vikker didn't listen to his idea, or that he's listening to mine.



## Chapter Four

It doesn't take me long to get settled into my room at the boardinghouse.

I didn't bring much with me—I don't own much to bring in the first place.

The room is small, barely space enough for a dresser, a bed, and a single chair, but it'll be fine while I'm here. A dirt-streaked window faces the main street, four stories below me.

I collapse into bed not long after the sky goes dark, too tired from being on the road and meeting Captain Vikker to even eat dinner. Burrowing under the thin blanket provided to me, I shut my eyes and wait for sleep to overtake me.

Instead, I find myself tossing and turning in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar city, trying desperately to ignore the unfamiliar noises coming from outside.

Back home, I fall asleep every night to the sound of crickets, and wind rustling the trees, and raccoons burrowing in the trash. Morwassen's Pass offers me a lullaby of people out on the streets at all hours of the night, doors opening and closing, and footsteps on the ceiling above me.

Morwassen's Pass accounts for one eighth of Nivstede's population.

Thoughts creep in of what will happen to this place if I fail.

*No. No.* I can't think about that. It never helps. I'm not going to fail.

I am *not* going to fail.

I *can't*.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try not to see this city burned to ash.

It is a very, very long night.

...

"You look like absolute shit."

I groan, lifting my head off my hand and looking up. Maryse is in front of me at breakfast, looking pretty and totally refreshed, eyes bright.

I know I've got eyebags, and I don't even want to know how bad my hair looks. I stuffed it into a braid and hoped for the best.

"Good morning to you, too," I mumble. "What are you doing here?"

She takes the seat next to mine. "I live here. Aren't you going to eat?"

I shrug, picking at my food for appearance's sake. I've reached that level of exhaustion where the sight of food makes me nauseous.

"I take it you don't like your room much," Maryse says, digging into her fried eggs with the vigor of a starving bear.

"The room's fine, it's the *noise*."

"Oh that. Well, if it's any comfort to you, I thought your neck of the woods was too quiet to sleep. Turnabout's fair play."

"Did you say you live here? I didn't see you last night."

"I'm on one of the upper floors—long-term tenants go up there. Bigger apartments and we're not packed in so close." She brushes a hand through her auburn hair, which somehow looks better after she musses it up. "How'd the meeting with the townsguard go yesterday?"

"The captain seems okay, but his lieutenant is the *worst*."

"Lieutenant Basvaan?"

"Yeah, him. He called me a 'little girl' and got all defensive when the captain took my side over his."

Maryse lets out a short laugh, clear and ringing. "Oh, that sounds like him. He doesn't like being upstaged."

"He should get used to it. He's going to be upstaged a lot in life if he's always this insecure."

She laughs again, and the sound makes me smile wider. Her eyes crinkle when she laughs, and I wonder how many people get to see this. I don't think she so much as chuckled our entire trip here.

"Be glad you have to deal with him only when his boss is there. With no one who can keep him in check, he's insufferable."

"Do you see him around town a lot?"

"More than either of us would like." She shrugs. "We steer clear of each other as best we can, but sometimes the whole family ends up in one spot, and then things get ugly."

I blink, sure my tiredness caused me to misunderstand. "Family?"

She nods with a rueful grimace. "He's my brother. Unfortunately."

I stare at her as it suddenly occurs to me that I never did learn what her last name is.

“You never told me you had a brother,” I say, though I have no idea why she would have. She and the blond soldier look nothing alike at first glance, but when I recall his face, I can see small, significant resemblances. They both have high cheekbones and a certain squareness of the jaw, and a proud, distant demeanor.

“Well, I do—two, actually, plus a sister.”

“But you live alone?”

Maryse fidgets in her seat before answering. “Yes. Cornelis—that’s his first name, call him Corny if you want to see his face get all purple—is sort of the white sheep of the family, I guess, joining the townsguard and everything. The rest of us all work in the appraisals business. We have a shop in town—I need to get back there today; it’s been closed the whole time I was gone. I’m the only real employee right now.”

“Appraisals? So you check to see if jewels are real, things like that?”

“That’s part of it, yes. But my family specializes in magical appraisals; spotting real enchanted artifacts among all the forgeries—and there are a *lot* of forgeries. Pa taught me how to do it when I was a kid.”

“But you still get to see real magic,” I say, a hint of envy creeping into my tone. Back home, the only magical items around are a few waterproof cloaks, and a horseshoe that hangs on the wall of the local tavern that curses anyone who touches it with overwhelming dizziness. It’s a popular pastime for the locals to take a couple shots and see who can hang on longest. What about this is fun is beyond me.

“Only sometimes,” she says. “Mostly old books with runes and spells written in them. My favorite was a field guide to all the dragon types in the Faorel Isles. I couldn’t read the text, and all the runes faded decades ago, but the diagrams and portraits were beautiful.” A fond smile creeps over her face. “I still have it in my room.”

“Your father didn’t want to sell it?”

She shakes her head. “Once he saw how much I liked it, he said he didn’t think he’d get much money for it, anyway. Pa was always more interested in the flashier stuff. He uncovered all kinds of things. Some dishes that do the cooking for you, a gown that can’t ever be stained or torn, some stones that vibrated if someone near them told a lie—though he figured out the trick to throwing them off pretty quickly—a necklace that lets you change shape—oh, there was also a sword that glowed that we got a pretty good price for.”

“What else did it do?”

“Nothing, it just glowed.” She shrugs. “People will pay a lot for something that looks interesting even if it’s not very useful.”

I laugh. “Magic is magic.”

“Too true. ’Course, there isn’t as much magic as there used to be, so it’s the regular appraisals that usually pay the bills. You wouldn’t believe how many men try to pass tin off as silver and expect their wives or mistresses not to notice something’s off.” She rolls her eyes. “Child’s play, really. But a few years ago, Cornelis decides he’s too good for the family business and runs off to play with swords, and then Horats and Letja decided to go and strike out on their own, too.”

“Do you see them much?”

“Nah. We’re not close. I’m the youngest by kind of a lot, and I think they all were sick of family togetherness by the time I came along.”

“What about your parents?”

“Like I told you before—not in the picture. Pa’s out of town, and my mother passed away when I was a baby.” She says it plainly. If it upsets her to talk about it, it doesn’t show on her face. Even so, a twinge of guilt twists in my stomach.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault. Besides, I’m fine on my own. I like running the shop; it needs to be open only a few hours a day, and no one gives me grief for turning up late or eating on the job when it’s just me.”

Silence falls between us as she goes back to eating, but it’s too awkward for me to bear.

“My parents are gone, too,” I blurt out.

She looks over at me but says nothing.

“My father died when I was nine, and after he died, Mother was... She sort of withdrew. She couldn’t take it. After a while she left me with my grandmother and came to the city to look for work. So, um...I’m sorry, not because it’s my fault, but because I know it’s not any fun.”

Her gaze is unwavering, but then softens. “No,” she concedes, “it’s not. Your mother came here?”

I nod. “About four years ago. She, um...she wasn’t doing very well after Papa died, and she was having trouble finding a steady job.” I don’t mention that the reason for this is that she retreated to the bottom of a wine bottle, and blew through every second chance everyone back home gave her. After three years, she had no choice but to move if she wanted to get anyone to give her

a job. “Her family’s from Morwassen’s Pass, so she came here. I stayed back with Nana. That was about when I was starting to make money as a Dragontongue, and I didn’t want to have to start over someplace new anyway, so it all worked out.”

“Do you think you’ll see her on this visit?”

That’s quite a question. Mother wrote to me a little bit for the first couple of years since she moved, but after a while, the letters...stopped.

I sent at least a dozen letters to the town addressed to her but never got anything back. I never heard from her family, either, but that wasn’t a surprise. I know she ran off to marry Papa against their wishes, and I know their family name—Suren—but not much else. I’m not sure they even know I exist.

She would’ve told them, wouldn’t she?

But then why wouldn’t they at least let me know if something had happened to her? And I do have to assume something happened. I don’t know if she died or if she’s maybe in jail or something. But clearly, *something* happened. I’d like to know what, but it’s been so long since I talked to her.

And she wasn’t really herself after Papa died. She was...angry. At the world for taking her husband from her, at Papa for dying, at me for reminding her of him, at Nana for outliving him, at about everything. And I bore the brunt of that anger a lot of the time. Which I understand, I guess. Children make easy targets.

We didn’t leave things on the best of terms, and I’m not sure what I’d say if I saw her. Or what I’ll do if I find out she did pass away and I missed her funeral.

I can’t tell Maryse any of this, though. We barely know each other and she has enough to deal with. I just say, “Maybe, if there’s time. I’m supposed to meet Ker’kachin tomorrow.”

“Am I to go with you?”

“No. I’m trying it on my own first.” I frown as something occurs to me. “Hey, why did you come to get me? If you’re the one who he’s less likely to attack, I’m surprised the townsguard let you leave.”

Her face lights up. “*Thank you!*” she says, pounding the table once with her palm. “That’s what I said when they told me I was going. It makes no sense, right? Scyler and Danil didn’t want me to go, I didn’t want to go, but still, Captain Vikker insisted I go. He said some shit about how my ‘skills would be helpful’ in retrieving you. I think Cornelis must’ve put him up to it.”

“Why? Even if you two don’t get along, wouldn’t he rather have the dragon situation slightly under control?”

“You’d think.” She drums her fingers thoughtfully. “I think he needed me out of the way for some reason, but I can’t think for what. It’d be just like him to use his position to mess with me—but I can’t figure out what he’d want.”

I shrug. “I don’t know him well enough to say. But since I’ll be dealing with Ker’kachin from now on, you’ll have plenty of time to figure it out.”

“Well then.” She pushes my plate closer to me, and I wince. “Eat up. You’ll need all the strength you can get. And do try not to get yourself killed, all right?”

The corner of my mouth curves into a half smile. “Aw, are you worried?”

“Worried I’ll be tasked with retrieving your corpse? Yes, very.”

I clutch my chest and pretend to get choked up. “Stop, you’re being too sweet, I’ll start crying.”

“If you cry, I’ll move seats and pretend I don’t know you. Now eat—and tell me how you plan to not die, so I can poke holes in your plan and tell you all the ways that it’s going to backfire.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“Hey, I don’t often provide this service for free. Enjoy it while it lasts.”

I finally force myself to eat one bite, then another, then another, each time getting a little easier than the last. I don’t rush or eat huge amounts at once, and finally, slowly, the nausea begins to leave me.

I talk Maryse through the basics of my plan: present the tithe to Ker’kachin and try to learn more about him. “It’s not much of a plan yet,” I admit. “But I’m easing my way in. The last thing I want is to spook him or make him lose his temper.”

“There’s one thing I don’t understand about your whole...thing,” she says, dabbing her mouth clean with a gray, stained napkin that looks like it was once white. “I know Dragontongues are born with the gift, but I don’t understand how it *works*.”

“Honestly? Neither do we.”

“I mean, do you hear dragons speaking Stedi—I assume that’s your first language?”

“It is, but no, it’s actually kind of the opposite.” I bite the inside of my cheek as I try to think of how I can put this in a way that makes sense. “They speak Draken, and I hear Draken, but something in my brain...filters it.

People can learn any language, but Draken is so different that it takes years, especially because it's not something you can really take a class in or read a book about. The only people who have managed to learn it lived among dragons for years, and even they never learned to *speak* it—just understand common phrases and words. I never learned it, it came sort of...built-in."

"Built-in?" She frowns.

"Um...okay, do you speak anything besides Stedi?"

"I know Turnish. My father's parents grew up there, so he grew up speaking it—he taught it to my siblings and me when we were kids. He and I would sometimes use it when we didn't want to worry about eavesdroppers."

"Okay, so, when you hear a sentence in Turnish, you don't hear it in Stedi, right? You hear Turnish, and then your brain translates. And that's a process, right?"

"Sure. I mean, some phrases, I know so well, I don't have to think about them anymore to know what they mean."

"Exactly! My brain does that for Draken, except I never needed to learn it or study it, it *does* it."

"So it's basically your second language."

"One I've been speaking for a *long* time." I take another bite of my eggs. "Draken is so different from any human language, some things don't translate properly, but my brain does the job well enough that I can usually fill in the gaps."

"Like what?" she asks, leaning in, her elbows on the table. This is the most interested she's been in anything I've had to say. The feeling of her eyes watching me so closely, her waiting for me to speak, is a strange feeling. But good-strange, I think.

"For starters, dragons don't have a word for 'I.' Whenever they talk about themselves, they always say 'we.'"

"Like, the royal 'we'?" she asks, a confused frown crinkling her forehead.

I nod. "Sort of. I mean, I guess it kind of makes sense—they don't do names, either."

"Except Ker'kachin."

"Except Ker'kachin," I agree.

She turns her gaze away from me, her shoulders tensing. Finally, she meets my eye again.

"Don't do anything rash, okay?"

I blink. "Maryse, are you actually worried about me?" I ask, trying not to

feel flattered. That'd be silly of me, wouldn't it?

She doesn't confirm or deny. "A lot of people are counting on you, and we don't want to have to send you home in a box."

"Don't worry." I give her a crooked smile. "If I piss him off, you probably won't need a box."



## Chapter Five

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Danil asks me.

I take in a breath of cool evening air and let it out slowly.

I’m sitting behind him on his horse, holding onto him to make sure I don’t fall off, so I can’t see his face. His tense shoulders and soft, hesitant words are more than enough to give away his nerves, and I can’t blame him—I’m nervous, too.

Even so, I nod. “I’m sure.”

The sun is setting in the distance as we make our slow trek across town, heading toward the palace, which grows larger and larger in my sight with every step.

Danil’s horse pulls a small cart behind us, loaded with a filled chest carrying gold, silver, and copper coins, and pieces of jewelry people could be persuaded to give up. It’s enough for a dowry—or a ransom payment.

Unlike our first arrival in the city two days ago, our path is clear. People see us coming and, knowing what we’re on our way to do, step out of our way. Occasionally, people wish me luck, and I try to smile, nod, and look like I don’t need it.

I take another breath to try to calm myself. *I can do this. I can do this.*

“If you need anything,” Danil says, “scream, and I’ll come in after you.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“You better. We’ve lost enough already.”

“I promise I’ll be all right,” I say, touched by his concern. I pat his shoulder. “Wait outside for me. I may be awhile if he’s willing to talk. But I promise, if I think he’s going to get aggressive, I’ll get out of there. I know I’m no good to anyone dead.”

Scyler gave me their version of a pep talk earlier—a clap on the back strong enough to almost knock me over, and a firm “Give ’em hell, kid,” as if

they're not only three years older than me. Still, I appreciate the sentiment, and it was more optimistic than what Maryse had to say when I left the boardinghouse an hour ago: "If you don't come back, can I sell your stuff?"

She was joking, I think. I hope.

As we near the edge of town, the people becoming fewer and farther between, the horse slows its pace, letting out a quiet, nervous whinny.

Danil pats its neck gently, shushing it. "The horses hate this trip almost as much as we do," he says. "Some of the wilder ones, we can't make them come here."

"Animals usually notice dragons before we do. Like how dogs sense a storm before the sky's dark. I think it's some sort of survival mechanism—I mean, dragons don't eat meat so they're not *predators*, exactly, but I guess you can't expect a horse to know that."

Danil curses in Turnish, shaking his head. "I wonder whose ridiculous idea it was to use dragon food as money, however many centuries ago," he says. "Imagine how much mess we might've avoided if we didn't both want gold."

I laugh, though it's more sad than funny. "Oh, I'm sure we'd find something else to fight about. We're good at that."

The castle sits in the middle of what was once a moat.

However, the water was drained long ago and what remains is a thirty-foot ditch circling the building. The drawbridge is down, and judging from the rust on the chains and the vines growing over it, it has been in this position since long before Ker'kachin turned up.

We stop before the bridge and Danil helps me to the ground. He can't quite hide his anxiety, his hazel eyes darting from me to the castle and back again as he bites the inside of his cheek.

"You ready?" he finally asks.

"Yes," I say, and it's only half a lie.

My knees threaten to buckle under the weight of the chest, but I manage to hold it in both my skinny arms, and make my slow walk across the drawbridge, toward the rotting wooden door of the castle. It's standing partially open, but when I try to catch a glimpse of what's inside, all I can see is pitch black.

Danil follows behind me, one hand on his sword, and we're both silent.

The only sound is that of our footsteps on wood, and the minimum amount of air entering and exiting my lungs. I strain my ears, desperately listening for a voice, a snarl, anything, but there's nothing.

Both of my hands are still full when we get across, so Danil knocks for me, pushing the door open the rest of the way.

The fading light of the evening shows me what was once a grand entrance hall, wallpaper peeling and shattered glass on the tile floor. I swallow.

“I wish I could carry a torch,” I finally say, when no response comes from inside. I don’t know what I was expecting—certainly not for the dragon to actually answer the front door.

Still, I expected *something*.

“Once you get past the first passageway, turn to your left. That will take you straight to the grand hall, and there’s enough light coming in there.” He takes a step back and looks me up and down, like he’s making a note of what to tell the authorities in the event they ask what I was last wearing. “Be careful, Lotte. Be smart.”

“I will,” I promise. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

Unable to put it off any longer, I take my first step into the castle.

The stench of mildew and rotted wood floods my senses, and I blink rapidly, trying to get used to the darkness. I move down the hallway, clumsily stepping around bits of litter and trying not to drop the chest.

Each soft footstep is like a clap of thunder, but I breathe in and out, slowly, gently, willing myself to remain calm. Some animals can sense fear, and while dragons are several steps above a dog or a horse, they can certainly spot weakness from a mile away.

With each cautious step, I move farther away from the entrance and closer to the end of the hall. When I’m only a few feet away, I take a step and hear something clinking and scraping quietly against the floor.

Looking down, I see that I’ve stepped on a couple of uneven, dull gold coins with the royal crest on them. Jere.

Moving forward, I look down again and see more jere—a few handfuls scattered on the ground here and there become piles and piles. By the time I reach the end of the hall, I can’t avoid stepping on them. Anywhere I put my feet, gold ends up underneath.

The left turn Danil advised me to take is impossible to miss.

When the hallway ends, it splits into two pathways, and the left path is lined with still more gold.

I can no longer see the floor at all as I move forward, and each step is announced with the sound of coins scraping against metal and stone.

I find myself staring into what my brain at first mistakes for a cave. Then I

blink, and I realize, no, I'm looking at a very large room—large enough that it must take up the majority of this floor, and could probably fit an entire city block comfortably inside. But the light... Where is the light coming from?

There are some windows on the walls around me, but they're filthy, they haven't been cleaned by anything but the rain for years. And why do I feel air moving?

My eyes flick upward, and I gasp when I see the darkened sky, stars starting to appear and peek down at me through a massive hole in the roof.

Actually, it's a complete lack of a roof, save for the remains of a few stone columns that once held one up.

I lean my head back to look around, and find that the only part of this room that is still completely covered is the area around the entrance, where I'm standing.

The room has several exits leading into the rest of the palace, all bathed in darkness.

The only thing I can see clearly is the room I'm in, which glitters in the moonlight.

It's not just what's covering the floor—against the walls, covering some of the windows completely are piles of treasure making up what is by far the largest dragon's hoard I have ever seen.

Coins, gemstones, some cut and cleaned but as many not, chalices and jewelry and ornate swords and a few pure silver mirrors.

There must be enough here to feed ten dragons for ten years. I've never seen this much gold in one place in all my life—I don't think anyone has, ever. The royal family must not keep this much on hand. This is... If I weren't here now, looking at it with my own eyes, I would never believe this hoard existed.

What's the point in having all of this?

I turn slowly in place, taking it all in, when something in one of the dark corners moves. It's quick, so quick I almost think I've imagined it, but I know what I heard. Something dragging along the floor. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I spin around, in time to catch a shadow moving along the back wall.

Taking another long, slow breath, I stand frozen in place, blood pumping through me as I wait.

After a full, agonizingly still minute, I step closer to where I think I saw something moving, and slowly, I crouch to the floor. I place the chest down

and open it, the latch swinging with a *click* so loud, it makes me cringe.

My hands are trembling, but I force myself to push the lid open and tilt the chest onto its side, letting the coins and gems for this week's tithe spill out, making a noise almost like a waterfall.

Dragons don't frighten me, as a rule.

Certainly, I have a healthy respect for them, as anyone should when dealing with someone that could literally swallow you whole.

But this is new, the shaking and the overwhelming sense of dread gnawing at the pit of my stomach. I don't like it one bit.

Heavy breathing from behind me sets my hair on end.

I dare to look over my shoulder, and as soon as I do, the breath stops, like he's hiding from me. Like he's somehow as unnerved by me as I am by him. Or maybe he's toying with me, getting a kick out of watching the human scurry about.

Squinting, I don't see anything, except a shapeless pile of treasure, a dirt-streaked window, and a corridor leading out of this room, cloaked in shadow. Maybe I was mistaken...

My eyes continue to bore ahead, but nothing happens. Tiring of this, I open my mouth, but no words come out on my first attempt. I swallow, take a deep breath, and try again. This time, my voice doesn't fail me, though it's higher-pitched and shakier than I would like.

"I'm not carrying any weapons. I only want to talk. Can we do that, please?"

Silence meets me, but I'm not backing down. The fear hasn't left me, not entirely, but now it's supplemented by something else: determination. I have a job to do, and I'm not leaving until it gets done. Even if I have to stand here waiting all night.

"I know you're here, and I'd appreciate it if you'd come out where I can see you, please. I like to look someone in the eye when I speak to them."

I finally get a response: a wordless, guttural noise that echoes off the walls, and I nearly jump out of my skin. I can't help the relieved sigh that escapes me when I realize it's a snort, a *laugh*.

"I can come to you, if you'd prefer." I take a small step toward the source of the noise. "Please, let me see you."

Finally, a low voice that slithers out of the darkness and up my spine and into my head responds to me. "Is it not custom to bow before a dragon before speaking?"

A shudder passes through me.

I lower myself to my knees in a bow, ignoring the way the coins dig into my skin, no matter how much it hurts. I keep my eyes up to try to see something, anything.

“Look down.” The words hit me like slaps to the face, and before I can consider it, I find myself obeying.

My gaze shifts to the floor, and I don’t dare breathe.

Heavy footsteps threaten to shake the floor, and I can hear coins being moved and sloshed around in a way that makes me think of children running through puddles when it rains.

I want to look up, I want to see whatever’s approaching, but I don’t dare. Not until he tells me I can. To stave off the temptation, I squeeze my eyes shut and take a deep breath.

“Are you afraid?” There’s an amused lilt to his voice that sets me more on edge than anger ever could.

“No.” My lie hangs in the air for a second before it falls away unacknowledged, and the noises draw closer.

Hot, damp air flushes against my face, and my fingers twitch.

He must be close enough to touch now. Close enough to touch *me*.

“Open your eyes.” The words don’t grant permission—they give an order.

I instinctively sway backward when I see a truly massive beast directly in front of me, not two feet away.

His scales are a dark, furious shade of red, fading into pale gray on the end of his long, spiked tail and around his wings. He must be at least sixteen feet tall and has only two eyes. Both big, bright, and a vivid scarlet, with gold flecks near the irises, which are shaped like diamonds and blacker than the sky above us. His head is adorned with a crown of dull red spikes, which form a half circle above and around his eyes.

His gaze is fixed on me, and his lips pull back to reveal his massive, yellowing teeth in what may be a smile, or a snarl. “Stand.”

I do.

“Who are you?” he asks, and his voice digs into my skin and clings to my bones even more when he’s this close. “Where’s the other girl?”

“I’m Lotte.” I take another step back, but it’s not just to put distance between me and him. It’s also so I don’t sprain my neck to look at him. “Lotte Meer.”

“You’re a Dragontongue. Not the first to come here.”

I nod slowly. “Right. Right. I’m... I’ve been hired by the city to speak to you. They thought it would be better if I delivered your tithe to you this week.”

“And you’re here to try to negotiate with me, hm? I suppose you can’t be any worse at it than the last Dragontongue. And it is nice to talk to someone who can hear me properly. The others could probably understand me if they bothered to try, but, well, I suppose they’re too busy trying to pretend they’re not afraid of me. I will say they’re much better liars than you are, Lotte Meer.”

The sensation of falling from a great height overtakes me, though my feet remain firmly planted on the floor. My chest tightens and my stomach flips and the breath catches in my throat as I stare up at him. He tilts his head to one side slowly, surveying me with an expression I hope is mere curiosity.

In the near-decade I’ve been speaking to dragons, I have never, ever heard one use the words “I” or “me.” They don’t even have those words.

Could my ability be acting up somehow, translating his speech incorrectly?

No—that doesn’t make sense. It’s never happened before, and everything else he’s said has come through perfectly.

But no other explanation I can think of makes any sense, either.

It feels...wrong. Like the feeling you’d get if your horse suddenly started talking to you in perfect Stedi.

I search for something to say, but I seem to have forgotten every word.

The dragon lowers his massive head closer to me. He looks me up and down, sizing me up before he says, “Meer... Are you from Rosburnt?”

That startles me out of my silence, and I don’t attempt to hide my surprise.

“I...yes.” There’s no point in lying. “How did you...?”

“I have lived here a long time.” He draws back again and settles to sit, his tail wrapping around him. The spikes are like rusted nails embedded in a club, and a couple are big enough to impale a person. Even sitting, he’s tall enough that, if the ceiling were still intact, his horns would probably brush against it. “They must be desperate to be rid of me, if they’re willing to send men out to a one-horse town like Rosburnt to bring back a child.”

“Hey, give us some credit. We finally got our second horse this year.”

A low, amused rumble escapes from the depths of his throat, and he leans his head back, exposing his long, rough-scaled neck.

Feeling a little braver, I say, “They told me everything that’s happened. About your demands. I’ve spoken with other dragons about you, too.”

“My reputation precedes me.”

“Looks that way.” I glance around at the piles and piles of treasure. “May I ask you something?”

“All right, but don’t expect an answer if I don’t feel like it.”

“I...I was wondering, what do you need all this for? I know you need some of this to eat, but you... Surely you have enough?”

He narrows his eyes before he says, “You have no idea what is or isn’t enough, Meer. Do us both a favor and leave that to me to decide.”

I nod, deciding not to push my luck. “Okay.”

“I suppose they would’ve also told you about my latest request?”

I bite back a snort at him calling it a *request*. “Yes.”

“Have they made any progress?”

“I know they’re looking, but magical artifacts are—”

“Don’t bother with excuses. Remind them of their deadline.”

“I...I will.” Looking into his eyes, I wonder how Maryse manages to come in here every week and not turn and run, especially since she can’t understand him. She must not scare easily—but neither do I, not usually. I need to get this under control. “May I come back to see you again?”

An amused glint dashes across his gaze, but he nods. “If you have the tithe. I suppose it’ll be useful to have a direct line of communication with the people again. But tell me something. What are you hoping to achieve here? What do they think you can do for me that Maryse can’t? Surely you’re not being sent in to have a friendly chat and keep me updated on what’s going on out there.”

I pause, searching carefully for the right words. I don’t know if I’ve found them.

“I want to help arrange a peace between you and the people who live here,” I say. “No one wants to fight.”

“They don’t want to fight because they know they’d *lose*.”

I can’t deny that. “What about you?”

“I would rather get what I need than fight. But I will if they continue to try my patience.”

“I...” I nod. “Understood.”

“Good.” He brings himself up to his full height again, and raises one of his front feet.

I nearly turn and run away on instinct when he reaches toward me, but he doesn’t grab or slash. Instead, he uses a massive, sharpened claw to push me.



It's not a hard push, not for a dragon, but the force is still strong enough to make me stumble backward, barely catching myself before I fall. He continues to nudge me.

"You should go, Meer. Tell them what I said. And find out what they've been doing to secure my payment, all right? You may as well make yourself useful if you're going to come and see me."

"Okay." I step back, relieving myself of the massive weight pressing against my chest. "Thank you for speaking with me. I'll be back next week with your next tithe."

"Good."

I bow my head once more before turning to go, stumbling over piles of coins.

"Meer?"

His voice stops me in my tracks, and I look over my shoulder. "Yes?"

"What have other dragons said about me?"

Goosebumps form on my arms and down the back of my neck as I regret mentioning that to him. I turn to face him fully. "They...they say some of this hoard," I say carefully, "was originally theirs. I mean, that's what—that's what they said."

That last part comes out stammered and nervous, and he chuckles. "Relax, I won't kill the messenger without provocation. Besides, what the others told you was true. Some of this was theirs. It still would be if they fought hard enough to protect it. If they cared enough. But they didn't, and now it belongs to me." The satisfaction in his tone makes my skin crawl. "Did they say anything else?"

"Not much. Just that they...they've given you a name."

He looks thoughtful. "That's unusual, is it not?"

"Extremely."

"What do they call me?"

"Ker'kachin."

"Strange name."

"It's an old word. They told me it translates to...to..."

His head tilts. "Go on."

I swallow. "*Thief*."

His eyes narrow and my gut twists with fear, but then he relaxes. "Well, I've certainly been called worse in the past—and I'm sure I'll be called worse in the future." He looks directly at me again. "You should go. Don't come

back without the next tithe or an artifact. And tell those fools at the townsguard that I'm running out of patience."

He doesn't wait for my reply before turning to go, slinking back into the shadowy corner in the far left of the room. I don't stick around, turning and walking away.

Somehow, I manage to not break into a run, no matter how tempting it is.

I walk calmly and with purpose—I need to get outside and talk to Danil. One foot in front of the other, that's all I have to do. One foot in front of the other.

I can feel Ker'kachin's eyes on me the whole way.

## Chapter Six

“So, essentially, nothing has changed?” Vikker says, the barest hint of irritation coating his words. The dark circles under his eyes make him look like a bearded raccoon.

My mouth twists into a small frown that I force away as quickly as I can, straightening my back. Danil took me back to the townsguard’s office, and it’s almost empty. Most soldiers have gone home for the day, and those who work the night shift are at their posts throughout the city.

“I knew it,” says Lieutenant Basvaan—Cornelis, as I now know, thanks to Maryse. He hovers in his usual position behind the captain. Has he sat down since I saw him last? He hasn’t met my eye or addressed me directly, instead preferring to argue his case to Vikker. “We’re lucky she wasn’t killed.”

From where they sit next to me, Scyler shoots him their most withering look, dark eyes scalding him. On the trip over here, it was reserved strictly for Maryse. Apparently, an ability to try their patience runs in the family.

“He didn’t make any move to attack me,” I say. “He let me leave with no problem, and he said I can come back next week. That’s something.”

“True.” Vikker sighs. “I’m still uneasy about all this. What happens if you make a misstep, and he loses his temper?”

“I won’t.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

I’m *not*. Not at all. “Because it’s the only option I have.”

Vikker rubs his forehead, blinking slowly. “I don’t want to resort to an outright attack unless there’s no other way,” he says, “but we don’t have a lot of time. And his familiarity with the city is...worrying, to the say the least. Miss Meer, be honest with me. Do you think you can do this?”

I hesitate. “He is stubborn,” I admit. “But I’ve gotten through to dragons who seemed immovable before. This...this may not work. But an ambush

will *definitely* get people killed. So I want to keep trying. I believe negotiation is your best bet at keeping the casualties down.”

“You’re not a soldier,” Cornelis sneers. “You know nothing of casualties, or of strategy.”

“Neither do you,” Scyler mutters, loud enough for everyone to hear.

He gives them a nasty look, a grimace curling his lip. “I’ll remind you that I’m your superior, Prins.”

“Yes, I’ve heard. Every single day since you were promoted.”

“Well, maybe if you managed to control that miscreant aunt of yours and keep her out of jail, you’d have been promoted instead.”

They let out an astonished laugh. “*You’re* lecturing *me* about having relatives in jail? How many times do we drag your siblings in here every month? And don’t get me started on your father!”

“At least I don’t continue to *associate* with them—”

Vikker slams on the table, turning everyone’s gazes back to him. “Both of you, that’s enough.” He shoots them a look of warning. “With funding so tight, I’m *looking* for an excuse to start suspending people without pay.”

That shuts them both up.

After a moment of awkward, semi-hostile silence, I clear my throat and try to get us back on something resembling the track. “He...he wanted to know how the hunt for an artifact is going.”

Vikker sighs. “It’s still happening, but we’ve made minimal progress. I suppose we should keep looking as a contingency plan—though the thought of handing over something so valuable to that monster makes my skin crawl.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “And as much as I dislike the idea of an ambush, I do think we need to prepare ourselves for that possibility as well.”

I nod, trying to ignore the smug smirk that flashes across Cornelis’s face. “I understand.”

“Maybe you could do some recon while you’re visiting him,” Scyler says. “See if you can spot any weaknesses—in him or the lair.”

“That could work,” Vikker agrees, looking at me hopefully.

I bite the inside of my cheek, but nod again. “I can look. I don’t know what I’ll find, though.”

“What sort of vulnerabilities do dragons usually have?” he asks me.

I shift in my seat, trying to stave off the sinking feeling in my stomach.

Humans and dragons have been forced to fight in the past, but that doesn’t mean I have to like having any part in it. Still, I can’t bring myself to lie.

“It depends. Mountain dragons don’t do well in heat, desert dragons don’t do well in cold. He isn’t either of those, though. I think he’s your common forest dragon, though red ones are pretty rare in this part of the world,” I say. “Taking off the tail usually does some damage; robs them of one line of attack and messes with their balance. Of course, with the scales protecting them, it’s a miracle if you actually manage to get that far. Their eyes are also usually a good place to hit if you need to defend yourself. Even if you don’t do any permanent damage, it can usually buy you enough time to run.”

“We’re not looking to run anymore,” Cornelis says.

Before I can respond, the sound of a door opening and slamming shut in the front of the building tears all of our attention away from the conversation.

I turn in my seat, looking toward the hallway as a familiar voice says, “Look—I’ll tell him you came by, but he can’t talk right now—”

Rapid footsteps approach, and suddenly, Maryse appears in the doorway, dressed in a dark blue tunic and heavy boots that add an inch to her diminutive stature. Her face, normally pale and ghostlike, is presently pink with fury.

A tired-looking Danil trails behind her, shooting Vikker an apologetic look as he reaches to grab her shoulder. She shrugs him off, swatting his arm before entering the room and stalking toward the desk.

“Maryse, what are you—?” I begin to ask, but I’m cut off.

“Miss Basvaan, I’m in the middle of a meeting,” Vikker says calmly. Neither he nor her brother look surprised to see her. “You’ll have to come back tomorrow.”

She ignores him. “Cornelis,” she says, her voice an unforgiving frost, “do you want to explain to me why I can’t get into my own property?”

He grins in a way that reminds me of Ker’kachin. “Oh, nobody told you? We did a few raids while you were away. Townsguard’s cracking down on untrustworthy vendors. That curio shop you and Pa try to pass off as a legitimate business was first on our list.”

“It is a legitimate business! One I need to keep running in order to pay my rent!”

“I’ll remind you we’re currently paying your rent,” Vikker says. “Since you’re helping us with our situation.”

She shakes her head. “Oh, come on, we both know that’s not going to last. Not with how much money you’ve already lost.”

I bite my lip. I hadn’t thought of that. If Maryse’s family is mostly out of

the picture, how hard must it be for her to take care of herself?

“Wait, what happened?” Danil asks, looking from Maryse to Vikker and back again.

“I went to check on my appraisals shop, and I was greeted with a padlock on the front door and an official notice that some of my goods had been confiscated! No one warned me, no one *told* me, and now I’m expected to cough up an obscene amount of money to—”

“Miss Basvaan, the only items we confiscated were reported as stolen to the townsguard,” Vikker says calmly.

My eyebrows raise in surprise as I look back to Maryse. She closes her mouth with a snap, her hands curled into fists.

“We’ll remove the lock and reinstate your right to operate as soon as you pay the fine.”

“But where can I get the money for the fine if I can’t run the business?”

“Figure it out,” Cornelis snorts. “And count yourself lucky. I wanted you arrested—”

“*But*,” Vikker interrupts him, “I didn’t think that was necessary. After all, I’m sure you had no way of knowing the items you acquired were stolen, right?”

Her chest heaves with a sharp breath, but she nods. “Of course,” she says faintly. “Our providers are very reputable. There must’ve been some sort of mix-up somewhere.”

Cornelis gives a cough that sounds like the word “bullshit,” but everyone ignores him.

“We got the goods back and are in the process of seeing them returned to their rightful owners,” Vikker continues. “That’s what really matters here, so I saw no need to dig into this further. If you want the shop reopened, I suggest you come up with the money for the fine somehow.”

Maryse, tight-lipped and rigid, nods. “Fine.”

“Good night, Miss Basvaan.” With that, he looks at some papers on his desk, dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

Her fist clenches again, but her voice remains even. “Good night, Captain Vikker.” Then, she shoots her brother a look that I estimate took at least a decade off his life, before turning on her heel and exiting, closing the door behind her with a *slam*.

The rest of us are left to sit in horrible, uncomfortable silence for nearly a full minute before Danil speaks for us all, scratching the back of his head.

“Well then.”

Vikker sighs, rubbing his temples. “I understand siblings are predisposed to this sort of thing,” he says, “but do not provoke her in the future.”

Cornelis protests. “But *she* started—” Catching himself, he stops mid-sentence and simply nods. “Yes sir. Sorry sir.”

Without thinking, I get to my feet. I’m out the door and heading outside before anyone can try to stop me.

I spot her as soon as I step outside, standing in front of the office’s double doors. She’s making her way down the path, her back to me, instantly recognizable by her auburn hair.

“Maryse.”

She stops walking, but doesn’t look back.

I jog to catch up with her, moving to stand in front of her. Her gaze is turned toward the ground.

“Hey.” I hesitate before reaching to touch her shoulder. Her eyes flick up to my face, as if startled. “Are...are you okay?”

“Swell.” Her voice is a croak, and for a second, I fear she’s crying. Her face is dry, but she won’t meet my eye.

“It’s okay if you’re not. I mean, that seemed pretty rough, if you want to talk about it...”

“I’m okay.” A hand comes up to rub one of her eyes. “You didn’t need to come check on me.”

“I’m sure you can get things straightened out with your store soon,” I say, desperately grasping for something I can say to comfort her. Anything to make that sad look on her face go away. “You’re smart, you know what you’re doing.”

“I try, at least.” She finally looks directly at me, letting out a sigh. “I guess now we know why Cornelis wanted me out of the way. He’s always pulling stuff like this. If he’s not trying to have us shut down, he’s trying to bury us in fines so we can’t afford to operate.”

My nose wrinkles. “Because of some family drama?”

“Pretty much.”

“I can’t believe he’d use his position for something so...petty.”

“I’m used to it.” She slumps against the wall. “I don’t know what I’m going to do if I can’t get things up and running soon. The townsguard can’t house me forever; I’m going to have to find someplace else to live, and without an income...”

“He wouldn’t let you be homeless, surely?”

She just snorts.

I squeeze her shoulder. “I hope you can get this all fixed soon.”

Maryse lets out a short, exhausted chuckle. “You... Why are you worrying about me, Lotte?”

Her words sound so unsure, so genuinely confused, that it breaks my heart a little.

“Because somebody should,” I reply.

We don’t speak, but in the moment that our eyes meet, it feels like a million words are exchanged in complete silence. I blush and blurt out the first thing I can think of.

“I’m sorry your brother’s a dick.”

That makes her laugh. “Me too.” She takes a small step back. “I have to go. Thank you for... Just, thank you.”

I nod and give a small smile. “Will you be okay?”

She shrugs. “I’ll land on my feet. If only to really stick it to my brother.” We chuckle before she reaches for my hand, giving it a single squeeze that sets off a flurry in my stomach. “Good night, Lotte.”

“Good night.”

She lets go of my hand, leaving my skin tingling, and disappears down the walkway and into the crowded city streets.

I don’t realize how long I’ve been watching the space she once occupied until the door opens and shuts behind me, making me jump.

“Hey,” Scyler says. They and Danil come to join me. “What was that about?”

“I was checking on Maryse,” I say. “I was kind of worried.”

“She’ll be fine,” Danil says. “Like Vikker said, he isn’t interested in arresting her. Trust me, Maryse can take care of herself.”

I nod, hoping he’s right.

“Come on.” Scyler pats my arm. “We’ll take you home. Actually—have you eaten supper yet?”

“No,” I say. “I was going to grab something at the boardinghouse.”

“Don’t bother with that. Have dinner with us and my family.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to impose—”

“You wouldn’t be,” Danil assures me. “Scyler’s ma won’t mind; she owns a restaurant in the middle of town, so there’s plenty to go around.”

“Yes, but you will have to help with the dishes afterward,” they add.



I smile. “Sounds fair to me.”

...

The restaurant is fairly quiet when we arrive, only a few tables with people eating their dinners and chatting idly about whatever’s on their mind.

A wooden plank with the words PIM’S TABLE painted on it hangs above the door, with a similarly painted sign listing the specials sitting in the windowsill. Small iron chandeliers hang from the ceiling, holding candles that burn with a warm and inviting glow.

As Danil holds the door for Scyler and me, the scent of pepper and garlic and paprika makes my mouth water.

“Who’s Pim?” I ask, stepping inside.

“Nickname for Willem, my great-grandfather on Papa’s side,” Scyler explains. They take off their purple uniform jacket and hang it on a hook next to the door. “He was long dead by the time this place opened—my grandpa named it after him, since he was using his recipes.”

The room is full of small, round tables, a few of which are full. In the corner, there’s a broom that moves on its own, sweeping the floor. Or at least, it sweeps about two square feet of the floor, moving in an endless circle, pushing the same pile of dust around over and over again. Nana used to have one of those for our house, and we ran into the same problem; they always work great for about a month, and then the enchantment begins to wear off and go haywire, and you have to push the broom around yourself anyway.

“So it’s always been family-owned?” I ask.

“Yes. It’s a good thing my brothers like to cook—with them to take over here, I was free to join the townsguard instead.”

“Oh, think you’re too good to work for your mother?” a voice says, and I turn my head to see a middle-aged woman coming out of the kitchen. She wipes her hands on a cream-colored apron before wrapping an arm around Scyler’s shoulder and planting a kiss on their cheek.

They groan and make a token effort to pull away, but don’t do much to stop her. Danil, however, greets her with a broad smile and a hug.

Scyler’s mother is lovely, with thick, curly hair she’s twisted into a bun, and a face full of freckles. The only obvious physical resemblance she shares with her child are their large, dark eyes. When she releases Danil, she looks me over, and snaps her eyes upward with a spark of confusion.

“New friend?” she asks.

“Yes,” Scyler says. “Ma, this is Lotte—the Dragontongue.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am,” I say, offering my hand.

She takes it and gives it a shake. “You, too. I’m Anneke Prins. They had to go across Nivstede to fetch you, didn’t they? Where are you from?”

“Rosburnt.”

She nods, then looks to Scyler. “I suppose you’ll be wanting me to feed you,” she says, raising her eyebrows.

They smile. “*Pleeeeeeease?*”

“Fine...but only because I don’t want to piss off the townsguard.” The annoyed words are completely undermined by a fond smirk.

“Thanks, Ma.” With that, Scyler grabs me by the wrist and pulls me back into the kitchen, Danil following close behind.

The double doors swing open, and we’re flooded with the smell of meat roasting over a truly massive fireplace in the back.

Pots hang suspended over smaller flames, being supervised by a small team of cooks, all taking direction from a man and a boy, both of whom I instantly realize must be Scyler’s brothers. They all share a strong jaw, warm brown complexion, and thick black hair, though only the boy, who can’t be older than thirteen, has their mother’s curls.

“Hey, Scy,” the man says. He must be nearly thirty, though with the beard it’s hard to tell for sure. “Dinner for two?”

“Three,” they say, pointing to me. “Should we eat downstairs?”

“Nah.” He shakes his head, pulling three plates out of a cupboard and beginning to load them with hot, steaming slices of beef. “Things aren’t too crowded tonight; you can eat out in the dining room. Niels, get them their drinks.”

My stomach rumbles and I’m suddenly aware that it’s been hours since I’ve eaten—and much, much longer since I’ve eaten anything that smelled this good.

“What do you want?” the boy asks me. His voice is clearly in the middle of changing, making it resemble that of a child trying to sound older.

“Oh, water is fine,” I say. Even though I’ve legally been free to drink mead and wine since my last birthday, I have yet to actually try it, beyond the small sips I take at weddings and funerals.

He doesn’t answer right away, and I realize he’s giving me the same, quizzical look as his mother. I fidget, a hand coming up to tug on a stray lock of hair. *Is there something on my face?*

“Hey tiny.” Scyler reaches over to flick his forehead, and he lets out a small “Ow!” “She said she wanted water.”

“I heard,” Niels says defensively, swatting their hand away. “Sorry, ma’am, I—you look like someone I know, is all.”

“Oh, please, don’t call me ma’am. Lotte is much better.”

He goes to fetch the water from a barrel tucked away in the corner, talking as he works. “It’s going to bother me until I figure out who you look like. Maybe someone I go to school with?” He pauses to look at me, then shakes his head. “Nah, that isn’t it. Rafe, don’t you think she looks like somebody?”

The older brother looks up from where he’s chopping vegetables to go with our meat and gives me the once-over. “Maybe,” he shrugs.

I don’t particularly enjoy being gawked at like a statue on display at a museum, so I change the subject. “Is there extra dining space in the basement?”

“We live down there,” Rafe explains. “Plus the storage cellar. Grandpa had the extra space converted into an apartment when Papa was a kid—it was too much to have to constantly be going back and forth between home and work every day. Papa is down there now. He worked all through the night and most of the morning, so he collapsed right after lunch.”

“Doesn’t the noise bother him?”

“Nah,” Scyler says. “You live here long enough, and you can sleep through anything. I think once I move out, I’ll have trouble sleeping in the quiet.”

I have difficulty imagining any part of Morwassen’s Pass being “quiet.”

Rafe finishes fixing our plates and pushes them into our hands before waving us out, making a snarky comment to his sibling about how he has paying customers to worry about.

But when I say I’ll gladly pay for my meal, he won’t hear it. I make a silent promise to leave money on the table when I go, and leave before they can stop me.

Niels follows us out to the dining hall, carrying a mug of water for me, plus two empty mugs and a bottle of ale for Scyler and Danil.

We find an empty table in the center of the room, and I almost lick my lips at the sight of the meal. Smoked meat and fresh vegetables have never looked so good.

As he sets down our drinks, Niels glances toward the front door, and a bright “Oh!” escapes him. He taps my shoulder and points ahead. “I realized who you look like!”

I follow his gaze, and my knife falls out of my hand and to the floor with a clatter.

I am looking at a woman who just came in, talking to Anneke.

She's a bit younger than her, but has a weathered, tired look. Niels is right—she does look like me, thin and flat-chested with pale eyes, fair skin, and curly brown hair. Her nose is different, though, and she's shorter than me. I got my father's nose, as well as his height.

"I..." My voice falters, and it's only now that I realize my hands are shaking. Despite how hungry I was only seconds ago, now the idea of eating anything is physically nauseating.

"Lotte?" Danil says, but I can't look at him. I can't look away from her. "Lotte, are you okay?"

I can't even begin to decide whether or not to lie and say I'm fine when Anneke gestures back toward our table.

*Oh no no no no no not like this.*

The woman looks over at us, and the second she sees me, her face goes white, and I see her step backward as if struck. Anneke's face becomes a mask of confusion, I see her lips say the words "*What is it?*" and then, suddenly, the woman is turning to leave.

Seeing that, seeing her head for the door, is what pushes me out of my stunned state. I stand up, so quickly I almost knock my chair over, and stride toward her, ignoring Danil calling my name.

She's leaving.

She saw me and she's leaving.

*Again.*

I don't know why I'm surprised.

Well, not this time. This time, I can stop her.

I catch her wrist before she can step outside. As soon as I touch her, her whole body tenses, but she stops in her tracks.

"Juna," Anneke says from behind me, "you want to tell me what's going on?"

She says nothing. Anneke says nothing. And, somehow, I force a smile. Not a big one, certainly not a convincing one. But a smile. A show of goodwill. Or maybe a buffer between the world and my anger and my hurt.

And I say, "Hello, Mother."

## Chapter Seven

She and I stare at each other, her face a mask of distant confusion.

Tears, hot and stinging, prick at my eyes, but I blink them away.

No, I am not going to cry, not now. Not in front of her.

When I was a kid, she never knew how to handle it, except to weakly beg me to stop. I can't imagine she's gotten any better at dealing with tears in the years since I saw her last.

The world is completely silent except for the sound of my own breath, and I realize that she's holding hers. Like if she's quiet enough and doesn't move, I'll forget she's here and go away.

Finally, Scyler's voice shatters the silence from behind me. "My apologies, but if I could interrupt... What is going *on*?"

I blink, and cross my arms, hugging myself tightly.

Anneke turns to my mother, her jaw dropped partway open before she gathers herself. "Juna, is this—is this girl really—? Did you have—?" She stumbles over her words, only to fall silent when Mother nods.

Scyler sucks in a long breath, but when they speak, they can come up with only one word. "Meer." I glance over my shoulder at them. They shake their head, closing their eyes. "I...I can't believe I forgot. You were married to Jasper Meer."

Finally, she speaks. Even before she started drinking, Mother's voice was throaty and ragged. Not in an ugly way, her voice has a sort of soothing quality when she says the right thing, but that so rarely happens. And she's always sounded older than she is.

"It's fine, Scyler." She doesn't address me. "I haven't gone by that name in a long time. Not since..." A pause, before she brushes past something in her mind. "Well, not since I left Rosburnt, anyway."

"What are you going by now?" I ask, desperate not to let her forget that

I'm here.

Finally, her eyes meet mine. "Suren. My maiden name. I...I decided it'd be best if I had a fresh start."

I scoff. "I'll say."

"Lotte..."

Danil clears his throat and rests a hand on my shoulder. "I didn't know you had a daughter, Juna," he says, as if he's simply met a new coworker's family for the first time.

"None of us did." Anneke's gaze turns to me, pleading, and she takes my hand in hers. "Dear girl, please accept my apology. I would've invited you here or come to Rosburnt to meet you long ago, had I known I had a niece!"

It almost makes me laugh, or perhaps cry. All my life, I believed I had a small family.

A dead father, an absent mother, almost no other relatives. Just me and my grandmother. Once, when I was a little girl, I asked Mother if we had anyone else, and she said, "No. There's no one else."

I don't know why, but even after everything, even after all the screaming and drinking and the years of silence, I can't quite believe she lied to me.

"It's okay," I say. It isn't.

Anneke squeezes my hand once before dropping it and turns to Mother, a look of utter disbelief on her face. "Juna, how could you never tell me?"

"I didn't..." She trails off, eyes darting from me to her sister and back again. "It seemed easier for all of us. I didn't want to explain to Mother and Father why she wasn't with me when I came back here, and I'd never told her about all of you—"

"Wait." I raise a hand. "Your parents are still alive? You always told me they were dead."

She flushes. "For all intents and purposes. We hadn't spoken since I married your father."

"They actually did pass away a few years ago," Scyler adds, rubbing the back of their neck. "I'm sorry. I—seems better to tell you that up front."

"I...oh." Without thinking, I sink to sit in a chair, and I can't look anyone in the eye.

Functionally, I suppose it makes no difference at all.

Mother never talked about her parents, only that they were dead, and now they really are gone forever. I shouldn't miss what I never had, and in a way, I don't. I know nothing of what sort of people they were, whether I would've

liked them if I had known them. But it's impossible not to feel the absence of yet another piece of my history.

Anneke speaks after a brief-but-unbearable silence. "We should eat. Then we need to talk—all of us. We have...so much catching up to do."

I'm brought to my feet by the guiding hand of Scyler—my *cousin*.

I have a cousin. Three, in fact.

I'd completely forgotten about the presence of Niels, but he's still in the corner by our table, now looking like he's been punched in the stomach, which is about how I feel.

Scyler keeps their hand on my arm as they walk me over to the table, and Niels pulls out my chair.

None of it is really necessary, but I think they have made a silent agreement to be extra-polite to me, like people tend to do when they see someone especially old, or someone with their arm in a sling. It's what you do with someone you expect to be fragile. Which I suppose is a fair assumption to make of me at the moment.

Anneke pulls Rafe out of the kitchen and, judging from the look he gives me and Mother when he joins us at the table, she told him what's going on. No one goes downstairs to get Scyler's father.

We all sit at the same table, crowded around it, elbow to elbow. I'm squeezed in between Scyler and Anneke, which feels both safe and suffocating.

Part of me wants to stand up, run outside and back to the boardinghouse, and pretend this never happened. But most of me wants—no, *needs*—to stay and get an explanation for...any of this.

Rafe brings food for himself, his mother, and his aunt—*my* mother, a thought that still feels impossible to me.

The first few minutes pass in awkward, polite comments about how good the food is, everyone taking every opportunity to fill their mouths with more of it to have an excuse not to talk. I can't take my eyes off Mother, and no matter how much she avoids my gaze in favor of asking Rafe about the recipe, I can tell she notices.

Scyler leans down to mutter in my ear. "Want me to say something?"

"Yes." I have no idea *what* I want them to say, but I want someone to say something, and they seem like the best possible candidate for getting a discussion going.

They don't disappoint. "Juna, what happened?" They set down their

utensils with a clatter. “You basically disappeared for years and years before I was born, then you suddenly show back up, then you’re in and out of jail and disappearing *constantly*—and now we find out you have a kid and you never said anything?”

“You left *them*, too?” I can’t stop the accusatory question from shooting out of my mouth, but I can’t feel guilty. Mother doesn’t wince.

“I come and go,” she admits. “A few months here, a few months on the road. I don’t usually announce myself, because I don’t usually know what my plan is until it’s happening. It isn’t anything personal.” Everyone at the table shoots her incredulous looks, and she presses on. “Really, it isn’t. I... I want to keep separate parts of my life separate. And with Lotte staying back in Rosburnt, I didn’t see any reason to make things here worse than they had to be. I wanted to just bury as much unpleasantness as I could—which I suppose I managed, when my parents died.”

She says it lightly, like it’s a joke and we’re all meant to laugh at it, but no one cracks a smile.

She shrinks slightly into her seat but tilts up her chin defiantly. “Look, it’s like I said. I wanted a completely fresh start after Jasper died. I knew I couldn’t do that if...if...”

“If you had a kid holding you back?” The sharpness of my words comes as a shock even to me, and I don’t know whether I want them to cut her or not. What I don’t want is for them to bounce off, for her to carelessly brush them away.

I know I’m supposed to wish her well and not want her to feel any hurt, but I guess I’m not that good of a person.

“You remember what I was like before I left.” There’s no fire or pain in her eyes, but there is a coolness that makes the skin on the back of my neck crawl. “It was for the best, and I think you know that.”

The air rushes out of my lungs, leaving them burning. My heart beats so hard, I can feel it against my ribs. I couldn’t speak if I tried.

“What are you doing here, anyway? I thought at first you came looking for me, but I take it that’s not the case?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I was hired to deal with the...dragon situation.”

Her eyes widen, and for a second, I think she’s going to say something like, “*No, don’t do that, it’s too dangerous.*” Which she’d have no right to say, but still, I think some part of me would welcome it. It’d be nice to know she



still worries about me.

Instead, she takes a swig of her drink and nods slowly. “I suppose I should’ve guessed. Still making a living as a go-between, then?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Good. Gift like yours doesn’t come along every day, I’m glad you’re putting it to use. And you’re bound to handle it better than the townsguard has so far.”

Scyler and Danil’s heads both snap up. “We are sitting *right* here,” Scyler says, at the same time Danil cries out, “Uncalled for!”

Mother rolls her eyes. “I’ve given up more than my share these past few months, I’d say it’s called for.”

“To make sure the town doesn’t get burned to ashes,” Scyler says, a bit too loudly. “I’m sorry we had to take some jewelry, but it feels like a worthy trade-off in exchange for not *dying*.”

A couple of patrons sitting at the next table glance over at them, expressions darkening as they try to ignore them. Apparently, people don’t like being reminded of possible imminent doom when they’re trying to enjoy their supper.

“Darling,” Danil says, gently shushing them with a touch to their knee.

“We’ve all been forced to make sacrifices, Juna,” Anneke says with a resigned shrug.

“They made me hand over my wedding ring,” she says, tossing her napkin into her lap and foisting her left hand into her face.

It’s only now that I notice the gaping absence of the band she always wore when I was growing up. It was the only truly ornate thing she owned, at least back then. Pure gold, with unique engravements of flowers and a bright ruby to decorate it. It was one-of-a-kind; Papa forged it himself.

Anneke’s gaze softens. “I know. I know, it isn’t fair, and—”

“That was all I had left of Jasper!” Her words leave a ringing silence in their wake, as we all wait for her to realize what she just said. As her eyes flick from face to face, a wave of nausea passes through me, and I set my utensils down, knowing that if I take one more bite of food, I’ll be sick.

Finally, she looks at me, and the tension drops from her shoulders.

“Oh,” is all she says.

With that, I stand up, pushing my chair back.

“Th-thank you for supper,” I manage to stammer to Anneke and Rafe. “I’m sorry, I—I need to... Should I put my dishes in the kitchen?”

“Leave them next to the basin,” Rafe says.

“Thank you,” I say again, before taking off.

The kitchen still has a couple cooks at work, but it’s a relief to be out of that dining room.

A shuddering sigh escapes me as the double doors swing open and I disappear from my family’s view.

Bringing up a hand to wipe my eyes, I set my plate down where Rafe instructed, and decide to peek outside. If they aren’t looking this way, I can slip out the front door and get back to the boardinghouse. A rude, sudden exit. Mother certainly taught me well in that regard.

With a gentle push, I slowly open the door and peer out into the dining room—and let out a yelp as I find myself face-to-face with Anneke.

“Oh! I’m sorry, I was—”

“Making a break for it?” she guesses. I flush red, and give a guilty nod. “I don’t blame you. I can make your excuses if you want to go now.”

“I...thank you. I’m sorry.”

“This isn’t your fault.”

I can’t quite bring myself to nod, to make a show of believing her.

I wish Maryse were here. She’s not mixed up in this mess, she could be objective about it. If *she* told me this wasn’t my fault, maybe then I could convince myself.

When she talked about being on her own, it didn’t seem to bother her at all. I can’t help but feel jealous. Maybe she could share some of that toughness, that confidence with me. It’d be nice, at least.

I step aside to let Anneke past, and she joins me in the kitchen. Leaning against the wall, she watches the cooks before letting out a sigh.

“This *isn’t* your fault,” she repeats, as if able to read my mind. “I hope you know that. None of us are angry at you. Not even Juna, I don’t think. She... honestly, I’m not as surprised as you’d think. She’s always been hard to keep in one spot, and harder to get a straight answer from. Look, about what she said, I’m sure she didn’t mean to...I’m sure she wasn’t thinking.”

“Right,” is the only thing I can say in response.

Anneke reaches over to touch my cheek, but draws her hand back quickly, as if she’s afraid I’ll swat her away. “For what it’s worth, I’m very glad to have met you, though I wish it had happened sooner. You’re welcome to come here any time. If you ever want to know more about this side of the family, or want something to eat, please come by.”

I feel like I'm about to cry. "Thank you. I'm sure I will, I need to...I don't know."

"Go and rest," she says. "You've had a long day. Would you like me to say something to Juna?"

"No, that's okay. If she wants to talk to me, she will. If not..."

"If not, I'll talk to you. Anything you need."

I finally manage a smile, relief warming me to the core. I don't know what I want to do about Mother, if I want to talk to her after all this.

Well, no, I realize, that isn't quite true.

Of course, I want to talk to her. She was gone for so many years and I missed her so much. But I'm all too aware that I may not like what I hear. I certainly haven't so far tonight.

But I've gained an extended family, and for that I'm grateful. Grateful for relatives who want to know me. Grateful that some good has come of this.

I say my goodbyes and slip out the front door as Anneke returns to the table. Without thinking, I duck into the alleyway separating the building from its neighbor. My only company is a small, wingless dragon who's decided an overflowing trash can is the perfect place for a nap, and for that, I'm grateful. Ragged breaths wrack my body as I lean against the brick wall, and burning hot tears escape me at long last. I reach up, furiously trying to wipe them away, but it's no good. They continue to flow, even as my lungs burn and my sobs turn to gasps.

It's not as if I didn't know she left me. It's not as if I have any right to be surprised that she wouldn't tell her family about me, or that she'd leave her memories of motherhood behind entirely. My fault, really, for hoping for anything different, even if it was only in private.

*Stop crying. Stop it. Stop it.*

"Lotte?"

My head snaps up, and through my tears, I see Mother, cast in the dim light of night in the city. She remains a few feet away from me, her arms crossed, and shifts uneasily on her feet. I look away, squeezing my eyes shut and trying to stop my tears.

Not now. Not while she's watching.

"Were you ever going to come back?" I ask, the words coming out in a croak.

I still can't bring myself to look at her. But I couldn't not ask. Not after all those years of wondering.

Mother lets out a long breath. “Initially, I thought I would,” she says. “Or that I’d have your grandmother send you here to live with me, once I’d gotten myself established.”

Images of what could have been flash through my mind. Mother and me sharing one of the city’s many claustrophobic and drafty apartments overlooking the busy streets. The two of us sharing meals after coming home from long, boring, hard days at work. Holidays spent together as mother and daughter.

It’s all so lovely, and so, so fake.

“What changed?” I ask, looking up at her.

She shrugs, shoving her hands into the pockets of her trousers. They’re clearly old; the fabric is stained with what looks to be years’ worth of dirt and grime, and there are rips in multiple places. Her shoes are in similar condition, with a large hole in the toe of one, and the soles close to worn out. Back home, she always dressed in low-maintenance tunics and trousers—she and I both prefer that to skirts and dresses—but she kept what she had clean and functional. Even when it was too expensive to replace something outright, she’d try to keep it in decent condition.

I can’t tell if her current state of disarray is due to a lack of money to spend on upkeep, or a lack of caring. Either way, it hurts a little to see.

“I don’t know,” Mother says. “I got here, and...things were simpler. Still bad, but simpler. If I wanted to break things, or drink until I vomited, or rip out my hair and scream, I could and it wouldn’t hurt anybody, and no one would try to stop me. My parents and I hardly spoke, and Anneke had her own family to worry about, so I could be alone as much as I wanted. And no one else knew me, so I could walk around without hearing everyone whisper and pity the poor, drunk widow. I’m sure things were simpler for you, too, once I moved.”

I shudder as I remember the last weeks before she left. Her departure was like having a rotting tooth pulled out. It hurt like hell, but I had to admit—the worst of the daily aches and pains I’d grown accustomed to subsided once it was over.

“So you left me because it was easier?” I ask.

“No. I mean, yes, but...” She sighs. “Look. It doesn’t matter. You’re here now. Would you...would you like to come to my apartment sometime? We can talk about everything.”

The brightness of hope collides with the sick feeling of distrust deep inside

me. Optimism would be foolish, only setting myself up for more heartbreak.

But a chance to talk to Mother is all I've wanted for years.

Maybe she's missed me, too. Maybe she wanted to reach out but never knew how. Maybe she needed a little push to get started, that's all.

I can't bring myself to smile, but I dry the last of my tears and meet her eye.

"Okay."

## Chapter Eight

I return to the boardinghouse, exhausted but hopeful.

Mother didn't say when she'd have me over, but she promised it would be soon, and I've decided to try to believe her. Heaven knows she's far from perfect, but if she's willing to try, then so am I.

The boardinghouse is quiet, although not as desolate as I would've expected for it being nearly midnight. In the common area, near the staircase that leads upstairs to the bedrooms, a few night owls lurk. Four men sitting at a table, playing a game involving lots of dice and rigorous notetaking, an elderly person reading a book and, much to my surprise, Maryse.

She's pushed her hair up into a bun, but it's uneven and makes her look prettily disheveled in her usual way. She's sitting alone on the long bench in front of the fire. A small pocketknife and a block of wood are in her hands, shavings falling to the stone floor as she carves away.

Despite my tiredness, I find myself joining her on the bench.

She looks up in surprise when I sit and gives me a brief nod before returning to her work. Neither of us say anything, and I watch her, as the block of wood disappears and a small, nearly recognizable figure emerges. I can't decide whether it's meant to be a bird or a butterfly.

As she starts to carve more detail into a rough, uneven wing, Maryse tilts her head and closes one eye, scrunching up her nose. The tip of her tongue pokes out between her teeth. I let out a giggle before I can stop myself, and she blinks, looking up and blushing before setting the knife down on her lap.

"Oh, sorry—don't stop on my account," I say. "I didn't mean to laugh, it's just funny, the faces people make when they concentrate."

"You're up late," she says, and I realize she's blushing. It makes me smile.

"So are you."

"I've always been more of a 'late to bed, late to rise' kind of girl. I didn't

see you at supper.”

“Oh, I...I ate with Scyler and their family.” Instinctively, I tug at a curl of my hair, so hard that a few strands come out in my hand.

I flush and pull my hand away, putting it back in my lap. I never mean to do that; it happens sometimes when I’m upset. When I was a kid, I used to chew on it, a habit that drove my mother and grandmother alike around the bend.

“How are you doing?” I ask, forcing my hand back to my side. “Are you feeling better?”

“Eh.” She shrugs. “I’ll survive. Don’t worry about me.” The words are gentle and easy as hail storming against the pavement.

I hesitate. “I’m sorry your shop got closed.”

She turns the wooden figure over in her fingers, not looking at me. “Me too.”

“Has it happened before?”

“Once or twice. Pa always dealt with it then, but...whatever. I’ll figure it out.”

“It must be hard. Sorting this out with him away. It sounds like a lot to deal with on your own. But I don’t doubt you can handle it.”

She pauses, then nods, looking surprised to hear somebody say it. “I *can* handle it,” she says, “but I still miss him so much.”

I give a small smile. “Are you two close?”

“Yeah. I’m the only one of my siblings he doesn’t fight with.” She fiddles with the wooden figurine in her hands. “He taught me how to look after things and take care of myself, and I’m grateful for that. But it’s still harder when he’s not around to help.”

“I can understand that. Did he say how long he’d be gone?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “Never does. Pa comes and goes as he pleases—trying to keep track of him is a fool’s errand.”

My stomach lurches. That sounds familiar.

“I hope he comes home soon,” I say.

“Yeah.” Maryse lets out a sigh. “Me too.”

We fall into silence again, and I turn my gaze to the fireplace.

The flames crackle and glow invitingly, and the warmth is a welcome guest. I wonder how many nights Maryse has spent sitting here by herself, carving something or just thinking, enjoying her own company. Perhaps I’m bothering her. But if I am, she hasn’t said so.

It takes a while before I pluck up the courage to ask what I really want to know.

“The stuff in your shop that Vikker said was stolen,” I say delicately. “I was wondering... I mean, I know what you told him, but did you...?”

“Of course not,” she says.

Our eyes meet, and her gaze is unwavering and stern. Either a sign of honesty, or of a very well-practiced lie. I shrug and turn away first, looking back into the fire. I suppose it doesn’t matter. I mean, frankly, if she’s not selling anything she stole from me, it may be best for me if I mind my own business.

“How did meeting the dragon go?” she asks suddenly. “You’re alive, which is a good sign, I suppose.”

“It went...about as well as I guess I could’ve reasonably hoped for.” I lean forward, resting my chin in my hand. “He isn’t budging, at least, not right now. I expected it to be an uphill battle. At this point, I think there’s about as good a chance of me convincing him to leave as there is of the townsguard finding an artifact to give him.”

“And if neither of those can happen?”

I sigh. “Then I guess the townsguard will go through with the ambush.”

She doesn’t respond, but her knuckles go white as she grips the figurine tighter in her hands, running her fingers along the bumpy edges.

I give her a gentle nudge. “I’ll try not to let that happen.”

“You better.”

The sharpness of her voice is a surprise, and I frown. “Hey, we’re on the same side here,” I remind her.

“I...I know...” She clenches and unclenches her jaw, still not looking at me. “I want to believe you can pull this off. I really do. But he’s so stubborn, and...”

I watch her for a moment. She’s gazing ahead, not looking at anything in particular as her thoughts overtake her. She snaps out of it only when I say, “When I spoke to him, he knew your name.”

Maryse blinks, thinking that over for a second. “I guess he must’ve heard one of the soldiers say it one of the times I brought him the tithe.”

“Maybe. He seemed to recognize my name, too, that’s why I asked.”

Her eyebrows raise. “Really?”

“Yes. He even asked me if I’m from Rosburnt.”

“What’d you tell him?”



“The truth. I couldn’t think of anything else in the moment. It’s just as well, I’m a dreadful liar.”

That makes her chuckle, a light and musical sound, but it fades away as quickly as it came. “It’s so strange, that he seems to know us.”

“I know. He said he’s been around long enough to know about the people in the city, but that doesn’t...” I cut myself off.

Now that I know Mother’s still around, I guess that might explain how he knew my family’s name. No, that’s not it—she went back to using her maiden name, and if she never told her own sister about me, she certainly wouldn’t have told anyone else. She left me and Rosburnt behind, never spoke about that part of her life.

To the people here, those years may as well have never happened.

A lump forms in my throat and I find myself pulling at my hair again. No, no, don’t go there. Things will be different. They’ll get better. They have to.

Maryse nudges me. “Everything okay?”

“Oh, I...I’ve had a long night, that’s all.”

I think about telling her everything, but when I try to find the words, I come up short. I’ve barely begun sorting through in my mind what’s happened with my family; trying to explain it to anyone else feels impossible.

Maryse accepts my half-truth with a slow, understanding nod, for which I’m grateful.

“Do you have any idea where the townsguard is planning to look for an artifact?” she asks. “They’ve been asking me to help appraise anything they find.”

“Doesn’t the government have people for that?”

“Oh yes, plenty. But they work only where the King tells them to work, so...”

I nod. “So, we’re on our own. Got it.” Our current monarch’s concerns seem to begin and end with whatever’s in his current line of sight. Unless Ker’kachin burns Morwassen’s Pass to the ground and goes to the capital next, the royal family will probably never get involved.

“I think they’ve checked every shop in a hundred miles. Only a couple items have turned up so far, and they’ve all been knockoffs. No real magic.”

I sigh. “I guess a museum would be their best bet, but that won’t be easy. It doesn’t seem like they can afford to buy one from somebody—they’d have to be asking someone to give up an artifact for free, and I don’t think many people would go for it.”

"I wouldn't," she admits. "Magic is hard enough to get ahold of these days, I wouldn't want to throw it away."

"Neither would I, but at least it would be for a good cause."

"You're a nicer person than me." She gives me a tiny, crooked smile that makes heat creep into my cheeks.

Our eyes meet and I reflexively smile back.

"That almost sounds like an insult," I say, still smiling.

"Oh, it was." Her tone is light with teasing, and I can't help but laugh. "If none of the museums will donate, I wouldn't be surprised if they resort to taking one."

"You mean stealing?" I say, unable to keep the skepticism out of my voice. "I don't doubt a few of the soldiers would be willing, but I don't think Vikker would allow it."

"Normally, no," she agrees, "but things are getting desperate. He isn't really the type to do anything illegal himself, but he might look the other way while someone else does, if he has to."

I think this over.

"You would never sell anything that was stolen," I say, choosing my words carefully, "but you probably know some people who would." She doesn't say anything, so I press on. "Maybe if you asked one of them for help, we could speed the search along."

Maryse bites the inside of her cheek. "I'll try," she finally says. "I can't promise anything more than that."

I let out a breath. "Thank you."

She gets to her feet, flipping her pocketknife closed and shoving it into the pocket of her trousers. "I'll put the word out tomorrow and see if I get any bites. I'll let you know."

"Okay. Seriously, thank you, Maryse."

"Don't get your hopes up," she warns. With that, she leaves the room, taking the unfinished wood carving with her.

I'm left alone in front of the fireplace, and a yawn escapes me as I'm suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to lie down right here on the floor and sleep.

Instead, I manage to force myself to my feet and up the stairs.

The small room I'm staying in looks much more inviting than it did last night, and I collapse into the bed and fall asleep within minutes, the constant noise and buzz of the city not bothering me in the slightest.

...

I wake up late the next morning, cringing as I open my eyes to the full light of day.

I stumble to my feet, looking out the window. The sun tells me it's nearly noon, and my stomach gurgles. Barely touching my dinner last night and skipping breakfast this morning is finally catching up to me.

Dressing in the first somewhat clean clothes I can find, I head toward the door, eager to get downstairs and eat whatever's available.

It's then that I notice a scrap of paper on my floor, slid under the door.

The writing on it is small and made up of sharp angles, the signature a scrawl that's completely unrecognizable as any letters. Still, as soon as I read the note, I realize who must've left it for me, and a surge of excitement shakes the last of the sleep out of me.

*Found a lead. Going to check it out tonight.*

*Meet up with me at dinner if you want to come. If not, I'll tell you about it tomorrow.*

*Don't tell the townsguard about this.*

## Chapter Nine

My stomach grumbles as I follow Maryse, weaving our way through the crowded street.

After walking for what feels like hours, we stop in front of a shabby-looking brick building. One of the front windows has been shattered, the gap where there should be glass haphazardly covered with a wooden plank.

Maryse pulls the door open, holding it for me. As soon as I step inside, I cough, the overwhelming smell of tobacco smoke clinging to my lungs.

There are several tables, each seating a group of people who are intently focused on cards—their own or their neighbor's. Piles of jere sit in the middle of each table, coins rapidly moving from hand to hand. In the very back of the room is another door, probably leading either up or downstairs.

I don't see what Maryse didn't want me to tell anyone about.

Gambling halls like this are all over the city, and are perfectly legal. The townsguard may not like them, but no one's committing a crime by coming here and making a few bets.

In fact, I spot two men wearing the telltale purple uniforms, here to celebrate the end of their shift by losing a day's wages over a game of cards.

"Come on." She gestures for me to follow her to a table in the back, where a game is played by a group of about a dozen people.

A couple of them appear to recognize Maryse, giving her a nod before looking back to their hand of cards, but I'm met with suspicious, unfriendly looks.

"Hey, Mads," she says, knocking lightly on the table to draw the attention of the dealer, a man who looks like he could be her grandfather. He has a short white beard and dark eyes that light with recognition as he looks up at her. "I want to join a game."

He nods to the room at large. "Knock yourself out."

She doesn't pause to look at the options before she says, "Nothing up here looks good. Are there any private games I could join?"

He scratches his chin, and looks me over. "Is your friend playing as well?"

"Yes," Maryse says. "She's good for it."

Before he can respond, a soft, guttural snort draws our attention downward.

"Oh!" My hand flies to my heart, taking a step back, while Maryse starts laughing.

On the floor, slithering between people's feet and under the table, is a light green, wingless, foot-long dragon. A miniature, obviously—the square shape of their three eyes and flat snout tell me this is a common cave dragon.

"Do these humans ever go to their own nests?" she asks herself in a high-pitched, scratchy voice, which the others will no doubt hear as light and catlike hissing.

Mads smiles and picks a single jere off the table, letting it clatter to the floor. The dragon tosses him a look, saying, "We do not need a human's help."

Then she picks it up with both of her tiny, clawed hands, popping it into her mouth for safekeeping before running off. She scurries across the floor, weaving through the chairs, before disappearing into a shadowy corner.

One of the other men at the table grunts. "You can't afford to keep feeding that thing, Mads."

"Oh hush." He waves him off. "Dalton's harmless."

"You've named him," Maryse says, an amused lilt in her voice. "That's new."

"What can I say? Around the tenth time he broke in here, I realized I'd gotten attached. So long as he doesn't burn anything down, he can stay."

"You don't need to worry about that," I say, and all eyes turn toward me. "Cave dragons don't breathe fire. She probably stays near the kitchen because she doesn't have any fire in her to keep herself warm—does Dalton ever like to hide behind the oven?"

Mads blinks. "Er, yes, he does. Or—did you say she?"

I nod. "The size of the spikes on her tail, and the coloring around her belly—Dalton's female."

The other man snorts. "Lucky you found that out before she started laying eggs."

"You know a lot about dragons?" Mads asks, ignoring his companion.

"Tons," I say. "I'm surprised you're letting one in here, considering."

He shrugs with a small sigh. “Not her fault. All the little ones around here have been struggling, just like we have.”

I hesitate, before reaching into my bag and pulling out a couple pieces of silver, and I press them into Mads’s hand.

“Leave these for her to find,” I say. “But let her think she’s done it all by herself.”

Mads looks at the coins before looking me up and down. I guess I pass whatever test I’m taking, because he smiles, nods, and looks back to Maryse. “There’s another game downstairs. Take your friend with you. Ask for Alina.”

She smiles. “Thank you.” With that, she walks toward the door behind him, not waiting for me.

I quickly follow, almost tripping over my own feet in my nervousness.

The door leads to a long flight of stairs going down, taking us into the basement. The path is narrow and rickety, requiring me to hold onto the wall to keep my balance. At the bottom is another door.

Once we’re both there, Maryse raps on it, and it opens a crack. I can barely see half of a man’s face peering out at us.

“We’re looking for Alina,” Maryse says.

The man nods, and the door swings open the rest of the way.

When we step inside, he hands Maryse a playing card, and then hands me one, too. Confused, I look down to see I’ve been given the six of spades.

The basement is filled with several dozen people.

Some mingle in small groups while others are on their own. The walls are lined with items that sit on various tables and shelves, even some chairs acting as makeshift displays, with sheets of parchment and quills and ink sitting next to them.

People move from table to table, observing the items, which range from a stack of books that look like they must be decades old, to shimmering and downright luxurious jewelry, and scribble something on the parchment before moving on.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“The King’s Auction.” She leads me through the crowd, weaving around people effortlessly as I barely avoid knocking into them. “We got here later than I wanted to, but we should still have time to bid.”

“Why would the king...?”

“He doesn’t. Not really.” Every now and then she pauses, looking at

whatever's offered on the nearest table, and then starts moving again. "It started something like a hundred years ago. The name was always a joke. Like naming a cat 'Tuna' or something. Royal family tried to get it shut down back then, and now the townsguard makes a go of it every few months. Sometimes they even succeed. But we always pop back up sooner or later."

I nod. Illegal and stolen products have to be bought somewhere. Back home, it was getting beer from an unlicensed brewery operating out of someone's barn. Here, it's bidding on who-knows-what in a dingy basement, literally under the townsguards' noses.

"I'm surprised the hall is still open for gambling, if they've been shut down before."

"The Auction moves every time," she explains. "Owner of the building takes a cut in exchange for the trouble. I knew this was supposed to be happening today, but I had to find out where it was. That's what I spent most of this morning doing."

"What are we looking for?"

"We aren't looking for anything. I'm looking for something good, something that might actually be legitimate magic. Funds are limited, so I need to look carefully." She holds up the playing card the guard handed her—the three of clubs. "This is what I'll use to identify myself for anything I win."

"So why bring me at all, then? If I'm supposed to stand here and watch?"

That makes her pause before she answers. "I don't know. I thought you'd want to come along. You seemed...kind of down. I thought you'd want to get out tonight, and maybe it'd be fun. See some sights the townsguard wouldn't show you, meet some interesting people."

I chuckle. "I feel like such a rebel."

"Anyway," she says, "you'll want to keep moving as best you can. If the townsguard does show up, they'll go for the people who are standing around first. Easy pickings. That should give the rest of us enough time to run."

"But there's only one exit."

She shrugs. "I never said it wasn't a risk."

More and more people are arriving now, coming in groups of no more than three, but still arriving at a steady pace.

The room grows hotter and more suffocating as Maryse and I mill from table to table. The people playing upstairs must know something is going on, even if they don't know what. Have the guards that I saw caught on? Will

they come down here and arrest us all?

Or maybe they think, hey, they're off duty, it's not their problem. I can only hope.

I've never been to a silent auction before, but I've heard enough about them to realize that this is what's happening.

There's no one who's obviously working the auction, no man in black giving a rapid spiel at the front of the room. People simply write down their card and price, and when bidding ends, whoever's in charge will see to collecting the money and distributing the prizes.

While many, like Maryse and myself, have simple playing cards, others have been given tarot and fortune-telling cards, writing down the mystic symbols assigned to them. I suppose you have to get creative when more people than playing cards show up.

I stick close to Maryse, who still hasn't found anything she deems acceptable, though she does occasionally pause to say "hello" to someone she knows. Mostly her father's friends, she explains.

Finally, almost a full twenty minutes after we arrived, she stops in her tracks, so suddenly I knock into her.

"Oh shit," she mutters, drawing back but keeping her gaze straight ahead.

"What is it?" I follow her stare, and see two people, one man and one woman, looking to be about ten years older than us, standing at a table examining one of the wares for sale.

A silver compass.

Obviously related, they share the same pale blond hair and dark brown eyes, and short, light build. Although I've never met them before, a tug of recognition pulls at my mind and won't let go.

It takes me a moment to place it, but then I realize—they look like Cornelis. If you aged the man by about five years and changed his eyes to gray, they'd practically be twins.

"Are those your other siblings?" I ask her. She could easily deny it if I hadn't already met Cornelis. Her auburn hair and green eyes, when compared to her family, make her look like a changeling.

She nods. "Let's—" She begins to turn away, but it's too late, and the woman's voice calls out.

"Maryse?"

She winces, but washes it off her face quickly, replacing it with a look of neutrality that I'd almost believe. Turning toward her, she says, "Hello,



Letja,” and sounds like she might choke on the civility. She gives the briefest of nods to her brother. “Horats.”

“What are you doing here?” she asks. Horats follows at her heels in a puppylike manner that makes me cringe, as I realize that’s how I must look following Maryse.

“What do you think I’m doing? I’m here to buy.”

“With what money?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

Letja squints at her before her mouth forms an O. “You got it out of Pa’s savings, didn’t you?”

I have no idea why that would be such a shocking thought, but Maryse crosses her arms and takes a half step back. “I said it’s none of your concern.”

“You little—we tried to get some money out and the teller wouldn’t give it to us.”

“I guess he didn’t put you on the account. I can’t imagine why.”

Horats scowls, twisting his otherwise decently handsome face into a mask of envy. “You’re only a child. How could he trust you over us?”

“Oh, what did you expect?” Letja asks with a sneer. “She’s always been his little pet. I suppose the reward for unwavering loyalty is being able to waste his money while he’s gone.” Then a grim, sickening smile. “Enjoy it while you can. You have only, what, another month before it all goes to Cornelis?”

Maryse lets out a scoff. “You realize that if Corny gets all the money, you’re still as broke as you are now.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. He may not like us, but he knows you don’t, either—and he *hates* you.”

A small huff escapes Maryse. “Well, as fun as this family reunion has been, I have some bidding wars to win. See you in jail.” Maryse begins to turn away, but her sister reaches forward to grab her arm, with a hold that looks like it’s bruising.

Without thinking, I step in and shove her on the shoulder. Not hard, just enough to get her to let go.

“We’re leaving,” I say, a bit of stone finding its way into my voice without my realizing.

“Who the hell are you?” Letja asks.

“I’m...” I remember what she told me about not revealing I’m working for the townsguard. “I’m a friend.”

Horats looks genuinely bewildered, and I'd almost laugh at his expression if it wasn't directed at Maryse. "Since when do you have friends?"

"Decided to buy a couple," she says dryly. Her arm links with mine, and she pulls me away. "Come on."

We move closer to the front of the room, squeezing our way through the crowd. I guess getting arrested is a more appealing prospect than staying close to her siblings, and I can't blame her for that.

"Are you okay?" I ask, once I'm sure we're out of earshot.

"Of course."

"Are you sure? I mean, if you want to talk about it—"

"I'm fine." She finally comes to a stop, and we have a pretty good view of the table at the front of the room. "We've never gotten along. I'm used to that crap." She hasn't let go of my arm, and I don't pull away.

I hesitate. "What was all that stuff about your father?"

There's a pause, and when I start to think she's pretending she didn't hear me, she says, "He's been...away for a few months now."

"Did he leave for work?"

She shrugs weakly, still not looking at me. "That's what we thought at first. But it's been ages, and no one's heard from or seen him, so now he's technically 'missing,' I guess. And if he doesn't turn up in the next few weeks, he could be declared dead, if someone from the family reports it—which I'm sure Cornelis will, because once he's dead, his money and property all go to him."

My stomach gives a lurch. "He didn't think to put you in the will?"

"He did." Upon seeing my confused look, she explains, without any shame, "He's a convict."

"Oh. *Oh*."

One of the more controversial laws passed by the previous king is an act that causes the legal wills of people convicted of a crime of "a suitably heinous and serious nature" to be declared invalid. This lets the government seize their property after they die. Anything they don't decide to keep is given to their closest living relative. In this case, the oldest child. Cornelis.

What, exactly, "suitably heinous and serious" means is unclear. It obviously covers murderers and the like, but I've also heard of it being invoked for people who shoplifted a few hundred jere's worth of food over the course of a few years, or even people whose only transgression was adultery. It seems it means whatever the local officials want it to mean.

I wonder what they got Maryse's father for. With what I know of her family, anything seems possible. It could easily be the theft she denies is happening, or selling counterfeit goods—in which case, she's in danger of having it happen to her, too, one of these days. I want to ask her about it, but I don't dare. She has enough to deal with already.

"I'm sorry," I say, but she waves her hand, finally pulling away from me.

We glance at each other, and I feel my cheeks heating up, though I do everything I can to ignore it.

"Don't be," she says. "I've got it figured out."

"I'm sure you do," I say, and I honestly mean it. "But you shouldn't have to."

She doesn't respond, and we continue making our way around the room.

"So," I finally say, "do you plan to bid on lots of smaller items, or go for one big thing?"

"I have to go for quantity." She pauses at a table covered in dozens and dozens of amulets and brooches, ranging from cheap tiny charms made of fake gems to a gargantuan ruby thing that costs more than a month's rent at the boardinghouse. "Appraising takes so much time, and there's so little chance of finding anything useful to begin with, I can't afford to buy one thing and pray it's what we want."

On that note, she scribbles down prices for three of the brooches for sale.

As we move to the next table, we pass the silver compass Letja was looking at.

Its description boasts of an ancient enchantment that will always lead the owner directly back to their house. Maryse looks closely at it, then puts down an offer that outdoes her sister's by ten jere before we move on.

"How long have you been coming to this thing?" I ask.

"Oh, since I could walk," she says with a laugh.

"Your father didn't worry about you being here?"

"He figured it was best I get used to the company he kept early on. Plus, there were times he needed to send me in his place when he wasn't on the best of terms with the sellers."

Maryse's father, it appears, is a man with many enemies. She doesn't seem to mind; if anything, whatever her father does is a point of pride. But after meeting her siblings, I have to wonder if she cares more about the rift in her family than she lets on.

We stay for a while, Maryse placing bids, while I try not to look too out of

place and amazed by everything that's for sale.

If all the ware descriptions are accurate, I'm exploring quite possibly the greatest collection of magical artifacts in the country. In practice, I'm probably in the greatest collection of fakes.

Still, some of what's for sale is beautiful: handcrafted combs and statuettes and journals. I cringe at one lot, which proports to sell a real baby dragon's skull. That someone would want to pay money for such a thing turns my stomach. Upon closer inspection, however, I see that it's another counterfeit. Someone took a calf skull and used sap to fix the horns of a goat on top.

Maryse's face scrunches in disgust when she sees it. "Some people, I swear," she mutters.

When she's placed her fifth bid of the evening, I ask, "Is there anything here you think is real?" But before she can respond, a noise causes us—and several others—to stop in our tracks, fall silent, and look up.

Above us, footsteps of what must be a dozen people or more pound against the floor, and, among the muffled voices, I hear a door open.

For a split second, everyone is still.

The footsteps get louder and closer, bounding down the stairs toward us.

"Stop in the name of the council of this city and King Maikel IV!"

With that, the basement door is pushed open.

A line of purple-clad guards floods the room, and everything devolves into absolute chaos.

Tables are overturned and people all around make grabs for the merchandise. Whether they're workers for the Auction not wanting to lose their wares, or customers hoping to take advantage of the chaos, I'm not sure. Everyone goes in a different direction—with only one exit, the best anyone can hope for is to evade capture and slip past the guards and back up the stairs.

I try to remember what Maryse said—keep moving.

*Oh no.* My throat closes up as I cast a frantic and harried glance around the room. Maryse. Where's Maryse? I didn't realize we'd been separated until now.

With everyone shoving and moving and shouting at once, it's impossible to keep anyone in my line of sight for more than a few seconds at a time. I crane my neck to try to get a better look at the crowd. Someone collides with me, not pausing as I'm knocked to the ground.

I cry out as I land on my shoulder, an arm flying up instinctively to shield

my head.

No one seems to have noticed me go down, and none of them stop moving. From the floor, everything looks so much worse. Like a single ant attempting to navigate a busy and bustling town square, where most never see them.

I make an effort to get to my feet, but someone walks over me, their foot pushing me back to the floor by my hip. More people nearly trip over me or outright step on me, but no one pauses or looks down long enough to see me as I try, again and again, to get up on my own.

The room is overwhelmingly hot and loud, far too many people crammed in at once, and my every effort to get someone's attention is overrun by the voices of others. Guards shouting at people to stop resisting arrest, others screaming at each other to leave the wares behind and run.

Someone running past and slamming their heavy boot directly onto my fingers is what pushes me to my breaking point. I scream and tears come to my eyes as I draw my hand to my chest. The pain is throbbing, too overwhelming for me to be able to assess whether or not anything's broken. Using my uninjured hand, I reach desperately upward, gripping tightly at the first brush of fabric against my fingers.

"What the—let *go*—" It's Letja.

She pauses, trying to swat my hand away from her yellow tunic, and I see in her other fist the silver compass she and Maryse both bid on earlier. Apparently, she decided not to bother with the formality of upping her offer. She spots me looking at it and shoves it into her pocket, before, not without some level of exasperation, reaching down and pulling me off the floor.

"Thank you," I say, uneasy but back on my feet.

"You never saw me," she says sharply.

"Hey, what's going on over here?"

We both whip around to see a guard shoving their way through the crowd toward us.

My heart sinks as their face comes into full view, and I see Scyler is on duty tonight, looking severe and serious in their uniform with their hair tied back in a bun and their jaw clenched. They exchange a steely glare with Letja before glancing at me. Their eyes widen, before their face falls in marked disappointment.

Letja doesn't waste any time. She bolts through the crowd and disappears back up the stairs, taking the compass with her.

Before I can do anything, Scyler grabs me by the arm and drags me

upstairs as well. I cringe as their fingers dig into my skin but follow along as best I can, trying not to trip over my own feet.

Letja is long gone by the time we get up there.

In fact, the entire gambling hall seems to have cleared out, though the gambling itself is completely legal. Apart from some bidders escaping from the basement, plus the guards trying to round them up, the whole floor appears to be deserted.

“Where are we going?” I ask, as Scyler continues to pull me along like a disagreeable dog.

We step out of the building and into the cool night air, and they lead me down the road, back to the center of town.

“We’re finding my horse and getting the hell out of here. My job is to keep you safe,” they say. “It’s also to break up any illegal activities. Didn’t expect those jobs to overlap, but whatever.”

“Am I arrested?”

“I’ll decide when we get there. Just keep walking and let me mull over how furious I am with you right now.”

I cringe and decide not to push my luck. Their fingers are almost certainly going to leave bruises, but I don’t think they’re doing it on purpose. I really don’t want to find out what they could do if they actually made an effort.

We pass a small group of people I recognize from the auction, being ushered into a cart pulled by a horse draped in the townsguard colors. Their hands are chained and a few shout curse words and complaints at the two guards guiding them.

“Hey, Prins, got another one for us?” one of them calls, seeing me.

“Let me handle her,” they call back, which isn’t a “yes,” thank goodness, but also isn’t a “no.”

As we cross the road to where Scyler tied up their horse, I get a better look at the people being taken off to jail. Sitting in between two men who are at least three times her weight each is Maryse, slouching back against the cart, her lips twisted into a scowl.

“Maryse!” I call without thinking. She looks up, giving me an exasperated “What can you do?” shrug from where she sits.

Scyler gives me a tug and brings me farther away. Having no choice but to follow—at least, not unless I’m willing to *really* piss them off—I can’t do anything but raise one of my hands and wave to her.

She weakly waves back, and then sways and nearly loses her balance as the

cart begins to move. It passes us, and I can only stand there as she disappears from my view, wishing I could run after her.

## Chapter Ten

There have been so many arrests tonight, Vikker begins to order the guards to let first-time offenders off with a warning.

I'm not sure if Scyler would've actually arrested me or not, but it's a relief to not have to worry. Instead, they opt to give me what they call a "talking to," but in practice has turned out to be a tongue-lashing that would put most parents to shame.

About forty minutes into their seemingly endless rant, I start to think maybe I'd have been better off if I'd been arrested after all.

I shrink back into my chair as they stand over me, waving their hands and shouting, for the fifteenth time, "What were you *thinking*?!"

"I wanted to—"

"Ah-bup-bup-bup!" They wag their finger in my face, as if they're a disappointed schoolmarm. It'd be really, really funny if I had not been cast in the role of disappointing student. "You could've been arrested, you could've lost your job, you could've been hurt—I don't even have *time* to list all the ways that could've backfired on you! And do you have any idea how much shit I'd catch from Ma if her niece got hurt basically one day after she found out she even had a niece? What were you thinking?"

They stare at me, placing their hands on their hips and raising their eyebrows, and I realize they actually want an answer this time.

"I wanted to help find an artifact. Maryse said she had a lead, and—"

Scyler groans, collapsing to sit in a chair across from mine.

While most of the guards involved in the raid took to the main offices to begin the work of calculating bail and determining charges for everyone they arrested, Scyler dragged me back to one of the break rooms to ream me out. Their throat must be raw from all the shouting by now.

"Lotte, you can't go chasing every lead that girl says she sees," they say.



“She’s nothing but trouble.”

“That’s a little harsh, isn’t it?” The defensiveness in my voice is a surprise even to myself, but I keep talking. “I mean, she wanted to help me—us. She was only trying to help.”

“She got you caught up in a raid tonight!”

“I mean, from a certain perspective, *you* got me caught up in a raid—” They shoot me a glare that shuts me up immediately.

There’s a light knock from outside the door, and I look over my shoulder to see Danil leaning into the doorway from the hall.

He’s still partially in uniform but has left the buttons of his jacket undone and is wearing only one glove. With dark circles starting to form under his eyes and his sandy hair sticking up in the back, the effects of a twelve-hour shift are definitely showing.

“I’ve finished all my paperwork for tonight,” he says. “Are you ready to go home, Scy?”

Scyler fixes me with one more steely stare before they finally relent, visibly softening as the tension drops out of them. “Let me sign out and then we can go.”

They stand and leave, giving me a firm clap on the shoulder as they go.

Danil comes in and takes the chair they were occupying, looking at me with a mixture of sympathy and amusement.

“We could hear the screaming from the holding room, you know,” he says. “Vikker was beginning to wonder if he should remind Scyler about the laws regarding torture.”

I chuckle, though it’s halfhearted and tired. “They kind of let me have it.”

“That’s how they express concern.”

“Do you ever wonder about the effect this will have on your married life?” I ask, only half joking.

He laughs. “Oh, I’m well aware of what I’m getting into. We got engaged while we were sparring.”

I smile. That sounds about right. “Which of you proposed?”

“They did, kind of. We had been practicing for an hour when they asked, out of the blue, ‘By the way, are you thinking about marrying me yet?’”

“What did you say?”

“Once I realized they weren’t making fun of me? I said, ‘Well, I was starting to consider it,’ and they said, ‘Good. I don’t need it to happen tomorrow, but I was starting to worry.’”

This is all said with the utmost fondness.

I'm not too surprised Scyler would opt for a no-fuss, no-frills engagement, or that Danil would go with it. They're not the sort of couple to be all over each other in public, but anyone can see how well-attuned they are to each other.

"When do you think the wedding will be?"

"Oh, I don't know. We're not in any great rush. They want to get promoted and be earning more before we set a date. I'm fine with waiting until then." He glances at the clock and stands up, stretching out his back and shoulders. "You should get back to the boardinghouse. Want us to walk you?"

"I'll be fine, thank you. Good night."

"Good night."

Before he gets out the door, I call out, "Danil?"

"Yes?"

"Is Maryse gonna go to jail?"

He lets out a low whistle. "I don't know," he admits. "But I find it hard to imagine there won't be consequences. She has a record already and she was caught red-handed."

"But..." I trail off, unable to find an actual argument against that.

She *was* committing a crime, I can't deny that, though I'm willing to bet she would with her dying breath. But the idea of her in a cell for any length of time makes my stomach do a backflip.

I guess it shows on my face, because Danil sighs. "Look, I'll talk to Captain Vikker and whoever her arresting guard was, see if we can figure something out. Okay?"

"Okay." I take a deep breath and let it out, trying to be optimistic. "Thank you."

"You can visit her in the morning if you like. She'll be moved to...well, wherever they decide to place her. Get some sleep."

With that, he disappears out the door, and I'm left alone with my thoughts.

Specifically, my thoughts about how unfair it is that Maryse is in trouble because she was only trying to help me, and here I am, getting off scot-free.

I hope she won't be angry with me.

We were starting to become friends, and... I'm embarrassed to realize how much I want Maryse to like me. But I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Pretty girls always did have a way of superseding my dignity.

I shake my head and force myself to stand, resolving to try to follow

Danil's advice. Fair or not, there's nothing I can do for Maryse or anyone else right now. The best thing to do is to make sure I get some rest.

...

The townsguard offices are packed to the walls the next morning.

Apparently, they managed to arrest far more people than I realized.

Now, it appears every single one of their friends and relatives have turned up to try to post bail, find out court dates, or get answers as to what they've been arrested for.

Everyone crammed in so tightly gives me flashbacks of nearly getting trampled last night, but at least no one's running now. Even so, it takes me twenty minutes before I manage to get to the front desk.

A harried, exhausted-looking secretary sits with a quill in his hand, piles of forms surrounding him. His eyes flick up as I approach, giving me only the briefest of glances before he looks back down at whatever he's writing. "Have you reached the age of majority?"

"Um—yes, barely, but—"

"Who're you here for?"

"Maryse," I say, pausing before I think to add, "Basvaan."

"Basvaan, Basvaan..." He reaches under his desk, producing a stack of papers that's a couple inches thick. Riffing through the pages, I catch glimpses of dozens and dozens of arrest forms, all written in different hands. The secretary searches, muttering to himself about retirement and how he should've gone to art school instead.

"Her brother works here," I offer. As little as I want to talk to Cornelis, the crowd of people waiting to find out what's going on with their relatives has only gotten larger. And besides, if this man dies of exhaustion at his desk today, I'd rather it not be when he's helping me. "Lieutenant Basvaan. I could ask him, if you like."

He looks up at me, relief shining in his eyes. "Go through there. Second office on the left." He turns his head long enough to shout, "Civilian coming back!" before waving me toward the door leading to the offices in the back of the building.

As I step away from the desk, a member of the townsguard I don't recognize steps out of the door.

He spends a minute or so patting me down to make sure I'm not carrying any weapons, but I can tell he's not really too worried. He probably has to do

this every day. Or maybe he's just looking at me and correctly figuring that, even with a sword or something, I'd have a hell of a time trying to do any actual damage before a guard took me down.

Once I've been cleared, I'm allowed to go directly to the office, where Cornelis sits at a large desk.

It's a fairly small room, and there's a small mountain of paperwork not unlike the one I saw out front. His coat hangs from a nail on the wall, and judging from the crumb-covered plate that's been shoved onto the windowsill, he ate breakfast in here.

As he sits in his large oak chair, he stares intently at an object, some sort of small, shiny knickknack that he holds carefully in his hands, wearing white gloves.

I can't quite make out what it is. Maybe a piece of jewelry or something.

"Yes?" he asks, not looking up as I step into the doorway, pausing before I cross the threshold of the room.

"Hi." I suddenly realize I don't actually have a plan here. "It's—um, hi, it's me."

He turns his gaze upward now, and his lips purse in annoyance. "So it is."

He hasn't invited me to sit down or come inside, so I continue to awkwardly hover in the doorway. "I guess you heard about the raid last night?"

"I helped organize it," he says with a self-satisfied smirk.

"Then I guess you probably know that Maryse was arrested."

"Yes, I do." His gray eyes bore into me, as if he's trying to break open my skull with his gaze alone. "I also heard you were escorted out by Guard Prins."

"Yes." I scratch the back of my neck. "I'm sorry Maryse and I got separated. We weren't able to catch up with each other until—um." I falter when I see he's already gone back to studying the object, making a real show of trying to ignore me. "Look, I wanted to find out what's going on with her. I mean, I know she was taken in, but I don't know if she was processed or anything, and I really don't want her to be stuck in jail over something like this, and—"

"I hope you're not asking me to abuse my power as a lieutenant to have her released."

"No! No." I shake my head.

"Because you understand my sister and everyone else there—including you

—were committing a *crime*?”

“I know,” I admit. “And you can’t get the charges dropped, that wouldn’t be fair, I understand that. But...your boss wants her to help examine whatever maybe-magical items you all find—you must have loads you seized last night. Maybe she could work some time off whatever her sentence is with that.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’m quite capable of appraising the items myself.” He turns the knickknack over in his hands, and I finally get a better look at it.

It’s round and silver, and I suddenly recognize it as the compass Letja took.

“Your other siblings,” I say. “Were they arrested as well?”

Cornelis looks up at me, and his eyes narrow ever so slightly before he relaxes and says, “If they were, I haven’t heard about it. I assume they weren’t there.”

I almost say something like, “No, I saw them,” but I stop myself in time. I really think he’s lying, but what if I’m wrong? I don’t like Horats and Letja much, but it still wouldn’t be very nice to get them arrested, especially since Letja did keep me from getting trampled. Still, though, how could he have the compass? Did she lose it somehow? That doesn’t seem likely.

I clear my throat to cover the pause that’s arisen, and ask, “Do you know how much Maryse needs for bail? I was wondering if anyone had come to pay that yet, or if there’s a plan for this sort of—”

“I don’t know what her bail’s set at, and I don’t care.” His voice is unenthusiastic, as if he’s describing the weather. “No one’s come to pick her up, and I don’t expect anyone will. Maryse’s concerns stopped being mine a long time ago. If she wants to ruin her life and turn out like our father, that’s her prerogative. It might be best for her to get used to staying in a cell now. Prepare her for the future.”

My hand clenches into a fist without a thought, and I have to bite my tongue to keep from saying what I’m thinking. Namely, that this man is an absolute asshole.

Instead, I ask, “May I see her, at least?”

“She’s downstairs in holding. Knock yourself out.” With that, he stops acknowledging me, and I take this as my cue to leave.

The holding rooms are below the offices, easy enough to find with the guards posted at the door. They have a distinct look of surprise when I tell them I’m here to see Maryse, but let me go anyway.

The temperature drops as I descend the stairs, and a chill passes through me and causes me to shudder when I reach the bottom.

Holding is a long, dim room, and one wall is made up entirely of cells, which are currently full. A handful of faces stand out to me as familiar from last night.

Most people are looking merely irritated or bored, sitting on the ground if they didn't manage to snag a spot on the wooden benches, some killing time by tracing patterns in the dirt floor, others complaining to one another about how the auction went south.

A couple give the occasional shout at the guards who are on patrol, demanding to be let out or spewing profanity, but they are ignored.

One guard working her post, looking like she might actually fall asleep standing up, directs me to Maryse's cell, which is at the far end of the room.

Reaching it, I spot her immediately.

Looking remarkably well-rested for someone who spent the night in a cell with a dozen other people, she's managed to claim a spot on the bench. Sitting with her elbows on her knees, she's staring up at the ceiling, either lost in thought, or extremely bored. A sigh of relief rushes from my lungs the instant I see that she's not hurt.

"Maryse," I say, approaching the bars.

She gives a start at the sound of her name, and when her head whips over to look in my direction, I'm both surprised and oddly pleased when she smiles.

Her hair is mussed from a night spent in the cell, but other than that, she looks fresh-faced and relatively together. She stands—her seat being immediately stolen by someone who was stuck sitting on the floor—and comes to stand in front of me. On instinct, my hands reach up toward the bars, but she shakes her head, stopping me.

"Don't. They don't like visitors getting too close," she advises. "They may ask you to take a step back, too. It's good to see you."

"You too," I say, taking my hands down. I'm not sure what to do with them, so I shove them in my pockets. "I'm so sorry."

"Why? Not your fault I got arrested."

"No, but...I don't know, I feel bad. I was there, too."

"Be glad you're not in jail. My brother's already trying to get rid of you."

"Trust me, I know. I went to see him."

Her lip curls like she smells milk that went bad a week ago. "Why?"

“I was hoping maybe the townsguard would cut you a deal because of—well, I don’t know,” I stammer, suddenly very aware we’re surrounded by people who don’t know about the search for a magical artifact. “But he didn’t go for it. And he wasn’t sure what your bail was.”

“Oh, three thousand jere. But don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it?” I repeat incredulously. “It’ll probably be weeks before they get to your case. Do you have any money set aside or anything? I know you’re sort of short on cash right now, but you can’t get your shop open again if you’re stuck here waiting for your sentencing.”

“I’m not gonna get sentenced.”

Her tone is so unworried, I can’t help but stare at her. Has she not noticed she’s in a cell?

Upon seeing my expression, she looks over her shoulder to make sure no one’s listening, then over mine to see if the guards are paying attention to us. They don’t seem to be, so she gestures me to lean in.

In a lowered voice, she explains, “I need to sit tight for a few days, maybe a week. Just until things around here calm down and Vikker gets sick of waiting for Corny to appraise anything.”

“You think he won’t have it done yet?”

“He won’t have it done, period. The knack my father and I have for sensing magic? He doesn’t have it. At all.” She shrugs. “No one really knows why. I doubt he’s told Vikker. It’s a bit of a sore spot for him. But once everyone sees that he doesn’t know what he’s doing, they’ll offer me a deal, and then I’ll be out of here.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” I cast a glance around.

“I’ll be fine. A lot of people will probably be able to leave on bail today and tomorrow, and then it’ll at least be less crowded in here. You don’t have to worry about me.” She gives me a playful half smile. “Enjoy freedom for me, all right? I’ll be out soon.”

I huff. “I hate seeing you here. It’s not fair.”

“You’re sweet,” she says, which makes my face heat up. “But I promise, I’ll be okay. It’s really not so bad.”

“Promise you’re not being brave?” I ask, half teasing, half serious.

She laughs. “I promise, when I’m upset, you will know about it.”

I nod, trying to feel as calm and confident as she seems.

If Maryse is sure everything will be fine, then maybe everything really will be fine. After all, she’s been mixed up in this sort of thing for...well, her

entire life, from what I can gather. She knows what she's talking about.

Of course, I thought that before she got arrested in the first place.

But she's probably right that, if Cornelis can't deliver, Vikker will probably be willing to let her go. There's nothing she or I can do except wait. And, in my case, try not to worry or feel too guilty for this whole mess.

"You sure you don't want me to find bail for you?" I ask.

"Don't bother." She gives me a reassuring look. "It's nice of you to worry. But I'll be fine. Promise."

"Of course I'm worried! You're in jail! That's a thing people are supposed to worry over."

Maryse's eyes meet mine, and for a second, all the noise around us goes quiet. Something that could just as easily be confusion or uncertainty lights her gaze, but she doesn't look away from me. It's a moment before she speaks again.

"It's been awhile since anyone's fussed over me. I forgot how it feels."

My gaze darts downward, staring at my feet as I try not to blush. "Sorry, I don't mean to be..." Panicky? Overbearing? Annoying?

"It's okay." When I look back up at her, she's smiling. "You can be."

I let out a sound halfway between a laugh and a sigh of relief. Neither of us speak at first, gazing at each other, before finally, I step forward, a bit closer to her. In complete defiance of her earlier warning, I reach up and grasp one of the bars.

A small, painful jolt passes through me, like a stab directly into my nerve endings, and I yelp, jumping back. Inside the cell, a few of the prisoners snicker.

Maryse cringes. "Are you all right?"

I shake my hands, trying to jostle the hurt out of them. "I'm fine, but..."

My palms are still tingling from the attack. Leaning closer, I squint at the bars. Carved into the gray metal are tiny images, which I recognize from books I've read about magic. Protective runes.

From behind me, I hear footsteps. "You're lucky that spell's a hundred years old," the guard says, sounding bored. "When it was first cast, the pain was enough to make people faint."

I cringe and wonder if they haven't replenished the spell's magic out of laziness, or because they lack a witch powerful enough to do it. Either way, I suppose I'm lucky.

"The jail at home doesn't have anything like that," I say.



“The attractions of Morwassen’s Pass,” Maryse says. “A financial crisis, a yearly mice infestation, and stronger prisons.”

We both laugh but are interrupted by the guard telling me I should get going.

“I’ll visit again,” I promise. “Tomorrow.”

“I should have taken the place over by then.”

# Chapter Eleven

Until the next tithe is to be delivered, I have no obligations, no responsibilities, nothing that I need to do. And I feel completely and utterly useless.

I've tried to kill time by wandering the streets, checking out shops and restaurants near the boardinghouse, but my mind is constantly dragged back to the crumbling castle and the dragon that waits for me inside.

I can see the towers from my room's window, and this afternoon I spent an hour sitting on my bed gazing at them. The piles of stolen gold and his massive, red eyes are never too far from the edges of my mind, and I'm left constantly trying to rehearse what I can do or say the next time I see him.

Especially if the townsguard still hasn't come up with an artifact by then.

The sun is starting to set when I finally force myself to stand up and get off the bed, resolving to at least get out of that room. Maybe not being able to see the castle will help take my mind off things.

I leave the boardinghouse to see what I can find for supper. The smell of roasted lamb is calling me from one street, though I don't want to think about how much it'll probably cost. But as I try to force myself to think about food instead of Ker'kachin, my mind keeps going back to him.

For as many businesses that are open and bustling, there are also dozens with CLOSED signs permanently in the windows, with some storefronts being completely emptied out. According to Scyler and Danil, usually any empty building in Morwassen's Pass is immediately bought and the business there is replaced by something new, but that hasn't been happening in the last few months. People simply can't afford it.

To my surprise, when I walk past the gambling hall where the King's Auction was being held, it's still open and I can hear voices coming from inside. Looks like the townsguard couldn't keep them down for long.

Peeking in through the window, I see that the hall isn't quite as crowded as it was the night Maryse and I were there. There are still a few games going on, however, and walking through the room, weaving between tables, is Mads, the older man who let us into the Auction.

The man with a dragon living in his home.

Hardly anyone spares a glance at me when I come inside, though the few who do look me up and down, bewildered. They probably think I'm just some kid who wandered in by mistake.

My gaze darts around, searching for the little green dragon, but instead I find Mads, whose eyes light with recognition. He approaches me as I let the creaky door swing shut behind me.

"You're Maryse's friend," he says. "Back for a game?"

"Sorry, no," I say. I glance around. No sign of the townsguard here tonight. "I'm surprised you're open so soon after...well, you know."

Mads shrugs. "Called in a favor."

I frown. "With Captain Vikker?"

"Oh no, no." He laughs, shaking his head and ushering me farther into the room, away from the entrance. "No, he wouldn't be caught dead cutting deals with me."

He offers no further clues as to who helped him out, and I decide not to ask. There are more pressing concerns right now.

"Look, this is going to sound odd, but—is Dalton around?"

His white eyebrows jump up in surprise. "I don't know. She comes and goes as she pleases."

I chuckle. I can't imagine trying to keep a dragon, even a tiny one, indoors would go over very well. "Where do you think she'd be?" I ask.

"Kitchen, probably. Why?"

"Because..." A small sigh escapes me. "I need to talk with her."

Mads's brow furrows as he squints at me, as if trying to figure out whether or not I'm being serious.

"I'm a Dragontongue," I say. He opens his mouth, and I continue before he can reply. "And I know that may be hard to believe, but I will gladly prove it if I can see her."

Not that it's exactly up to Mads, or, for that matter, me. Mads might be able to point me in the right direction, and it seemed rude to just march in and start looking for the dragon without at least letting him know what I'm doing. But whether or not the dragon actually wants to talk to me, let alone tell me

anything useful? That is definitely not for either of us humans to decide.

Properly intrigued, Mads leads me into the small kitchen, which seems to mostly exist as a place to store beer and ale for the gamblers. There is, however, a small, round metal oven, and a little gap between the back of it and the wall. Crouching, I find a miniature hoard for a miniature dragon: a couple handfuls of jere, a few small pieces of cheap-looking jewelry, and a single, teeny-tiny ruby in a pile on the tile floor. Lying curled up in a ball on top is Dalton, and slowly, all three of her acid-green eyes open at the sound of our approach. A low, irritated growl escapes her, and Mads takes a half step back, raising his hands as if to show he's not holding a weapon, but I don't move. She's not baring her teeth, which is a good sign.

I clear my throat, bowing my head, and speak quietly. "Hello there."

Dalton blinks rapidly, her head perking up, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Mads shoot me a shocked stare. People usually do that when they hear me speak Draken for the first time. I'm told the sound of Draken in a human voice is something akin to a bluebird singing in the language of wolves.

"Are you well met?" I ask, keeping my voice soft.

She tilts her head. "We have met only one other human who could speak to us," she says. "Where have they found you?"

"A long ways away." I lift my head and lean back on my heels, still crouching in front of her. "I'm here to help sort out the situation with...with the dragon in the castle. Ker'kachin."

Instantly, her tiny body curls tighter, protectively attempting to shield her meager hoard from view. "We do not meddle in the affairs of other dragons," she says. "Safer that way."

"I understand," I say, and truly, I do. She'd be no match for Ker'kachin if she ever crossed him. "I won't ask you to do anything or go anywhere near him. I just have some questions."

Her trio of eyes narrow. "What will you offer us?"

I sigh. I should've expected that. Digging through my purse, I find a couple jere, which I place on the floor for her. She gets to her feet, snorting happily as she scoops up the coins, tossing one into her pile and holding onto the other like a child holds a treasured doll.

Mads lets out a low whistle. "Impressive. Took me weeks of leaving food out to get her to come near me."

"Have you ever spoken to Ker'kachin?" I ask her, watching as the coin glints in the lamplight.

She shakes her head. “We have never gotten that close. We saw him only once—the night he came here. We were searching for food outside when we saw him fly overhead. So big, he blocked out the moon and stars. Humans everywhere screamed, ran everywhere and hid in their caves, but we stood and watched him fly—we can’t fly, but we like to watch—and we saw his eyes. Beautiful scarlet eyes.”

“What about any other dragons in the city? Do you know anyone who’s talked with him?”

“We all knew to keep away. He’s marked as a thief.”

I nod slowly. “The name Ker’kachin. You’d heard it before he came here?”

A small shudder passes through her. “Whispers came from the forest,” she says, her voice hushed, as if afraid Mads might somehow be eavesdropping. “Whispers of a great red dragon who had slain another and stolen her food, driven her children and countless others into hiding. A few of us go back and forth between here and the forest—not we, we prefer to stay right here where we know all the best hiding spots—but those that travel into the woods heard the warnings and spread them to us.”

My heart leaps. If there are some dragons who have spent time in both the city and the forest, there might be some dragons here who have tangled with Ker’kachin before the townsguard did. Dragons who lived to tell the tale.

Dalton continues, “The dragons in the woods tried to find his nest before he came here. They tried to end him, to put out the fire before it could spread, but they found nothing.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“They found no nest nor hoard in the woods that was unaccounted for—nowhere he could’ve slept or hidden away his stolen treasures.”

“But he must’ve had one somewhere before he came to the castle,” I say.

Ker’kachin is clearly well into draconic adulthood; he’s surely been through decades’ worth of feasts by now. He has to have come from someplace, right?

“We thought he must’ve come from the woods,” Dalton whispers, “from how well he knows them, how well he knew where everyone was hiding. But all the dragons who live there swear they never saw him before last feeding season.”

She looks about as confused as I feel. Dragons don’t usually migrate, not in this part of the world, anyway. In places with blistering summers and freezing winters, some species have to move around to stay in whatever

weather they prefer. But in Nivstede, with its mild warm seasons and consistently cold winters, the local dragon types stay put year-round, and they won't move for anything less than an absolute catastrophe. Once a dragon finds a hill they like, they die on it.

"I'll ask around about him, try to figure out where he came from," I say. "Thank you. You've given me a great lead."

I begin to get to my feet, but pause as I think of a final question.

"Do you like it here?" I ask. "In the city?"

Dalton blinks thoughtfully, gnawing on one of the coins. "The city is a frightening place. But we have settled in this nest for now. We are safe and warm here," she says. "And the human who occupies this place has not harmed us yet. It is more than many dragons can say. Especially here."

I glance over my shoulder at Mads, who leans against the wall and has watched all of this with great interest. Looking back to Dalton, I say, "I don't think you have anything to worry about for as long as you choose to stay here."

Dalton bows her head before turning away from me, her tail wrapping around her body as she closes her eyes, effectively dismissing me. I get to my feet, wiping my palms on my trousers, and leave her be.

"Will it do me any good to ask what all of this was about?" Mads asks, following me.

"No. Sorry," I say, before hastily adding, "I swear, it's nothing sketchy."

He laughs. "It's not? Oh well. I forgive you."

...

As I turn over in my mind everything Dalton told me, my stomach rumbles, and I realize I completely forgot about my original quest to get some supper.

My feet carry me to Pim's Table, where I can see Anneke serving patrons their drinks through the window.

I haven't seen her—or anyone in the family besides Scyler—since I saw Mother, and I stop on the street before the restaurant, debating whether or not to go in.

The thought of facing everyone makes my gut twist into a knot, but I take a deep breath and try to calm myself.

What happened with Mother wasn't my fault, and they all know that. And Anneke did seem to sincerely want to get to know me.

I push open the door and let the scent of baking bread and frying meat

wash over me, and I can't help but smile.

"Hey," I say, approaching Anneke as soon as she's done with the table.

A smile lights up her whole face as soon as she sees me, and it's a good feeling.

"Lotte," she says warmly, wiping her hands on her apron before giving me a brief hug. She pulls away and looks me up and down. "Oh, after everything that happened, I was worried you wouldn't want to come back."

"I wasn't sure I would," I admit. "Have you...have you seen Mother?"

"Not since that night." She sighs. "She hasn't spoken with you?"

"No. I mean, I guess it's not surprising, I didn't tell her where I was staying, but..." I trail off.

She said she wanted to see me. She *promised*.

Anneke shakes her head and pats me on the arm. "Don't give it another thought. At least, not until you've had something to eat. We're about to have supper. Would you join us?"

"If you're sure I wouldn't..." I stop and correct myself mid-sentence. "Yes. Thank you."

Minutes later, Rafe and Niels have left the kitchen in the hands of the other staff so they can take their break, emerging from the back with flour splattered on their clothes, and I'm helping them push two tables together to make enough room for all.

As we work, a man comes up from downstairs, and I instantly realize he must be Scyler's father. His eyes light with a sort of recognition the second he sees me, and he comes toward me immediately.

Like all his children, he has pitch-black hair, dark eyes, and brown skin, although he's shorter than all of them, including Niels. He doesn't reach my shoulders, making me feel like even more of a giant than I normally do.

"You're Juna's kid?" he asks, and before I can answer, he seizes my hand to shake it. "Of course you are, look at that hair! Sorry I didn't meet you the other night, I was dead tired—I'm Edmond, Scyler's pa."

"I'm Lotte," I say, though he obviously already knows that. "It's nice to meet you."

"Bet you wish it was under different circumstances, though, eh?"

Anneke elbows him in the ribs, causing him to cough, before saying to her sons, "Go get the food for everyone, will you? Lotte, dear, would you mind helping them? There's a lot to carry."

"Yes ma'am."

Maybe we can all make believe that this is normal, as if I'm like any other cousin they don't see very often. Like the distance from here to my hometown is the only reason we've never done this, never had family dinner together, before this trip.

Rafe and Niels both manage to carry four plates at once, practically gliding into the dining room without a thought. For two gangly individuals, they're remarkably light on their feet. I follow behind them, each step taking just as much thought and effort as most people would put into juggling flaming axes. I can carry only two plates, overloaded with savory-smelling food and feeling like they may clatter to the floor at any moment.

When the door swings open and hits the wall with a small clunk, I give a start, the plates wobbling in my hands as my concentration shatters.

"What did we say about slamming the door?" Edmond calls as I stop in my tracks, finally able to breathe again when I realize I didn't drop anything.

"Sorry." I look over to see Scyler and Danil, both in full uniform, their boots splattered with mud and their limbs looking stiff. Scyler's hair has come out of its usual bun, and they have to keep pushing one lock in particular out of their face, before reaching up to wipe some sweat from their brow.

A short huff escapes them as they add, "It's been a long day."

"Where have you been?" Rafe asks, delivering his plates to the table. His clothes and hands are lightly splattered with flour. "I went by your post at lunchtime and you weren't there."

"We got sent to Balluei Fall," Danil says, taking his coat off. He rolls his shoulders before attempting to flatten his hair, which has been sent into disarray from the wind. Balluei Fall is the nearest major town, about five hours on horseback. It isn't on the ocean, so it doesn't have a proper port, but it is situated near a river that's good for trade within Nivstede. "We had to leave before sunrise and we only just got back. I'm glad we didn't miss supper, I'm starving."

"Dealing with bureaucracy will do that," Scyler mutters, absentmindedly reaching up to rub Danil's sore back.

As we all get seated, crammed around the two tables in a fashion that feels both claustrophobic and comfortable, Danil explains, "They've got a museum over there with some interesting stuff—we were sent to see if they could help us with the artifact thing."

"Shh!" Anneke's eyes flick around the restaurant in alarm, but no one



appears to have heard him. Lowering her voice, she leans closer to him. “You said not to talk about that in public.”

“Actually, we’re not supposed to talk about it with civilians at all,” Scyler admits. “But it’s fine. Vikker’s planning to release an official statement tomorrow or the next day. He told us about it last night. I think he was putting it off because he doesn’t want to cause a panic.”

“So, what’s the plan?” I ask. “Hope someone has a magic thing lying around and is willing to give it up?”

“Yes. But even if people come forward with whatever they have, there’s a good chance most of ’em will be fakes. That’s why he sent us to the museum over there. As far as enchanted items go, their bottomless inkwell is rather pathetic, but at least we know it’s real.”

“Try running out of ink in the middle of the night when you’re writing a letter, then see if you think it’s pathetic,” Edmond says with a chuckle.

“The emperor of Ballina has a rune that lets him turn into a bird, and a university in New Pequinil has a map that lets people travel instantly to any place they touch,” Scyler says dryly. “Forgive me for not being too impressed by ink.”

“To be fair, I hear that map is more trouble than it’s worth these days,” Danil says. “Not very exact anymore, since the magic’s faded. I hear that about half the time, it misses the mark by a few dozen miles—a group of junior mages tried to go to the Faorel Isles for an academic expedition, ended up in the ocean.”

“Don’t try to make me feel better,” they grumble. “I guess it doesn’t matter what other countries have got. We can’t ask for their assistance without the king’s input, and he’s no help whatsoever. We’re stuck with what we’ve got here.”

“I take it the meeting didn’t go well?” Edmond asks.

“No.” They shove down a mouthful of potatoes. “The guy in charge of the archives there gave us some long-winded crap about having a moral responsibility to preserve what little magic remains in the world, and when I asked about his moral responsibility to protect people’s lives, he went on a tangent about the endless value of knowledge. Which, I mean, is certainly important, but it feels sort of redundant if people are too dead to get anything out of it. The point is, he basically gave us the academic version of, ‘It’s ours, not yours, you can’t have it, get lost.’”

“He kicked us out after talking to us for maybe half an hour,” Danil adds,

his voice more bitter than I've ever heard it. "He'd decided on his answer before we got through our first sentence."

"Can't you go over his head?" Rafe asks.

"Maybe," Scyler says. "But that requires a lot of processes that can take months to get through. We don't have months."

The sobering reality of that statement causes the table to fall silent, leaving us picking at our food as the rest of the restaurant chatters away in the background, happy and oblivious.

Finally, Edmond clears his throat, and his smile, maybe not quite as bright as it was before, forces its way onto his face. "Well, it's a big city, lots of old families in the area. I'm sure one of them has something you can use."

"Right," Scyler says, sounding not even slightly convinced.

They're right to be worried; I am, too, and it makes the food go down like tart, chalky medicine.

Back in the old days, lots of families had heirlooms that were supposedly enchanted.

But over the years, the magic would fade, or the items would be lost or stolen or destroyed, and now the few people who still have them hold them tighter than they would any gold. Even the promise of a financial reward, or the fear of the dragon, may not be enough to get anyone to part with what they have. I mean, look at Mother. Her wedding ring wasn't enchanted or anything, but it still meant a lot to her; she could barely be persuaded to give it up.

At the thought of Mother, and a ring, a memory pops into my head, like the sudden chime of a bell.

"Um, I could be remembering this wrong," I say, turning to Anneke, "or maybe it was only a story, but Mother told me about a ring that was passed down in your family. It was an amulet or something?"

"Oh, that old thing?" she asks, taking a sip of her water. "I remember that story, too. Bronze ring with an emerald, right?"

"That sounds right. She told me about it only once or twice."

"That makes sense, if she didn't tell you much about her family." She drums her fingers on the table as she thinks. "Our grandmother used to wear it when we were girls. Supposedly, it warded off disease, but I was never sure. She did die of lung troubles, but that was probably more thanks to tobacco than anything else. There were a lot of those amulets, way back when; some worked better than others, and some were counterfeits. That ring

has been in the family for centuries, from back before a real amulet would've cost a fortune, so it's possible it really worked. But I have no way of knowing for sure. Juna got it in the will, and I haven't really seen it since. I always assumed she pawned it years ago."

"She used to tell me I could have it when she died," I say. "But I never saw her wear it. She didn't wear much jewelry aside from her wedding band."

"She may have held onto it, then. Something to pass on, even if it isn't worth much."

"Do you think she'd let us have it?" Danil asks.

"Honestly, I don't know. It's worth a try."

As we continue to eat, the conversation shifts from the artifact hunt and toward the upcoming holiday.

The Feast of Ny is soon, and, as much as I hate to be away from home, I am sort of excited by the idea of being in Morwassen's Pass for the holiday.

It's supposedly meant to honor Nivstede's victory in some war or other about a thousand years ago, but these days, it's mostly an excuse to get drunk and party.

It's an all-day event, where the streets close down and everyone enjoys good food, games, and dancing. It's always a lot of fun back in Rosburnt, but I hear in big cities like this one, celebrations get downright raucous, with merchants coming from all over the place and the townsguard setting off fireworks. I've never seen fireworks before, only heard about them.

And though I can't be with Nana, I do have family here to spend time with now.

I wonder if Mother will join us for the festivities.

From what I've heard, she's not exactly big on family togetherness, but I find it hard to imagine even she can resist the lure of a night of feasting and music. Back before Papa died and things got bad at home, the Feast of Ny was her favorite holiday. I remember watching them spin around in the town square, more drunk from the music and their own joy than the wine.

My heart lurches at the memory, and I look up as Edmond nudges me gently.

"You all right?" he asks quietly, not drawing attention to us while Niels rambles about all his friends who will be in the parade this year.

"Yes," I whisper back, flushing as I realize my eyes are damp. "Thanks."

He obviously doesn't believe me, but lets it go, nodding once before turning away and jumping back into the conversation, keeping everyone's

attention off me. I take a couple deep breaths and chime in once I'm feeling up to it.

I'd like to get to a point where I can at least think about Mother without it hurting. And I think there's only one way to do that.

...

Before I leave the restaurant, I ask Anneke for my mother's address. She hesitates before giving it to me, saying over and over that it should be up to Mother to bridge the gap between us.

I know that. I do. But I'm also tired of waiting.

If I have to be the bigger person in order for us to talk, I'm willing to try. When I explain all this, Anneke relents and tells me where she's living, but warns, "Don't bend over backward to make her life easier. You're doing her a kindness by reaching out; you don't owe it to her."

Mother lives in a block of apartments that's about an hour away on foot.

It's a nice clear night, so I don't mind the walk. It gives me time to think about what I'll say. Despite going through literally hundreds of potential scripts, when I finally reach the right street, the best I can think of is simply, "Can we talk?" And maybe that's okay.

Maybe I don't need to say anything special, so long as I say something.

The building is made of an ugly beige rock and reminds me of a gravestone.

There are some lights in the windows facing the street, but Mother lives in an apartment that faces the alley out back, on the second floor. I hover in front of her door for almost a full minute, my heart going like a rabbit that ate coffee beans for breakfast, with one fist in the air, not quite daring to knock.

This is ridiculous. I'm being ridiculous.

I knock twice.

No answer.

I knock three times.

Still no answer.

I hesitate before knocking yet again, calling out, "Mother? Are you home?"

A door opens, but not the one I wanted. It's the one across the hall, and a young man leans out. "Come on, some of us have work in the morning," he groans.

"Sorry," I say. "I was looking for Juna Suren. She lives here, right?"

"Juna? Yeah, that's hers. She hasn't been home for a few days, though."

My heart stops racing, in favor of freezing in place. “Oh.”

“She does that,” he says, unworried. “Usually around tax season, but sometimes it’s all *poof*, she’s up and gone. Dunno how the landlord hasn’t kicked her out yet, ’less she pays her rent all ahead before she goes. I could tell her you came by, whenever she comes back.”

“No,” I say. “That’s...that’s okay.”

Before he can ask me any questions about who I am or why I’m looking for his neighbor, I leave, feeling hurt, angry, and incredibly foolish.

## Chapter Twelve

Whispers and frightened looks make their way through Morwassen's Pass when Vikker announces the hunt for an artifact.

The notices posted everywhere make no mention of the time limit, but have caused a surge of anxiety all the same. The townsguard has been tasked with investigating every possible avenue for obtaining an artifact.

Scyler and Danil are working around the clock, meanwhile Maryse continues to sit in jail and wait for Vikker to get tired of Cornelis's failure to accomplish anything useful. Things are so chaotic around the townsguard offices, they haven't moved her out of holding yet.

She must be sick to death of me asking if she's okay, but as soon as I arrive for a visit, I can't help it. The words slip out without a thought.

"Just dandy," is her response.

She's now sharing her cell with three men who, judging from their states of dishevelment, the array of bruises on each of their faces, and the fact that they flinch at sound and light, I'm guessing were dragged in here last night for a drunken fistfight.

"How are things out there?" Maryse asks, coming to stand at the bars, facing me. "I heard Vikker made the announcement."

I nod, hugging my sides to stop myself from reaching through the bars. I don't want that protective spell to zap me again. "Yeah. People are pretty frightened."

"Of course. They're finally realizing exactly *how* much trouble we might be in." She sighs. "And how are you?"

It'd be so easy to lie. To simply say that I'm fine. With anyone else, that's surely what I'd do. But with Maryse...I want to be honest. I want to let the dam burst, to tell her about everything that's happened and all the ways I'm *not* fine.

But I can't.

I can't dump all my problems on her. She doesn't need that. No one needs that.

I need to push through and deal with this on my own. Surely I can manage that, right?

Still, I don't want to lie to her.

"Getting through the day," I say.

She nods. "Good. I'm glad. You're supposed to make a delivery tonight, aren't you?"

A sigh escapes me. "Yeah. I'll let him know you're still alive."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate that."

She raises her hand, looking at the bars, but then thinks better of it and brings it down again. "I do worry about you," she finally says.

Bubbles fill my stomach, and it's all I can do to ask, "Why?"

"Because...because I like having you around." She shrugs. "Friends are hard for me to come by. And I don't want anything to happen to you."

The bubbles spread from my stomach to my chest and lungs, and I'm reminded of when I had my first real crush when I was twelve. I was convinced I was coming down with some sort of strange illness.

"Be careful, okay?" she says.

"Okay."

"I'm serious."

"Maryse..." I look into her eyes, trying not to blush at her concern. "I'll be careful. I promise."

"Good."

She doesn't pull her gaze away from mine for a few seconds, and for those few seconds, it feels like the bubbles inside me might actually carry me away. Then she smiles and lets out a small chuckle that brings me back to earth.

"Ah, what am I worried about? You know what you're doing. You'll be fine."

"Right," I say.

I wish she could share some of that confidence with me.

...

The tithe this week is a single chest of coins and some stray pieces of jewelry.

Cheap, mismatched earrings with gems that lost their shine a long time

ago, bracelets whose clasps broke and were never replaced, a handful of plain rings of silver or bronze.

I don't know whether everyone is desperately clinging to the nicer things for as long as they possibly can, or if there simply isn't anything left. This offering would scarcely be enough for the smallest of newborn dragons, but for Ker'kachin, it's a mere drop in a vast and unending ocean of gold.

Scyler escorts me this time, giving me largely the same warning that Danil did. If they hear me shout, they'll disregard the plan and come to assist me.

We stop in front of the door to the castle and, before I can take the chest off the cart, they place their hands on my shoulders and face me. For a moment I think they're going to pull me into a hug, but instead they give me a squeeze and a firm nod before they let go.

"I'll be fine," I say.

"I know." They turn their gaze up to the darkening sky, the moon illuminating their worried frown. It's a mild evening, warm enough that I needed only a light jacket, and the sky has been perfectly clear all day. They look back to me. "You ready?"

"I think so."

They laugh quietly. "Good enough."

At first, entering the castle is much the same as last time.

A dark, mildewy hallway, a pathway littered with stolen jere. But the farther I go, the closer I get to the grand hall, the more something feels... different.

I can't explain it, can't quite put my finger on it, but something in the air feels off, though I couldn't begin to explain it if I tried. I wonder if this is how it feels for people who come home to find a relative has died while they were gone—the immediate but inexplicable sense of wrongness.

Every hair on the back of my neck is standing up as I step into the hall.

This time, Ker'kachin is waiting for me.

I suck in a sharp breath, but don't waver or step back when I see him.

He's lying down, but even then, he's a truly gigantic beast.

When he spots me, his tail flicks, causing a pile of coins to topple over and scatter everywhere. Slowly, he stands up and takes a few massive steps toward me, the ground seeming to shake with each one.

Ker'kachin lowers his head, so his face is only a few inches from mine. His breath smells like smoke and granite, hot and moist against my face. Back when I first began to work with dragons, the sensation would cause me to



gag. Now I don't flinch.

"It's you." His voice still feels unnatural, somehow coming from both outside and inside of my head at once, and it's much worse with him so close.

Before I can say anything in response, the sound of coins and gems being moved comes from the corner behind him. My eyes are torn away from him, and I see movement.

A person in the shadows, trying to get to their feet.

My throat closes, and I look up at him, unable to keep my eyes from widening.

*Somebody's here.*

He grins at me, leaving me staring into the vicious, fang-filled maw.

"I think I have something of yours." He says it simply, lightly almost, like a joke, but it nearly brings me to my knees.

Without waiting for his permission, without so much as a single thought, the chest falls from my arms and crashes to the floor, the latch breaking open and spilling the contents everywhere. An amused snort escapes him, but I barely notice. I've already dashed past him, toward the corner, nearly tripping as coins slide and slip underneath my feet.

My brain reaches the impossible conclusion of what's happened before I see the person in the corner well enough to confirm it.

"Mother!" I don't mean to yell, but the sound is ripped out of me and echoing off the walls before I realize it's forming.

She stands, one hand holding the wall to give her balance, and stares at me, her face a sickly white. She looks a mess, one sleeve torn off her shirt and a barely scabbed gash on her bare arm, her hair loose and messy, her eyes puffy.

I come to a skidding stop as his tail swings, creating a barrier between me and her, barely managing to avoid a collision.

"Mother, how did you—?" I'm cut off by the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps from down the hall, and I freeze. *Scyler. Shit.* They must've heard me.

I look at the dragon, who is watching the door with anticipatory interest.

"Don't come in here!" I shout. "Scyler, stay outside!"

Their footsteps come to a sudden halt, but they're close enough that I can hear their heavy breath. After a pause, they call, "Why did you scream? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine! Stay there!" I'd probably be more convincing if my voice wasn't

wavering, but fortunately, they decide to trust me.

I don't hear them retreat back down the hall, so they must be waiting outside the door, probably with a sword in hand, ready to come in and help me at a moment's notice. I need to play this very, very carefully. And somehow keep my knees from buckling.

Looking back to Mother, my hand reaches out, but I barely manage to brush her face with my fingers before she steps away. She cringes, and I notice that she's putting all her weight on her left foot.

"What happened?" I ask, trying to keep my voice low. "How long have you been in here?"

"A couple days." Her voice is ragged and weak, like she has a nasty flu.

"What happened to your foot?"

"Tried to run. It stopped me." Her gaze flicks up to the dragon, who's watching us closely. "I think I broke my ankle."

"Sit down—sit down, you'll make it worse." I want to go over and help her, but the massive, spiked tail between us makes that impossible.

So I watch, trying not to cringe every time she gasps or winces from pain as she slowly lowers herself to sit, her back against the wall.

Her movements are unsure and uneasy, and her legs give out as she finally sinks to the floor. An exhale escapes her as she gets off her feet, some part of her plainly relieved. On the ground next to her, I see a canteen.

"Have you had anything to eat or drink?"

"Eat, no. Drink, barely." She holds up the canteen and shakes it. A truly pitiful splash is barely audible. "I've been rationing this as best I could until you came."

I nod and turn back to Ker'kachin. Trying to keep the fear out of my voice, I ask, "May I see if my escort has any provisions, please?"

"Fine, but keep them outside."

"Okay." I run back to the door, where Scyler is waiting.

Their eyes are lighted with shock and alarm, and one hand is on their sword. "What's going on?" they whisper. "Is that—I thought I heard *Juna*."

"You did," I whisper back. "Listen, she's been without food for days now. Can I have your canteen, and—and do you have any food on you? Even just a crumb."

"Shit." They take their canteen off their belt and hand it to me. It's nearly full. "I'll go check my saddlebag. I might have something in there."

They take off down the hall, and I bring the water to Mother. She accepts it

gratefully, though her arms are so weak and tired that it's almost too heavy for her. I look between her and the dragon, and attempt an authoritative, calm tone of voice.

"What happened?" I look to Ker'kachin while Mother takes a much-needed swig. "Did you bring her here?"

He snorts. "I understand your townsguard isn't the best and the brightest," he says dryly, "but I think even they would've noticed my presence in the city."

That's...actually a good point. I hug my arms. "Then how did she get here?"

"It's her own fault. A few nights ago, I heard someone come in—at first, I thought it was you, or one of the guards deciding to make a sneak attack. Imagine my surprise when I saw her digging through my offerings like a common thief. Which is what she is, I suppose. I can only assume she was here to rob me."

I want to ask Mother if that's true, scream at her for being so careless, but she's closed her eyes and is leaning her head back, looking almost ready to fall into a coma.

No. Now is not the time. I can be furious with her later, after I've gotten her out of here.

Scyler's footsteps approach again from the hall, and I go to meet them.

To my relief, they did have something to eat in their saddlebag. Just a couple pieces of jerky left over from their trip to Balluei Fall, but it's something.

I bring it to Mother, who begins to tear into it like a wolf who's caught a deer for the first time in years.

As she eats, I whisper, "I'll try to talk to him. Promise me you won't try to run again until I figure this out."

"Believe me," she says, her mouth half full before she manages to swallow, "the ankle took care of that."

I leave her to enjoy her meager supper, walking to the center of the room to stand face-to-face with Ker'kachin again.

I'm frightened of him. There's no point in denying that.

He's enormous and cruel and I'm an ant next to him. But now my fear is supplanted by something that keeps me grounded, something that steels my resolve: anger.

I've often thought anger was a destructive, useless animal, good only for

causing untold damage to people who can't keep it in check. But now, it gives me the strength I need to stare my mother's captor in the face and say what I need to say.

"Let her go."

He tilts his head. "What do we say?"

I breathe in through my nose, biting back an insult. "Let her go. Please."

This is met with a low and thunderous chuckle. "Not yet."

My palm twitches, and I'm struck by the sudden urge to reach out and hit him.

It would do no good, it'd almost be comical—but I have to close my eyes and clench my jaw, remind myself to keep my head.

This is my job. This is what I've worked so hard to become good at. I can't lose my temper and make everything worse.

I open my eyes and try a different tack. "What's the point in keeping her here? Surely she's more trouble to you than she's worth."

"Normally, I'd be inclined to agree. Juna often isn't worth the effort, isn't she? At least, that's what I hear."

Shock is a stab to my gut, a knife twisting inside me. I swallow. "Is that how you recognized my name? Because you've heard of her?"

"Well, there can be only so many Meers running around."

"If you didn't mean for her to come here, why keep her?"

"I'm not about to waste a perfectly good opportunity. If the key to a treasure chest fell into your lap, would you throw it away?"

I raise my hands, a gesture of surrender. "I have nothing," I say slowly. "I came here because I need money, not because I have any. If I had anything to offer in exchange for my mother, please believe that I would—"

"You misunderstand me." He draws his head back, looking down at me from what feels like miles above. "It's not what you have. It's what *she* has."

"What?" My gaze flicks back to Mother, but she's just sitting there, staring at me with bated breath. It takes a second before I remember that she doesn't speak Draken. This whole conversation may as well be gibberish from her perspective. "Mother," I say, switching back to Stedi, "he says you have something he wants. Do you have any idea what he's talking about?"

"Everything of value I have, the townsguard took," she says.

"Listen, you wouldn't have known this—it was only just made public—but he also wants an enchanted item. Do you have anything like that?"

She pauses, surprise flickering across her face before being replaced by a

look of bewilderment. She shakes her head. “No.”

I stare at her, trying to discern if she’s being honest or not.

Surely she remembers the heirloom ring, but Anneke did say she was never sure if it was really magic or not. And maybe she did sell it. Or maybe she’s lying. It’s hard to say.

I want to believe she’s telling me the truth. I really do.

“Is he going to let me go?” she asks.

I don’t answer that, mostly because I don’t like the answer I’d have to give her. I try again with Ker’kachin. “She’s already given everything she could to the offerings every week. If she still had something she could give you, why would she come here to take something?”

“Greed,” he says with a bite to his voice. “Human greed is damned near limitless.”

“My mother says she doesn’t have anything—”

“Your mother is a liar and a cheat. She has something I need, and she knows exactly what it is. She’s not going anywhere until I get it.”

“But—”

“Meer.” My name is harsh in his mouth. “Don’t make this worse for yourself.”

I go quiet. This is proving to be a hopeless endeavor.

He can’t be convinced, and if Mother knows what he’s talking about, she’s not giving anything away. Part of me is inclined to disbelieve anything she says, but there’s no reason for her to lie to me right now. Not when she’s in a tight spot only I can help her out of.

After agonizing silence between us, he stretches his neck, as if growing bored with me. “Have they found me an artifact yet? I suppose if they had, this conversation would be going very differently.”

“They haven’t, but they’re looking. Actively looking.” Mother shifts from where she sits on the floor, and I suddenly realize she must’ve had to sleep on this uncomfortable bed of metal. I remove my jacket and say, “I’m going to give this to her.”

He rolls his eyes. “If you must. Then get out.”

“Can I come back tomorrow morning with food for her?”

“Fine. I suppose she might be more talkative after she eats properly.”

I walk over to Mother, and this time, he moves his tail out of the way so we can actually touch. I give her the jacket, saying, “I know it’s not a lot, but I’ll bring blankets and everything tomorrow, once I’ve had time to gather things.

I promise.”

“Thank you.” She clutches the simple red garment in her hands, looking at it rather than at me. “I suppose you’re irritated with me for getting myself captured.”

“Oh, absolutely livid,” I assure her. “And don’t let yourself off so easily, I’m also irritated with you for a lot of other things. You’re lucky I’m getting paid to keep people alive. Otherwise, I’d have told him, ‘She’s all yours.’”

Her gaze flicks up to meet mine, and after a moment, a light snort escapes her, one that allows me to smile, just a little bit. There’s really nothing to laugh or joke about right now, but it’s good to feel something other than anger and terror.

“Mother,” I say, “are you *certain* you don’t have anything you think he’d want?”

“Yes.” When I raise my brow, she presses on. “Yes, Lotte, I swear to you. You’re welcome to go through my apartment if you want to check for yourself. I live—”

“I know where you live. Anneke told me.” I sigh. “Fine. I’ll look. It’s not that I don’t believe you, but...”

“You don’t believe me.” She shrugs, shoulders limp. “It’s fine.” She takes another bite of jerky, finishing it off, before saying, “I heard the King’s Auction got raided a few days ago. Is the artifact thing why?”

“Yes.” I nod. “I was there, actually. It got kind of hectic for a minute, lots of people got arrested—this girl Maryse was with me and she’s still in jail waiting for her sentencing, and—”

“What?”

The word is spat behind me, and when I look up, Ker’kachin is staring directly at me. Fire burns in his eyes and threatens to spill from his mouth, long trails of steam rushing out of his nostrils as he lets out a growl.

“The girl—you said she’s imprisoned?” he asks. His calm confidence is gone, replaced with something like the sense of disbelief that I felt when I saw Mother here.

I’m so startled, I can’t decide whether or not I should lie. I nod limply, without thinking.

How could he have understood us? We’ve been speaking in Stedi—dragons picking up a phrase or two over the years isn’t unheard of, but a whole *conversation*—

A rumbling snarl erupts from his throat, and like a cat knocking a vase off

a shelf, he reaches a massive claw in front of him and swats at a pile of treasure.

In his frustration, coins and gems and small trinkets go flying everywhere, leaving Mother and I to hastily shield our faces from the projectiles.

Ker'kachin ignores us, making another angered swipe. As a chalice bounces off the wall and hits the floor with an ear-splitting clatter, he reaches forward.

He moves so quickly, I don't realize what he's doing until his bony, talonlike claw wraps around my arm and pulls, hard enough that my shoulder nearly comes out of its socket. I cry out as he pulls me toward him. Mother's hand grasps at my tunic, but it's useless, and I'm dragged away and toward the dragon.

"Lotte?" Scyler calls from the hallway. I didn't realize they were still there. "Lotte, are you okay?!"

"Stay there!" is all I can say, desperately trying to keep the situation under control, and just as desperately trying to ignore the ache in my shoulder.

My feet dangle a foot off the ground as Ker'kachin lifts me by the arm. He lowers his face, bringing it close to mine again, and snarls, "What the hell is going on out there?"

His voice shakes, and at first, I assume it's simple rage.

But when I look into his eyes, behind the cold anger, I see something else, something that almost looks like worry. I stare at him, breathing heavily, trying to understand.

"Maryse and I went to the auction to try to find an artifact. We got separated when the townsguard showed up. She got arrested. B-but—" I wheeze as he squeezes my arm tighter. The circulation's been completely cut off, the feeling going from my fingers. My next words come out quickly, tripping over one another. "She's fine! She's fine. I saw her today. She thinks they'll cut her a deal. The townsguard seized all the items from the auction, she says she can help appraise them—Cornelis, her brother, he's working on it now, but she thinks—"

"Cornelis," he says, disgust dripping off every syllable, "is useless."

Without warning, his claw opens, and I'm dropped to the floor.

It's a short fall, but it's a short fall directly onto a pile of coins.

I hit the ground with a *thud* that makes my mother suck in a breath between her teeth, and a yelp escapes me as I land on my side. I see stars for a split second, bumping my head and the entire left side of my face against the floor,

and my shoulder is practically screaming from all the abuse it's been through.

Slowly, I manage to sit up, hissing as I try to move my left arm.

Fighting every instinct in my body to not whimper or cry from the pain, I face Ker'kachin. He stares back at me, unyielding and unapologetic.

My breath is ragged, but I don't turn away. Not yet.

"How do you know anything about Cornelis?" I ask. "Or my mother, or anyone? Something is going on. Why won't you tell me?"

"How I know what I know is no concern of yours." His lip curls in a sneer, exposing his massive, pointed teeth. "Do you wish your mother dead, Lotte Meer?"

"Of course not."

"Then don't ask me impertinent questions. Not only for her sake, but for your own. Remember, just because I've elected to let you come and go unharmed doesn't mean I can't take that privilege away any time I like. Now, I've had my fill of you for a while. Tomorrow, you may leave the provisions for her in this room, but you do that, and you leave. And I don't want to hear a single *word* out of you—not to her, and not to me. Not unless you have something useful to say. Do you understand me?"

My teeth grind, but I manage to answer without snapping. "Yes."

"Good. Now, get out."



## Chapter Thirteen

I wake up the next morning with deep blue and purple bruises up and down my entire left side, splattered across my face, arm, hip, and leg, and it feels almost as bad as it looks.

It was well past midnight before I got to bed last night. Scyler and I had to go back to the townsguard offices to let everyone know we're now dealing with a hostage situation, which I suppose makes me the negotiator. Lucky me. Vikker kept calm, promising to provide food and bedding for Mother, but he seemed unnerved by the turn things have taken.

I go to the castle alone at sunrise.

Scyler and Danil probably aren't awake yet, and they're the only guards I can tolerate going with me. I'm really in no mood to be with a stranger right now.

Borrowing a horse and small wagon with the permission of the night shift, I bring a thick blanket, a few days' worth of rations, and several canteens of water. I intend to go and check on her every day, but I need to make sure there're extra supplies in case something happens that prevents me from doing so.

When I step into the passageway leading into the grand hall, I hear a low, steady rumbling.

Ker'kachin must still be asleep—apparently, he snores.

Tiptoeing down the hall and into the room, it takes me two trips to bring all the food and water, setting it down as quietly as I can on the pile of coins.

After the second delivery, I pause, peering into the corner where I last saw Mother to see if she's still there. She is, lying curled on her side, my jacket folded underneath her head as a pillow. The sound of her breathing is almost drowned out by the dragon's, but if I really strain my ears, I can make it out, soft and uneven.

I stand there for a minute more, watching her and wishing I could wake her and tell her we're going home, when Ker'kachin's snoring comes to a snorted halt.

Slowly, one of his massive crimson eyes opens, but I've turned and taken off down the hall before I can find out whether or not he saw me.

...

I get back to the boardinghouse as breakfast is in full swing.

There are plenty of people in the dining room, but I'm in no mood to join them. Some people whisper back and forth, but the room is drenched in an unnatural quiet, completely unlike the chatter and laughter I've grown used to. The walls are covered in notices from the townsguard about the artifact hunt, which seem to suck the oxygen right out of the air.

I'm about to head back up the stairs when a familiar voice stops me dead in my tracks.

"Holy hell, what happened to you?" Maryse is sitting at a table, working on a plate of eggs and ham, wearing a fresh set of clothes and staring at me like I've sprouted a tail.

Her bewilderment is such a sight for sore eyes, that before I realize what I'm doing, I've rushed to her and crouched down to hug her around the neck.

"Oh! Hey, hey, watch it," she grumbles, but she doesn't push me off.

After a second, she hugs me back. I let out a sharp hiss when she touches my sore shoulder, and she starts to pull away. But something makes her stop, and instead, her arms wrap around my waist. We remain fixed in place for a minute, like a statue carved just to capture this moment. Her face turns to nestle in my neck and I feel her let out a soft sigh that makes me blush.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I breathe deeply and try to compose myself, but that's not easy when my heart is pounding so loud, I'm convinced everyone in this room can hear it.

I finally pull away, blushing but trying to pretend I'm not. "Sorry," I say. "I...it's good to see you out of the cell. Yesterday was rough."

"I can see that. Sit down." I do so, and she leans forward, her deep green eyes examining me closely. "You look like you've had rocks thrown at you."

"I fell. Well, actually, I was dropped." I wince when I realize she's looking at me with a sheen of worry in her gaze. "It's not the worst I've ever gotten, not by a long shot."

"It looks awful." Her gaze flicks to one of the worse bruises, which peeks

out from under my collar.

“It isn’t great, but it’ll be okay.” I pull up my sleeve to show her the burn scar on my left arm, still prominent through the bruising. “*This* was awful.”

She lets out a slow exhale, and hesitantly raises a hand. I nod, and she lightly traces two of her fingers over the scar, inspecting it like it’s a gem she’s been asked to appraise. I almost shiver at the feeling of her touching my skin, the beginnings of a shudder clinging to the bottom of my spine.

It makes the bubbly feeling in my stomach come back when I look at her face, so instead I follow her gaze, watching as her fingers examine my scar. She’s barely touching me, but the light brush of her skin against mine is enough to stop my breath for a moment. The few kisses I’ve had didn’t make me feel like this.

“How old were you?” she finally asks.

“Thirteen. One of my first jobs, actually, back when I was still in school. It’s probably good I had to keep talking to the dragon and try to negotiate even after she burned me,” I say. “Otherwise, I might’ve cried from the pain, and that probably would’ve undermined my authority.”

“Just a bit.” Maryse laughs, but it’s short-lived. “I’m surprised your grandmother let you keep working after this.”

“She didn’t want me to. We actually fought about it,” I admit. “But there was no way I could quit. Besides, injuries are part of the job. I told Nana I knew what I was getting into, and it was worth it. Eventually she realized she couldn’t stop me, and made me promise to do more research and be more careful.”

“You really are very brave.” She says it simply, like she’s stating a known fact, with a hint of admiration, and it makes my face burn hotter.

“I’m not,” I say. “I’m—”

“Oh, please don’t be modest.” She reaches up to roll my sleeve back down for me, and I’m reminded of the way my father would sometimes help Mother lace up her dress. He always did it before she could ask. “Modesty is for the insecure and the cowardly, of which you are neither.”

The warmth that floods my whole body threatens to engulf me, and I’m struck with the urge to give her another hug. But I can’t, I won’t make a fool of myself.

With a cough and a bashful smile, I pull my arm away, and we’re briefly silent before I change the subject. “Have you heard what happened? When did you get out?”

“Just this morning. They released me before the sun was up. I came here to wash up and eat before I go back to work on those items they got.” She gives a satisfied, almost smug smile. “Cornelis couldn’t definitively say whether anything was enchanted or not, so they decided it was time to bring in a second opinion.”

I let out a sigh. “I’m glad you’re out now. Are they dropping the charges?”

“So long as I cooperate. I told you it’d be okay.” She raises a hand, almost touching a bruise near my lip. I try to hide my disappointment when she pulls away. “So...you were dropped? I take it Ker’kachin did this?”

I nod. “Yes. Last night...didn’t go great.”

Her brow creases and she bites her bottom lip for a moment, then her face becomes neutral once more. Still, her eyes don’t leave me for a second, and I feel my face heating again. “I don’t understand, I thought he agreed to let you make deliveries.”

“He did. I can still do that, he... Well, everything about last night was weird.” I briefly squeeze my eyes shut to try to fight back the tears that have been threatening to spill forth for the last twelve or so hours. “He has my mother.”

Her jaw drops open. “*What?*”

“She snuck in—I can’t believe she did this, she actually went in there to try to take something or whatever, and she got caught, and now he’s holding her hostage because somehow he thinks she has something he wants—”

“Your mother is *here*?”

“Yes.” I groan and run my hands through my hair. “The night before you were arrested, I went to Scyler’s house for supper, and my mother...showed up. It turns out, she’s been here *all along*. I thought she might be dead or something because she stopped writing back to me, but no, she’s here and she’s *fine*—I mean, she was before she got kidnapped—I don’t know if it’s kidnapping technically if she went in there herself—”

“Lotte.” Her hand touches my uninjured arm. “Deep breaths.”

“Right. Right.” I try to take her advice, inhaling and exhaling a few times before continuing, a little calmer. “She’s been here, more or less, ever since she left, and, get this, Scyler’s mom is her sister. Scyler and I are *cousins*.”

“Holy shit,” she says, punctuating each syllable. She shakes her head as she registers everything, before she suddenly snorts. “Wait, you say you all found out about this the night before the auction?”

“Yes.”

“I was wondering why you weren’t thrown into holding with the rest of us. Congrats on baby’s first nepotism!” She nudges me, and it actually makes me laugh a little bit. “Not that it would’ve mattered in the long run, since Vikker didn’t bother to prosecute the first-timers. Still, I was expecting you to at least get an official warning.”

“I got an *unofficial* warning from Scyler, which may have actually been worse. It was certainly louder.”

“Ah, familial love.”

I sigh, fingers grasping and twisting the hem of my tunic. “I... Mother’s always been difficult, especially since after Papa died, but I can’t believe she didn’t tell me she was here. Or that I had cousins. I mean, she never even told me she had a sister!”

Maryse frowns slightly, and I see something click in her eyes. “Wait... Scyler’s mother runs a restaurant, right? Anna or something?”

“Anneke. Yes, she and Scyler’s father run Pim’s Table. Why?”

Her mouth moves as if she’s about to speak, but no sound comes out, and it shuts again. Her frown deepens, and she tilts her head in confusion. “I—hm. I could be wrong, but is your mother named Juna?”

Whatever I was expecting out of this conversation, it wasn’t that. I stare at her open-mouthed like a fish, before I manage to ask, “Does everyone here know Mother better than I do?”

“Wow.” Her eyes look me up and down. “Sorry, I...I knew Juna had a kid, but...I dunno, I guess I was picturing you younger for some reason.”

“From what I’ve heard, she doesn’t talk about me much since she came back here.” I do my best to push past that, for my own sake. “How the hell do *you* know my mother?”

“I don’t know her especially well. But she’s a friend of my Pa’s. Well, okay, I’m not sure I’d call them so much ‘friends’ as ‘business associates who have tried to kill each other only once.’ But I met her a few times. She mentioned Scyler only the once, complained about how they wouldn’t get a fine cleared up for her.” She drums her fingers on the table, tapping quickly and without rhythm. “Wait, so...sorry, this is a lot to process. Your mother is Juna and Ker’kachin’s...kidnapped her for some reason?”

“Sort of kidnapped. Like I said, she snuck in there—*don’t* ask me why, I’m guessing a combination of hubris and impulsiveness—and now he’s keeping her there.”

“I mean, no offense to your mother, but it’s not like she’s valuable enough

that the townsguard will pay more for her than they would for the tithes anyway. Does he think holding her will speed up the artifact hunt?”

“I asked him the exact same thing. He’s convinced she has something he wants.”

“Why would he...?” She trails off, looking away from me to stare at the floor. Her brow furrows in confusion, her eyes narrowing.

“I don’t know.”

“Huh?” She looks at me, as if suddenly remembering my presence.

“I don’t know why he’d think that.” Curling a lock of hair around my finger and tugging it, I sift through all the information in my head and try to assemble it into something resembling a logical motive, but nothing works. “He did know who she was—he knows who Cornelis is. How can he know so much about the people around here?”

“He mentioned Cornelis?” Maryse’s eyes widen.

“No—I mean, sort of. I did, and he said he was useless.”

She snorts. “Well, at least we can all agree on that.”

We trail off into silence, and I turn everything over in my mind.

I have no idea what it is Ker’kachin could possibly be after. Could he know about the heirloom ring? That feels like a stretch.

But maybe there are other things Mother’s family wouldn’t know about, because she wasn’t supposed to have them in the first place.

“If she knows your father,” I finally say, “then that means that Mother works in...appraisals.”

She nods once, slowly. “Yes. She’s certainly dabbled in it if nothing else.”

“So she might also have things that could be sold to similar clientele.”

“I know for a fact she does.”

“Do you know where she’d keep them? Does she have a shop or something?”

“Nah. Juna always works out of her apartment.” Our eyes meet, and she tilts her head. “Got any plans for tonight?”

## Chapter Fourteen

Neither of us have keys to Mother's apartment, but that isn't much of a problem for Maryse.

She's able to make quick work of the lock, using a small set of tools she keeps in her bag. "In case I'm ever locked out of my room, of course," she assures me.

While I keep watch for her, she needs only two minutes before we hear a *click* and the door swings open with a creak.

"That was impressive," I say, closing the door behind me.

She fumbles through the darkness for a minute before she reaches the window. Pulling back the curtain, the dim light of the lamps outside is enough that we won't knock into things. "Not really," she says. "The locks here are sort of shit."

"Hey, what did we say about modesty?"

She smirks. "The insecure and the cowardly. Right. So, where do you want to start?"

I glance around the apartment.

It's a fairly simple setup; a bedroom and a small living area, which is what we've stepped into.

She appears to be using it mostly as storage. Haphazardly shoved on the shelves and left lying on the table are boxes and boxes of items, most of which are wrapped in thin, fraying fabric for safekeeping. It looks as if she used old dresses, tearing them into rags.

Books and papers are kept in small piles, some on the table, others stacked on the floor. She's left herself a small path to be able to walk in and out, but most of the floor is completely obscured by boxes and knickknacks.

"Can you start sorting through these?" I ask. "I'll go check out the bedroom. And hopefully we'll know what we're looking for whenever we

find it.”

Maryse nods and kneels down to lift the lid off a small wooden crate. A cloud of dust comes out, causing her to sneeze. “This is all probably inventory. Stuff to pawn off, or stuff she was acting as a go-between to deliver. I think anything she wanted to keep for herself would be in her room.”

I leave her to it, and step into Mother’s bedroom.

There’s another window in here, which gives me a perfect view of the alley behind the building. It mostly seems to be an unofficial dumping ground for garbage, and the sight of it turns my stomach.

I check the closet first, but it doesn’t have anything other than a few sets of clothes.

I take a coat of hers and set it on the bed; at least I can bring it to her next time I go to deliver food and water. I walk carefully over the floorboards, hoping to get lucky and find a loose one hiding a secret storage space like in stories, but there’s nothing like that.

I guess I didn’t really expect there to be.

Checking under the bed accomplishes nothing except dust making my eyes water, and I have to wonder when she last bothered to sweep.

The bed’s mattress is thin and deeply uncomfortable, and, upon examining a particularly nasty lump, I discover a small bag of jere tucked away for safekeeping.

I wonder how she can stand sleeping on this thing.

The blanket, quilted and fraying at the edges, is one I recognize. She told me she’s had it since she was a girl, and she brought it with her when she moved.

On the bedside table is a small jewelry box, but it’s unlocked and empty, save for a few chains with nothing on them. Everything else looks to have been removed.

There’s no sign of the ring she told me about, and I wonder if Anneke is right about her pawning it. A pang of resentment bites at me, but I try to swat it away.

Mother might have needed the money, and if she didn’t believe the enchantment was real, it would make sense for her to sell it.

Even if she did once promise it to me.

*She also promised she’d write,* a nasty voice in my head whispers.

Opening the drawer yields nothing useful. Apart from a few spare jere and



a half-empty bottle of ink, the only thing I find is more papers, some loose, some in torn envelopes.

I almost discard them entirely until I notice that one of the envelopes has the words “Juna Meer—Morwassen’s Pass—Nivstede” scrawled across the front in my own handwriting.

My heart gives a jolt, and I slam the drawer shut.

I often wondered if my letters were getting to her at all. I think some part of me hoped they weren’t, that it wasn’t that she was ignoring me, but that she didn’t know I was trying to reach her. Now I have my answer.

At least she opened them, I guess.

A minute passes before I go against my own better judgment and open the drawer again and take out the stack of letters. Sitting down on the bed, I check the date on the first one. My thirteenth birthday, a little more than three years ago. Nana let me skip school and we had a picnic that day; I wrote to Mother when we got home, full of fruit tarts and a little chocolate, to tell her how sorry I was that she missed it.

I stop reading and shove the letter back into its envelope, crumping it a little bit as I do.

My cheeks are burning, and I look up, half expecting to find Maryse standing there reading over my shoulder. But I’m alone, thank goodness. No one else to read the ramblings of a kid who still hadn’t quite figured out that her mother wasn’t coming back.

Looking through the stack, six of the letters she has here are from me.

I don’t know exactly how many I sent her, but I feel like it must’ve been a hundred, at least. Some of the others are from money-lending companies, merchants, and traders, and one from Nana that I decide not to read.

There are also a dozen letters from about twenty years ago, addressed to Juna Suren of Morwassen’s Pass, from Jasper Meer of Rosburnt.

I know my parents met when my father was in the city for a festival, and that they exchanged letters constantly for a few weeks before deciding to elope.

I wonder if perhaps her parents didn’t approve of the match. She did say they stopped talking after the wedding. Did they cut her off, or did she do it for them? I could forgive her lying about them if she’d tell me *why*.

I sneak a peek at one of my father’s letters, but the first sentence alone is difficult to decipher. His handwriting was somehow worse than mine, riddled with spelling errors and some letters being backward. He wasn’t an

unintelligent man by any means, but reading and writing never came easily to him.

He avoided it whenever he could; if he had to read something, like if he wanted to know what a book or a recipe or something said, he'd usually ask me to read it aloud to him. Despite his difficulties with writing, he apparently considered Mother to be worth the effort.

"How's it going in there?" Maryse's voice snaps me out of my thoughts, and I quickly put the letters away, standing up off the bed.

She's still in the other room, the sound of ruffling and items being placed on the floor drifting in through the doorway.

"Fine," I say. "Nothing's really stood out so far. She doesn't have anything that looks valuable."

"I've found some stuff I'd love to have in the shop, but nothing I think Ker'kachin would want."

I walk back out, and join Maryse where she sits on the floor, having opened and gone through five or six of the boxes by now. Looking around at all that's left untouched, I sigh and reach for one of the crates. "This'll take hours. I wish I knew what we were looking for."

"Let me take a look at anything that seems remotely interesting," she instructs. "I can take it to appraise later."

"Define 'interesting.'"

"You'll know it when you see it."

"I can almost guarantee that I won't."

The box I've taken is filled with small statues of various saints and religious figures, the kind old people often have adorning their shelves or sitting in their windowsills. I pick one up, examining the shoddy paint job, and frown when I realize how light it is.

Holding it up to show her, I ask, "These aren't normally hollow, are they?"

She looks up. "No. Turn it over. Is there a place where you can screw the bottom off?"

I check, and sure enough, if I squint, I can make out a seam. When I take the bottom and twist, it starts to loosen. "What the...?"

"When you hide something up in there, you can't usually tell the statue is hollow unless you specifically think to check. Smugglers love those things," Maryse says casually. I stare at her, and she hastily adds, "I mean, it doesn't necessarily mean your mother's a smuggler. She might have been pawning the statues to other people."

“Other people, meaning smugglers?”

“Well...yes, probably.” She continues to dig through her own box, which is full of assorted pieces of jewelry. There’s no question as to why they weren’t taken for a tithe; a single glance, and even I can tell they’re fake. “Juna really wasn’t involved in any of this stuff when you were a kid?”

“No. I mean, I don’t think so.” I shrug. “Maybe she was, for all I know. I’m starting to feel like I don’t actually know her at all.”

“Is that really so bad?”

I glare at her, hot irritation flaring through my body.

“I mean—” she stammers. “I mean, I know I haven’t known her as long as you, probably not as well, and she’s never seemed like a terrible person or anything, but she’s not exactly...I mean, she’s...”

I sigh. “Say it.” I can appreciate her wanting to spare my feelings, but I’d much rather have the truth.

“I don’t know. I’ve never really gotten the sense she was a people person, is all. I knew she had a family, but she never seemed to want to talk about them. I think she mostly spent time with Anneke and Scyler for the free food.”

I can’t help but snort. “That wouldn’t shock me.”

I run a hand over my hair and sigh. I’m desperate to beat back the words threatening to spill from my mouth, not burden Maryse with them.

But something about her makes me want to talk. I can’t quite explain it. Just...she makes me feel like maybe it’s okay to let someone else hear what’s going on inside.

“She was a lot more social before Papa died,” I say. “It was a while before Nana and I realized it wasn’t regular mourning. She stopped going out altogether, except to the tavern a few nights a week. More often than not, the owners would kick her out when she started getting...well, the word they used was ‘belligerent.’ The rest of the time, she’d be at home with me and Nana, and she wasn’t pleasant to be around. Not that I expected her to be, given the circumstances, but it wasn’t that we could never be happy anymore. We couldn’t even really be sad together.”

“How do you mean?” she asks. “If—if you don’t mind talking about it, I mean. My mother died when I was a baby, so I don’t really remember what it was like. My siblings barely talk about her, except to say she’d be disappointed in...well, the whole lot of us.” She laughs, but it’s sad and quiet. “Like I’ve said, you can’t miss what you never had, so I never really

mourned her. Maybe I should have.”

“I don’t know.” I bite the inside of my cheek as I try to put it into words. “When Papa died, I wasn’t sure how to act around Mother. I was sad, of course—crushingly sad. So was Nana, I mean, she lost her son. But Mother was completely devastated, and it never really seemed to go away or get better.”

I glance over at her, and blush when I realize she’s watching me. I look down at my hands, trying not to feel self-conscious.

“If I was happy around her, I felt like I was being disrespectful or annoying her. But if I was too sad, I felt like I was piling on, making her feel worse. I hate that. Knowing I’m making people’s problems worse.”

“You were a child,” Maryse says. “You didn’t do anything wrong by grieving.”

I blink away tears and resist the urge to thank her for saying that.

“I was able to talk to Nana about it all, about how much I missed him and thought about him, but I could never really talk about that with Mother. Not without her getting upset.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I mean, it’s over now. I was sad when she left, but...I can’t pretend there wasn’t a little part of me that was relieved.” I wipe my eyes on my sleeve, not daring to look at Maryse. “Does that make me horrible?”

“No,” she says immediately. “You’re not horrible at all.” I look up at her, surprised, and she presses on. “It sounds like things at home were pretty bad. You’re not horrible for being glad that was over.”

A wave of relief washes over me, and I realize for the first time how badly I needed to hear someone say that.

“Thank you, Maryse.”

We fall into silence after that, continuing our increasingly fruitless search.

But I feel a little lighter, and maybe a little better. At least for now.

About an hour passes in relative quiet before I suggest we call it a night and come back tomorrow. “I really don’t think whatever we’re looking for is here,” I say.

“We should keep looking,” Maryse’s voice is surprisingly firm. When I raise an eyebrow, she says, “I think she may not realize what she has is valuable. It can’t hurt to look through everything. She has so much here, she may well have forgotten everything she has on hand.”

“But how would Ker’kachin know about it?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. It doesn’t matter. We’re here, we may as well do this properly.”

So we keep going.

We work all the way through the evening, skipping supper, the room becoming darker and darker, even with the lamplight coming in. By the time we reach the last few boxes in the room, my eyes are beginning to hurt from how much I have to strain them in the dim lighting. Despite the complete lack of results, I can’t help but feel hopeful when we go to open the final box, a tiny wooden chest with a padlock that was cut off some time ago.

Maybe this has what we’re looking for.

Maybe this is the hidden treasure we’re searching for.

Or maybe not.

When Maryse lifts the lid, my nose twitches at the unusual smell, and I peer inside to see some dried dark green leaves. I can’t tell if it’s tobacco or something else, but I can’t help but chuckle. I can’t say I’m particularly surprised.

“Did she have a side business?” I ask, half joking. “Or do you suppose this is a personal stash?”

“Could go either way.” She closes the chest with a snap and tosses it back on the floor, rubbing her eyes. “Dammit. I really thought we’d find...” She trails off and shakes her head. Movements stiff and uneasy, Maryse gets up, making her way to the door. “Come on. We’ve wasted enough time here already.”

I scramble to my feet, going back into the bedroom to grab the coat and the quilt off Mother’s bed. Then, I follow her, dashing out into the hallway and closing the door behind me. Maryse is already headed down the stairs, her hands shoved in her pockets, and it’s like all the confidence has been sapped from her with a bolt of lightning.

I catch up to her, walking alongside her as we head back to the boardinghouse, but I can’t bring myself to ask about the sudden change in demeanor.

I didn’t expect her to take it so hard. Then again, I wasn’t really expecting to succeed. For whatever reason, she had far more faith in us, or maybe in my mother for having something we could actually use.

When we get back, standing outside the boardinghouse, dinner is long over.

Maryse doesn’t appear to be hungry. Instead, she’s exhausted, looking at

me with wary, baggy eyes. “You should go to bed. Another long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“Thank you for going with me,” I say. I want to also thank her for letting me vent about everything with my family, but I’m already so embarrassed I rambled like that. Maryse was so nice about it and I do feel a little better, but it’s been so long since I talked to anyone besides Nana about that. “I’m sorry it didn’t work.”

“It’s fine. I’m...” She crosses her arms and huffs. “I don’t know. I guess it was silly to think any part of this would be easy.”

“You can’t be too hard on yourself. I mean, we were searching with no instruction, no description, no nothing. It’d be like trying to find your way home drunk and blindfolded.”

“I suppose you’re right. I really wanted this to be what we needed, is all.” She shakes her head. “Thanks for helping. I know that couldn’t have been fun, especially given everything that’s going on with you and your mother.”

I rub the back of my neck. “No,” I admit. “But it was easier with you there.”

“I’m glad I could help.” She reaches out with one hand and gives my unbruised arm a gentle squeeze. Sparks rush through me, warm and impossible to ignore. “Try to get some sleep. You’ve had a long day.”

“I will. Thank you, Maryse.”

In the moment of silence that follows, Maryse squeezes my arm again and leans forward, ever so slightly. For a split second, my eyes close, and I dare to hope...

“Well...good night.”

My eyes flutter open just as Maryse lets go of me. She gives me an awkward smile and disappears inside before I can say another word.

My face burns, and I’m certain I’m glowing magenta by now. That’s what I get for reading too much into things.

I turn to see if I can find something to eat before going to bed myself. As I go, I think about everything we talked about, and a wave of absolute embarrassment floods me as I remember all I told her about my family.

Why would I say all that to her? We still don’t really know each other. We’re barely to the point where I could call us friends. And I...I don’t know. I want her to think well of me.

I cross the road, and as I walk down the street, toward a place I saw that serves Turnish food and is open all day and all night, I catch a glimpse of the

castle's towers in the distance, peering out over the city.

The sight of them makes my heart leap into my throat, and all thoughts of Maryse and my embarrassment are driven from my mind. I have far more important things to be worried about. We all do.

And if I don't find a way to salvage the situation soon, things could get much, much worse.

## Chapter Fifteen

I've come to dread these meetings with the townsguard, because so far, I have absolutely no good news to give them. We meet nearly every day, and they always ask for a play-by-play of everything that happened when I saw Ker'kachin.

Vikker is glad to hear Mother's still alive and that Ker'kachin isn't interfering with the delivery of food, but that's about the only silver lining we've got. When I confirm I'm still no closer to convincing the dragon to leave, Cornelis's lips twist into a sneer. Scyler and Danil are in the meeting, looking as harried and overworked as usual with their wrinkled uniforms and barely kempt hair, and, as always, are seated near me. It's nice to have people who are definitively on my side, but I look at them and wonder if they should really be staying in town. I'm not sure *anyone* should be staying. Part of me wants to tell Vikker he should start evacuations today, get people out while they still can.

Some people have already left. I've heard whispers of people packing up their homes, closing down their businesses, and disappearing, deciding to try their chances someplace new rather than stay here. The wealthier families, according to the gossip. Relocating is expensive; starting a new life is expensive. People who have weathered this storm with any money left to spare are few and far between.

Two members of the Council have sent their families away from Morwassen's Pass to wait the crisis out elsewhere, and there are rumors that the Councilmen will join them if things get much worse. I don't know if that's true, but I have noticed the houses in the nicer end of town going dark and quiet over the last few days. It seems like anyone who can afford to leave is leaving.

Everyone else just has to keep pushing through.



“We have two weeks left until the new moon,” Vikker says, clasping his hands, squeezing until the knuckles go white. “We need to find a new course of action. All our leads have gone nowhere, and all of the ‘enchanted’ items seized from the King’s Auction were counterfeits, according to the work done by Miss Basvaan. We need to start considering alternate routes. If we can’t find an artifact, we need to find a weakness we can use.”

“I noticed that his horns block off his line of vision.” I hold up a hand to the side of my eye to demonstrate. “Like this. Whenever he wants to look at me, he has to turn toward me.”

He nods slowly. “That could be useful for a sneak attack. Of course, he’ll be watching the entrance and will hear our footsteps coming from the hallway.”

“Not to mention, that castle isn’t exactly set up for fighting,” Scyler says. “And he knows the place better than we do.”

“Could we lure him out somehow?” Danil suggests. “Tell him we found an artifact and draw him outside? It’d give us more room to work, at least.”

“It’d also give him open access to the city and the sky.” Vikker shakes his head.

“And I don’t think he’d fall for it,” I add. “He’s greedy, but he’s smart. He’d either make me bring it in to him, or use my mother as collateral.”

“I wish we had some collateral of our own,” Cornelis says. “Something to balance the scales a little.”

“Maybe we’ve been looking at this the wrong way,” Danil suggests. “If he has no weaknesses and won’t leave the castle, perhaps there are weaknesses in the castle.”

“Interesting,” Vikker says, leaning forward. “Go on, Guard Komatin.”

With all eyes on him, Danil’s face turns slightly pink, but he continues. “Well, we already know the building is coming apart. Ceiling’s gone in the main hall, structure is no good. How many times have we said a bad storm could knock it over? It’s an old building; old buildings always have weak spots. Perhaps we can find a way to make them useful to us. And besides, most of the castle he cannot access because he’d never be able to fit inside—but a human could.”

Scyler scratches their chin. “I think you might be onto something, but we’d have to investigate, and getting in...”

“A place that big, there must’ve been more than one way inside,” I say. “There’d have been a servants’ entrance if nothing else, right? The room he

keeps all the treasure in has doors leading into the rest of the castle. I think most of the hallways on the first floor lead back to that room eventually, so if you can find an alternate way inside, one he doesn't have eyes on, it could work."

"Hardly anyone's spent much time up there in years; I'll have to pull some building plans from the city archives," Vikker says, "and there's no guarantee other entrances won't be blocked off, caved in, or unsafe."

"What do we do once we know what we're working with?" I ask.

"Well, it depends on what we find out, but I imagine our next step will be to assess what we have in the armory and start making a plan of attack."

I swallow, but force myself to nod.

"For now, keep doing what you've been doing. Talk to him. Watch him. See what you can find out. Any new information, no matter how trivial you think it is, you report to us immediately."

"Yes sir."

He dismisses the meeting, and as all the guards file out and we get to our feet, he reaches out to stop me from leaving. "Miss Meer," he says, "I hope you know our first priority will be the safe return of your mother before we start a fight. The fact that a civilian has gotten dragged into this is, frankly, a nightmare, and...well, you have my deepest sympathies."

"Nightmare" feels like an understatement. At least you can wake up from those.

I swallow. "Thanks."

As I leave with Scyler and Danil, a feeling like a rotting snake slithers around in my stomach.

I'm not sure if it's because of my worry for Mother or my anxiety at the prospect of a direct attack on the dragon, or both.

Vikker's sympathy is nice, I suppose, but it does nothing to quell the overwhelming sense of dread or the feeling that we're all still in very deep trouble. If even one thing goes wrong, it could be *extremely* bad.

But I remind myself, if we do nothing, it'll certainly get worse.

It reminds me of an old saying. Sometimes the only way out of the forest is to wander deeper into the trees until you see the other side.

...

A free afternoon leaves me with plenty of time to follow up on the lead Dalton gave me. She's one of dozens of miniature dragons residing in

Morwassen's Pass. Armed with a small bag of jere, I'm extraordinarily glad Nana implored me to take more than I thought would be necessary. She was concerned with inflation in the city, given their economy, but it's now seeing use as a draconian negotiation chip.

Walking through the streets, I keep my eyes peeled for the signs of forest dragons—the muscled, weathered bodies, the rough and thick scales, the horns on their heads. I find what I'm looking for...in a tree.

"Great," I mutter to myself, craning my neck so I can see better. A large, bare-branched tree overlooks a small row of apartments on a side road, and in the hollow of the tree, several feet above my head, I can see the glint of gold. As far as nests go, it's a good choice if they're going to live in a city.

I can't just climb up and stick my head in to look. That'd just invite a claw or burst of fire to my face. I'll have to be slower, gentler with my approach.

Looking over my shoulder to make sure I'm alone, I knock on the trunk of the tree, calling up in Draken. "I'm coming up to speak with whoever's here," I say, "and I don't wish to take anything."

I get no response, but my ears pick up the slightest hint of movement from within the hollow. Somebody's home.

With a sigh and a moment to steel myself, I reach for the lowest branch of the tree, and give it a couple pulls to make sure it's sturdy. Once I'm sure it won't break under my weight, I grasp onto it and jump, trying to swing my legs and pull myself up. I must look ridiculous as I thrash and wriggle around. Climbing a tree always looks so *easy* when other people do it.

I've planted my feet against the trunk of the tree, determined to climb up it as if I'm walking along a sideways floor, when a small horned head sticks out of the tree hollow. The dragon is a warm brown, with golden eyes that peer down at me.

"You would have better luck if you had wings," they observe.

"Thanks," I pant. "That helps."

I stop trying to climb in favor of gripping the branch. The dragon slowly climbs out of their nest, stretching out their long and curved back. Their spine is adorned with beautiful, oak-colored spikes, the same color as their horns. The dragon is maybe a foot and a half long, no bigger than a raccoon, and they have six legs and long, thin wings. Ambling out onto the branch, they make themselves comfortable, lying down near my hands and watching me.

"There have been rumors of another Dragontongue here," they say. "We didn't know what to believe until we heard your voice."

“I just want to ask you some questions,” I say, bowing my head and maintaining all the dignity one can possibly maintain while hanging from a branch with one’s feet dangling off the ground. “Are you one of the dragons who still ventures into the forest?”

They stiffen. “We were. Back when there was still food to be had.” They let out a sigh, turning their gaze to the sky. “We may soon have to leave this behind, as well.”

“Ker’kachin didn’t show up until less than a year ago,” I say. “Do you have any idea where he may have come from?”

“None.” They look back at me, letting their head rest on their front claws like a cat in deep thought. “We attempted to track him, once, before he moved into the city.”

Intrigued, I make another attempt to pull myself higher into the tree, but my foot slips, and I’m back to dangling. I curse under my breath. How does anyone ever climb anything?

“Careful,” the dragon says, an amused lilt in their voice.

“When did you track him?” I ask.

“Six moons ago, we believe it was. We heard his movements in the forest, heard the whispers of other dragons as they tried to hide—we thought, we are small and quick, he would not see us.”

“Did he?”

“No. But we never saw him, either. We followed his footsteps, his scent, for miles, never quite glimpsing him. We saw his tracks in the dirt, we followed him very closely, but eventually, the noise of his movements stopped. We thought he’d found a place to rest for the night, but by the time we reached where he’d last been, he was gone.”

I blink. “What?”

“His tracks were in the dirt, his scent was in the air,” the dragon says. “But Ker’kachin was gone.”

“He just...vanished? Is there any possibility he flew away?”

They roll their eyes at me. “A dragon that size taking flight? We would’ve heard.”

“Fair enough.”

How could a dragon that big leave undetected, without footprints? It doesn’t make any sense.

“Is there anything else unusual about him that you’ve noticed?” I ask.

The dragon pauses, their snout twitching as they consider my question.

“His scent,” they finally say. “It’s like a hatchling’s.”

I frown, baffled. “How do you mean?”

“The smell of a dragon’s smoke and sulfur builds as they get older, stronger. It would all smell the same to you, but to us, it is distinct. But Ker’kachin...he is obviously grown, but his scent is as if he has been in this world for only a few seasons. We noticed when we were tracking him.”

The wheels in my head spin rapidly as I try to make sense of everything. Ker’kachin certainly isn’t an ordinary dragon—we’ve known that for a while, of course, but the more I learn, the more I become certain that something definitely isn’t right.

“We wish we could help you further,” the dragon sighs, lazily stretching out each of its six legs in turn. “We would love to be rid of him.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “Thank you.”

It’s a relief to let myself drop to the ground, even if I do stumble when I land. My arms are killing me. I get a couple jere out of my bag, but to my surprise, when I reach up and offer it to the dragon, they shake their head with a snorted laugh.

“Watching you attempt to climb was payment enough,” they say, disappearing back into their nest.

...

A plate full of food is set on the table next to mine, and I look up to find Maryse sitting down next to me.

I decided to have supper at the boardinghouse today, and apparently, she had the same thought. Neither of us speak as she starts on her food, and the silence between us crackles and simmers. Or maybe that’s all in my head.

Maybe I’m the only one who feels a pull between us, and whatever I think she may feel is mere wishful thinking on my part.

The thought of finding out for certain, one way or the other, is petrifying.

We’ve become friends and I don’t want to ruin that.

She’s nearly cleared her plate without so much as a glance in my direction when she says, “I didn’t get a chance to ask earlier—how’s your mother?”

My mouth is full of food, which buys me a few seconds to think of something to say. After swallowing and taking a sip of my drink, I say, “Better, ever since she’s been able to eat and have water. She’s physically fine, at least.”

“Good.”

“What...what have you been up to all day?”

“Looking at listings for cheaper apartments.” She pauses, then meets my eye with a sheepish shrug. “I’m not being sarcastic, that’s really what I did.”

“You really think Cornelis will have Vikker stop helping you?”

“I think he’ll try. So I’m getting a safety net in order.” She pushes some peas around on her plate. “I should’ve expected him to pull something like this.”

“Has he always been so...?” I search for the right word. “Vindictive?”

She lets out a hollow laugh. “You have no idea. The first month after he made the townsguard, he basically stalked Pa, following his every move, hoping he could catch him breaking some minor law so he could finally live out his childhood fantasy of locking him up. He stopped only when his superior threatened to report him.”

“Did he and your father fight a lot?”

“Yes. Pa is...like I said. He’s a good parent, he really is. But he’s...he’s always particular. And he can be harsh sometimes, you weren’t wrong about that. So he holds us all to high standards. He’s proud of what he’s built, and he wants us to do just as well. I...I can’t pretend it’s always easy.” She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. “When he’s disappointed in you, it’s awful. When I wrecked a really important business deal a couple years ago, he didn’t speak to me for a week.”

“A week?” I repeat, unable to stop myself.

She shrugs. “We’re business partners. I fucked up. If I wasn’t his kid, he’d have fired me and been done with it. But I am his kid, so he had to forgive me. And I did get his trust back eventually; Cornelis could never manage to do that.”

“I take it he was never the favorite.”

Not for the first time, I’m glad I’m an only child.

“No, and it got worse as Corny got older—at least, that’s what I can gather. They were barely on speaking terms by the time I was old enough to really remember anything. From what little I can get Letja and Horats to tell me, they really played nice only when my mother was forcing them to, so when she died, they felt no need to pretend anymore.”

She won’t meet my eye.

“Whenever Pa would push him to do better, *be* somebody, he’d lash out and try to destroy whatever he was trying to build, just to make him angry. And then things would get worse for all of us. Even if Pa was really angry

only at Cornelis, we'd all be in the line of fire. It was like living in an active war zone. The day Cornelis moved out was a relief, though without him around to fight with, Pa started clashing with Letja instead."

"And then she was next to move out," I guess.

She nods. "Took Horats with her. Which is better. Pa and I have always been the closest. I think I had an advantage; I could watch my siblings and learn from their mistakes. I knew what Pa expected of me, and how to calm him down when he got too angry to be reasonable. Not just with me—if he gets pissed at someone else, I can usually talk him out of doing anything he'd regret later." A small half smile curves her lips. "Some of his business partners started to say they wouldn't meet with him unless I was there, because I kept him fair."

She says this like it's a point of pride, but it makes me feel sick to my stomach. "And if you couldn't?"

"Then I should've worked harder at being a better partner."

"That's a lot of pressure to put on a kid."

"I didn't mind."

"Didn't you ever...I don't know, didn't you ever wish you could be his daughter and not his business partner?"

I'm afraid I've overstepped again, that she'll lash out at me, but she shrugs, fiddling with her fork. "The shop is the most important thing to Pa," she finally says. "Being a good business partner and a good daughter are one and the same."

"I'm—" I stop myself before I can say that I'm sorry. Sympathy doesn't do much for her, and I don't want us to fight. So instead I say, "I'm surprised you managed to appraise everything from the auction so quickly."

"Well, when I came in to work, they basically locked me in a room with the items and some water and told me not to come out until I was done unless I had to eat, sleep, or piss." She rolls her eyes. "There were no distractions, at least. The hardest part is getting in the right mindset to work. Once you really get on a roll, it goes by much faster. Pa probably could've gotten through it in a day or two."

"I guess he'd have had more experience."

"Yes, but it's more than that." Her fingers tap against the table as she thinks. "How do I explain this... Sensing magic runs in the family, but not everyone can do it as well. And if you don't have it, you don't have it—similar to being a Dragontongue, I guess. Cornelis doesn't have it. He still

won't admit it. Pa realized it when he was a kid, before I was born, even. Corny would help him with inventory for the store and help him determine if anything was magic. One too many false positives made Pa suspicious, and eventually he figured he was faking it, but he never admitted it."

"Do you think he was upset?"

"Who, Pa or Cornelis?" Before I can answer, she adds, "Well, both. But Pa got over it quickly enough—after all, he had three other children who all had the gift to some degree, and he could put Cornelis in charge of other things, like keeping track of the money. He was certainly disappointed, and furious he was being lied to, obviously, but it couldn't be helped. But Cornelis never really got over it, I don't think."

"I'd feel bad for him if he wasn't trying to have you evicted."

She chuckles. "I didn't know you cared enough to hold a grudge for me."

I blush but try my best to ignore it. "Having someone to hold grudges for you is half the reason to bother having friends. Didn't you know that?"

Maryse rolls her eyes again, but this time it's accompanied by a fond smile that lights her face. "You're funny. But don't worry about it, Lotte. Really. My family's always been a bit of a mess. Which, given recent developments, I suppose you can relate to. How are you doing with all that?"

I look away, fiddling with my spoon. "Honestly, ever since Mother got kidnapped, I've sort of let it go."

"Let it go?"

"Well, maybe shoved it into a box. There's nothing that can be done now, and there are more important things to worry about. No time to worry about my family drama when there's a hostage situation going on."

"I guess not. It's still awful, though. You don't deserve all this mess."

I know that already, of course, but hearing someone else say it is so nice. Especially Maryse.

"Thanks," I say softly. "It's... I wanted to talk all this out with Mother, maybe yell at her a little bit, but mostly get some answers about why she left and why she never talked to me for so long. But then this happened, and I can't do that, so I'm left thinking about it constantly, pretending like I'm not. I've been trying to keep it together, especially in front of her and Ker'kachin, but... Is it pathetic to admit sometimes I want to curl up in a ball and cry until the sun comes up?"

"No," she says. "I feel that way too, sometimes."

She finishes her food and begins to pile her dishes up. Before she leaves,



though, she touches my shoulder. I turn, and find myself looking up into her eyes. Every time I do that, I worry I'll forget how to speak. Am I ever going to get used to that dazzling shade of green?

"I'm sorry," she says.

"It's not your fault."

"No, but..."

She trails off, and for a moment I think she'll change the subject, move on before I can find out what she's thinking.

"I don't want bad things to happen to you," she finally says. "And I know it's inevitable, bad things are part of life, but I don't want them to be a part of yours."

Heat flushes through me, and I'm struck by the urge to reach for her hand or press my lips to hers. To share some of this overwhelming warmth and anxiety with her. "Maryse." Her name is the only word I can manage.

Her smile is small and laced with uncertainty. "Promise you'll do what you can to get through this."

Before I can say anything, she stands. Maryse hesitates for a moment before one of her hands comes up to touch my face, and I'm certain she must be able to feel my heartbeat. But if she does, she doesn't say so. Her fingers brush over my skin, and then, just as quickly as the affection came, it vanishes. Withdrawing her hand, Maryse turns and leaves, her cheeks bright pink and her gaze avoiding mine.

"Promise," I whisper to the empty air.

## Chapter Sixteen

The Feast of Ny is in two days, and instead of the joy I'm accustomed to for the holiday, preparations are laced with unease and discomfort. Dinnertime discussions of people's plans for the festival are weighed down by concerns over money and safety. People say they're glad to have something to look forward to, but their smiles are shaky and often paired with a terrified glance to the towers of the castle.

The crisis hasn't stopped the holiday from coming, but the holiday can't block out the crisis, either.

People have begun to set up tents and temporary stands to sell food and crafts during the festival. Some shops are having massive sales, so they can afford to close for the festival.

Every time I go out, I see more people putting up decorations; children put their toy animals in the windowsills or on the front stoops, while their parents hang banners and tapestries decorated with paw prints and feathers.

Queen Ny was the ruler of Nivstede something like two thousand years ago, back when magic was everywhere. But even by the standards of her time, Ny was supposedly a gifted and sometimes terrifying sorceress.

During her reign, we were at war with a country that no longer exists. Part of it became one of the three countries we share our western border with, Rell. Some say Ny wanted to expand our borders and was met with resistance, others say the other country was looking to expand *their* borders, and Ny was protecting Nivstede from a takeover.

No matter which version you believe, the story always concerns an attempted invasion of Morwassen's Pass—and how it was singlehandedly foiled by Ny. When she saw the army approaching, swords and axes and maces in hand, she climbed to the tallest tower in the castle. Again, the details are a bit fuzzy, whether she said some words in a language that was

long forgotten, wielded some ancient artifact, or prayed to some deity for help.

But what we do know is that each and every member of the opposing army was transformed into an animal, mutating in their armor. Some became woodpeckers and turtledoves; others became bats and weasels and mice.

Nivstede was saved, the story proclaims, because our clever queen ravaged the opposing army with a spell that was never undone, leaving them to scatter into the woods, never to be seen again. Supposedly, this is why Morwassen's Pass has a mice problem.

Several decades later, this was officially classified as a war crime. Maybe because of that detail, most modern celebrations don't usually mention the reason Ny gets a feast anymore. The animal imagery is everywhere though—the decorations, the costumes worn by children, even some of the food.

When I arrive at the townsguard offices, a small gaggle of officers is loading several unmarked crates off a wagon, carrying them into the building through a side door.

As I get closer, a strange scent makes my nose twitch. It's like sulfur, and oddly metallic.

I try to get a look at what's in the crates, but they're sealed shut. It takes two people to lift a single crate, and even with help, some of the younger guards' knees threaten to buckle under the weight.

I weave my way through the crowd, trying not to knock into anybody as they carry their cargo downstairs to storage, and eventually make my way into the meeting room. Most of the chairs are empty, save for a few guards who are on their break, and Maryse, who sits by herself at the edge of the room. As soon as I see her, I reflexively smile.

"Hey," I say, going to sit next to her. As if left over from what I felt last night, a crackle of heat passes through me. "What are you doing here?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." She smooths out the skirt of her dress, a simple tan-colored piece that would look plain on anyone except her. "Vikker sent me a note last night and told me to be here. Did you see all those crates?"

"Yes. I wish I knew what was inside."

"I have a hunch." When I stare at her expectantly, she says, "I smell gunpowder."

My nose scrunches. So *that's* what that smell is.

I didn't think the townsguard would have any use for the stuff, especially

since we're not at war. I know there are cannons and guns on hand in the capital, ready to protect the royal family, but I haven't seen any here. They must keep them belowground, in storage.

Members of the townsguard begin to file in, some stretching their aching shoulders and arms, collapsing off their tired feet into chairs.

Vikker is the last to come in, closing and locking the door behind him. When he sits down, he doesn't bother with pleasantries. His calloused hands are lightly smudged with black, which he absentmindedly tries to wipe off on his trousers, to no avail.

"We've received a shipment of fireworks from a merchant who has been implored to keep quiet," he says. "That shouldn't be a problem. He's been paid well enough, and he's local, so he's as eager to amend our problem as anyone."

"Fireworks?" I repeat, frowning.

"We don't have time or, frankly, money to build a proper detonation device." He sighs, and I can't tell if he's irritated with me or with the limitations he's forced to work with. "For our purposes, fireworks should be a decent substitute."

Guns and explosions are foreign to me. I've heard them described, read about their effects, but I can't comprehend something that can kill so suddenly, do the sort of damage that's normally reserved for hurricanes and wildfires.

From what I've heard, the contraptions are liable to backfire, doing as much damage to the assassin as they do to the victim. It never really occurred to me that fireworks were made out of the same stuff, but maybe it should have. After all, they must explode somehow.

"Wait, so what's your plan?" Maryse asks, leaning forward in her seat. "Toss fireworks at his head and pray?"

Vikker ignores her, instead continuing to address me. "You'll deliver the next tithe while the festival is underway."

"Sir," an older female guard says, "are you certain it's wise to still have the festival this year, with everything happening?"

He sighs with a small shrug of his shoulders. "In all honesty, I don't know. The City Council and I discussed it at length, and none of us have a good answer. But people will celebrate with or without the city's official involvement, and we decided it'd be better to have safe, heavily guarded places for people to go. In any case, I think people have earned a reprieve, if

only for one night.”

Some of the guards accept this with nothing more than a few nods, while others exchange uncertain glances.

“All the noise and activity should provide us with some cover as well. Not much—we’ll still need to be extremely careful. But some is better than nothing.” Vikker looks at me again. “Miss Basvaan will go with you, and between the two of you, you need to hold Ker’kachin’s attention for at least ten minutes. Do you think you can do that?”

My throat closes, but I nod. Next to me, Maryse bites the inside of her cheek before nodding as well. It’s almost a comfort to know that she’s nervous about this plan, too.

“Good. While the two of you keep him occupied, Lieutenant Basvaan and Guard Komatin will enter through an alternate entrance to plant the fireworks we’ve procured. They’re currently studying the building plans to figure out the best places for them.”

“You can’t be planning to set them off,” Maryse says. “I know most people will be at the festival, but there’ll still be people in the area, you can’t—”

“Don’t worry.” He raises a hand. “We don’t intend to detonate them yet. We decided to plant the fireworks first, so we can set them off as soon as the evacuation of the northern district is complete—give the dragon less time to notice what we’re up to. So, we need to have them in place as soon as possible. The smell of gunpowder always lingers in the air for a couple days after the festival, so that should keep him from paying much mind to the scent in the castle.”

“What about my mother?” I ask. “She’s still in there, you know!”

“Of course, I haven’t forgotten that. If we can’t negotiate for her release, we’ll send in two of our best officers to extract her. Everyone here is fully prepared to keep him engaged so she can escape.”

My stomach turns.

If someone were keeping Ker’kachin occupied, Mother probably could run out the front door. But that would certainly cost the guard their life, and... I know it’s part of their job, but I can’t stand the idea. Their death would be on my hands. I was brought here to get rid of the dragon and it’s only gotten worse.

Every day this goes on is a day I’ve failed.

“So you’ve officially given up on ending this peacefully,” I say gloomily, slumping back into my seat.

“Well...we’re not holding out much hope, no,” he admits. “I would prefer to not have to go through with this. If, by some miracle, you can persuade him to leave on his own, I’d be a happy man.”

“Bit hypocritical,” Maryse says. “Saying you still want peace when you’re planning to rig his home with deadly weapons.”

“It’s not hypocritical, it’s pragmatic.” Vikker gives her a look so cold I almost shiver. “And I’ll remind you, Miss Basvaan, that this isn’t his home. He’s taken us hostage and forced my hand. The lives of the people in this city are more important than me keeping the purest form of my principles. I don’t have to like it. It’s part of the job.”

We fall silent, and Maryse’s gaze turns to the floor.

I reach out to touch her arm, and I’m surprised when she doesn’t pull away. Instead, she lets me give her a gentle squeeze before trailing my hand down to loop around her wrist. Her eyes close in thought before she opens them again.

“I’ll go with Lotte,” she says, “but only because I don’t want her to get killed when this inevitably goes sideways.”

Vikker grunts. “I’ll take it.”

I flush and pull my hand away. I want to say something like, “You don’t have to protect me,” but I’m certain that if I said anything right now, it’d come out jumbled and nonsensical. It’s a common feeling around Maryse. I’ve never considered myself unintelligent, but given how often I lose my words and my dignity whenever she’s around, maybe I should start.

Vikker dismisses us, asking us to stick close to the center of town for the festival. “Once we’re ready for you, I’ll have someone pull you aside so we can go deliver the tithe. Miss Meer, we’ll bring provisions for your mother as well.”

I say, “Thank you,” before following Maryse outside, who takes the lead without any thought, trusting me to follow at her side as she walks down the street toward the boardinghouse.

“So,” she says, “what do you think of this plan of theirs?”

“I don’t know,” I say, which is true.

“I suppose I don’t need to tell you what I think.”

“No.” I chuckle nervously. “Do you really think I’m gonna die?”

Maryse wanting to protect me makes me feel flushed, but her feeling like she *has* to makes my stomach twist into a bundle of nerves.

“I hope not,” she says. “But I ...I feel like they’re underestimating him,

you know? And they should know by now what he'll do if properly angered."

I rub the back of my neck. "I'm gonna choose to have a little more faith in your brother than is probably wise so I don't have a nervous breakdown thinking about all this."

"Fair enough."

"I trust Danil, at least." Not that this stops me from worrying about him, or praying that he won't do anything to draw Ker'kachin's attention.

"Good. I meant what I said. I don't want you to get hurt because Vikker made a foolish mistake."

Right on cue, the heat floods my face again, and I'm glad that her eyes are on the road ahead of us. "I'll be okay," I say. "You really don't need to worry about me."

She laughs and turns to look at me. "Too late."

Her emerald eyes meeting mine causes me to pause, and it's a moment before I realize I'm no longer keeping pace with her. Jogging to catch up, I hope against hope that she didn't notice.

I've never really gotten like this around a girl before.

There have been girls I've liked, girls I've wanted to impress, girls I've made myself look foolish in front of. But none of them have made me feel as flustered and sometimes silly as Maryse does. I don't know if that's good or not.

The poets always say that they'd do anything for the ladies they dedicate their works to, throw themselves headlong into any danger, do or say anything ridiculous, just to have a chance with her. I never felt that for anyone. At least, not until Maryse.

She keeps talking. "Do you think there's any chance you can convince him to stop? The dragon, I mean?"

"I...I don't know," I admit. "I still don't like the idea of killing anyone, but he...he's made negotiation near impossible. I don't know if there's any other option at this point."

Maryse groans. "Not you, too."

"You know I don't want to—"

"I know, I know." She sighs. "This whole thing really doesn't sit right with me."

"No," I say. "Me, neither."

"Honestly, I'd rather have you go home and get out of the crossfire than help with this ridiculous plan."

I swallow. Gathering my courage, I ask, “Because you don’t want me to help kill him, or because you’re worried that he’ll hurt me?”

She stops walking then, and we stand there before she finally says, “Both.”

My heartbeat accelerates to a nearly dangerous pace, and it takes a second to remember I’m supposed to breathe.

I turn my head to face her, but she isn’t looking at me. “Maryse,” I say, reaching for her arm once more. This time, however, she raises a hand, stopping me. Not letting me comfort her or reach out for her.

“Look,” Maryse says. “I know I can’t stop you because you’re overly stubborn or overly optimistic or have a death wish or something. But be careful.”

“I will,” I promise. “But Maryse...can I ask you something? Just between us?”

“Sure.”

“Why do you care so much about the dragon’s safety? I mean, I know you don’t like the idea of killing anybody, neither do I—but you must realize that it might be necessary at this point. You call me overly optimistic, but you still insist on trying to negotiate with someone who clearly has no interest.”

“Can’t a girl be principled?” I give her a look, and she rolls her eyes before looking away. “Look, I don’t feel like getting into a moral debate with you. Killing is killing.”

“I agree, but if it’s down to his life or the city’s...”

“It wasn’t supposed to get to that point.”

“But it *has*,” I plead. “You know that, right?”

“I’m not a fool.” She starts walking again, not waiting for me.

“Maryse, I promise I’m not judging you, I want to understand—”

“Don’t you have more important things to worry about?”

I flinch but say nothing.

We fall into silence, suffocating silence that lasts the rest of the walk.

When we get back to the boardinghouse, Maryse heads upstairs, saying something about needing some rest.

I watch her go up the stairs, resisting the urge to follow and ask her to talk to me about whatever it is that’s clearly going on with her.

This. This right here is why I can’t really imagine myself telling Maryse that I feel...something for her.

Not just because she lives here, and I live across the country, and we’ll have hundreds of miles between us within a couple weeks. Not just because



I'm not sure if she likes girls. Not just because I've never actually properly courted anyone before and wouldn't know where to start.

But because every time I think she might be opening up, she pushes me away.

A relationship that's always one step forward, one step back is in no way a relationship I want to be in. It's for the best if I let this go, and focus on the plan.

## Chapter Seventeen

My last sleep before the Feast of Ny is a restless one.

My dreams are plagued with visions of the dragon's eyes, the smell of sulfur, my mother's scream. I wake and turn over several times during the night, and by the time the sun begins to creep in through the window, I've given up entirely on the concept of rest.

I'm eventually dragged out of bed by the sounds of the city below, a steadily growing cacophony of music and chatter.

There are people out in the streets, though not as many as I'd expect from such a massive city. They seem almost spitefully determined to have a good time. Their laughter is loud and shrieking, their desperate smiles toeing the line between forced and sincere. The roads are lined with booths, and a gust of wind sends the mouthwatering scent of roasted ham and candied walnuts my way.

I force myself to dress and go downstairs. It won't do any good to stay shut up in my room all day. Putting on my clothes and going downstairs to sit with other people makes me feel at least somewhat human.

There's a note on the kitchen door when I get there.

*Kitchen closed today. Entire staff gone to festival.*

"Great," I mutter, as a flurry of footsteps comes down the stairs behind me.

"Oh, you're still here." I turn to see Maryse, dressed for the day, looking pretty in a light daffodil-colored dress, with a leather bag slung over one shoulder. Suddenly, my black trousers and old, worn tunic feel a bit plain. We stare at each other for a moment, and I wonder if she's feeling awkward after last night, too. "I thought you'd be out by now."

"I didn't sleep well," I say.

"You're worried about tonight."

“Incredibly.”

She crosses her arms, approaching me with a hopeful glint in her eye. “You don’t have to go through with this, you know.”

I shake my head. I hate to let her down, I hate everything about this whole situation, but I know what needs to be done. “Yes, I do.”

She turns her gaze away, shoulders slumping. Still, she doesn’t look all that surprised. “If you’re going, I’m going,” she says. “But I say there’s still time to bail until we’re literally in the room with the thing.”

“Are you going to check out the festival?” I ask, desperate to change the subject.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” A small smile appears on her face as she nudges me in the shoulder. “Aren’t you planning to go?”

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

She frowns. “Is this about...well, everything, I suppose?”

“It is,” I admit with a small sigh. “I’m not good company right now. I barely slept and I can’t stop worrying about everything and—”

“Okay, okay.” Maryse grabs me by my forearm and tugs me to follow behind her. It’s truly amazing how such a petite girl can drag people along with such little effort. “Come on, you need to get out and enjoy the day.”

“Maryse, you don’t need to—” But she cuts me off again.

“There’s nothing to be done until tonight. Vikker probably won’t send someone to get us until after the feast, so we’ve got the whole day, and I don’t see the point in you spending it by yourself.”

We step outside into the brisk air of the morning, and are almost immediately knocked over by a group of children in animal masks running down the road. One is clutching a paper kite made to look like a giant bird of prey, and the others seem eager to try it out.

Their laughter makes me smile, and I watch them as they disappear down the road, followed by a harried-looking woman who must be their mother.

“What do you do for the feast in Rosburnt?” Maryse asks, leading me down the road, in the direction of a stand selling some truly scrumptious-looking cakes and pies, shaped like frogs and mice and butterflies.

“Pretty much...this.” I gesture around. “Just on a much smaller scale. But all the shops close and everyone spends the day eating and drinking. When I was a kid, my parents would let me get a new toy and I’d go off with a friend to play with them until the sun set. Nana always liked hearing the music in the square. We don’t have any fireworks, though.”

“Oh, you’ll love them.” She gives me a smile. “And I know a spot that’s the best view in town. Stick with me.”

I try not to blush, and give her a gentle nudge on the arm. “I think you want an excuse to hang around me all day long.”

“Well, it’ll be easier for Vikker to find us if we’re together.”

“Oh, yes, because making Vikker’s life easier is always your first priority,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“*Always.*”

On her advice, I get a small raspberry pie fashioned to look like a rodent’s face from the food stand she directs us toward. Eating what is almost pure sweetness first thing in the morning may not be wise, but with Maryse pulling me along, I try to quiet the concerns ringing in my head.

We walk together for hours, stopping at various stands to see what’s for sale, sometimes finding a place to sit and watch all the people go by.

Amid all the cacophony, music floats through the air, fiddles and flutes that never run out of notes to play. The music is high-pitched and has a pace like someone gasping for air, frantic and stumbling. It’s beautiful, but it also sends chills up and down my spine.

One stand is selling little wooden animals, carved by hand out of pine, oak, and cedar.

We stop to look, Maryse peering at each item with great interest. I remember the little figurine I saw her whittling a few days ago. As good as she was with her knife, the animals here are so intricate, so perfectly detailed and painted, that I spot a hint of envy in her eyes.

“I like yours better,” I say as we walk away.

She chuckles. “You’re sweet, and a liar.”

I laugh, too, giddy from the sugar and the company. “I’m serious.”

“I’m not as good as that guy. I’m still learning. And I don’t have any paint.”

“No?”

“Too expensive to really justify it right now,” she says. “I don’t even buy wood for whittling—I usually use whatever I find lying around in the woods or in the street.”

She pauses to look through the window of a jewelry shop that’s remained open for the day. I hesitate, then say, “Hold on,” and run back to the man selling the wooden animals.

“Changed your mind?” he asks, sitting up in his chair.

“Actually, I was wondering—do you sell paint?”

He frowns, surprised, then scratches his chin. “Not usually. But I brought extra for the trip. I could part with a couple jars if you’re paying. Not blue—stuff cost me a fortune, but black, yellow, and red, have at it.”

I purchase a jar of each. They’re not cheap, but I don’t regret it for one second. Carefully stowing the jars in my hip purse, I catch up to Maryse as she’s starting to look for me.

“There you are,” she says. “What were you looking at?”

“This.” I open my purse and produce the jars, holding them out to her, unable to keep the proud smile from my face.

The grin only grows when her eyes widen, reaching out to take the jars from me with an astonished laugh. “What did you get these for?” she asks, examining the yellow paint, which is almost as vibrant as the dress she wears.

“You,” I say. “Happy feast day!”

The Feast of Ny isn’t really a gift-giving holiday, but it’s as good an excuse as any.

The corner of her mouth twitches as she tries to fight a smile, and I realize she looks downright bashful. “I didn’t get you anything.”

“That’s okay. I thought you would like to have some paint. And it’s the stuff that guy uses, so you know it’s good. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been able to tell good paint from bad.”

She stares at the jars before looking up to meet my eyes. Her face is glowing red. “Thank you. You really didn’t have to—”

“I wanted to,” I say. “Enjoy them, okay?”

“I will. Thank you.”

We continue our walk through town, and an odd sense of pride floods me.

I’m glad she liked the gift. The smile that still hasn’t left her face is all I need in return.

...

Basvaan Family Antiquities and Fine Goods is several blocks away from the boardinghouse, and I find myself there with Maryse after a day of food and games and sightseeing.

It’s still boarded up and dark on the inside, though the chain across the front door has been snapped in half.

“So, this is the family business,” I say. “Did your father inherit it?”

“No.” She gazes up at the rusting metal sign with an almost wistful look.

“He built it himself. It’s probably his favorite child.” She laughs. “Always joked he’d rather sell the place than let it be taken over by an incompetent relative. I think the name is because people trust family-owned places more.”

I don’t get much chance to look around before Maryse leads me to the back of the building.

In the alleyway, there’s a wooden ladder attached to the back wall, which looks as if it hasn’t been replaced in decades. It’s also my way up. I stand on the ground, staring uncertainly at the old and scuffed wood, before flicking my gaze upward.

Maryse waits on the roof, having ascended easily, without a hint of hesitation. “What’s the holdup?” she asks, meters above me.

“Is this safe?” I call back.

“I wouldn’t have brought you here if it wasn’t. Come on, they’re gonna start any minute!”

I take a deep breath before reaching to grab the sides of the ladder and put my foot on the first rung. My other foot joins it, and I stay there for a second or two.

It hasn’t given out yet.

Turning my gaze to the darkening sky, I force myself to climb up, going higher and higher, passing birds’ nests resting in some of the windowsills.

With each floor I pass, my heart feels lighter.

By the time I finally reach Maryse, who gives me her hand and helps me get my footing on the flat stone roof, I feel confident enough to look down at the ground below.

Stepping forward, I gaze out over the city, watching the people, like living dolls, walk and dance and eat and laugh. The tapestries and flags look like mere smears of colorful paint from up here, flickering in the wind.

Maryse doesn’t let go of my hand, and I don’t let go of hers.

Heart racing, I take a moment to work up my nerve before I let our fingers intertwine. I half expect her to pull away, but she doesn’t. Swallowing a lump in my throat, I give her a nervous smile, which she returns.

The silence is broken by a strange noise, like the whistling of a teakettle, which fills the air.

I look up as Maryse gleefully says, “Here we go!” She pulls me forward, a bit closer to the edge of the roof, still not letting go of me. The warmth of her hand is more than enough to make me feel safe, no matter how close we are to falling off the edge.

The whistling grows louder, and I gasp as I see a long stream of white smoke rapidly rising into the sky. My eyes following its path down to earth, I see that it came from the direction of the townsguard offices.

A sound like a hundred doors slamming at once echoes across the city, met with a rapturous cheer from everywhere, and I look back up to see shimmering, sparkling embers of pink and red exploding across the sky like shooting stars.

As they begin to fade away, there's another explosion, and a burst of blue and green—then a burst of gold—then white and blue—all dance across the dark tapestry of the sky for us.

My free hand rises to cover my mouth as I stand in awe, watching the display with wide eyes. Maryse stands next to me, and it's not until there's a brief lull in the fireworks that I realize she's looking at me. She's smiling.

"Best view in town," she says.

Heat creeps into my skin. "Thank you."

She squeezes my fingers, and suddenly, the fireworks and the festival and the whole world go completely silent.

When I look into her eyes, it's like the fixed point of the entire universe shifts to her.

"Are we...?" I don't have a chance to consider my words before I'm saying them. "Are we going to still be friends after I go home?"

A spark of surprise lights her gaze. "Do you want us to be?"

"Yes!" I say it too quickly, too enthusiastically, and I want to pull away and hide in my embarrassment, but I don't. "I mean, we can write, can't we?"

There's a pause, and I'm terrified she's trying to find a way to let me down gently. But then she smiles, and she says, "I'd like that."

I exhale. "Me too."

She gives me a gentle bump with her shoulder. "I've gotten used to having you around. It's been nice, talking to someone my own age. Usually, it's been people Pa works with or customers."

"What about your classmates?"

She shrugs. "Pa taught me and all my siblings at home. He thought he could teach us more practical things that way. I liked learning on the job, but I guess I did get shortchanged in the social skills department."

"Oh no, you—"

"Lotte." She laughs, and I can't help but laugh, too.

"Just a little," I admit. "But if it's any comfort to you, I did go to school,

and I don't really have that many friends, either."

"No?" She sounds genuinely surprised.

"I was super shy as a kid. And by the time I got over that, my father had died, and my mother was...well, you know. I think no one really knew how to talk about it. I sure didn't. And I'd known I was a Dragontongue for a while, so I was already doing some work, and after Mother left and I finished school, I started doing that full time. It's not a job where you get to talk to a lot of people. I mean, people back in Rosburnt are nice, I like it there. But I'm not close to anyone except Nana. Sometimes I feel like I missed my chance."

"Nonsense." She gives my fingers another squeeze. "You have Scyler and Danil now. And me."

"And you," I repeat with a small smile.

The fireworks continue to shimmer and shine above us, but I much prefer to keep stealing glances at Maryse. Sometimes, I catch her looking at me, too.

...

The path is lit by streetlamps and bursts of flame and color and sound in the sky above us. We make our way to the center of town, where the largest of the many feasts is being held.

There's a large square that's been set aside, bordered by low stone walls.

Half of the square is filled with tables and benches while the other is set aside for dancing; a quintet of musicians stands on a small, makeshift stage and constantly plays, never seeming to stop or rest.

It looks like half the townsguard is posted here, keeping an eye on everything as people flood in. Lanterns with soft, flickering candles are strung everywhere, shining through thin, colored paper to give their light a variety of pleasant hues.

It's five jere per person to eat, which causes quite a bit of grumbling and muttered cursing among the populace. It's been free, every year until now, Maryse tells me. But with the town going bankrupt, they've decided the best way to make sure there was enough food to go around was to make people pay for the meal.

"It's probably going to be years before everything can recover," I say, as we manage to squeeze into a table with two empty spots on the end. The family eating here is happy to let us join them, and equally happy to ignore us as we talk between ourselves. "Unless the townsguard can get back every bit



of gold.”

“No one’s holding out much hope for that,” Maryse says, shoveling a spoonful of bread pudding into her mouth. “I have no idea what we’re going to do. I don’t think anyone does.”

I sigh, watching the people whirl to the melody of the violin. I think everyone here is doing what I’m doing—trying to enjoy the day and not think about the hard reality of tomorrow. As I watch them go round and round, a pale man with a honey-haired young woman on his arm catches my eye.

“Hey, is that your brother?” I ask, nudging her.

She looks up, and instantly, her face becomes a mask of disdain, her lip curling. “Oh, *he’s* here. And he brought Norah.”

“Who’s Norah?” I ask.

“Corny’s darling fiancée.”

I almost choke on my drink. “He’s engaged? As in, he found a woman who *actually agreed* to marry him?”

“Miracles do happen, apparently.” She rolls her eyes. “She deserves better than my brother, but she doesn’t seem to have noticed.”

“Toads and worms deserve better than your brother.” I watch him, spinning Norah around, as a girlish and exuberant giggle escapes her.

She looks to be only a few years older than me, with rosy cheeks and curly hair that, unlike mine, sits on top of her head in perfect, pretty ringlets. She’s wearing a gown that must be the envy of every fairy tale princess, a silver thing with lots of bows and shining pearls on the bodice. It must’ve cost a fortune, but it looks like what would happen if meringue was somehow turned into clothing.

“She looks happy,” I offer.

“Oh, she is. She adores him.”

“Does he at least treat her well?”

She shrugs. “As well as he ever treats anyone. He isn’t cruel, which is about as good as it gets. Some people find men charming who never laugh at themselves, never think of anyone’s feelings, and ignore them half the time. I never understood it, but to each their own, I suppose. I never understood the appeal of men in general, so maybe that’s what I’m missing.”

Despite my heart skipping a beat, I try not to get too excited about that last part. After all, Maryse never said she did understand the appeal of women. Maybe she’s not inclined to think of *anybody* that way. And even if she does like women, that doesn’t mean she’d ever like *me* like that.

Trying not to blush, I say, “Well, Scyler does like men, and can you imagine them ever tolerating someone like that?”

“Oh, that poor bastard would be impaled in the front lawn before he knew what hit him.” She laughs and turns her gaze to watch them. Her laughter fades away and is replaced by a wistful look. “Norah thinks that, since we’ll technically be family after the wedding, we should be spending more time together. She actually floated the idea of moving me into their house, but Cornelis shut it down. Her father’s already reluctant to have one Basvaan on the property, he’d never agree to two.”

“Are you disappointed?” I ask.

“No.” Her voice is firm, but I have a feeling she’s putting it on. “Her house is...well, it’s magnificent. But it’s not worth living under the same roof as Cornelis. Never again.”

“So her family’s rich?”

“Of course. That’s why he’s marrying her. Don’t tell her that, she won’t hear it. But her father is Councilman Howe, and the whole family has more money than they know what to do with. They’re one of the only households that hasn’t gone broke through all of this.” She sighs, watching them. “Councilman Howe sent his wife and other kids to stay in the capital until all of this is over. He wanted Norah to go with them—ordered her to, actually, but she refuses to leave without Cornelis.”

“She really does love him.”

“Yes. It’s too bad he isn’t worthy of it.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Norah’s silver dress stop spinning, and I realize she’s spotted us. “Oh, I think they’re—”

Before I can finish the sentence, Maryse vacates her seat, muttering, “Tell Norah I said hi, tell Cornelis to rot in hell or something” before disappearing into the crowd.

“Wait—” But it’s too late. She’s gone, and Norah and Cornelis have appeared at our table. Well, to be precise, she’s appeared, dragging him behind her. He wears a smile that looks like it physically pains him.

Now that she’s closer, I can get a better look at Norah’s whole... everything.

Her shoes look brand-new and the jewelry she wears would be enough to pay for a month’s groceries in my house.

Glittering diamonds hanging from her ears and wrist feel a bit...well... inappropriate, given the state of the city, but her smile is so bright and sincere

that I feel a little bad for thinking that. Around her neck is a silver chain with a single, teardrop-shaped blueish-green stone.

“Oh dear, where’d Maryse get off to?” she asks, her voice like a baby songbird. “I wanted to say hi!”

“She’s...gone to get drinks,” I say, putting my elbow down in front of my full goblet. “She asked me to say hi, though.” I decide the second part is best left unsaid. Given her usual interactions with her brother, it’s probably already implied.

“Well, darn. I was hoping to talk to her. Oh, you must be that little friend Corny was telling me about!” I almost giggle at the sound of someone besides Maryse calling him that, especially when his jaw tenses. “Once she’s back, would you girls like to join us at our table? I can make room for you easily.”

“Uh...” I know perfectly well that Maryse would want me to say no, but that feels too mean. Fortunately—and this is the first and last time I’ll ever think this—Cornelis speaks up.

“I think the girls are best left to their own devices,” he says, placing a hand on her waist. He pecks her cheek, an action without any sort of warmth behind it. “I’m going to go get more to eat. See you back at our table. Don’t keep me waiting too long, all right?”

When he leaves, she watches him go with a glowing smile, and I wonder if she’s somehow seeing a completely different person than I am.

After he’s gone, she leans down to look me properly in the eye. “You and Maryse are friends, right?”

“Uh...yes?”

“Could you do me the teensiest, tiniest favor?”

“Maybe.” I raise an eyebrow. “You’re not gonna ask me to help you hide a body, are you?”

She stares at me, eyes going wide as her mouth drops open and a hand flies to her heart. “Oh my goodness, no! Has anyone ever asked you to do something so terrible?”

“What? No, no, it was a joke...” I trail off and see that she’s still giving me that same concerned, horrified look. “Never mind. What do you need?”

“Well, I’m a little concerned about Maryse. So is Corny, of course. He won’t say so, but I know he’s worried sick about her.”

“How can you tell?”

“Well, he doesn’t let it show, but I *know*. What man *wouldn’t* be worried

about his baby sister when their father has up and gone?” she asks, as if it’s the most logical thing in the world. Which I guess it is. Anyone would be worried. Anyone *should* be worried. “They’re both so *proud*, that’s the problem.”

“You’re not wrong,” I admit.

“He knows Maryse won’t come live with us because she hates accepting help. He won’t even let me ask her! And he hates to admit when he’s made a mistake, which I’m sure is the main reason he hasn’t said sorry for all the trouble they’ve had. Dreadful, that.” She sighs. “But the biggest problem is that I’m not sure what he plans to do for her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, once his father’s declared dead, legally, I mean—may he rest in peace—he’ll have whatever money’s left in his accounts, and because he hates talking about it so much, he won’t tell me what he plans to give Maryse. The poor girl will need something to help her get along, but whenever I try to talk about it, he changes the subject. It must upset him so much to think about.”

“Uh...yes.” It occurs to me now that Norah believes her intended is far fonder of his family than he really is. “So what do you need me to do?”

“Just...ask Maryse to come see me when she has time, would you? Maybe while Corny’s at work, we can talk, just us girls. I’d like to know if he’s told her anything, or if she has a plan yet. Could you ask her to talk to me, please?”

I nod, trying to ignore the pit in my stomach. “Sure.”

“You’re a darling.” She straightens up and smooths her skirt. “Well, it was lovely to meet you. Enjoy the rest of the festival.”

She walks off in a manner that I really can only describe as flouncing. A few minutes later, Maryse reappears, collapsing onto the seat next to mine.

“Cornelis actually took off pretty fast,” I say.

“I couldn’t risk it. Sorry for ditching you.”

“It’s okay.” I tear off a piece of bread. “Norah wanted me to tell you she wants to talk to you alone sometime. About what you plan to do after your father is...well, you know.”

Her face is grim. “Can we not think about that right now?”

“Fine by me. But if you want to talk...”

“I don’t.”

We let the matter drop from there, instead focusing on the fantastic food

and drink before us. Even after we've cleared our plates, we sit talking, laughing together, and soon, the unpleasantness brought by her brother is forgotten.

Eventually, the conversation fades, but instead of silence between us, there is music. The quintet has now started playing a sort of waltz, lots of harp and flute, and it makes me feel lighter listening to it.

All at once, before I can think about it or talk myself out of it, I blurt out, "Do you like to dance?"

Her head snaps up, surprised, but then her gaze softens. "I don't know. I hardly do it."

"Would..." I swallow and try to sound casual, like her answer doesn't matter to me in the slightest. "Would you like to? It could be fun, maybe."

Maryse looks at the crowd of people enjoying the music, before looking back to me. She's smiling. "Sure, why not?"

I get to my feet and offer her my hand, hoping she doesn't notice that it's shaking. She takes it and together we make our way to where everyone is dancing.

I hardly dance, either, but it doesn't seem like anyone here really cares if anyone actually knows what they're doing or not. People sway and spin out of rhythm, some clumsily knocking into one another, others dipping or lifting their partners just because.

This makes it easy for Maryse and me to fit right in, her grabbing my arms to place them around her shoulders. Her own arms loop around my waist, and I feel my cheeks burning. Awkwardly, we begin to move, chest to chest, stepping in time to the music as best as we can.

"Thank you," I finally say. "For today. I had fun."

"I did too," she says. "Are we...doing this right?"

"Hell if I know."

After a minute of stepping forward, to the side, backward and forward again, trying to keep to the rhythm, I decide to let go of her with one hand. I draw back, letting her spin out before pulling her back to me rapidly. She laughs as we collide, her forehead knocking into my chin.

Slowly, seemingly without thought, she lays her head to rest on my shoulder, and I almost collapse right then and there. Taking a deep breath and hoping she doesn't hear my heart thudding against my ribcage, I wrap my arms tighter around her.

"I'm actually gonna miss you when you leave," she says, so quietly I

almost don't hear her.

"It won't be goodbye," I remind her. "We'll write, and we can visit."

"*You* can visit. I'm not going to that town of yours."

I snort, swatting her on the back of the head, which makes her laugh. "Asshole."

"You love it."

"You're really not as cute as you think you are," I lie.

She looks up at me, giving a playful roll of her eyes, but she doesn't turn her gaze away.

Instead, her shining eyes stay fixed on mine, and every ounce of dignity I ever had leaves me all at once. She's so close to me and I want to collapse into a heap, or leap into the air, or pick her up and spin her around, or...

We stop moving as everyone around us continues.

My eyes drift down from her eyes to her lips, and I'm about to tear my gaze away, pray she didn't notice, when she reaches up to place a hand on the back of my neck. Her eyes close, and my heart is in my throat, pounding harder and harder, the blood pumping in my ears—

"There you two are!"

*Are you fucking kidding me?*

At once, we jump about two feet away from each other, and Maryse is bright pink.

I turn to look, and see Danil approaching us, out of uniform for the first time since I've met him. He wears dark clothes and a long, gray cloak that swishes around him as he raises a massive arm to wave to us. It makes him look like some sort of vampire. If he has any idea what he interrupted, he doesn't let it show.

"Come on," he says, reaching for my arm, completely ignoring the steam coming out of my ears. "It's time to go to work. You ready?"

I don't answer, but Maryse clears her throat. "Let's get this over with."

And like that, whatever was between us, whatever happened, or almost happened, is in the past. She walks alongside me and Danil, and whatever nervousness I saw in her moments before is gone, replaced by her usual dignity and confidence.

We have a job to do and that's all she's thinking of—or at least, she's not letting on that she's thinking of anything else.

I do my best to imitate her, and focus. But all I can think of is the song that was playing as we danced together, and the feeling of her in my arms. And

various ways I can kill Danil later.

## Chapter Eighteen

It's a slow journey to the castle.

Cornelis and Maryse, unsurprisingly, stay as far from each other as can be managed. Maryse rides on the back of Danil's horse, pulling a cart with a pitiful offering of gold and some provisions for Mother. Cornelis and I follow on his horse a few paces behind them, me clinging to him so I won't fall off, him trying to ignore my presence.

I wish Scyler were here instead of him. Vikker decided that the fewer people who went into the castle, the better, and he decided to send Cornelis because he's a high-ranking officer. He's supposed to "lead and supervise." I'm sure Danil and Scyler could manage just fine, if not better, without him, but it wasn't my call.

In the cart behind us is a crate full of fireworks, connected by rope that will act as a slow-burning fuse.

The music and babble of the city slowly fades as we move farther and farther away from the center of town, venturing into the northern district.

It's so still.

On previous journeys, I'd always see at least a few people about, even if I was going before sunrise. But now, everyone's at the festival, leaving their windows darkened and the streets empty. It feels like the world is waiting for something.

"What's the plan?" I ask when I finally can't take the silence anymore.

Cornelis grunts. "Guard Komatin and I will enter through one of three possible entrances we know about. While you fork over the tithe, we'll get as close to the center of the castle as we can and plant the fireworks."

"Don't get too close. You don't want to risk being heard."

"Well, us not getting noticed depends almost entirely on your ability to keep the damned thing distracted. Keep talking and stay out of the way—and



keep Maryse out of the way, too. Make sure she doesn't do anything impulsive."

"She won't," I say firmly. "She knows what she's doing."

"I wish I had as much faith in people as you do."

I hesitate, glancing ahead to make sure Maryse and Danil don't hear us. They're some meters in front of us, and I can hear that they're talking, but I can't make the words out. I decide to take a risk and ask what both Norah and I have been wondering.

"Listen," I say, "I know this is a personal question—and I don't mean to pry, I—your fiancée talked to me for a minute—"

"Out with it, Meer."

"I know that once your father's been gone for a few more weeks, the state gets his property, and then whatever they don't want is yours. So, um, Norah wants to know what you plan to do with Maryse's inheritance."

I can't see his face, but I feel his shoulders tense.

Finally, he says, "My sister has no inheritance, nor do I. Not anymore. Our father's will was invalidated about four convictions ago."

"I know, but his money will revert to you—some of it, at least. I don't know if the government takes any of that—and he did intend to leave her something—"

"If my father wanted to have a say in what happened to his money after he got himself killed, he should've stayed out of trouble. And if Maryse wanted me to help her, she shouldn't have followed in his footsteps." He straightens his back. "I'll speak to Norah about this, and about involving strangers in our personal matters."

"You'd really do that? Leave your own sister with nothing?" My stomach churns.

"She's made it perfectly clear she prefers taking care of herself. Don't waste a thought or an ounce of pity for Maryse. She's gotten herself into this situation, and she's already well aware of where I stand on the matter. She's on her own, and by all rights she should be at peace with that."

I can't find anything to say in response, and so disgust and silence both hang thick in the air between us for the remainder of our journey.

I glance up ahead at Maryse, who is still chatting with Danil. Has Cornelis already told her about his intent to cut her out? Or is he planning to shock her with the news?

We finally arrive at the castle, and Danil and Cornelis bring the horses to a

stop.

Cornelis jumps off without so much as a glance at me, starting to unload his wagon, while Danil dismounts and offers Maryse a hand down. I get to the ground as gracefully as I can manage, wiping my sweaty palms on my shirt.

Maryse lets out a long breath, crossing her arms as she gazes up at the towers. “So, what do we need to do?” she asks in hushed tones.

Ker’kachin shouldn’t be able to hear us from inside the thick stone walls, but a certain level of paranoia feels necessary.

“Go in and keep him distracted, and let us handle the rest,” Danil says.

“How will we know when you’ve done what you need to do?”

“One of us will come to get you through the front. He’ll be expecting you to have been escorted here, so that shouldn’t raise any suspicion. The goal is to keep him from realizing we’re in the castle before that.”

I chew on my bottom lip. “This makes me really nervous.”

“I know. But it’s our best option.”

Cornelis finishes unloading the fireworks from his wagon, and looks up at Danil. “Let’s do this.”

• • •

Maryse and I walk side by side, our arms full of offerings.

Although I know she’s been here before, I can’t help but worry about what will happen to her. It’s bad enough that my mother’s gotten dragged into this mess, I don’t want Maryse to get hurt, too. The bruises on my face and body have started to fade, but they’re still painful to the touch, and a more than ample reminder of what could happen if one of us makes a misstep.

When we step into the room, Ker’kachin rears back as Maryse enters his line of vision.

“What...?” His voice trails off in a confused whisper.

She meets his eye at what must’ve sounded like a quiet growl to her, and waves with one arm, awkwardly saying, “Hello.”

Ker’kachin’s head lowers quickly as his scarlet eyes narrow, a wordless grumble erupting from his throat. It’s a low, soft rumbling, sounding more intrigued than upset, but even so, I watch him closely, ready to get in between them at a moment’s notice.

A chill runs up my spine when he gets within a few feet of her, but Maryse doesn’t flinch. She simply draws in a sharp breath and stays still, letting him

peer at her like a bug caught under a glass.

“She got out of jail a few days ago,” I explain.

Slowly, his eyes widen again, and some sort of tension appears to leave him. Maryse seems to relax, too, letting out a sigh of relief, though I hope she isn’t letting down her guard.

I look past him to the corner where Mother has taken up residence. She’s still there, sitting on her knees, watching Maryse with a look of bewilderment. “May I go give her the food we’ve brought?”

He nods, barely looking at me, and I make my way across the uneven terrain of coins while Maryse sets down the chest with this week’s tithe.

As I approach Mother, I keep my ears pricked for any sound coming from the rest of the castle. Every breath and heartbeat feels like a thunderclap, but I don’t hear so much as a single footstep coming from outside the room.

“What’s the matter?” Mother asks, getting to her feet. She still winces when she puts weight on her right foot, but she can at least walk on it now.

“Nothing.” I hand her the food and water we brought. She passes me an empty canteen, her brow creased as she watches me.

Not wanting to risk giving anything away, I turn away from her.

Maryse has finished emptying the chest of its coins and jewelry, and has taken a step back, standing against the wall of the room. She looks up at the dragon without a hint of fear or concern.

“The townsguard is running out of time to find what I asked them for,” Ker’kachin says. He slowly turns his head to look at me, and I notice, not without relief, that his eyes don’t look angry or irritated with me today. Maybe having Maryse here, seeing she’s out of jail, has thrown him off a little.

“I know,” I say. “The search is still on. We’ll...we’ll find something. I promise you.”

Slowly, trying to appear completely natural, I take a few steps to the side, to draw his gaze in that direction. Away from Mother, and more importantly, away from the doorway leading to the rest of the castle.

I hope Danil and Cornelis aren’t reckless enough to pass by there, but I won’t take any chances. I have no idea what the inside of the castle looks like, and neither of them have ever been inside, except for the first hallway and this room. They may well find themselves by accident closer than they intended to this room.

Knowing that they’re here makes my whole body feel cold and tight. Both

for the fact that I'm helping them set a deadly trap for someone who, while I have no positive feelings toward him, is still a living being, and because I truly fear what will become of them if they're caught.

"My cousin has—has a broom that sweeps by itself," I offer with a hollow, fake laugh. "If you're interested."

He snorts. "Keep it. Those things never work right."

"What is it that you actually want?"

"I've heard stories of a stone that can change anything into anything else," he says, his tone almost thoughtful. "That would be nice."

"You'd certainly have all the gold and gems you could eat."

He doesn't respond, and my bad joke hangs in the air. Soon, things have been silent for too long, a fact I realize when he says, "Is that all you have to report for me? Why are you still here staring at me?"

I swallow, taking an instinctive step back and knocking into a wall. "I—um." My mouth has gone dry. *Think of something!* "I want to ask you again if you'll consider releasing my mother." Actually, I didn't plan to ask him about that at all today, but it's better than standing here until he gets bored.

"Have you found what I need?"

"No."

"Then you have your answer."

From across the room, Maryse watches with a vaguely confused frown, her eyes darting between him and me, and she clearly can't understand a word that's being said.

Even so, my face or my trembling hands must give me away. Moving so quickly I worry she may startle the dragon, she comes to join me. When she reaches me, she lifts a hand to touch me on the arm, watching him warily from the corner of her eye.

"Are you okay, Lotte?" she asks softly.

I nod, too quickly to possibly be convincing. I take a few deep breaths, like she had me do when I told her about this whole mess in the first place, before forcing myself to press on.

*I can't give up. I won't give up.*

I decide to try a different tack. "Mother, do you remember that heirloom ring you told me about when I was a kid? The emerald one? You—you said it was—" My gaze flicks up to Ker'kachin, who is watching the exchange with great interest. "You said it was supposed to have some sort of magic, right? Is that maybe what he means?"

Maryse's back straightens, her head snapping over to watch my mother. I could be imagining it, but I swear even Ker'kachin is holding his breath now.

Mother doesn't answer me right away. She averts her gaze and uncomfortably rubs her neck.

Refusing to be deterred, I press her. "You know, the bronze ring with the emerald. Been in your family for years? You said it kept you from getting sick—"

A gravelly, roaring laugh cuts me off, filling my ears and shaking the ground beneath me.

Both Maryse and Mother give a start, staring up at the dragon as he shakes his head, fangs bared in a cruel, amused sneer. When his laughter fades, he doesn't share the reason for his mirth, instead watching me through narrowed eyes.

Mother squeezes her eyes shut, face flushed. "I don't have it," she mumbles, almost inaudibly.

My shoulders slump. "Don't tell me you sold it."

"No!" Her defensiveness sends a wave of guilt through me. "Of course not. It...it got stolen. About a year ago, long before he ever showed up." She gestures to Ker'kachin with a jut of her head. "I'm sorry, Lotte. I would've told you to bring it to him ages ago if I still had it, but..."

I draw in a shaky breath and nod. "Okay. Okay."

It was a long shot to begin with, but the disappointment that floods me feels insurmountable. I'm still not entirely certain she doesn't know what Ker'kachin wants from her, but even if she's lying, there's nothing I can do. Every time I think I'm getting remotely close to finding a way out of this, the path is blocked or cleared away entirely, and I'm right back where I started.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see movement, and my pulse goes still as a figure passes by the doorway. Ker'kachin exhales, and for a second, I think they've been spotted, but he doesn't say or do anything.

"Do you have any idea where...where it might've ended up?" I ask, desperately trying to keep my gaze on Mother and the fear out of my voice.

"No," she says. "It could be in a different country by now for all I know."

"I guess it...it isn't too surprising. I should've known getting you out of here wouldn't be that easy."

"It could be easy," Ker'kachin says. I shudder. "She knows what I want."

It takes everything in me not to check the door again, or stop mid-sentence to listen for their footsteps. Their lives rely on me being able to pretend

nothing out of the ordinary is happening, and I can't let them down. I search for something else to say, anything.

"Why did you come in here?" I don't mean for the words to sound so harsh, and more guilt comes in the form of a stab in the gut when Mother winces. But Ker'kachin is still watching us and hasn't grown impatient or told me to leave yet, and that's what matters. I force myself to keep talking. "You must've known how dangerous it was."

"I told you," he says. "She's a thief."

I ignore him and watch Mother, waiting for her response.

She's quiet for a minute, refusing to look me in the eye. Finally, she says, still not looking at me, "The townsguard seized everything important I had. I wanted it back. I didn't intend to take anything else, just what was mine. Not all—hell, not *most* of what was taken from me. I wanted my wedding ring."

Of course. Of course, it has to do with my father. Her last reminder of him, except, of course, the living, breathing one right in front of her.

Tears prick at my eyes, and I shake my head. "Mother...I know you miss Papa, but that wasn't worth risking your life over."

"Yes, it was."

Ker'kachin gives a derisive snort, and I can't find it in me to respond to either of them. What could I say? That he's wrong to think it was foolish of her to come here over a piece of jewelry? That she's wrong to want a reminder of someone she loves?

Behind Ker'kachin, I see Cornelis pass by the doorway again, footsteps light and inaudible, as if honed from a lifetime of sneaking around. I have no idea if anyone spotted him except for me.

Before the dragon has a chance to react or not, I blurt, "Where did you come from?"

His blood-red eyes narrow and snap to stare me down, a couple tendrils of steam flooding from his nostrils. Both Mother and Maryse back away, but I stand my ground.

"I know you're not from the forest. But you can't have come from the city, either. Where did you come from?"

"You're asking the wrong questions, Meer."

I frown. The wrong questions?

Then again, there are so many unanswered questions about Ker'kachin that sorting right from wrong feels impossible.

He's nothing like other dragons, and he doesn't seem to want to be like

them. He may wear the same skin as them, but inside is something else entirely. But what?

“Who *are* you?” I ask.

Ker’kachin bares his teeth in a horrible grin. “There is nothing in the world you could offer me that would get me to tell you that.”

“Were you forced to leave your old home, or were you looking for something here?” It may be foolish to press on, but I have to keep him occupied somehow, and the questions rush from my lips like a river. “What about your family? Were they like you? Or did you change?” I frown, a thought suddenly striking me. “Do you remember?”

He scoffs. “Of course I do.” His words are dismissive, but his voice is weighted down, oddly quiet.

I take in a shaking breath. “*Something* must’ve happened to you.”

“What has or hasn’t happened to me is none of your concern.”

“It could be. If you told me what all this is really about, maybe I could help \_\_\_”

Ker’kachin takes a step closer, lowering his head to look me in the eye. “Your pity,” he spits, “is worse than a knife to the head.”

I don’t respond, resisting the urge to flinch. He stares me down, teeth still exposed, but doesn’t lunge at me. His eyes flick up and down, sizing me up, as if calculating whether I’m worth the trouble.

Suddenly appearing beside me, Maryse grabs one of my hands with both of hers, and pulls me closer to her. I take a step back, not daring to look away from the dragon for even a moment. The three of us stand and stare at one another in a painful stalemate.

Finally—*finally*—I hear footsteps coming up the hallway at the entrance of the castle.

“Is everything okay?” Danil’s voice calls from the corridor.

Ker’kachin whips his head around to look, squinting suspiciously at the door. “What are they...?”

Mercifully, a lie comes to me easily. “After what happened last time, they’re being extra-vigilant.”

He huffs, but makes no move toward the door, for which I’m grateful. “Well, go set them at ease.”

I nod, hoping he doesn’t hear my blood racing, and raise my voice to yell, “We’ll be out in a minute! Everything’s fine!”

Maryse and I turn to leave, both trying not to move too quickly or look too

nervous. I let her go in front of me. She pauses in the doorway and glances over her shoulder, taking one last apprehensive look at the dragon, before she goes to join Danil.

I'm about to follow her when the dragon speaks my name.

"Meer—do you know when the next new moon is?"

My throat goes dry as my eyes instinctively glance upward at the exposed night sky.

A shining, curved sliver of moon stares back, destined to grow smaller and smaller through the week until it's completely vanished into darkness.

"One week," I finally answer.

"Good. So you *are* aware you're running out of time."

"Yes." I meet his eye, a rabbit looking into the face of a fox. "I should go. They're going to worry about me."

I don't wait for his reply before I leave down the hallway, going from walking to running before I realize I've done it.

I shoot outside, stopping only when I'm a few feet away from the door, and I collide with Maryse. She puts her hands on my arms and holds me in place, trying to meet my eyes. "Lotte?" she says softly.

I shake my head, unable to speak, taking a deep breath of the cool outside air like I've come up from underwater.

Everyone stares at me, but no one else approaches as I stand there, closing my eyes and trying to breathe. Maryse continues to hold onto me, and slowly, her hands move from my arms to my face, drawing me in closer to her. I stoop down to meet her, feeling her forehead rest against mine, and I'm torn between pulling away and collapsing in to her. The warmth of her touch is at once a comfort and a terror.

Finally, I open my eyes, meeting Maryse's gaze and exhaling slowly.

We're both okay. She's okay. I can breathe again. She's okay.

"Lotte." She says my name again, so quietly that the word feels like a gift just for me.

"Let's go," I whisper.



## Chapter Nineteen

“Lotte! Wake up!”

My eyes are forced open by the sound of rapid-fire knocking at my door.

Sunlight is seeping in from behind the curtains, and, looking down at myself, I realize I slept on top of my covers, fully dressed.

With the festival still going strong, it was decided that we wouldn't have a meeting about last night's operation until this morning, so I was able to come back to the boardinghouse and collapse immediately. I groan and sit up, pushing some tangled curls out of my face as the knocking continues.

“Come on, you weren't at breakfast.” Maryse's voice floats in from the other side of the door. “Get up.”

“I'm up, I'm up!” I call back. “Let me get dressed.”

I hastily change into the first clothes I can find, forcing my hair into a bun to keep it from looking like an overgrown patch of weeds sprouting from my head.

When I open the door, Maryse is still standing there, arms crossed and eyebrows raised. Her eyes are slightly baggy. It looks like she had a restless night.

“She lives,” she says. “I was starting to wonder.”

“Oh ha-ha.”

Without waiting for me to step aside, she nudges past me and comes into my room, plopping herself down on the bed. Heat crawls up the back of my neck as she glances around, and I'm suddenly self-conscious of the fact that my dirty clothes have formed a small pile in the corner.

“Scyler came by during breakfast looking for you,” she says. “They said to let you sleep but wake you before the meeting—you've got an hour to get over there.”

“Oh. Thank you.” After a second of awkwardly standing near the doorway,

not sure of where to look or what to do with my hands, I come to sit next to her on the bed.

“So...” Maryse says. “Last night was weird.”

Last night. Right. I couldn’t hide from it forever, could I?

Like a bolt of lightning, I’m suddenly struck with the thought that maybe she’s talking about what happened between us at the Feast.

Or, rather, what almost happened, before Danil came and interrupted.

I grab a stray lock of my hair and tug on it, trying to keep myself from blushing at the memory, already feeling more like a distant dream than something that really happened.

I can’t believe Maryse and I nearly kissed—well, I nearly kissed Maryse. Maybe I was reading too much into things, maybe she wasn’t—

“Are you okay?” she asks, suddenly snapping me out of my thoughts. “I know everything with your mother is probably getting to you.”

Oh. Of course. Of course, that’s what she meant.

I shrug. “I’m fine.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m *fine*.”

“Lotte.”

I huff and shake my head. “I have to be,” I say. “I know I should be completely losing it, but I can’t. Not right now.”

“Look,” she says, “I know you’re keeping it together—far more than I expected, to be honest—but you don’t have to sit there and tell me you’re doing fine when we both know that you’re not.”

We fall into silence before I finally say, “I keep telling myself, once Mother’s safe, then I can lose it. But that’s not true, because there’s still the whole city at risk. And I’m sure once we figure out what to do about that, there’ll be something else to worry about.”

“Oh, probably.”

“Great.”

“Well, you don’t like me for my optimism.” I snort, and she gives me the smallest smile and nudges my arm. “There she is. I figured once I got on your nerves well enough, you’d be yourself again.”

I look up into her eyes and forget how to speak. When I do, my words come out without a thought. “Do you think your brother loves you?”

She blinks, visibly taken aback at the question, but she doesn’t scowl at me or get offended. Instead, she shifts in her seat, shrugging. “No.”

“Not even a little?”

“Doubt it. Why?”

“I don’t know. I guess I...” I trail off, embarrassed by my own naïveté. “I know a lot of people have terrible relatives and that no one is obligated to love anybody else, but I always thought family is so connected that they’d always love one another a tiny bit, even if they hate one another, too. Now I’m not so sure.”

Her gaze softens. “Is this about my family, or yours?”

“Both, I guess. I—I mean, I know Mother doesn’t hate me or anything. When I was younger, after Papa died, I wondered sometimes. But now I know she was sad and sick, and I was there. She could be mean, really mean, but I think it was out of pain, not hatred. And that seems to have gotten better, which I guess is one good thing about her having left for so long. But she hasn’t said sorry for any of it, and... Even if she doesn’t hate me, that doesn’t mean...” I can’t finish the sentence. It’s too pathetic.

Maryse lifts her hand, and for a second, I think she’s going to hold mine, but instead she pats my knee twice before placing the hand back in her lap. “I can’t say for certain how your mother feels about you, but I can say that you don’t deserve the crap she’s pulled.”

“Thank you,” I say softly. My head falls to rest on her shoulder for a minute, and a small smile finds its way onto my face when she reaches up to muss my hair.

“That ring you were asking your mother about last night,” she says after a pause, “what did you say it looked like?”

“I barely remember it, but it was bronze with an emerald—well, I guess the emerald may have been fake.” I sigh, sitting up again. “That was a shot in the dark to begin with, but I still can’t believe it got stolen. Talk about rotten luck. I mean, even if it was fake, I would’ve liked to have it. We don’t have any other heirlooms, at least none that I know about. Papa’s family was poor, and Mother didn’t take much with her from home.”

She looks away, shoulders drooping. “I’m sorry it’s gone.”

“It’s okay. Nothing to do about it now.”

“I guess not.” There’s a pause before she says, “I wish I could make you feel better. I hate seeing you upset.”

I fidget bashfully with my fingers. “You’re here. That helps.”

“It does?” She looks over at me, surprised.

“Yes.” I nod, and suddenly wonder if anyone’s ever told Maryse her being

there was helpful before. “Yes,” I repeat.

“I’m...I’m glad. But I still want to do something.”

“It’s okay, Maryse, really.” I nudge her gently. “Thank you for coming to check on me.”

“You’re welcome.” She holds my gaze for a minute before she coughs and looks away. She gets to her feet, glancing out the window. “You should probably get going if you don’t want to miss your meeting. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Okay.”

I watch her go, shutting my door behind her, feeling a little better.

...

Cornelis places a map of the inside of the castle on the table, holding down the corners, which attempt to curl back after so many years of being rolled up and stowed away.

The ink is faded, and the paper is creased and torn in some places, but it’s still legible.

His pale blond hair is unusually messy today.

Vikker’s boots are splattered with dried dirt and mud and look like they could wear out with each step, and Danil clearly hasn’t shaved in days, a bit of light brown stubble appearing on his freckled skin. Scyler looks like they fell asleep in their uniform after last night, the fabric wrinkled and their joints stiff as they move.

Clearly, no one’s been paying much mind to getting enough rest, let alone making themselves look their best.

We all stand around the table peering at the map while Danil places small domed pieces of metal at various points.

I raise an eyebrow when I realize they’re thimbles, and give him a look.

“We’re not supposed to write on anything we don’t have copies of,” he says with a shrug, placing a thimble in a room labelled as the armory. “This was the best thing I could think of.”

“These are places where we’ve set up fireworks,” Cornelis says.

He lifts one of his hands, and the corner immediately begins to roll back, until Scyler shoots their hand forward and presses it down again. Using his finger, trailing it along the paper, Cornelis draws an invisible line connecting all the points without crossing itself.

“The fuse goes from here, where we laid the first stash in what was the

library, all the way across the ground floor to the west staircase. We'd have liked to plant some on the upper floors, but the stairs looked too unstable."

"Just as well," Vikker grunts, scratching his chin as he examines the map. "The explosives will do the most good if they attack the foundation. Take out the bottom level, and the whole building comes down."

It's only now that I realize I'm chewing on one of my fingernails. Bringing my hand down and shoving it into my pocket, I ask, "How many people do you think you'd need to evacuate to make it safe, if we end up having to... you know, bring the building down?"

"We'd be erring on the side of absolute caution, of course, so...I'd estimate thirty, thirty-five thousand people. Once you account for everyone within a few miles of the castle. I don't really expect the damage to be felt that widely, but there's no way to be certain."

"I've been meaning to ask," Scyler says, biting back a yawn, "does the royal family *know* we're planning to demolish one of their castles?"

"No," he says dully. "The last I heard from them about our problem, they made it clear it is *our* problem and they're leaving us to deal with it. So, I am."

"By blowing up their property? I'm not saying I'm not on board, I'm pointing out that this sort of feels like we're skirting the line of mutiny."

"Oh, don't worry. It's mutiny only if you disobey orders, of which we've had none." He shrugs. "I'll beg forgiveness. If worse comes to worse, I'm willing to lose my job over this if it gets rid of that monster."

"Assuming they notice the castle's gone," Danil adds. "They haven't been here since they moved the capital, and they left the place to rot. I'm not sure anyone who ever actually lived there is still alive."

Scyler lets out a snort of laughter. "That's true, we don't necessarily have to *tell* them. Even if they do eventually come here, if we all denied everything, we might get away with it. Think there's any chance we could convince them there was never a castle there at all?"

Vikker doesn't quite manage to repress a smile. "Right now, we should focus our energies on finding a way to evacuate as many as people as possible before Ker'kachin becomes suspicious." He looks to me. "You may have to act as a diversion again. Do you think you could persuade Miss Basvaan to go with you?"

"I don't know. She'd want people to get out of harm's way, but you know how she feels about this whole plan. And I'm not sure, even with her help,

I'd be able to hold his attention long enough for you to clear out thirty thousand people."

"You won't need to, not for that long. I'm talking about only the last round of evacuations."

"Would he be able to hear from inside the castle?"

"I'm taking no chances. We'll deal with people who are farther away from the castle first, which we should be able to do without him noticing us. It's rather backward and not how I'd prefer to do it, but if we've already cleared out as many people as possible, we'd need you to keep him occupied only long enough for us to get to the people who are closest before he realizes what's going on. I'll have every guard in the city come to help, but even then, the whole process will take hours."

"There's also going to be some people who won't move when we tell them to," Cornelis grumbles. "Always are in these situations. We had to evacuate a few neighborhoods for flooding last year. You'd be amazed how many people will choose to die on their property with their things than live anywhere else without them."

"Yes," Vikker agrees, nodding ruefully. "But there's nothing we can do about the people who refuse to leave. The most important thing is to help all those we can."

The meeting is dismissed after everyone's had a chance to get a good long look at the map, and with the help of some heavy books put down on the corners, it's left on the table so people can continue to study it.

I linger for a few minutes after nearly everyone else has left, my eyes following the path of all the explosives, trying to visualize the explosion that will bring an entire fortress to ashes.

## Chapter Twenty

I don't see Maryse for the rest of the day, even at meals, and the silly, insecure part of me with no sense of priority worries that she's avoiding me.

It's absurd, I know, to worry that a girl doesn't like me, with everything else going on. But I can't help it. Maryse has crept her way into my brain and now I couldn't get her to leave if I wanted to.

I can't help the rush of disappointment I feel whenever I look around the dining hall only to find her absent, or close out the hope that she'll walk through the door at any moment.

Still, I try my best to keep my head on straight. Just because she isn't around doesn't mean she's avoiding me.

In fact, I remind myself, in all likelihood, her absence has nothing to do with me whatsoever. She has a job and her family problems to worry about. And so do I. We should both be focusing on things other than each other.

No matter how much I tell myself that, I can't deny that my heart leaps into my throat when I wake up the next morning to find a note written in her hand slid under my door.

*Don't leave without talking to me. I have a surprise. Apartment 7 on the eighth floor.*

I quickly dress and put my hair in something resembling a braid before heading out.

I've never been to any floors above mine. I know everything above the fifth floor is for permanent residents, but from what I see from the stairwell, it doesn't look too different from the section I'm being housed in. Lots of closed doors with the paint starting to fade away.

When I reach Maryse's apartment, my palms are sweaty, and I have to wipe them on my trousers before I knock. She answers straightaway, looking

just as lovely in her simple, loose shirt and dark trousers as anyone would in a queen's jewels. Her eyes light up as soon as she sees me, which sends another jolt of nervous energy through my heart.

"Ah! There you are." She steps aside and waves to me. "Come in."

"What's this surprise?" I hesitantly step over the threshold.

Once I'm inside, I can see that her living quarters are a little bigger than mine, with two small rooms instead of one. There's a sitting room, which is where I am now, and a door that leads into what I assume must be where she sleeps.

"One second." She closes the door behind me and ducks into the other room, leaving me to look around the sitting room.

It's fairly neat, although that might be because there plainly isn't much here.

There are a handful of books sitting on a shelf, most of them relating to dragon behavior and history, and two pairs of shoes sitting under the windowsill. A single coat is tossed onto the threadbare couch, and there's a small table against the wall that's covered in wood shavings.

Her whittling knife sits on the surface, next to the jars of paint I bought her. I can't help but smile when I see that they look a tiny bit emptier than I remember them.

The sound of footsteps causes me to look up, and she breezes out of the other room, holding one hand behind her back.

"Okay," she says, stopping in front of me, "I want to manage some expectations here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I got you something that I hoped would be a big deal, and it sort of is a big deal, maybe, but it's probably not as big a deal as we were both hoping, and I don't want you to get your hopes up because then you'll be disappointed—"

"Maryse." I laugh and reach out to touch her arm. "I promise, my hopes aren't up, you can't disappoint me, because I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

She lets out a breath. "Okay."

In one swift motion, she pulls her hand out from behind her back and presents me with...a ring.

I blink, peering at it, completely confused, and maybe a little flattered, before I manage to take a really good look at it. There's a simple gemstone



adorning it, which sparkles with a vivid green in the light of the morning.

“Holy shit!” My hand flies up, clapping over my mouth as I continue to stare at the ring, before I turn my gaze upward toward Maryse, who grins at me. “Is that...?”

She nods, her smile widening. “It is. I got it back for you.”

Laughter escapes me, astonished and disbelieving, as I reach forward to take it from her. I turn it over in my hand, unable to take my eyes off the emerald. “How on earth did you find this?”

“I figured it’d still be for sale somewhere.”

“That’s incredible. There are so many shops in the city, it must’ve taken you forever to—wait. Still?” I repeat, looking up at her. She shifts awkwardly on her feet, and I frown, tilting my head. “Maryse, how did you know where to look for the ring?”

“Well, your mother said it had been stolen. Most stolen goods are pawned, so I thought—”

“But you said it was *still* for sale. Did you know where it was before?”

A pause that goes on for a heartbeat too long passes before she says, “Yes, technically.”

“Technically?”

“Definitely. I definitely knew where it was.”

“How?”

“Because...” She huffs, turning her gaze to the floor before answering in a voice barely above a mumble. “Because I may have been the one who sold it to the shop in the first place.”

It’s impossible to repress another laugh, and I shake my head. “And how did that happen?”

“Do I actually have to answer?” she asks, squeezing her eyes shut.

“I mean, this is very entertaining to watch, so, yes, I would appreciate it.”

That makes her chuckle, and the tension drops from her shoulders. “Promise not to have me arrested?”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. It’d be a poor way to repay you for getting the ring back. Even if I’m now about ninety percent certain you’re the one who stole it.” I give her a look. “Am I wrong?”

“No,” she admits. “It was a team effort, but I am the one who broke into your mother’s place and took it, along with some other jewelry she had around. My father kept her distracted. I don’t know if she knew it was us.”

“Why’d he decide to take it?” I ask. “I mean, of all things?”

She shrugs. “No idea. They went back and forth between getting along fine and fighting a *lot*. He was pissed off at her for something or other for the second time that month. So he figured he’d make a quick payday out of some of her stuff for revenge.”

“You are unbelievable.”

“Are you angry?”

I look at the ring, and then back at her, and I smile, shaking my head.

“No,” I admit. “Not really. I can’t say I approve, but you bought the ring back, so I’d say we’re more than even.”

“Right,” she says. “Bought.”

I raise my hands to cover my ears, laughing. “Please don’t tell me anything more! I don’t want to have to lie to the townsguard later.”

“Deal.”

I examine the ring again.

There’s really not much to look at, outside of that single, small emerald, but I can’t stop smiling. There are so few heirlooms in my family, so few treasures to pass down, that having one back is a great blessing. Mother will be so happy when she sees I have it, and Anneke will probably be glad to know it’s recovered, too, and it can keep getting gifted to the next generation.

Unless, I suddenly realize, it can be useful in some other way.

I look up at her, eyes wide. “Wait, do you think we could give this to—?”

“No.” She says it quickly, voice firm, but with an apologetic glint in her eyes. “That’s what I meant when I said I didn’t want you to get your hopes up. The ring isn’t enchanted. I don’t think it ever was.”

My heart hits the bottom of my stomach with an uncomfortable *thud*.

“Oh,” I say.

Maryse hugs her arms. “I already knew that. That’s...why my father and I sold it, actually. We appraised everything we took from your mother’s apartment to see if there was anything *really* valuable, but nothing had any magic, so we took it to the pawn shop. If the enchantment was ever real, it must’ve faded years ago, because Pa couldn’t find anything.”

“Was he ever wrong?” I ask, with what little hope I can muster.

“No. Never.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” she says.

I swallow and try to smile again, slipping the ring into my purse. “Well, I’m still glad to have it back. And...seriously, Maryse, thank you. Thank you

so much. I know you went to a lot of trouble—”

“Ah, don’t worry about it, the lock on the back door is child’s play.”

“What did I say about incriminating yourself in front of me?” I chuckle.

“It really wasn’t any trouble, is my point.” She places her hands on my shoulders and squeezes. “I wanted to. It...seemed a nice thing to do.”

“Since when are you in the business of doing things to be nice?”

Maryse hesitates, then shrugs with a shy smile. “Since meeting you, I guess. You’re a bad influence.” Her hands slide down my shoulders to my arms, before eventually coming down to my wrists, lifting my hands and enveloping them in hers.

My face flushing with happy embarrassment, I stammer out, “Next—next thing you know, you’ll be serving soup to the homeless and smiling at children.”

She laughs. “Even you couldn’t corrupt me that much. But you have been rubbing off on me. You’re certainly the nicest person to befriend a Basvaan.” She squeezes my hands, and I realize she’s gone pink in the face. “I’m starting to see the appeal in not *exclusively* hanging around scam artists and thieves.”

“Well, scam artists and thieves aren’t always so bad. Just look at you.”

“That’s true. I am *intoxically* charming. Beautiful, too.” She says it in a glib, joking tone, and we both laugh. She really has no idea, does she?

Suddenly, without thinking, I step forward, enveloping her in a hug that I’m worried she’ll immediately eject herself from. But she doesn’t.

After a moment of shock, she wraps her arms around me and hugs me back, standing on tiptoe so she doesn’t get completely buried in my shoulder.

“Thank you,” I say again. “For getting the ring back.”

“You don’t have to keep thanking me.”

“Yes I do.”

We pull back to look at each other, but we don’t let go.

Her eyes meeting mine is enough to make me weak in the knees, but somehow, I remain upright. Steeling my resolve, acting before I can lose my nerve or overthink anything, I lean forward, pressing a quick peck to her cheek.

As soon as I’ve done it, exhilarating fear floods me, and I pull away, letting go of her and taking a step back. My face has gone from flushed to burning, and her cheeks are the shade of fresh tomatoes, but before I can apologize or brush it off or make a joke or run away, she’s grasped at my sleeve again.

“Lotte. Wait.” With a single motion, she tugs me forward once more, placing one hand on the back of my neck to pull me downward toward her.

My hands find their way onto her waist as our lips collide and my eyes close.

Her lips are soft and I’m suddenly self-conscious that mine are a bit chapped, but she doesn’t seem to mind. It doesn’t last long, a few seconds at most, but they are, without a doubt, the most spectacular few seconds of my life.

She’s warm and she’s here and she’s not letting go and *she’s kissing me*, which is maybe the greatest thing to ever happen to anyone. The ground’s disappeared from underneath me, but I’m not falling, I’m not plummeting to my death.

Somehow, I’m floating, and I’m sure it’s because her arms are still holding me close.

And then, almost as soon as it started, right when I’m getting used to it, it’s over. Maryse pulls away first. Now it’s her turn to step back and look bashful over what she did.

“That was...” Her voice is quiet, before she clears her throat and tries to speak again. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have laid that on you.”

“No!” I sound flustered, but I don’t care. “No, don’t be sorry, I wanted you to—”

“Really?” She sounds genuinely surprised, as if we didn’t have what was, by my admittedly limited metric, a *fantastic* kiss.

I nod. “Of course. I—I actually wanted to at the Feast, but then Danil showed up and the moment passed and—and...and I like you, Maryse. I like you a lot.”

“I...like you, too, Lotte. Very much. But...”

With that one word, the ground reappears beneath my feet so suddenly I nearly trip.

“But what?” I ask, unable to keep the dread out of my voice.

She sighs, running a hand through her hair. “Lotte, there is so much going on right now. For you and for me. And you don’t live here, and we’re both so stressed out, and...”

The sting of tears pricks at my eyes, but I blink it away and nod.

Okay. Rejection.

It’s not the end of the world. I can be an adult about this. No matter how much it hurts.

"I understand," I manage to say.

"You do?" A note of relief is obvious in her voice.

"Yes. I...I'm sorry. Let's..." I can't finish the sentence. *Let's pretend this never happened* is what I meant to say, but I can't force the words out.

I don't want to pretend. I don't want to forget.

"Let's talk about this later," Maryse offers.

I'm pretty sure we won't, but I nod. I take a deep breath and pat her on the arm.

"I should go," I say. "You know. Meeting the townsguard and all that. Thank you again for the ring."

"Of course. I'll see you at supper, okay?"

"Right."

We stand there staring at each other for a second before I turn away and leave, closing the door behind me with a click.

I manage to make it to the stairwell before the tears are back in my eyes, and this time, I let them flow for a minute, feeling like a child.

I sniffle and wipe them on my sleeve, pausing on the sixth-floor landing long enough to take a few deep breaths. The tears keep coming, and it's all I can do to at least be quiet about it.

She's right. Of course, she's right. Most of her concerns are ones I had myself.

But it still hurt to hear them all laid out like that. Especially after having a moment of hope.

It takes a few minutes before I can calm myself enough to walk the rest of the way back to my room.

I haven't eaten breakfast yet, but I need to take some time to recover before I can go out there and face people. The last thing I need is for someone to ask why my eyes are red and my skin is all blotchy.

I sit down on my bed and lie back to stare at the ceiling, continuing to take deep, slow breaths, lest I start crying again. If I start now, it may be hours before I stop.

Almost absentmindedly, I reach for my purse on the floor and take out the ring, looking at it once more. Thinking about how it made its way back to me both helps and hurts.

*Well*, I remind myself, *she cares*. At least that much is certain.

I'm sure someday I'll look back on this day with fondness, nostalgia for a wonderful kiss and a gift given to me by a friend.

I wish I could skip ahead to that part, so I wouldn't have to feel the heartbreak and live with it now.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“I can’t believe you actually got it back,” Scyler says, examining the ring. “You sure it’s the same one?”

I nod. “Definitely. I remember Mother wearing it sometimes when I was a kid.”

“I never saw it, so I can’t really tell one way or another.” They hand it back to me, resting an elbow on the table.

We’re at their family restaurant, enjoying some time before they’re on-duty and we have to meet with Vikker to plan our next moves. They’re out of uniform, with their thick, shiny black hair allowed to hang down past their ribcage, wearing an old shirt that’s been patched up and repaired at least twice. They look younger, less serious than they do when they go to work.

The lunch crowd is bustling and talkative, feasting on a soup that consists of barley and very little else. I’m told that Rafe prefers to work with all sorts of meats and spices and vegetables, but with money being so tight, he’s had to stretch the barest essentials to the limit.

I haven’t told Scyler about my kiss with Maryse, about how it’s been repeating over and over in my head, about how I can still feel the exhilarating warmth creeping through my body every time I think about it, about how she let me down gently and I wanted to cry.

Mostly because I’m afraid they’ll either tease me or feel sorry for me.

I’m not sure which would be worse. What I am sure of is that I absolutely do not want to talk about my dead and buried love life right now.

“It’s too bad it can’t help us with Ker’kachin,” I say, putting the ring away. “I know it was a long shot anyway, but I was hoping maybe it would be the key to fix all of this.”

“I know. I was sort of hoping it would, too,” they admit. “But we shouldn’t be too surprised. Nothing’s ever that easy, and stuff like this doesn’t get

solved with one person. We'll figure something else out." They glance around, before lowering their voice and asking, "How's Juna holding up?"

"Well, she's still alive. She doesn't seem scared, but...with her, who knows? Has anyone noticed she's gone?"

"Not yet. Guess we're lucky the thief decided to kidnap someone who tended to vanish anyway. Ma thinks she's skipped town again." They sigh. "I was almost relieved when Vikker ordered us to keep the news that she was taken under wraps. I did *not* want to have to tell my mother what happened."

"If this goes on for much longer, you may not have a choice," I remind them. "I mean, he can't expect you to lie to cover this up forever. At least not to the family."

"I know." They lift their chin. "But don't worry. We're going to rescue her before it goes that far. One way or another, we're getting her out of there. We can tell Ma what happened once she's safe. When she's so happy to see Juna, she won't care that we kept it from her."

I nod, wondering if they're really as optimistic as they appear, or if they're putting on a brave face for me. I know I should say that I want the truth, no matter how scary it is, but I'm actually glad to hold onto hope for now, no matter how unlikely it is.

...

Maryse and I don't sit next to each other at the townsguard meeting.

She sits off to the side, not interacting with anyone, and I'm with Scyler and Danil. When I catch her eye, though, she does give me a small smile and a wave. I wave back, half-wondering if I should invite her to sit with us, as Vikker comes in.

Vikker gets started before I get a chance to decide. He sits down at the table and rolls his shoulders, trying to soothe an obvious ache.

"Before we can light the explosives, we need to get Juna out of there," he says. "We also need to prepare shelters for those evacuated—they'll likely have to stay at least overnight, if not longer, if any of their homes end up damaged."

"We should find some local business owners we trust to have in the loop," Cornelis says. He's assumed his usual position by Vikker's side, like an overdressed shadow. "Some of the restaurants could probably fit some cots if they put away the dining tables. The bank could also fit a few dozen people if they packed them in tight enough."



“Good thought. Make a note of that.” Vikker rubs his temples, eyes scanning over the map that’s sat on the table since our last meeting. “Our main concern today is finding a way to get Juna back. Miss Meer, do you think there’s anything besides an artifact that he’d be willing to take in exchange for her release?”

I shake my head, biting the inside of my cheek. “I don’t think so. He’s been clear that he wants an artifact and is interested in nothing else.”

Vikker curses under his breath but doesn’t look surprised. “If we had a decoy, something that could buy us a little more time...”

“Would he know the difference?” Danil’s freckled nose crinkles in confusion. “I do not understand what a dragon wants with an artifact in the first place.”

“I’m not sure if he would be able to tell or not,” I say, thinking it over. “Dragons do have...some kind of connection with magic, but they don’t cast spells or anything like that. I have no clue how he’d be able to tell a fake from the real thing.”

“He would know,” Maryse says. Everyone turns to look at her. She folds her hands in her lap. “Look, we’ve already figured out he knows more than he should about a lot of things. I’m not willing to take that bet.”

“I don’t believe he’s as smart as you’re giving him credit for,” Cornelis says. “He is still only an animal.”

Maryse scoffs and looks away.

“Considering dragons to be ‘only’ animals is how many people get killed,” I say. “You have to respect them as equals—”

“You cannot honestly believe that monster deserves any level of respect.”

“As a fellow intelligent being? Yes.” I slump back in my chair. “I don’t know if he’d be able to spot a forgery, though.”

“Well, in any case, this needs to end,” Vikker says. “We have to put a stop to this. The beast needs to die.”

Maryse’s back goes rigid, her expression darkens, and a wave of nausea passes over me.

Even so, I find myself nodding in agreement along with most of the guards. When I glance over at her again, our eyes meet and her look of betrayal hits me straight in the gut.

Vikker continues. “We start evacuating those farthest from the castle tomorrow. We should take steps to release all first-time offenders and everyone here for nonviolent offenses, so we’ll have room in holding. It’s not

a comfortable place for them to stay, but it is safe. I'll send a few of you out to secure other temporary shelters in town today. If we start moving now and make this as smooth as possible, it shouldn't cause enough of a fuss to get his attention until we've set the place on fire." He looks to me. "We'll need your help providing a distraction, especially when it comes time to pull your mother out of there."

My eyes briefly dart to Maryse before I think of my mother, trapped in that castle, her life hanging in the balance every moment I sit here wasting time.

I think of all the people whose lives are being destroyed by Ker'kachin.

I think of his greed and his cruelty.

It doesn't matter if I like it or not. Vikker is right. The only way this ends is with the dragon's death.

I nod. "Yes sir. I'll do whatever I have to in order to get my mother home safely."

The meeting is dismissed amid a sea of anticipation and nervousness.

Scyler and Danil go to speak to Anneke about turning Pim's Table into a shelter, leaving me to walk back to the boardinghouse by myself.

I've gotten only half a block away from the townsguard offices when someone grabs my shoulder and stops me.

"Lotte!"

I turn and find Maryse, flushed from running to catch up with me, staring at me with a fire burning in her green eyes.

"Hey," I say, but she isn't in the mood for pleasantries.

"How can you be going along with this?" she demands.

I shrug helplessly. "Maryse, I don't like it either."

"But you're agreeing to be a part of it!" She shakes my shoulder. "Lotte, I know you, and you know that this is wrong. This goes against all your principles—cooperation, keeping dragons safe, maintaining peace—"

"*What choice do I have?!*" I don't mean to shout, and Maryse's eyes widen, plainly shocked.

We stare at each other before my shoulders slump and I speak again, quieter this time.

"Principles are great," I say. "In theory. In practice, right now, they're keeping my mother held prisoner by a thief who might kill her if she gets on his nerves or if I don't deliver what he wants."

"He won't kill her." Her words are brisk, bordering on dismissive, but there's a hint of uncertainty that she can't hide.

"You can't know that."

"He hasn't killed her yet, has he?"

"What about the first Dragontongue?"

"That was an accident! Probably."

"*Probably*," I repeat incredulously.

"If he kills her," she says, voice stronger now, "he loses all leverage. He's too smart for that. He won't kill her."

I stare at her, my eyes growing damp. Maryse knows what it's like to not have a big family, to have fragile relationships with the few relatives you've got. She should understand better than anyone. I shake my head. "You care about me, right?"

She draws back, hurt. "Of course I do."

"Then quit gambling with my mother's life."

"Lotte, that's not what I'm—"

"Yes, you are!" I take a step toward her as my vision blurs. I furiously blink my tears away, poking her in the chest. "Do you think it is easy for me to make this decision? I hate this! All of this. But I can't leave my mother to die."

She bites the inside of her cheek, not meeting my gaze. "No," she says softly, "you can't."

"I have to work with the townsguard on this. It's the only way I'm getting Mother back."

"Lotte, there *has* to be another—"

"Maryse..." I shake my head. "Maryse, there is nothing else to do. You must realize that. This won't end any other way, and maybe it never could. It makes me feel sick, and I'm not sure it's the right thing, but it's the only thing, so please, *please* tell me you're on our side."

"I'm on *your* side." Her response is immediate. "Theirs? No. But yours? Always. You're my f..." She trails off before she can say "friend," hesitating as she tries to find a more accurate word for what we are. Apparently finding none, she settles on saying, "I don't want you to regret anything later."

"I'll regret letting my mother die more than I could ever regret anything else." My voice sounds like a croak. "And if you can't understand that, I have nothing more to say to you."

I turn away, striding down the road, some part of me hoping she won't follow me, and some other part hoping she'll run after me, give me a hug, say she's sorry and that she'll do whatever it takes to help get Mother back.

But she doesn't follow me or say anything, and I walk away by myself.

I try to harden my heart and my mind, prepare myself for what's going to happen soon by getting angry. Not just at Ker'kachin, but at Maryse, too.

Why can't she see this from my point of view?

Why isn't helping my mother as important to her as sticking to some lofty principles?

Hell, what does she know about principles? She's an admitted criminal. Why is she choosing now to be some paragon of virtue?

These thoughts, sour and petulant, feel out of place in my mind even as I think them.

I try to dwell on them, nurse a grudge, and let the anger fuel me, but it makes me feel small and cruel, and like somebody I'm not. I can't bear any ill will toward most anyone, and certainly not Maryse.

She's not wrong that what we're going to do is ugly and maybe not right. But I'm not sure if there is anything *right* we can do. Not now.

All we can do is choose the path that feels the least wrong.

She's chosen her path. And I guess I've chosen mine, too.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Ker'kachin is asleep when I arrive at the castle early the next morning.

With my townsguard escort—a young man I've seen at meetings—waiting outside, I enter slowly, following the sound of draconic snoring.

It seems to be a restless sleep, his breath uneven and his ash-gray snout twitching.

As soon as I walk in, Mother clambers to her feet and holds a finger to her lips. I nod, understanding. I have no intention of waking him. I keep my footsteps light and hold my breath as best I can as I make my way toward her.

Food and water are keeping her in about as good of health as we can expect, but she always looks exhausted, and the lack of access to a bath is starting to show. Dirt has found a seemingly permanent home under her fingernails and smudged on her arms, and her hair is tangled and rather filthy. Long and curly hair like ours is never a picnic to take care of, but she hasn't even been able to comb it, save for what she can manage with her fingers.

When I reach her, she grabs my arm and pulls me in as close to her as she can, leaning up to mutter directly into my ear, her voice quieter than the buzzing of a fly. "Someone was here last night."

My eyes open wide, darting nervously toward the dragon, but if he heard her, he doesn't give anything away. He simply remains where he is, snoring.

I don't dare speak. I simply stare at her, frowning and shaking my head in confusion.

"In the middle of the night," she hisses. She speaks quickly, her gaze fixed on Ker'kachin. "I pretended to sleep. Thought it might be you, at first. They weren't speaking Stedi—might have been Turnish, maybe. Someone came here and talked to him before leaving."

My breath is quick, my brain whirring and buzzing as it tries to understand. How could someone have come here last night and not been hurt?

Ker'kachin won't speak to anyone except for me, and...

I swallow before forcing the words out.

"Did you see them?" I whisper.

"No. Kept my eyes shut. I *think* it was a woman."

Before I can respond, the dragon's breathing hitches, and a low, confused grumble escapes him.

My chest tightens as we both turn to stare at him, before she gives me a single, whispered order. "Go."

I nod, stumbling backward. My eyes meet hers and I don't want to leave her alone with him, but she shakes her head and mouths *Go!* once more.

I turn and run, flying out of the room and down the hallway before he's had a chance to open his eyes. Back down the hall, back outside, back toward the guard and safety.

My heart is hammering and I'm grateful for the fact that the guard picks up on the fact that time is of the essence.

We're on horseback and riding away within a minute, a combination of relief and utter terror washing over me as I watch the castle grow smaller and smaller over my shoulder. I half expect Ker'kachin to rise into the sky, follow us, come after me, but he doesn't.

We're getting away. We're safe.

But Mother isn't.

And I know I have to do everything I can to make it up to her, investigate the lead she's given me. No matter how much I fear finding out where it goes.

...

In many ways, the stars have aligned for me to be able to pull this off.

Scyler and Danil are being worked to the bone and barely have time to eat, let alone invite me to eat with them.

Pim's Table is being used as a shelter and won't be allowing customers for at least a few days, until this is all over, one way or another. And Maryse, if she's still speaking to me, isn't seeking me out any time soon.

This all means that, despite being under strict orders to stay in the city limits unless I'm with an escort, no one notices when I leave the boardinghouse and keep walking.

It'll probably be hours, if not until tomorrow, that anyone notices I'm gone, and I should be back well before then.

My nerves begin to poke at me when I realize I'm well out of the area I've grown used to, but I set those concerns aside and continue forward.

The main drag of Morwassen's Pass cuts across the city, end-to-end, slicing it in half. So long as I stay on that street, I should be able to find my way back to more familiar territory on my own.

As I continue my long trek, the sun sinking farther and farther below the horizon and the sky growing darker, I expect someone to see me, to try to stop me. For some guard to grab me by the arm and drag me back to the boardinghouse. But no one does.

Finally, I arrive at the city gates, where a single woman clothed in the townsguard purple is keeping watch. She doesn't stop me or look up when I exit, officially stepping outside the town borders for the first time since I got here.

I let out a sigh, feeling as though I've gotten away with something. Which, I suppose, I have.

What follows is a long and very tedious trek down a straight and even path, nearly two full hours of solitary, slowgoing travel, toward the forest I traveled through what feels like years ago.

By the time I finally get there, the path becoming narrower and harder to keep track of in the growing darkness, the sky has turned a deep navy, and stars twinkle, though they're soon partially obscured by the tree cover above me.

Entering the forest is a cautious and slow ordeal. Every other step I take, I feel compelled to freeze in my tracks, listening closely to the world around me.

I'm completely alone in here, and this isn't like home, where I knew the forest like the back of my hand and was never more than a single scream away from help.

A shudder passes through me.

Maybe I should've swiped a sword or something from the armory at the townsguard offices before I came here. I've never carried a weapon while I work. I never saw a need for it before, and I wish to believe that it'll never be necessary. But there is plenty to fear from dragons.

Weaving my way through the trees, taking care to make sure my footsteps are light and my breath is steady and quiet, I let my eyes adjust to the darkness as I take stock of my surroundings.

Danil said he thinks there are still dragons living in these woods; I need to

be patient until I find them.

I stop and deliberately look around, examining each and every tree and blade of grass I can make out before I move again.

It's slow going, and it reminds me of why not just anyone, not just any *Dragontongue*, can do this job. It requires a lot of solitude and a lot of patience. Two things I've been lacking in ever since I met Ker'kachin.

After a long, long time, I finally pass a large tree with deep, precise slashes in the bark.

I can't tell how long they've been there, but when I look down at the ground, I see that the grass here is disturbed and pressed down, more than elsewhere in the forest. Some clumps of dirt and grass have been disrupted completely, leaving small, uneven valleys in the earth.

There are no footsteps to draw a clear line, but I can follow the disruptions deeper into the woods. Every now and then, I pause, digging my feet firmly into the dirt in the hopes of creating a path I can follow back out.

The moonlight above is scarce, and within days there will be none at all, but for now, it's enough that I can see where I'm going, so long as I'm careful and don't let my nerves get the best of me.

The trail of upset dirt and the occasional tree with a slash or burn mark visible eventually leads me to the mouth of a small cave, tucked away among the trees.

I don't dare go inside, so I stand on the outside, holding my breath and listening.

A low, near-silent gasp echoes off the cave walls, so quiet I think that I must've imagined it. But I decide to take a gamble.

"Hello?" I call out.

This time, there's a snort. Still quiet, but loud enough that I'm certain I did hear what I thought I heard.

Slowly, I raise my hands and take a step forward, not crossing over the threshold into the cave. Just getting close enough for the inhabitant to get a good look at me.

"Please. I only want to talk. Just for a minute. Then I'll get out of your way."

No response. I squint into the darkness, looking for any sign of life.

A single glint in the black catches my attention, and I peer at it until suddenly, I realize I'm looking at a single, dark eye that stares directly at me.

A gasp escapes me as I take a half step back, but I stop myself from going



any farther.

Taking a deep breath, I speak, a little louder this time. “There used to be more dragons in this forest, were there not? I understand if you don’t want to be disturbed, but I need some answers about what’s happened around here.”

After a pause, a voice emerges from the cave. It’s low-pitched and rough, but quiet, almost a murmur.

“We are all that remains in this place. All others have left. Driven away, frightened, confused, hungry.”

My breath catches in my throat. “Because of Ker’kachin.”

A snarl. “Do not speak his name.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I won’t.” Slowly, I lower my hands, and take another step forward. “May I come in? Or will you come to me?”

There’s an agonizing pause and I’m worried I may have pushed my luck too far, but finally, there’s movement from within the cave.

I back up as the eye draws closer to me, and soon, I can make out the outline of a head and a long, snakelike body.

Slowly, the dragon slithers out, coming within only a couple feet of me. My heart is pounding.

Judging from their sluggish, uneasy movements and the wear and tear on their scales, they must be an elder. At least a century old, probably more. They have wings, but they’re bent and weakened, useless for flying, and the black eye I saw in the cave is the only one they’ve got. The other socket is empty and scarred over, and the scabbed and barely scarred wounds around the area tells me this must’ve happened only in the last few months.

I have to remind myself not to cringe. They might not appreciate being pitied.

I remember my manners and get to my knees. “Are you well met?”

They snort. “We have barely slept in months. We will not be able to eat this year. We have had everything taken from us.”

I bow my head, wishing desperately that I could give them something, enough to sustain them through the year. But I can’t. No one can.

There’s so little left, and the people of Morwassen’s Pass have to think of their own lives before they can worry about anyone else’s.

“Humans,” they say, “have done nothing for us. They have ignored us at best and hurt us at worst. Now there is nothing that can be done to us. If you intend to bring even more harm, like the other—”

“I don’t,” I say quickly. “I’m not here to hurt you. I want to help.”

Their gaze is untrusting and disdainful, but they make no move to retreat or attack. “You cannot,” they say, voice flat.

“I...I want to try. Maybe I can’t help you, but I’m trying to stop things from getting worse. I’m trying to understand what’s happened. The dragon who stole from you...” I look up to meet their gaze again. “Is he the one who hurt you?”

They pause, before nodding once. “When our feast was stolen from us. We fought hard to prevent it—we fought far beyond what our strength allowed. Eventually, the thief overcame, taking all we had and leaving us bleeding and half blind. We would have rather he killed us than left us to starve...but he would not show us that mercy...”

In their irritation, their tail moves like a whip, wrapping around them. There’s another scar, a deep and uneven cut near the tip, smaller than the wound to their eye but still looking ghastly.

“Did he do that, too?” I ask, nodding to their tail.

The dragon’s gaze darts downward, before they shake their head. “No. The human laid that blow to distract us.”

Those words should shock me. They should knock me over, flood me with denial.

But they don’t.

They bring about a slow, creeping feeling, the feeling of approaching a cliff overlooking the ocean. You know what’s there, you know what you’ll see if you look down.

That doesn’t make the sight any less horrifying, but you can’t be surprised when you’re met with the depths and the waves below.

Suspicion has tugged at my brain all day, ever since Mother told me what she overheard last night, and now, I’m hoping against hope that it somehow doesn’t get vindicated.

“He had a human with him?” I repeat.

“Yes. We do not know how or why...they did not seem to be like yourself, they didn’t speak or understand our tongue. But they understood what they were there to do. To help subdue us and take what we had. They came on horseback and hid their face. They are the only creature we know to not fear the thief.”

Realization sets into my mind, and I nod. Still, some part of me hopes I’m wrong.

She’s been trying to protect him since day one, but there must be some

other explanation. She must not actually be in league with Ker'kachin. Surely.

"Did they speak? Could you tell me what size they were, or how old they were?"

"They never spoke, but they were smaller than you. Thin. Too old to be a hatchling, but we assumed they were a juvenile."

Biting my bottom lip, I slowly stand. "Thank you. You've...been more helpful than you probably know. I'll leave you to sleep. And I'm sorry I can't give you anything in return, except...I promise I'll find a way to fix this."

I turn to go, but before I can leave, they call out to me, "Do you intend to confront the thief?"

"Yes," I say. "But first, I need to confront his accomplice."

...

I make it back to the boardinghouse in the dead of night.

But when I arrive at Maryse's door, raising a hand to knock and ask her about everything I've learned and everything I suspect, I can't bring myself to do it. I can't bring myself to face her.

If I do, and I'm right, what's stopping her from running to Ker'kachin and telling him she's been caught? What will happen then?

He still has my mother and the entire city as hostages. Alerting them that I'm onto them could be throwing a lit match into a powder keg.

And, deep down, some part of me hopes that it's not what it looks like, that I've somehow got this all wrong.

Maybe Maryse is still a good person who has no part in this, and I'm not a mark for having cared about and trusted her.

Or maybe I've been played from the start. And if that's the case, I can't confront her until I'm certain doing so won't cause any more damage.

And so I retreat to bed, where I have a few restless hours of sleep before the morning comes, and I'll have to try to make use of what I've learned.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

For the first time since my arrival, the sky is overcast, and the air is damp when I wake up the next day. My hair is going wild from the humidity, and gray clouds have begun to cover the sky as the sun rises.

Putting up a hood, I walk as quickly as I can to the townsguard offices.

Once again, there are already many guards up and working when I arrive, most of them being assigned specific sections of the city to evacuate, while others stay behind to deal with the logistics of getting emergency provisions to thousands of people.

The atmosphere is tense and harried, and everyone in the building appears to share my sense of absolute exhaustion.

I slept for maybe two hours total last night, spending most of it tossing and turning and thinking about Maryse and Ker'kachin.

It doesn't make any sense.

Why would she be helping him? Of course she'd want to save a dragon, of course she would, but she must see what a threat he is to everyone.

She doesn't speak Draken, so they should have no way to communicate. There must be something I'm missing. She must be innocent.

But too much fits together too perfectly for me to completely discredit my suspicions. I can't afford to be naïve, not anymore.

To my surprise, Vikker is the one who greets me when I go to pick up the food to bring to Mother. He looks like he hasn't shaved or eaten in days, but he still gives me a handshake and a pat on the back, professional as ever.

"I'll be escorting you this time," he says. "I know you prefer to go with Guard Prins or Komatin, but they're both at work elsewhere."

"That's okay," I say. "But I'm surprised you're not working, too."

"Oh, I am. I've been on my feet for the last forty-eight hours... I'm embarrassed to admit I forgot to assign someone to escort you today. Since

everyone else is already doing what I told them, it seemed only fair I take the time out to do it myself.”

He leads me outside and helps me onto his horse, climbing on in front of me before we begin the trek toward the castle.

The farther we go, the more and more soldiers I see at work, knocking on doors and escorting people from their homes.

Most people bring a few items with them, but some bring nothing at all. They all bear an expression of confusion and alarm as the guards attempt to keep things calm.

As we pass a wagon full of evacuees being pulled along, Vikker says, “We hope to have the majority of people moved by nightfall.”

“Is that possible?”

“In normal circumstances, I’d say no. But every single person is at work on this, and with things being as they are, most people are desperate to see this matter resolved. I imagine you especially, given the circumstances.”

I nod as the first drops of rain begin to fall from the sky. People continue moving and working as their clothes become damp, and the dirt road turns to mud. I usually like a good rainfall, but not when I’m riding horseback in the middle of it.

“I’m sorry we won’t be able to get her out until it’s closer to time,” he says. “I won’t lie; we’ll be cutting it close. Since her being rescued will immediately put him on edge, we want it to be the last thing we do before we make our move against him.”

“What, blow the place up as soon as she’s outside?”

“Essentially, yes. I know all of this has put both of you through a lot, and I’m sorry for that. But it’s important that we take our time and do this right.”

“I know.”

“Listen, we at the townsguard office are more than familiar with your mother, and well—she’s nothing if not resilient. I’ve arrested her twice and gotten punched both times for my trouble. Once she broke my nose.”

I cringe. “I am so sorry.”

He chuckles. “My point is, knowing her as I do, I have complete faith that she’ll be able to tough it out until it’s time.”

A low rumble of thunder feels almost comically well-timed as we arrive at the castle.

My coat does me little good as it gets more and more drenched by the rain, and I’m left shivering.

“I’ll try to get in and out of there as quickly as I can so we can get out of this,” I say, accepting Vikker’s hand before dismounting.

He helps me get down, grabbing my shoulder when I nearly slip on the muddy ground, squinting as he looks up at the sky. “I don’t suppose this will hurt him at all.”

I shake my head. “That’s just a myth.”

If you look at old storybooks and legends, there are plenty of tales about knights dumping a lake’s worth of water over a dragon before they fought.

This would apparently make the dragon unable to breathe fire, or physically weaken them to the point where it was something resembling a fair fight. In reality, that would make the dragon wet and confused, and probably significantly more pissed off than they were five minutes ago, which is generally a good way to get yourself killed.

We’ve kept the food parcel wrapped in a blanket, so it isn’t too soggy by the time we’re ready. Vikker waits outside, promising he’ll be there if I need assistance.

It’s almost a relief to step into the castle, providing me a temporary respite from the rainfall.

However, all too soon, I’m back at that great, glittering room, the sky exposed and the raindrops flooding in freely.

The gold and jewelry that covers the floor glistens and shines in the rain. It’s nearly sparkling, beautiful in its way, but I don’t have much time to ponder it.

The instant he hears my footsteps, Ker’kachin rises to his feet.

He and Mother are both at the back of the room, trying to take shelter under what remains of the roof, but now, he stalks out into the open, scarlet eyes fixed on me. His breathing is slow and steady, his massive teeth bared as he moves closer and closer to me.

I take a step back on instinct, nearly slipping, not daring to take my eyes off him.

“You ran off yesterday, Meer,” he snarls. “An act of cowardice I don’t intend to let you repeat.”

I swallow. “I was—”

“When do they intend to kill me, Meer?”

I draw in a sharp breath, feeling the color drain from my face. “They don’t —”

My denial is interrupted by a wordless snarl, his eyes flashing as tendrils of

steam shoot from his nostrils and mouth. With a snap, my mouth closes, and I can only stand, rooted to my spot.

“Do *not* lie to me. When do they intend to kill me?”

It takes a few tries before any actual words manage to come out of my mouth. “I don’t know,” I say, which is technically the truth.

He stares down at me, breathing heavily, the distrust and anger evident in his gaze. Finally, he lowers his head once more, so close to me that either one of us could reach out and touch the other if we wanted to. “Do you want your mother to die?”

My gaze snaps away from him for a fraction of a second to find Mother.

Her back is against the wall behind him, her eyes wide and panicked and her entire body rigid. She looks so small and fragile, and so afraid.

It’s not an expression I ever wanted to see on my mother’s face, especially not because of my own failure.

“No,” I say, voice breaking.

“Good. Then I need you to remove the weapons planted by our friends at the townsguard.”

“How did—?” But I cut myself off, tears of anger and fear alike stinging my eyes.

*Maryse.* That’s how.

In this moment, all previous warmth associated with her name has left me.

In this moment, I truly hate her.

I take in a trembling breath, and find my voice, quiet and unsure as it is.

“If I do, will you let my mother go? She has no part in this, she didn’t know we’d done it—”

A sneer curls his lips. “If you do, I let her live another day. Be grateful I’m offering that much. But she stays here until she stops being of use, or until I get what I asked for weeks ago.”

I look to my mother, pale and tired and injured, and then to her captor, and, without thinking, my hand goes to open the purse on my hip.

Finally, my fumbling fingers find the ring at the bottom of the bag, and pull it out, desperately holding it in the palm of my hand, extended toward him.

“Take this—take this, it’s yours, let her go.” The words rush out of me, like water bursting through a dam, and I say whatever comes to mind in the hopes of persuading him. “It isn’t much, I know, but—but there’s magic in it. Real, very old magic. Just like you’ve been asking for, like you want. And it’s yours if you let her come with me.”

He narrows his eyes, staring at the ring. He's quiet and I think that maybe, *maybe*, I pulled it off.

And then he lunges forward, and my extended arm is caught in the hot, sharp cavity of his mouth. The last thing I hear before the pain overtakes me is my mother's high-pitched shriek.

My brain is overcome by a buzzing, like a thousand bees swarming around me, and there is no room for anything else except the thought that I *hurt*. Simple, childish, but accurate.

I don't realize I've begun screaming until I start to run out of air.

The pain is *indescribable*.

I've had injuries before, but nothing like this.

It's like having a serrated cooking knife shoved through the skin and piercing the muscle, twisting and digging into your veins and nerves. Blood, warm and thick, spills into his mouth, and instinctively, I begin to draw my arm back.

*No. No. Can't do that.* Moving makes it worse, everyone says that.

Can't move. Won't move. Stay still.

Wait. Breathe. *Breathe*.

All I can do is wait for him to let go, or finish the job.

I don't attempt to hide the fact that I've begun to cry from the pain, and focus on getting enough oxygen to my brain to remain standing.

*Breathe in, breathe out. In. Out. In. Out.*

Ker'kachin and I stare at each other, the only sound I can make out being that of my own shaky breath. He looks down at where my arm is caught in his mouth, as if he's only just realizing what he's doing. But before he can do anything else to me, the sound of footsteps brings me back to earth, approaching from down the hall.

Vikker rounds the corner into the room, panting. It must not have been as long as it felt.

It feels like it's been minutes or even hours, but from the looks of things, he came running as soon as he heard me scream. It can't have been more than a few seconds. How could so much pain fit into a few seconds?

"Drop her!" he barks, and I hear the sound of a sword unsheathing.

"Don't—" I try to speak, but the words come out quiet and weak, as if I'm being strangled. "Sir, don't—"

He doesn't listen to me, and rapid, heavy footsteps approach me from behind.



Out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of purple and the glint of a sword. With a single, mighty, useless swing, Vikker brings down his sword, cutting through the rain to try to strike Ker'kachin once on the side of his neck.

A rumble escapes from Ker'kachin's throat, and in an instant, he's let go of me and turned his head to face Vikker.

My knees buckle, and I fall to the floor.

I think that I've fainted, before I realize that if I had fainted, I probably wouldn't be awake to think about it.

I don't dare look at my right arm.

No matter how much it aches or how I can still feel the blood spilling, no matter how pale and nauseated Mother looks as she watches me, both hands clapped over her mouth, no matter how much I want to know how bad the damage is, I can't look. Not yet. I need to...need to...

The sword fails to so much as chip at the dragon's scales, and Vikker takes a step back, not taking his eyes off him. He breathes heavily, sword in hand, expression giving nothing away.

There's no fear on his face, but there's also no hope. He looks...resigned. Resigned and ready for whatever's about to happen.

"That," Ker'kachin says in a growl understood only by me, "was not a smart thing to do."

He lunges forward, one massive claw grabbing Vikker around the middle and lifting him up, shaking him like an infant shaking its rattle.

Vikker keeps a hold on his sword, swinging it and hitting him a few more times, but it's no good, and everyone knows it. A hit that would take a man's head off is a mere mosquito bite to a dragon of this size.

Getting to my feet, especially without the help of my dominant arm, is an ordeal, and when I do finally manage to stand, I sway and stumble, completely lightheaded.

I'm about to fall to the ground again when someone grabs me by the back of my shirt, saying, "Don't you dare pass out now."

I look up to see Mother, shivering from the rain, holding me up. "You need to leave," she says. "Get help."

"But he..."

Before I can attempt to finish the sentence, a loud *thud* followed by a horrid crunching noise causes us both to look back at Ker'kachin and his prey.

He hasn't let go of Vikker, and has now slammed him against the wall,

pressing him to the stone and squeezing him tightly. Bile rises in my throat as Vikker gasps and sputters, his sword clattering uselessly to lie among the coins and gems. His face has turned a sickening shade of blue, and his legs kick feebly at his captor, trying desperately to get him to let go.

“Go, *now*,” Mother hisses, giving me a little shake.

I ought to listen to her, I know I ought to, but I can’t bring myself to move or look away from the awful scene.

Ker’kachin draws him back and for a brief, foolish instant I allow myself to hope that he’s showing mercy, but as quickly as the thought occurs to me, it’s destroyed.

He slams Vikker into the wall again, harder this time, hard enough to cause a crack in the paint. I flinch and try fruitlessly to reach out for him.

The second I attempt to move my right arm, another burst of hot, searing pain spreads from my shoulder all the way through the rest of my body, and I cry out. I can’t move my arm even a centimeter, but the mere act of trying is enough to cause more tears to flow, hot and painful where the rain is cool and uncaring.

My shout is enough to draw Ker’kachin’s attention once more, and as he whips his head around, Mother and I both back up. He keeps a hold on Vikker, squeezing him tighter and tighter. Staring at me with hatred and fury burning in his eyes, he snarls, “This is what happens when you attempt to deceive us.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, stumbling toward him, ignoring my mother’s protests. “I’m sorry, please, let him go—let him—”

*Slam.*

In a single, rapid movement, he throws Vikker into the wall a third time, and this time, he hits his skull against the stone and begins to bleed. Thick, red blood gushes from the back of his head, drenching his hair. With a fourth hit, his head comes open with a crack, and pieces of his skull go flying. Another, and the blood and something gray and sticky smears against the wall. I nearly vomit as I realize it’s pieces of his brain, and his body finally stops twitching and goes completely limp.

Behind me, Mother lets out a dry heave, and I hear her footsteps stumbling backward, but I can’t move. I can’t look away from Vikker’s face. His eyes, which held determination and a sense of duty in them until the very end, are now dim and lifeless, and his expression gives away no sense of terror. He didn’t even scream.

“Lotte.” Mother’s voice snaps me back to reality. “Run. Run away right now.”

The room is spinning, and I feel like I’m going to throw up, but I turn and bolt toward the door. The coins slip and give way beneath my feet, sending me stumbling all over the place, but by some miracle I manage to remain upright.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mother attempt to follow me, limping on her still-injured ankle to make her escape, but Ker’kachin is unwilling to let her go.

He lashes his tail around, swiping at her feet and sending her crashing to the ground.

My heart freezes in place as I come to a halt in the doorway, watching helplessly as he turns his gaze to her.

He peers down at her, tilting his head in thought, before he uses his tail to pin her down, and looks to me. “She stays. You go.”

After exchanging a helpless, horrified look with my mother, all I can do is turn and run down the hall, not allowing myself to look back. I keep my eyes straight ahead. One foot in front of the other. *Breathe*. Keep breathing. Don’t look back and don’t stop moving.

I burst out the door as the rain intensifies, becoming a storm, a flash of lightning illuminating the sky miles ahead of me.

Vikker’s horse, still tied up outside, whinnies and paws at the ground nervously, eyes darting everywhere as it looks for its missing master, and I realize in an instant that there’s no way I can climb on its back.

I stand there, panting, cold and numb and lightheaded, trying to calm the noises in my head long enough for me to think, before I suddenly realize where we are.

We’re in a city.

There are people here.

I’m not alone, I’m not alone...

I dash forward, weakly crying out, “Help! Someone! I need help!” toward the houses in the near distance.

Across the bridge, I can see movement, people focusing on the evacuation, oblivious to what has happened. One, a guard, I think, pauses, looking around for the source of the cries, so I muster all the strength I can to yell, “I’m over here! Please hurry!”

He looks across the way and spots me, breaking into a run toward the

bridge.

Relief floods me and I sink to kneel on the muddy, soaking wet ground. It's only now that I can bring myself to look at my injury.

My entire arm, from my shoulder to the tips of my fingers, is coated in my own blood, and at least four massive puncture wounds have torn through my shirt, revealing my skin and muscle. It looks like meat that was sent halfway through the grinder, all the pink and red viscera and ripped skin and—I gag and tear my gaze away.

It's all right. I was only imagining things. I'm so tired and weak, I'm only imagining things now. It's all right. I didn't see my own bone.

The guard is halfway across the bridge when it all goes black.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

The smell of linen and alcohol lulls me awake.

A quiet, confused groan escapes me, and my mouth is dry, my tongue heavy as if I haven't spoken in years.

My eyelids flutter a few times before I manage to open my eyes, and I find myself lying on my back in a bed I don't recognize. I sit up and hiss through my teeth as my stiff and aching joints protest the movement.

Blinking, the world comes into focus.

I'm not alone; I'm in one of a dozen beds in this room, and most of them are filled.

A man is asleep to my left, his foot propped up on a pile of blankets and wrapped in white cloth, and to my right, a young girl with a freshly stitched cut across her forehead clutches a stuffed toy and snuffles as her mother sits at her bedside, praising her for being so brave.

My bed is directly below a windowsill, and I try to turn as slowly and carefully as I can to get a look outside.

A small cry escapes me, and this gets the attention of a plump, matronly woman dressed in dark blue, who's on the far end of the room tending to a woman, pressing a sponge to what looks to be a nasty dog bite.

She looks over and sees me, and, without raising her voice, stops me in my tracks with a firm, "Lie back down, I'll be there in a minute."

I obey, and, in spite of myself, feel some relief as I collapse back into the mattress.

After taking a deep breath and gathering my courage, I take a look at my right arm. To my great relief, it's still present and accounted for, although I can barely feel it.

It's rigid, lying next to me, feeling oddly disconnected, as if it's no longer part of my body. It's wrapped in several bandages and strips of cloth, and the

blood has been scrubbed from my skin. I'm in a dull gray shirt that's far too big for me, hanging loosely around my body.

"Well, it's good to see you awake," the woman says as she reaches my bed. Her hair is tied back and covered by a scarf, and she wears an old, discolored apron over her dress. One of her hands reaches out to touch my forehead. "You gave us quite a scare."

"How long have I been out?" The words come out in a croak.

"Just over a day."

"That explains why I'm starving."

"We'll get some food in you soon enough. Right now, I'm going to help you clean your wounds. You're going to have to tend to them for a few weeks after we let you go, and you'll likely need help. Do you have anyone about who can assist you, dear?"

"I think so," I say, dreading having to tell Nana what happened. "I'm amazed I didn't lose the arm altogether."

"Forget the arm," she scoffs. She begins to unwrap the bandages, and I decide not to watch, turning my gaze to the ceiling. "I'm amazed you're alive. It was a bit touch and go for a while in the surgery. The guard who found you, he tossed you on the back of a horse and brought you here straightaway, but you'd lost so much blood, I saw you and thought, poor thing's probably not going to make it. But you're tougher than I gave you credit for, aren't you?"

The last of the fabric falls away from my arms, although I can't help but feel that I should...well, I should *feel* it more, shouldn't I?

I sense the movement, feel the lightest hints of fabric brushing against my skin, but it all feels distant, like I'm only half there.

The medic reaches for a bottle of clear liquid on the table next to my bed, and a sponge.

"This is going to sting," she warns me, and it does.

I hiss, cringing and trying not to pull away as she applies alcohol to my wounds, which, when I dare to take a peek, have been stitched up but are still nauseating to look at. At least they're not actively bleeding anymore.

"There we are. Now, all I have to do is apply some ointment and we can wrap you back up with clean bandages. They'll need to be cleaned and replaced once as soon as you wake, and once before you go to bed, and you can't get them wet. You'll need to sort of wash around the wounds until they close up."

“But I’ll be okay?” I ask. The ointment doesn’t sting, but it feels heavy and slimy against my skin. “I mean, I didn’t get an infection or anything?”

“Not that we can tell. You were lucky. But it’s very important you keep it all clean so you don’t get sick, you understand?”

“Yes ma’am.”

She finishes up with the ointment and gets out fresh, dry bandages to wrap me again.

I try to watch her, try to get a feel for what I’ll need to do, but it’s all a little too much for me, so I close my eyes until she finishes.

“Now, can you wiggle your fingers for me, dear?”

I do.

Or at least, I try to. My brain sends the order to my hand, but my hand doesn’t get the message. My thumb twitches slightly, but other than that, my fingers remain perfectly still.

I frown, breath catching in my throat. “I—I really am trying.”

“Oh dear.” She seems more concerned than confused, and gently places her hands on my arm. “Can we try bending your arm instead? Slowly, take it easy.”

I nod, and attempt to bend at the elbow, like I’ve done probably every single day of my life.

But nothing happens.

My arm remains perfectly straight and rigid, refusing to bend no matter what I say to it.

You never really think about it, the complex mechanics that go on inside a human body in order to make it function. The incomprehensible language the body has to speak to itself in order for you to have the thought to take a step forward, and for your feet to carry out the idea, all within the space of a fraction of a second.

It’s beautiful and amazing and miraculous, but it’s also fragile. Anything can disrupt it, and then, the machinery stalls and breaks down, never quite working in the same way again.

You can trip on an uneven walkway and never be able to put weight on one knee after that. You can become so ill that your body is simply unable to maintain the level of energy that it used to, even if you get better. Or, you can have a problem in your brain that no one knows about until it suddenly decides to make you drop dead in the street one day.

One little hiccup is all it takes.

And, as I sit here, trying and failing to make my arm do anything I tell it to, I realize I've had a hiccup of my own.

"I'm not going to be able to use this arm anymore, am I?" I finally ask.

The medic sighs, setting it down to rest on the bed next to me. "Well, every now and then, miracles happen and these things resolve themselves. But I don't want to give you false hope."

I slowly exhale, nodding, trying to fully process it.

Part of me feels like I ought to cry, but I don't, and I don't want to, either. I've had my share of tears from this injury already, and it won't help anything. And besides, I was told I was expected to die—losing the use of one arm is a small price to pay for my life, right?

I say the first thing that pops into my head, which, for some reason is, "And it's my dominant hand. Just my luck."

She laughs, not in an unkind way, and pats my hand. "You'll adapt, my dear. Let your family help you until you have a chance to get used to it."

I feel cold at the thought of Mother, who last saw me bleeding and sobbing and has no way of knowing whether I'm alive or not.

As the medic runs off to find me something to eat, I take deep breaths and make a promise to myself. I'm getting out of here as soon as I'm strong enough to walk, and one way or another, I'm getting back into that castle and I'm getting Mother out of there.

Vikker died trying to protect me, and I'm not going to lie here and let that go to waste.

...

The infirmary allows two visitors to a patient at a time, and it's not until after a late breakfast that I manage to get the medic attending to me to send word that I've woken up to the townsguard offices.

Less than an hour later, a harried, exhausted-looking Scyler arrives, bringing Anneke with them.

I've barely managed to sit up when Scyler reaches me, throwing their arms around my neck and giving me a tight squeeze.

"You scared the living shit out of all of us," they say, earning them a sharp look from the mother of the girl in the bed next to mine.

"I'm sorry," I mumble into their shoulder.

They pull away and sit down next to my bed, while Anneke stands over me, hovering like a concerned mother bird trying to tend to her hungry



chicks, her face pale.

“We heard what happened yesterday, but no one would let us in here to see you,” she says, reaching out to tuck a lock of hair behind my ear. “We were worried sick! You and Captain Vikker hadn’t been seen all day and the last everyone knew you were going to see that monster, and, well...you understand why we all feared the worst.” She collapses into the chair next to Scyler’s. “Danil was the one who heard what had happened to you. The guard who brought you here reported it to everyone at the offices straightaway, and Danil came to tell us as soon as he heard.”

“Lotte,” Scyler says, in a voice that’s oddly gentle and wholly unsuited for them, “I don’t know if anyone ever told you, but Vikker, he—”

“I know he’s dead,” I say. “I...I watched him die.”

Anneke closes her eyes and sighs, while Scyler pats my shoulder, at least until I wince, and they quickly draw their hand back.

“I’m sorry, kiddo,” they say. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

In spite of all the promises I made to myself that I’d be strong, tears prick at my eyes. “He...he tried to save me. He heard me scream, and he came running, and the dragon went after him, and he wouldn’t have been there if —”

“No.” Their voice is stern. “Vikker did his job, like anyone would have. He’d have done it for anyone in danger, and he’d do it again, given the choice. He’d be glad to hear you made it out of there.”

I sniff, and wipe my eyes on my sleeve. “How did you find out about him?”

“Mostly a series of educated guesses,” they admit. “Two people go into a dragon’s lair, one comes out bleeding buckets? Not too hard to guess what happened to the other guy. But it was Maryse who confirmed it, actually.” A shudder passes over their face. “She heard what happened and, when they wouldn’t let her in here, went straight to the castle.”

“She *what*?”

“I know. The girl has a death wish, I swear. But with everything that was going on, no one realized she was there until we noticed one of our horses had gone missing and so had she. I caught up to her as she was going inside. I went to stop her—obviously. But by the time I’d gotten across the bridge, she was already back outside. She’d gone in for only maybe a minute at most. I was about to yell at her for being so foolish, but...” They sigh. “She was crying and looked like she was about to be sick, and...I felt like she’d dealt

with enough. So I took her back, and when we got there, she finally told us that she'd seen..."

They trail off, blinking slowly before bowing their head. Their breathing gets funny for a second, but when Anneke reaches out to pat them on the back, they shrug her off.

"He was a good captain," they finally say.

"I'm sorry, Scy," I say softly. We fall into solemn silence for a while, before I whisper, "So...what happens now?"

"Honestly, I don't know." They clear their throat, trying to collect themselves. "Well, obviously, the biggest concern is getting Juna out of there before we blow the place to smithereens."

My gaze darts over to Anneke, who's looking down at her lap, blinking rapidly, but she doesn't look shocked. I guess someone finally filled her in, with this latest crisis.

"Scy," I say with a shudder, "he knows about the explosives. He knows. He'll kill Mother if they don't get removed."

Both Scyler and Anneke look like they've been struck upon hearing this news, and Anneke whispers, "But...how, how could he—?"

I hesitate before saying, "Someone must've tipped him off."

Scyler looks like they're about to be sick. "But who would do that? Why would they...?"

"I'm not sure," I say. "But...look, we need to get those things out of there. I think he'll allow someone to go in and out if I'm there, or if...if..." I swallow. "If Maryse is there. One of us."

"Cornelis isn't gonna go for that."

"Cornelis?" I frown. "What does he have to do with—?" I stop mid-sentence, a horrible thought hitting me, and I tilt my head, eyes widening. "No."

Scyler grimaces, giving me a single, solemn nod.

"No."

"Afraid so." They attempt a sardonic smile, but it looks more like a macabre mask of disgust. "You can now call him *Captain Cornelis Basvaan*."

...

After Scyler and Anneke have to leave, I spend most of the rest of the day attempting to get used to holding things with my left hand, and trying and failing to move my right.

I know it's useless, and after a while, the medic attending to me outright orders me to stop trying for at least a few hours, but I can't help but hope that somehow, my luck will turn, and everything will be back in working order again. With my wounds being tended to and a warm bed being provided, I'm not in too much pain, so long as I lie still.

With nowhere to go and not much to do, I devote a lot of time to staring at the wall and thinking.

Thinking about Mother, about Vikker and the fact that Cornelis is now in charge, about how I'm inevitably going to have to face the dragon once again.

The idea sends a chill through my body, but I know I have to do it. Not just to complete the job and protect everyone, but for myself. I have to look him in the eye and prove to him that he won't get rid of me that easily.

That doesn't mean I look forward to the prospect, however.

The sun's beginning to set in the distance when I'm told I have another visitor.

I sit up in bed, looking to the doorway, expecting to see Danil or perhaps one of Scyler's siblings. Instead, I see Maryse.

She looks a mess; her hair is uncombed and stringy, and there's a weariness in her eyes that makes me think she hasn't slept in days. When our gazes meet, she smiles weakly, rushing to my bed to sit down next to me. I don't smile back.

"You look awful," she says.

Where the brutal honesty would normally make me laugh, it now elicits a glare.

The smile slowly drops off her face, and she looks down at her hands in her lap, twiddling her fingers. There are dark circles under her eyes, and her shoulders slump forward, as if there's a great weight pressing on her from behind.

After a lengthy pause, she tries again. "I...I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner. I came by twice before—the first time, you were still in surgery and they told me to come back later, and then I did, but you were asleep, and they said to let you rest. Once I heard you were up, I wanted to come, but then Scyler and their mother said they were going and...it seemed rude to not let your family see you first."

A small chuckle escapes me in spite of myself. I never would've guessed Maryse would be that desperate to see me. But the sense of flattery is short-

lived.

“Is it very painful?” she asks, looking at my arm.

“No, but it’s paralyzed,” I say. There’s a bite to my words that makes her wince. “And it hurt like hell when it was happening.”

Her eyes shift away from me, looking at the floor, and her bottom lip trembles a little. “I’m sorry,” she says softly. “I’m so sorry. I...I don’t understand, he never seemed to want to seriously hurt you before. What set him off?”

“A combination of foolishness and sabotage.”

She frowns. “Sabotage?”

“He was already angry when I arrived.” I watch her closely as I speak, looking for a hint of a confession. “The explosives that were planted, he knew about them. He was absolutely furious, and I wanted to try to get Mother out of there, so I tried to offer him the ring.”

“You did *what*?” She goes pale. “But it isn’t...”

“I know. He knew that, too. Right away. It was foolish of me, I admit that. But I don’t know if he’d have reacted quite as badly if he hadn’t already known about the plan to destroy the castle.”

She says nothing. She won’t look at me.

“Maryse...” I sigh. “We need to talk. And I think you know what about.”

She shakes her head. “No, please...” Her voice is a whisper.

I glance around.

No one’s paying much attention to us.

The man with the injured ankle was allowed to go home earlier, and the girl with the stitches is fast asleep, her mother knitting while she sits at her bedside. The medic is flitting about, tending to everyone, but not keeping too close an eye on me.

Slowly, I sit up the rest of the way, fixing Maryse with a steely stare I would’ve thought myself incapable of before now. Judging from the way she recoils, she wouldn’t have thought so, either.

“My mother overheard someone speaking to Ker’kachin a couple nights ago,” I say, my voice quiet but sure. Her eyes widen, but she says nothing. “So I decided to look into the matter, and I found the only dragon in the woods that he hasn’t driven out.”

“You went in there alone?” she hisses. “You could’ve been—”

“I was perfectly fine. There’s far less to fear in the forest than there is in this city. The dragon was willing to talk to me, and he told me that when his

hoard was stolen, Ker'kachin had assistance from a human. So, yes, I think someone tipped him off. Any idea who that was?"

She gives me no response. Her gaze is fixed on the floor, hugging herself and sitting there, rigid and still.

"Maryse, please. Tell me the truth. You owe me that much. You owe *Vikker* that much."

Maryse doesn't answer me, and for a moment, I think she's icing me out until I drop it, but finally, she says, her voice barely a whisper, "I asked him not to hurt you."

She meets my eyes, and I'm left staring into hers, shocked and angry and deeply sad.

Even though she simply confirmed what I already knew, even though I was *right*, the admission still hollows me out and leaves me feeling untethered.

I wanted to be wrong.

In spite of everything, some part of me was still desperately hoping to be wrong.

"Don't look at me like that," she pleads. "Please. I...I know what you must think of me, but..." She reaches for my hand, my right hand, and I try and fail to pull it away. No matter how much I try to recoil from her touch, I physically can't move. She doesn't seem to realize, and keeps talking, words hushed and desperate. "Lotte, you're my friend, and I never, ever wanted you to get hurt—I didn't want *anyone* to get hurt, no one was supposed to—"

"Let go of me."

Ever since I met her, I've wanted Maryse to like me. I've wanted her to call me her friend. I've wanted her to call me more than that. But now that it seems I finally have her affection, it makes me feel sick. How could someone who cares for me do this?

Reluctantly, she obeys, drawing her hand away from mine and resting it limply on her lap, but she doesn't look away from me.

"You would understand," she finally says. "If you knew the whole story. You'd understand."

"I understand that my mother is locked in there with a murderous animal, she probably has no idea if I'm even *alive*, a good man is dead, the entire city is completely fucked, and you've been helping him the whole time," I hiss.

"That's not...I mean, I..." She grasps for the words. "I *did* tell your mother you're okay."

"Did you?"

“Of course, I did. First chance I got.”

“I wish I believed you, but I...I don’t know if I can,” I say. “I can’t trust a single thing you say. Ever. Do you understand that?”

“I...” She trails off, before she simply whispers, “I’m sorry.”

The remainder of my fire escapes me in a single sigh.

I’m still angry, indescribably so, but I’m so tired and I don’t know what good it could do to talk to her anymore.

I don’t want to yell or see that wounded look on her face. It’s all too much right now, and what’s the point? I turn away, lying down in the bed.

“Go away, Maryse,” I say, screwing my eyes shut. “Please go away.”

There’s a long pause before I hear the chair being pushed back and her footsteps receding. When I open my eyes a few minutes later, she’s gone. Maybe for good.

The thought should be a relief, but it isn’t.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

“Are you all right?” Scyler calls.

“Just fine.” My words come out muffled from behind the fabric of my shirt.

They arrived half an hour ago to escort me back to the boardinghouse, in full uniform so they can go to work afterward. They were nice enough to bring me some clean clothes from my room, and now, I have to figure out how to actually put them on.

There’s a curtained-off area in the corner of the room for patients to dress and wash themselves, and that’s where I’ve been for the past ten minutes, Scyler waiting outside for me.

I did manage to wriggle into my trousers on my own. The shirt, however, has proven more difficult. I got it over my head and put my good arm through the sleeve just fine, but trying to get the other one through has led to me getting tangled up and frustrated.

“I can help, if you’d like,” they say.

I poke my head out, squinting at my right arm. Refusing to bend or move, it’s not quite going in the sleeve, instead hanging uselessly at my side.

Letting out a huff, I give up. “Come on in.”

They quickly pull the curtain open and close it again as they step inside.

I must look ridiculous, my stomach and back exposed and my shirt only half on, but they don’t laugh or look sorry for me. They tilt their head, examining the situation, before saying, “I think maybe you should try doing this backward.”

“What do you mean?”

“Try starting over, but put your right arm in the sleeve first, *then* your head and your other arm. That way you can use your left arm to help you.”

It’s more than a little embarrassing, needing the help, especially since it actually works. It still isn’t easy, but I do manage to actually get the shirt on.

My cheeks going red, I mumble, “Thanks. Feels like I should’ve figured that out five minutes ago.”

“Don’t worry about it,” they say. “I know only because a guy on the townsguard broke his arm last year—until it healed, he had to figure out how to get dressed one-handed. It took him some time, is all. I don’t think anybody expects you to be used to this right away.”

I nod, trying to let the words sink in. They’re right. Of course, they’re right.

If our roles were reversed, I wouldn’t think they needed to figure this out overnight.

Even so, I hate the fact that I needed them to step in and help me. I have to be able to do this on my own. I can’t expect Nana to help me dress and cook and do basic things every morning. The sooner I get the hang of this, the better.

With my instructions for avoiding infection clear, I’m permitted to leave the infirmary.

I guess they figured my lying there, taking up a bed, wouldn’t make my arm any less paralyzed. A week’s worth of bandages and ointment have been provided to me, along with a note about where I can get more. I have no idea where I can get them in Rosburnt, or if I’ll need to send away for them, but I can figure that out later.

A deep breath of fresh air is nice as we step outside.

Scyler helps me with my coat, then slings on their own. Rather than purple like the rest of their uniform, their coat is a solid black today and, looking around, I notice that all the other guards I can see are wearing black as well.

“Is there going to be a funeral for Vikker?” I ask, following their lead as we go down the road. I was told the infirmary is only a few streets away from the boardinghouse but, since I was unconscious when I got there, I don’t know how to navigate my way back.

“Eventually.” They sigh. “Cornelis wants to deal with the *situation* first.”

“I guess that is sort of the more pressing issue.”

“I think he mostly wants to be able to start his tenure with a win.”

“Were you able to recover his body?” I ask, dreading the answer.

A shudder passes over their face. “You could say that. First light this morning, a woman started screaming bloody murder. She lives near the castle, and when she went outside to prepare to leave for a shelter, she saw him on the bridge.”

“What?”



“Someone took the time to get his body out of there, but they left it on the bridge. It was hanging off the side, like a ragdoll. We have no idea who got him out. Our best guess is Ker’kachin dropped him there, but honestly, even that feels unlikely.”

I can’t answer. Bile is creeping up my throat at the mental image of his dead body, already beginning to rot, and I can’t bear to dwell on it anymore.

As we make our way through the city, things feel claustrophobic and uneasy.

Several buildings have been shut down for public use, but when you glance through the windows, you can see dozens of people crammed inside, a temporary shelter from an ongoing disaster. Every guard in the city appears to be on patrol, but no one looks to be *doing* anything.

They make their rounds, not speaking to anyone.

“Is everyone evacuated?” I finally ask.

“Nearly. We’re getting the last couple hundred out today,” they say. “Right now, the real problem is getting food to everybody. A few of us have tried to get Cornelis to sit down and help us figure all this out, the logistics and the cost and everything, but he stays shut up in his office. He comes out every now and then to get an update on how many people we’ve cleared out, but mostly, he’s focused on how to attack the castle.”

“Did you tell him that the explosives plan is wrecked?”

“I tried.” They grimace. “He won’t listen. Maryse volunteered to go and remove them, so the dragon doesn’t get angrier, but he ordered her not to intervene. And now that he could actually have her evicted, well... She isn’t happy.”

The mention of Maryse sends a sharp pang through me, but they don’t seem to notice.

I should tell them what’s going on, what I’ve found out. But the words are lost before I can even form them.

“None of us are happy, actually,” they continue. “A lot of people tried to point out to him that we’re compromised and need to do damage control, but he isn’t listening. So now he’s preparing to go ahead with the plan in the next day or so, and to have us all ready to attack. He isn’t convinced collapsing the castle will be enough to kill the thing.”

“He may be right about that,” I admit, remembering how Vikker’s sword failed to scratch him.

“I know. But he’s going to get more people killed. And in the meantime,

people need to eat, and not everyone can afford to go and buy food right now. My parents and some other restaurant owners have been volunteering to make food for the people they're hosting, but that still leaves a lot of people unaccounted for."

"Does he at least have a plan for getting Mother out of there?"

"No idea. I wouldn't bet on it. But, hell, if it comes to it, I'll go there and carry her out myself."

I smile, but it's halfhearted. "I don't want you to get hurt, too."

"Who says I'd get hurt?" They nudge me, pretending to be offended, dark eyes glinting with mischief. "He'd never notice me."

"Oh, yes, because quiet and careful are the first two words that come to mind when I think of you."

"I am the wind."

"More like a hurricane."

We both chuckle before suddenly, a thought hits me, and I stop walking as my heart gives a jolt.

"What's up?" they ask, stopping to look at me.

"Mother," I say. "Has anyone brought her food since I was hurt?"

Their eyes go wide, and they freeze. Finally, they speak, their words echoing my thoughts. "Oh shit."

...

With Cornelis in charge and the evacuation in its final stages, things at the townsguard offices are too chaotic for us to consider the idea that they'd have provisions ready for us. Thank goodness for Anneke and Edmond.

As soon as we arrive at Pim's Table—which is packed to the walls with displaced citizens—and explain the situation, they throw together a basket of bread and cheese and some nuts, and a fresh canteen of water. Nothing fancy, but enough to tide her over.

Scyler escorts me to the castle, and as soon as I see it from across the bridge, my heart speeds up. My breath becomes shorter, and I have to fight the urge to turn and run away.

Noticing my body going rigid, Scyler gives me a nudge. "I'll go in without you," they offer.

"No," I say. "You can't. You can't go in at all."

"Like hell I can't." We make our way across the bridge. "You're not going in there alone. Not after what happened."

“Scy. He’s already furious. He agreed to talk to me only if I come unaccompanied. I...I really don’t think right now is the time to test him.”

“But you—”

“I’ll be okay.” They give me an incredulous look, glancing pointedly at my arm. “I will!”

I’m not sure I really believe that, but I try to sound completely convinced, in the hopes of assuaging their fears.

“Look, I’m not putting you in danger. And don’t give me that crap about it being your job. I’m not letting you get yourself killed.”

“That goes for you, too,” they say. “Let me go inside with you. I won’t say a word, won’t touch my weapon; let me be there.”

I hesitate. “Would it make you feel better to go down the hall with me and stay outside of the room? Out of sight.”

Slowly, they nod, as we step off the bridge and approach the castle. “Fine. But if it sounds like he’s making a single move toward you—”

“I know. You’ll come in swinging.”

“Damn right.”

We stop and stare up at the castle.

From the outside, pretending I don’t know what’s happened here, it simply looks like a beautiful old building. But the mere sight of it makes me feel dizzy, and the phantom remnants of pain in my right arm stab at me, urging me to stay away from this place.

I take a deep breath. No sense in avoiding it. I have to face this head-on.

Hoping my apprehension doesn’t show on my face, I enter through the front door, carrying the basket of food, Scyler following close behind.

They’re remarkably light on their feet when they want to be, and if I look straight ahead, I can almost forget they’re with me. This is a comfort in one sense, as it makes me more confident that they’ll be safe, but it’s also a terror.

The entrance to the dragon’s den looks like the mouth of Hell, and now, I’m dearly wishing they could come with me.

As we draw closer, we hear the distant sound of someone’s voice.

A woman.

She isn’t speaking Stedi, but...

We look at each other, stopping in our tracks, and Scyler mouths, “Turnish.”

I nod. They’re right. That’s what it is. And then, suddenly, I realize that this must be Maryse, paying her friend a visit.

My stomach lurches, and I hold a finger to my lips before I begin to creep the rest of the way down the corridor. They follow me, neither of us daring to so much as breathe.

We stop outside the entrance to the room, before I kneel to the floor.

After several agonizing seconds, I force myself to peek around the corner into the room, staying hidden as best I can. Scyler hovers behind me, a frown creasing their face as they listen.

I don't speak any Turnish, so I can't understand a word Maryse is saying, but I see her.

She's standing in front of the dragon, looking incredibly small, holding her hands out as if she's pleading with him. He's looking down at her, head tilted and a look of annoyance gracing his features, but he makes no move to hurt her.

My eyes dart around until I spot Mother, who's in her usual huddle in the back of the room.

To my shock, she's *eating*.

Nothing much, only a small loaf of bread, but she's eating and appears uninjured. Maryse must've thought to bring her something. A sigh of relief begins to escape me before I catch myself and hold my breath again.

Fortunately, neither dragon nor girl appear to notice.

After several sentences in Turnish I have no hope of translating, Maryse kneels down, reaching for some coins on the ground, going to put them in her purse. My heart seizes up, and behind me, I hear Scyler inhale sharply through their nose.

Ker'kachin's eyes narrow, and for the first time, he stares at Maryse with the same iciness he often gives me. A single word, as indecipherable to Maryse as her words have been to me, passes through his lips. "Don't..."

She says something else in Turnish, looking up at him with what I can only assume is desperation, or maybe overconfidence. I can't actually see her face, but those are the only two things I can think of that would lead to her deciding to take from him.

She puts more jere in her bag, beginning to buckle it closed, when he speaks again.

This time, it's an all-out roar. "*Do not steal from us!*"

She may not be able to understand that, but she definitely understands what he does next.

With a single swipe of his tail, he knocks her onto her back, sending her

sprawling on the ground. She lies there for a moment, stunned, before she sits up, rubbing the back of her head.

Before she turns around to face him again, I swear I catch a glimpse of tears welling in her eyes.

To my great relief, she opens her bag again and spills the coins back out from whence they came. This seems to satisfy him, and he lies down, resting his head on his front legs.

Slowly, Maryse gets to her feet and takes a few steps back, muttering one last thing in Turnish before she turns and leaves, rounding the corner...and running straight into Scyler and me.

“Oh!” She lets out a small yelp before clapping a hand over her mouth.

The three of us freeze, waiting for any sign that Ker’kachin heard her, but fortunately, he didn’t. After a collective second of relief, we all stand there, staring at one another.

I look to Scyler, whose eyes have gone completely cold as they glare at her, and with a single, firm motion, they gesture for all of us to follow them back down the hallway.

As soon as we step outside, they grab Maryse by the arm, as if they expect her to run. “You better start talking. Now,” they say, pulling her in. “I have absolutely no idea what’s going on here, but give me one good reason why I shouldn’t drag you back to your brother and tell him what I heard.”

She doesn’t say anything, trying to wriggle out of their grasp. When that fails, she gives me a desperate look, shaking her head. “Lotte, I swear, it’s not as bad as it looks.”

“It looks really bad,” I say. “Maryse, you better tell us what’s going on.”

She takes a shaky breath, looking back at the castle before looking to us. “Not here, okay? I don’t want to risk him hearing,” she says, voice low. “Look, I got the explosives out last night. They’re out, so he’s not going to do anything drastic yet. I don’t think. Doesn’t that earn me some respite?”

Scyler stares at her, before they whisper, stunned, “You’re the one who got Vikker’s body out of here, aren’t you?”

Maryse nods, grimacing. “I couldn’t leave him in there to rot. I thought...I thought if I at least got him outside, he could be found and buried properly.”

They hesitate, and we exchange a glance. I shrug, completely at a loss. Finally, they clench their jaw and nod.

“We’ll talk in private, but after you’re done explaining yourself to us, we *are* going to have to deal with you somehow.”

She sighs. “Okay. Can we move before we get caught?”

“Fine. You can take us to wherever it is you’re hiding several pounds of explosives.”

...

Basvaan Family Antiquities and Fine Goods is still boarded up from the outside, but the chain on the door has been snapped in half, and Maryse pushes it open with ease. Scyler scoffs, but says nothing.

We follow her inside, and she shuts the door behind us, lighting a candle so we’re not standing around in darkness.

The shop is small and cramped, with several dozen shelves that have a thin layer of dust coating them. I can see the outline of where several wares used to be, which I assume are what were seized when the townsguard raided the place.

There’s a glass case underneath the counter, where several small, plush pillows sit, along with faded and yellowing price cards. It feels strange to be here, this ghost of a business, but Maryse moves around with complete ease and comfort. She goes behind the counter, and, with a grunt, drags a crate out to the middle of the shop floor.

Peering inside, Scyler lets out a low whistle. There’s a tangled mess of rope and fireworks inside, haphazardly shoved in.

“How the hell did you move all this by yourself?” I ask, looking up at Maryse.

“Borrowed a horse and cart.” Scyler glares at her, and she shrugs. “What? I said *borrowed*. I took them when the owners were asleep, and returned them before they were awake. No harm, no foul.”

“I should technically arrest you for that, but this doesn’t even come close to the other things you’ve pulled.” They place the lid back on the crate and straighten up, crossing their arms. “I heard you talking to that thing in the castle. I admit, my Turnish isn’t perfect yet, but I understood enough to throw at least a couple charges at you. You said you were taking money for ‘necessities.’ What does that mean, exactly?”

She goes pale. “Look, it’s a lot to explain, and I don’t know if you’d believe me—”

“Maryse, we can’t believe you if you won’t tell us anything,” I say. She looks at me, only meeting my eyes before she looks down at the floor, hugging her arms. “I...I don’t know if I can trust you. But I do want to know

what's going on. And you *did* help my mother, so...I'm willing to hear you out."

Her gaze shifts from the floor to me, and then to Scyler, who's staring at her with cold fury. Despite their apparent distrust, they gesture for Maryse to have a seat on the crate, which she does. She doesn't say anything, and I kneel down in front of her, trying to catch her eye.

"You said I'd understand if I knew the whole story," I say. "So give me a chance to understand. Tell me the whole story."

"And if you don't," Scyler adds, "I'll get your brother."

"You don't want to do that," Maryse says, not as a threat, but as a matter of fact.

They shrug. "No, I don't. But I will. Start talking, Basvaan. You can start with what you were doing there today."

She takes a few deep breaths. "Okay." A few more. "Okay. I...I was there partially to get food to Juna. But that wasn't all. I have been talking to Ker'kachin before today, but I guess you knew that. I can't understand him if he talks back, obviously, but... Anyway, I was trying to get him to let me take some money for my rent. With Cornelis in charge, I figured the townsguard wouldn't be covering it anymore, and, well..."

She gestures limply at the empty shelves and covered windows.

"This place isn't generating a profit right now. He...didn't go for it." She sniffles quietly, a hand coming up to rub her eyes. "I can't believe he... Look, what you saw, you have to understand, him attacking me like that? That's...weird."

"You tried to take gold from a dragon and use it to help yourself," Scyler says with an unsympathetic scoff. "How did you think that would go over?"

"He's not like that." An edge of defensiveness makes her words sharp. "Not with me."

"But *why*?" Without a thought, I reach my good hand toward hers, taking it and squeezing, trying to get her to relent and explain. "Why would he treat you differently? Why would you help him?" I squeeze her hand again. "Maryse, why don't you want us to kill him?"

She swallows before finally looking me in the eye.

"Because," she says, "he's my father."

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Silence hangs in the air, so thick you could reach out and feel it.

I stare at Maryse, looking for any sign that she's joking or lying to me, until Scyler finally speaks. "You're half dragon?" they ask.

Maryse rolls her eyes at them. "No. He was my father before he was a dragon."

"Oh." Their voice is high-pitched, exasperation leaking through. "Oh, of course. Why didn't I think of that myself? It's such a normal thing to say."

"I..." I blink and shake my head. "I don't understand. Your father is..."

I stop myself before I can say "dead." Because legally speaking, he's not dead yet. He's *missing*. Because they haven't had a body or anything to confirm.

"Wait, but Rusyard went missing weeks after Ker'kachin was first sighted," Scyler says. "And that doesn't answer the biggest question, which is...well, *how*?"

"It's sort of a long story," Maryse says.

"We have time."

She takes a few deep breaths, nodding. Running a hand through her hair, she takes a moment before she begins.

"Pa and I appraise anything we get our hands on, in case we get ahold of something enchanted," she says. "I'd say...hell, nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand, this gets us nowhere. And, honestly, that's probably being generous. Most of what we get is not exactly worthless, but rarely spectacular. Jewelry, antiques, sometimes old books."

"Stolen goods..." Scyler adds under their breath.

"But every now and then, we land on something that still has magic. The most valuable thing we'd ever found was an old alchemy textbook that still had some magic embedded in it. It took both of us to get the damned thing



open. There was a protective rune on the back—Pa figured it was supposed to open only for the owner. But, since the book was printed probably about five hundred years ago, the spell had faded. Honestly, its age was what made it valuable, not the magic.

“Anyway, we had no use for it, so we sold it. Took care of our rent for months, it was great. And that’s more or less how we’d always do things. We mostly sold in the King’s Auction, though we also had...alternative channels.”

A wave of sickness passes through me as I picture Maryse and a faceless figure I’ve designated her father examining the things taken from Mother’s apartment.

Studying the family ring and its every detail before deeming it worthless and getting rid of the evidence of their theft by passing it off to some other salesman. And now it sits in a pile of wealth, lost for what might be forever amid the sea of coins.

No wonder Ker’kachin didn’t even consider it when I offered it to him. He already knew.

What a fool I must’ve seemed to him—offering him his scrap and trying to pass it off as a treasure.

“A few months ago, we managed to buy a whole box of jewelry from Trunzlat in the auction,” she continues. “About fifty pieces total. Pa figured if we were smart about it, we could stand to make twice what we paid. So, like usual, we sat down to appraise all the pieces. It took days, and it was boring work. One day, I came home to him with five or six books open on the table. They were history books, copies of old archival statements from various collections—you know, basically catalogues of known magical artifacts deemed impressive enough to be written down.”

“He’d found one,” I say softly.

She nods. “I hadn’t seen him so excited in...years. It was this necklace, this simple little thing. Just a turquoise stone on a chain. You’d never think it was anything special at all. But Pa described it to me as...the instant he touched it, he felt like it was...special. It’s hard to describe, the hum of magic. It’s like the warmth from a fire, warming you from a few feet away.”

“Did you feel that, too?” I ask.

“Sort of. Like I told you, his abilities were always more refined, stronger than mine. When I touched it, I definitely felt something, but it was slight.” She exhales. “He spent a week digging through books and records until

finally, he found a description. The necklace was from Trunzlat, and had changed hands dozens of times over the course of several centuries. It was forged as a gift for a princess, then it was in a museum for a time, and then I guess it was stolen or lost or something. And, allegedly, if you touched it, it could transform you into any animal you could think of.”

Scyler raises an eyebrow but says nothing.

Noticing their skepticism, she dryly says, “You’ve known me awhile. You think I would tell a lie *this* complicated and hard to believe?”

They huff and mutter something I can’t quite make out. “Okay. Fair enough,” they admit. “So. Magic necklace. Sure. I can buy that. So, your father got ahold of it, and his first thought was, *Let’s change into a fire-breathing monstrosity that weighs two tons and really cause some trouble?*”

“No!” Maryse says, sharp and defensive, before she deflates. “We talked about what to do with it at first. I wanted to sell it, but Pa quickly realized it could be useful. The first time he used it, we were actually right here where you’re standing.”

She nods toward me, and I straighten up, oddly self-conscious.

“We closed all the curtains and locked ourselves in, and then he put the necklace on. I expected there to be a puff of smoke, poof, he’s gone and something new was in his place. But it was more like...it was as if I had blinked and he changed, only I didn’t blink. There was a burst of light coming from the stone, and when it faded, I heard the necklace hit the floor. I looked down, and there was a cat where my father had been standing.”

That sort of magic is rare. There are totems and runes throughout the world where the magic has hung on, but never in Nivstede. I always assumed whatever we had was either long since destroyed or scattered to other corners of the globe. To think of something like that happening, right where I am now...

Part of me feels happy, almost. But any joy I feel is quickly quashed by the knowledge of how it’s being used.

“When did he start taking from people?” I ask softly.

“Right away.” Her words are coming out faster, clearer now, as if it’s a relief to finally be able to share all of this. Like a convict readily confessing to the worst of their crimes right before they’re put to death.

“We started small. Places where we’d broken in before, where we already knew I could bust the lock. He could turn into a dog, pretend to be a stray, and stake places out for weeks without them ever suspecting a thing.” She

chuckles. “He ate well whenever he did that. People who hated his guts as a human would be more than happy to offer pieces of meat and bread to him as a dog.

“Sometimes he’d cause a diversion to let me get in someplace. Turn into a bird, get in through a window and fly around, and I’d slip in the back while everyone was trying to get rid of him. Though we stopped using that method after someone nearly crushed him with a cast iron pan. Anyway, he usually stuck to small creatures. Once we had a plan, he’d change shape, and after we’d gotten away, he’d touch the necklace again so he could turn back into himself. He had a rule. Only he could transform; I’d hang on to the necklace so it wouldn’t get lost, but I wasn’t allowed to use it myself.”

“How come?” I ask.

“He was aware there was a chance the necklace could be broken or something else would happen, and he’d get stuck. He didn’t want to risk that happening to me.” She lets out a bitter laugh. “Here I thought he was being paranoid.”

“So when did he start turning into a dragon?” Scyler has leaned against the counter now, crossing their arms and watching Maryse closely. There’s still a hint of skepticism in their voice, but they’re at least hearing her out.

“The first time was a few months after we got ahold of the necklace. He... he realized there could be bigger, better bounties if we started looking outside the city. He knew of the dragons in the forest, and that they’d be stockpiling for their next meal. I spent some time scouting out different nests and hoards, figuring out who already had more than enough—at first, we were taking only a little bit from dragons we figured could take the hit.”

“But why?” I ask. “Didn’t you have enough from what you took from people in the city?”

Maryse pauses, thinking. “We were keeping food on the table and a roof over our heads that way,” she says. “I’ve never been poor, but he has. *Really* poor. He hardly talks about it, but I know it changed him. By the time I was born, he hadn’t been in that situation in years, but he was scared of ever going back—and we were always closer than he wanted to admit. If one of us had gotten sick and couldn’t work anymore, or if somehow we lost the shop, we’d very quickly run out of money and be back where he started.”

I nod slowly. Rosburnt is full of families in that position, mine included. My work with dragons pays very well, but I get hired only every couple of months. Stretching out my payment from one job to the next is a grueling

task that Nana and I have spent years perfecting.

“I never let it bother me,” she continues. “Like I said, we had what we needed, and that seemed like the best we could aim for. But when he realized he had this power, I think he saw an opportunity for more. He wanted to be comfortable, wealthy, even. And he’d try just about anything to get there. The first time he raided a dragon’s hoard, he nearly got himself killed—he could barely stand up on his own after he changed back into a human, and I thought for sure he’d never try it again. But he’s stubborn, and he doesn’t like to lose. As he got accustomed to his form as a dragon, he got better at fighting.”

“So he’d ambush them?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No! Well, I mean, he’d surprise them, but he never attacked first. He’d try to talk to them, tell them we’d just take a little bit and be on our way.”

I groan. “Let me guess how that went over.”

Maryse cringes. “Right. A couple of the miniatures decided it wasn’t worth it and let us take what we wanted, but most of them fought us. So he fought back. And he got good at it. Eventually, he got good enough to be able to knock them out, and then we could take whatever we wanted.”

Her face is pale, as a shudder passes through her.

“One time that I know of, he actually managed to kill one. I...I doubt he realized how much damage he’d done until it was already too late, but... What happened was, Pa and I were there to get some gold, and while the dragon was trying to guard its hoard, it spotted me going near its nest.”

“You *what?*!” Scyler exclaims, their jaw dropped.

I can’t help but agree. “Maryse, what were you thinking?”

She raises her hands. “I wasn’t going to hurt the babies! Of course I wasn’t! I wasn’t even going to look at them...but I guess I can’t blame the dragon for not realizing that. I was just trying to make a grab for a few gems I thought I could fit into my saddlebag, and it saw me, and it made a grab for me, and Pa...lost it.”

She tugs at a lock of auburn hair, tears shimmering in the corners of her eyes.

“I got out of the way in time, and before it could grab me again, Pa had it by the tail and dragged it toward him. Then he started clawing and biting at its face and neck. It was the first time I ever saw him strike first, and it was... awful. Blood everywhere, the babies screaming—I started screaming, too,

screaming for him to stop, but he was so angry. The mother quit fighting back and was trying to get back to its kids, but he kept striking it over and over until...”

Maryse has to pause, taking a few deep breaths before continuing.

“Anyway, after that, he motioned for me to grab stuff out of the hoard, like he always did. The babies ran for it when they realized their parent was dead. I tried to leave some stuff behind in case they came back, but he...he gestured for me to take more.”

“And did you?” Scyler asks.

“I argued with him.”

“But you did it.”

She hesitates. “He... I went to walk back to the horse to ride home, but he blocked my path with his tail. I tried to go around, and he blocked me again. He may not have spoken, but he certainly made his message clear. I wasn’t leaving until I’d taken everything we could carry.”

A long sigh escapes her, and a small tear trickles down her cheek, which she quickly wipes away.

“I don’t know what would’ve happened if I’d kept refusing, but in that moment, he didn’t seem like himself. And I wanted him to go back to being himself. You have to believe me, my father didn’t mean for all of this to happen. We certainly didn’t set out to kill anyone. But something really shifted that day, and when we lost the necklace, all hell broke loose.”

“You lost it?” Scyler says.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Maryse says, so quickly and with such coldness that I’m now almost entirely certain it very much was.

I stare at her, raising my eyebrows and waiting for her to explain.

“I...sometimes, once he got comfortable transforming, Pa would leave for a few days as a dragon, and I’d hang on to the necklace. Before he left, we’d arrange a time and place to meet up so he could change back. He’d been gone a few days and I was still running the shop like always, until I came home to find our house looking like a tornado had ripped through it. The lock was broken, furniture was out of place or overturned, cushions had been torn open...”

Scyler exhales. “A break-in.”

“Obviously. They’d taken some jewelry and antiques, some stuff we had been planning to sell in the shop, and all the money we had in the house. But the really bad part—the part I didn’t realize until I’d been cleaning up for the

better part of two hours—was that the necklace was gone.”

“I can’t believe you let something that valuable off your person,” Scyler says, their tone somewhere between disbelief and outright annoyance. I can’t say as I blame them. It’s one thing to use semi-legal magic for very not-legal activities. It’s another thing to do so sloppily.

“It was in a locked box under my bed,” Maryse snaps. “It’s not like I left it lying around.” With a sigh, she rubs her temples. “Not good enough. Obviously.”

“Do you have any idea who stole it?” I ask.

“Honestly? For ages, I assumed it was Juna.” She meets my eye with an apologetic shrug. “It wouldn’t be the first time she’d swiped something from Pa and me, and if she’d figured out we were the ones who broke into her place earlier, she might’ve retaliated.”

“Do you still think that?”

She pauses, then shakes her head. “I realized I had to have been wrong when Pa started holding her hostage and she said she didn’t know what he wanted from her. She’d have given it up in order to get out of there.”

For the first time since Maryse began this story, I want to sit down and cry.

It’s for nothing. Mother is being held prisoner for absolutely no reason at all.

“I doubt whoever took it realized what it was,” Scyler says, scratching their chin. “Probably saw it and thought, *Hey, pretty necklace, bet I can sell this.* I’m assuming you never reported the break-in?”

Maryse gives them a withering stare. “What do you think?”

“I’m only asking questions. So, you got robbed. Necklace was gone. Then what?”

“Well, first, I about drove myself into the ground searching every shop in the city to try to find it. But it never turned up. Weirdly, some of the other things that had been taken did—but no one would tell me where they got them. Even people who I could usually count on to tell me who their providers were.”

A shiver passes through her.

“When Pa came back, I met with him like we planned, and then I got to have the very fun conversation where I told him he wouldn’t be able to turn back into a human. I couldn’t understand a word he said, of course, but I certainly understood what he meant when he ripped a tree in half.”

“That sounds terrifying,” I say.

“Honestly, it was,” she admits. “I ducked behind some rocks and waited for him to calm down before I came out. We worked out a way to talk—well, sort of. I could read his expressions most of the time, and sometimes we had to make do with ‘one scratch means yes, two means no,’ but we could at least communicate.”

Having been on the receiving end of Ker’kachin’s violent outbursts myself, the mental image of Maryse having to shield herself from one is enough to make my stomach twist.

“Obviously, the first order of business was getting the necklace back, but we also needed to keep the shop in working order, and keep paying rent on our house, and I needed to eat. The robbery hadn’t touched the shop or his vault in the bank, so we weren’t destitute, but we’d lost a ton of money in one go. We had to find a way to generate income, fast.”

“What I don’t understand is, why go to all the trouble he has?” Scyler asks. “You were doing fine taking from other dragons. Why did he settle in the castle? Why start blackmailing us?”

“He had no interest in sleeping in a cave or in the forest if he was going to be stuck that way for some time. I suggested it and he looked at me like I was talking nonsense. I think he wanted to be close to me, close to home. Wanted to keep an eye on everything as best he could. The castle had been abandoned for years, so we figured no one would stop him if he settled there.”

They sigh. “And then we sent in the first Dragontongue.”

A rush of guilt floods me as I suddenly recall the man who spoke to Ker’kachin before I ever heard of him, the man who lost his life in the process. What he wouldn’t have given to escape with only a paralyzed arm.

“Right,” Maryse says. “And as for why he decided to start asking for a tithe... Frankly, he’d done his job a little too well with the other dragons. Most of them had left, and the few that remained were going out of their way to avoid him. He had driven them all away, and we’d already spent a large amount of the gold he’d taken from them. And we...we knew we couldn’t hold out until we found the necklace. So we decided to sink as much time and money as we could into finding some other way to change him back.”

She shakes her head, looking tired.

“You have no idea how many fakes and knock-off talismans I’ve bought in the last six months, how many useless books I’ve read. It’s cost a fortune, and we’ve gotten absolutely nowhere.”

“When does it end?” I ask. Before I can talk myself out of it, I reach

forward and offer my hand. To my great surprise, she takes it, squeezing. “Maryse, you know there’s barely any money left in the city.”

“I—I know. I’ve told him. I’ve tried to tell him we need to stop, slow down, find some other way, but...”

She trails off, and I’m startled to see tears pricking at her eyes.

“Lately, he’s been acting...not like himself. In the early weeks, I could always read him, always see that it was him in there, even if he was, well, a dragon. But then...something changed. *He’s* changed. He’s stopped letting me take as much money as before.

“At first, he’d let me take whatever I needed, for research and for keeping things afloat out here. But then, he got testy if I took too much, so I started scaling back. And then I had to scale back from that. And from *that*, even after we lost the house. Now he...he won’t let me take anything at all. For finding some way to change him back or to even pay for food. That’s why I asked Vikker to pay me by renting me a room. I couldn’t afford rent on the house anymore, and I’d sold off most of our furniture. I told Pa I needed money, that I’d still help him, but I needed to help myself, but when I went to take coins, he...he tried to bite me.”

Scyler and I can’t bring ourselves to say anything at first. We stare at her, shocked and sorry. Finally, I stammer, “He—your father—your father attacked you?”

“He’s not like that,” she says. “Or at least, he wasn’t. He’s never struck me or any of my siblings. Even after he transformed, he was always fine around me. It was like he forgot himself. When he realized what he did, when he saw that I was frightened of him, he backed off, and he looked sort of ashamed. I thought it was the stress getting to him, but...I don’t know.” She hesitates before admitting quietly, “Sometimes, when he looks at me, it’s—it’s like he’s looking at a stranger. Like he doesn’t know me. Then it fades and I think I’ve imagined it.”

I squeeze her hand again, but this time, she pulls away.

“Pa loves me,” she says. “I know he does. I think this is too much for him. I think...I think I can persuade him to stop, especially if I get him to realize that he can’t keep it up forever. And we’ll leave, go somewhere else, find some other way to sustain ourselves.”

“Maryse,” I say, “if he hasn’t seen reason by now...”

“Don’t talk like that. He still can, and he will. I simply have to be patient with him. Once he feels like he has enough gold to be comfortable. Once he



feels safe and secure. Then he'll listen to me. I can still fix this, and no one else has to get hurt."

I look up to Scyler, and they're still watching Maryse with an expression that I'm sure she'd be revolted to notice is pity. But she isn't looking at them. She's looking at me.

"I don't want my father to die, Lotte," she whispers. "And I don't want him to be trapped in that form for the rest of his life. I know he's...he's done some bad things, especially to you, and I'm so, so sorry. I'm so sorry I couldn't stop him, that I couldn't prevent this, and I know you're probably going to be angry with me forever and that's totally fair. But please...please let me clean up this mess myself. I might be able to talk him into at least letting your mother go. Let me deal with him, okay?"

"I..." My voice tapers out. I don't know what to say. What on earth could I possibly say that isn't a comforting lie or a cruel truth?

Scyler speaks up, and it's oddly a comfort to hear them use an authoritative, calm tone. It feels nice to have an "adult" who wants to take control of the situation. So what if the adult is barely three years my senior and in possession of little legal authority?

"I'll try to get your brother to slow down enough for us to get Juna out of the castle," they say. "That buys us a little time. But I can't promise anything. And, listen to me—if this goes much further, if he doesn't leave in...hell, the next two days, probably, Cornelis is going to have to find out who Ker'kachin really is, and what's been going on."

Her skin pales. "He can't."

"I'm sorry. I wanted to make sure you understand the reality of the situation."

Maryse slumps back, looking like she might cry.

Apparently deciding they've questioned her enough for one day, Scyler pats my shoulder. "Come on, kid," they say quietly. "Let's go."

Reluctantly, I get to my feet, unable to take my eyes off Maryse.

I was furious with her, and some part of me still is, but now...I don't know. It's hard to hate someone who's so desperate and scared. Even if I maybe should.

"I'm coming by your room tomorrow morning," Scyler warns, as they turn to lead me out the door. "The three of us are going to make a plan. You may not like the plan, but right now, cooperating with me is probably your best bet for not getting arrested or getting your father killed. Understand?"

She nods limply.

We leave the shop and walk away in silence.

My head is spinning with everything I've learned. So many impossibilities, and yet, I believe every word. The story is simply too bizarre and outlandish to be a lie.

It's not until we reach the boardinghouse and stop outside, staring up at the building from the street, that I manage to speak.

"He's never going to stop, is he?" I ask softly. "No matter what Maryse says."

Scyler exhales, shaking their head. "I can't imagine he will, no."

"What the hell are we gonna do?"

"I don't know."

There's a long pause, before I look to them. "We can't kill her father, Scy."

"He's killed two people and nearly killed you."

"If we kill him, she'll have no one."

"She has no one right now." They don't say it in a cruel manner, but it still makes me flinch. "Lotte, we need to think about the big picture. He's shown he can't be reasoned with, and he's incredibly dangerous. Every second he's still alive is a second every person in this city is in mortal danger. He has to be stopped, no matter if he's a man or beast or something in between."

I can't argue with them. They're right, after all.

"What about Maryse?" I ask, almost scared to know the answer. "What happens to her?"

"I... Look, I don't wanna lock her up. She was desperate and I know she wants her father back. Given the circumstances, I think she deserves a little grace. But she didn't come forward when she could have asked for help at any point, and by now, she has aided and abetted several crimes. If she doesn't help us fix this by any means necessary, Vikker's death, your arm, your mother—all of that is every bit as much on her as it is on him. I'm willing to give her a chance to do the right thing. But we can't let Ker... Rusyard. We can't let Rusyard get away with this because we feel sorry for Maryse."

"I know," I say. "Do you think you can persuade Cornelis to wait until Mother is rescued?"

"I'm going to have to."

This inspires little confidence.

Maryse is holding onto the hope that she can get through to her father on

her own, but I can't. Scyler is right.

He won't listen to her, much less anyone else, and he's been acting more and more draconic by the day. He's certainly more beast than man at this point. And if it comes down to sparing him but devastating the city, or devastating Maryse but sparing the town...

The choice is clear. But that doesn't mean I have to feel the least bit good about it.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

This isn't going to work.

I know that.

As soon as the idea occurred to me, I knew that going and talking to Cornelis like a rational adult wouldn't work. The thing with solving something with diplomacy is that both parties need to be on board for it to get anywhere.

For the exact same reasons I'm pretty sure Maryse's strategy of talking to Ker'kachin is doomed to fail, I'm equally pessimistic about my efforts to reason with his son.

But I'd never forgive myself if I didn't at least try. And I don't think Maryse would, either.

He isn't at the townsguard offices, but someone is able to tell me that he's working from home today. I'm enough of a known quantity by this point that they don't mind telling me the address. I suppose Cornelis is lucky I'm not an ax-murderer.

He lives in the family home of his fiancée, Norah Howe.

With everything else going on, I'd nearly forgotten about Norah. She lives on the east side of town, far away from the castle and the townsguard, in the largest and prettiest house in a neighborhood full of them.

In a city full of old and weathered homes, the Howes live in a mansion that looks new and well-kept, with a large front yard and lush flowers growing, climbing up the walls.

I pause in my walk up the pathway, staring at the place.

If it's truly only the money he's after, Cornelis knows how to choose a bride.

I knock at the door, and a housekeeper answers, leaving me in the foyer while she goes to fetch Cornelis. Looking around, the walls are covered in art

from all over the world, and I feel deeply self-conscious about the dirt on my shoes as I stand on the perfectly clean, shiny floor.

Many larger families live in big houses like this, but I've never been in one that's so well-kept and pretty. Houses back in Rosburnt are built for functionality first, aesthetics being an afterthought at best.

The light sound of fabric drifting over the floor signals the entrance of Norah, wearing a periwinkle dress that's less ornate than the gown she wore the night we met, but just as lovely.

She floats in behind the housekeeper, who says, "I'm sorry, it appears Captain Basvaan has gone out without my noticing."

"He's always in and out of here," Norah chirps. "I can barely keep eyes on him for a minute! Feels like every time I go to talk to him, he's wrapped up in work or already gone." She sighs lightly. "Anyway, I thought I'd see if I could help, Miss... Sorry, I'm sure I know you, but I can't remember from where."

"I'm Lotte Meer, we met on Feast night," I say. "I'm Maryse's friend?"

"Oh goodness." A hand flies to her heart. "You're the one who got attacked earlier this week, are you not?"

Before I can answer, she steps toward me, an odd look in her eye. It takes me a moment before I realize it's probably what most people would refer to as maternal concern.

"Goodness, I'm glad to see you up and about. When I heard what had happened, I was sure you were a goner!"

"So was everyone else."

"Cornelis was, I'm sure he's told you, simply beside himself when he heard."

"He was?" I ask doubtfully.

"Oh, of course he was." She dismisses the housekeeper and leads me out of the foyer and into a sitting room with three couches, a huge fireplace, and a table. I sit down next to her, almost being devoured by the soft and squishy cushions. "Losing Captain Vikker, getting promoted, a civilian in the hospital... I thought he might collapse from stress. I'm sure he'd have gone to visit you if not for everything else he had on his plate."

"I'm sure he would have."

"What is it you needed to see him about? I could take a message for you."

I try to sit up as best I can. "Well, I wanted to ask him about...about what he plans to do about the dragon. I mean, I know he wants to attack, but..."

“Oh.” For the first time since I’ve met her, Norah’s face falls, and she averts her gaze. Her mouth twists into a small pout, before she says, “I know I shouldn’t say it, but I wish he wouldn’t.”

“You do?”

“I’m afraid for him. That monster has already killed two people, I don’t want it to kill Corny, too.” She looks up at me, her eyes pricked with tears, and tries to smile. It’s radiant and lovely and completely unconvincing. “Of course, I can’t say anything. I’ll simply have to learn to be strong if I’m going to be married to the captain of the townsguard.”

I hesitate. “Do you have any idea where he’s gone? I want to talk him out of fighting. I don’t know if I can, he seems really convinced it’s the only way, but...maybe I could try.”

“He didn’t say anything, but...” She pauses and thinks. “He was talking about needing better weaponry for the attack. Apparently, what the townsguard has on hand is quite old, and he’s worried it won’t be up to the job. He may be going to a smithy or something in town.”

“That helps. I can ask Scyler where they normally get that stuff done.”

I rise to my feet and prepare to say my goodbyes, but before I can, Norah stands as well and says, “Wait—if you’re going to go talk to him, would you mind bringing him a note?”

“A note?”

“Well...he’s been so busy lately, I barely see him—he doesn’t like it when I interrupt his work, and I try to stay out of his way, but I would like to talk to him every now and again.” She forces a laugh. “Perhaps if I send a note with you, he’ll mistake it for a memo and actually read it.”

“I can do that.” I don’t really feel like getting in the middle of what’s shaping up to be a pretty major domestic squabble, but it seems the nice thing to do.

She leads me upstairs, to the giant bedroom I assume she shares with Cornelis.

The bed is big enough that I think five or six people could comfortably lie in it, and it’s covered in an intricately stitched blanket I want to wrap myself in. A vanity with a large mirror is against one wall. On another wall is a circular window overlooking the flowers in the yard. The closet, which is ajar, seems to consist half of plain, practical clothing for Cornelis, and half decorative and detailed gowns for Norah. I look around for the plain clothes she has for regular use before realizing that these *are* the “everyday” clothes.

A lot of people prefer to wear dresses most days instead of trousers, but they don't wear dresses like Norah's. Far from the simple, sturdy pieces you always see around town, hers look like they were each custom-made just for her, sewn from exquisite and expensive fabrics, and each one is lovely enough to be worn to a coronation.

While I look around, Norah goes to the opposite side of the room to a small desk, where she pulls out some ink, a quill, and a piece of parchment.

"I won't be long," she says, leaning down to start scribbling her message. "I want to tell him to actually come and sleep here tonight. Sleeping at his desk can't be good for him, and every time he doesn't come home, I always worry something's happened."

"It's nice you care so much about him." While her quill continues to scratch against the parchment, I look closer at the vanity.

The surface is covered almost entirely by bottles of perfume and pieces of jewelry, which by themselves probably cost more than a month's rent at the boardinghouse.

There are dozens of pairs of earrings, a handful of bracelets, and several necklaces. Two different strings of pearls, a choker with a heart-shaped ruby pendant, a gold locket.

My eyes scan over each piece, not paying much mind to any one of them, until suddenly, a jolt of familiarity rushes through me.

In a small heap on the vanity, completely unassuming, is a simple silver chain with a single stone attached to it. Turquoise, carved into the shape of a teardrop.

I frown. How do I know this piece?

"There we are," Norah says, and I glance over my shoulder to see her straightening up.

I look back to the necklace. *Of course.* She was wearing this the night we met. But still, there's something else. Something I can't quite put my finger on.

*Think, think, think.*

"The turquoise," I say, trying to sound casual. "When did you get it?"

"Oh, it was a gift from Corny." She crosses the room to stand in between me and the vanity, the folded note in her hands. "He gave it to me at a fancy meal, and it wasn't even my birthday. I asked him why and he said no reason, he just felt like spoiling me." She smiles. "He's so thoughtful sometimes. Anyway, here you go. Thank you for delivering this for me."

She holds out the note, but I don't take it. I don't speak or do anything except stare past her, at the necklace, lying about as if it's ordinary.

*Think, think, think!*

Then, suddenly, it clicks.

"Was it before or after the dragon came?" I ask. I have to be sure. Unsurprisingly, she seems to find this question strange, and frowns lightly. I add, "I suppose he probably had more time for spontaneous things like that when he wasn't working so much."

"Oh...yes, you're right. It was probably the last peaceful week we had before that wretched thing showed up." She thinks it over before chuckling. "Actually, that may be literally true. Before I knew it, it was all overtime and weekly tithes and he was under so much pressure, poor thing."

My heart hammers in my chest, so hard it's almost difficult to breathe. All this time and effort Maryse put into recovering the talisman, the many ways we have tried and failed to put a stop to this, and it's been so close to home from the start.

"Are you all right, dear?" she asks, tilting her head.

I wince, suddenly realizing what I have to do.

"I'm really, really sorry about this," I say, before shoving her. I take care not to be too rough, but it's still enough to get her to stumble, bumping into the bed with a yelp.

I dive toward the vanity, clumsily catching myself on the edge with my one good arm.

Bracelets and earrings fall to the floor with a clatter. It's a second before I can steady myself enough to stand upright, but then, I make a desperate grab for the necklace. Fumbling with it, I almost drop it, too, but then I manage to shove it into my pocket.

Norah straightens up, face pink with anger and confusion. "What are you *doing*?" she cries.

"I'm sorry," I say again.

And then I run.



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

My feet hit the ground at a rapid pace, nearly tripping over uneven patches.

I pant, barely able to keep my breath as I sprint as far away from Norah's house as I possibly can. I don't dare look over my shoulder to see if I'm being followed.

I keep running.

Even as my legs begin to ache, even as my heart rate becomes so intense it causes me physical pain, I don't stop. I'm vaguely aware that I must look incredibly suspicious, not a desirable outcome for someone with a stolen necklace in their pocket, but I don't care.

I have to get to Maryse.

*Get to Maryse.* The thought sustains me, carrying me on my tired legs through the streets, weaving through the crowd.

When I've been running for what feels like an hour, when I absolutely can't run anymore, I slow down to a quick walk, taking slow, deep breaths.

Despite my anxiety, I dare to look behind me, half expecting to see a thousand guards chasing me with their swords drawn. But there aren't.

There is a guard nearby, and the sight makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, but he's casually leaning against the door of an empty storefront, absentmindedly watching the people go by. He isn't looking for me. He isn't looking for anyone.

I'm safe. It's okay. I got away.

My security is absolutely unsustainable. I mean, Norah *saw* me take the necklace, she knows who I am. I shudder. My first go at robbery and I decide to start with the future wife of the captain of the townsguard, who already hates me. *Great. Perfect.*

Didn't Maryse say Norah's father is a councilman?

Okay, no getting around the fact that I am completely fucked.

Forcing my gaze ahead, I keep walking, trying not to look too purposeful or alarmed.

Just walk.

Walk like you're going nowhere in particular, walk like you've done nothing wrong in your life, walk like you didn't commit a crime against one of the most well-connected people in the city and like the evidence isn't in your pocket.

Get to Maryse, and sort out the rest later.

...

As I make my way up the stairs at the boardinghouse, I feel like a fugitive.

Then I remind myself that that's probably because, for all intents and purposes, I *am* a fugitive. I don't know if the theft has been reported yet, but if not, I probably don't have long until then. No matter. *Get to Maryse.*

I knock on her door, and to my relief, I hear movement inside right away.

The door swings open, and she looks surprised to see me, her brow furrowing. "What are you—?"

I don't need words to cut her off. I reach into my pocket and let the necklace hang from my fingers, the turquoise pendant swinging back and forth between us.

Her eyes grow wide and she stares at it before grabbing me by the arm and pulling me into her apartment, closing and locking the door behind us.

"You—that's—" She sputters, not taking her eyes off the pendant. "How did you... Where did you even *find* that?"

"So I was right? It's the same one?" Relief floods me. Some little part of me was terrified I'd messed up and stolen it for nothing.

"I...yes. That's absolutely it." She takes it from me, sinking to sit on her sofa without looking away. "How on earth did you find it?"

"I went to see your brother, and Norah took me into her room, and it was lying on her vanity," I say excitedly. "He gave it to her, right when it went missing from your house."

Her head snaps up then. "You mean...?"

I nod.

Maryse lets out a string of nigh-incoherent expletives, her eyes lit by a furious fire. "That piece of shit! I should've guessed. The whole time I assumed it was someone who hated Pa for *business* reasons."

"What are you going to do?"

“You told me not to incriminate you, so I won’t answer that. It doesn’t matter now.” She clasps both of her hands around the chain of the necklace, looking down at it again. “I can’t believe I have this back. I... Thank you, Lotte. I could kiss you.”

I cough, flushing, and we both pretend she didn’t say that.

I shouldn’t still want her to kiss me, not after everything she’s done. But I can’t help it. I almost reach for her hand, but think better of it. Everything inside me is muddled and confusing.

Forgiveness is a tricky thing, and I don’t know if I’m there yet.

“He can turn back,” she says softly. “He can finally turn back.” She stands, grabbing her purse off the table and stashing the necklace inside. “Let’s not waste any time. Will you come with me?”

“You want me to?” I ask, surprised.

“I... Are you okay with it? After everything he did?”

“I’m okay with it if you are,” I assure her.

To tell the truth, I have no idea what I’ll say to him.

But if she doesn’t want to go alone, then I don’t intend on making her.

...

Usually, entering the castle is a slow, delicate affair, making sure you aren’t too loud or too hasty, not wanting to startle the beast within.

But now, it’s as if Maryse and I are racing to see who can reach the dragon first.

Sprinting down the corridor, I let her pull ahead of me, and I realize I’m smiling.

I can’t help it. Her enthusiasm and excitement are catching.

He’ll finally turn back and all of this will be over. I haven’t felt this good since I arrived.

She gets into the room a few seconds ahead of me.

I arrive as Ker’kachin lifts his head from where he rests in the center of the room, gaze alight with confusion. In the back, Mother gets to her feet, eyes widening when she sees me.

“Lotte, what’s—?” But her question is cut off by Maryse.

“Pa!” She digs into her purse as he looks uneasily to me, a low rumble stirring in his throat. It cuts off immediately when she pulls out the necklace, holding it up with a radiant smile. “Pa, she found it! Lotte *found it!*”

“That... *How?*” he murmurs.

Maryse holds it out in front of her, still grinning, while Mother watches in utter confusion. She squints at her, looking between her and the dragon.

Carefully and deliberately, he lifts one massive, curled claw, and hesitantly reaches forward, the talon scarcely brushing against the teardrop-shaped stone.

He closes his scarlet eyes, and breathes in slowly.

And then, he changes.

In the space of a single heartbeat, a white, shimmering glow surrounds him, starting from the place where he touches the chain and spreading to capture his entire body.

Maryse's breath catches in her throat and she doesn't tear her gaze away, even as the light becomes harder and harder for our eyes to take. The glow gets brighter and brighter, too intense to see past for a short burst, and when my vision comes back, the dragon is gone.

In his place stands a middle-aged man with graying auburn hair and sallow skin.

He's dressed smartly but his beard is uneven and unkempt. Behind him, Mother gasps and claps her hands over her mouth, backing away in shock, hitting the wall, while he looks down at himself, flexing his fingers and examining his arms, as if checking to make sure everything's there. Then, slowly, he looks up, chest rising and falling rapidly as it all sinks in.

His eyes are steel gray, like Cornelis's.

"Maryse?" he says, his voice no longer the roll of thunder it was before.

She flies forward, letting the necklace fall to the ground with a clatter against the coins.

He lets out a grunt, stumbling backward as she throws her arms around him and leans against him with all her weight. After remaining frozen for a moment, he responds, hugging her back and closing his eyes, kissing the top of her head.

"Pa..." she says softly, mumbling into his shoulder. Her voice breaks. "Oh, I'm so happy to have you back."

"Happy to *be* back." He pulls away and takes a step back, keeping a hold on her shoulders, looking her up and down. "It's strange to be so close to your height now. I was getting rather sick of hitting my head on the ceil—"

He suddenly hits the ground, so quickly that I think he might have fainted, but he lets out a grunt of pain and I look up to see my mother standing behind him, having thrown him to the floor with a shove. She stands over him, face

red with fury, and before Maryse can go to help him up, she's crouched over him. Her fists flailing, she presses a knee into his stomach to keep him from getting up.

"You miserable, wretched, loathsome *sewer rat*!"

She whacks him across the face twice. He makes an attempt to hit her back, but his hand is quickly knocked away by hers.

"I've been in this shithole for weeks on end because of you? I had to sacrifice my wedding ring because of you? The townsguard's been up everyone's asses for months because of *you*?" Each question is punctuated with another wallop. Maryse attempts to pull her away, but she shakes her off easily. "I swear to all the saints, Rusyard, I am going to chop you up, make you into a casserole, and feed you to your fucking daughter!"

"Mother!" I say, shocked.

Her rant devolves into furious, wordless screaming as she keeps trying to beat Rusyard to a bloody pulp, while he kicks and swings back, trying to push her away. He manages to land a couple good hits, including a punch across her jaw that makes me flinch, but she's like a hailstorm, raining down her fury so fast, he can't hope to keep up.

Maryse and I exchange a glance, then step forward and grab Mother, each of us taking an arm and pulling her back together. That's enough to haul her off Rusyard and back to her feet, and he coughs and sits up.

While I keep a hold on Mother, doing my best to keep her in place with only one hand, Maryse helps her father stand. His nose looks like it's probably broken, and both it and his lower lip are bleeding profusely. It's difficult to believe minutes ago he was a creature I found completely terrifying. Now he looks like...an ordinary man who got beaten up by my mother.

Cringing as he wipes the blood away on his sleeve, he rolls his eyes at her. "Hello to you, too, Juna. I suppose I don't need to ask how you've been."

She bolts toward him again, ready for round two, but I manage to grasp her wrist and stop her. "I am going to *kill you*," she snarls. "You've made the last few weeks a living nightmare. You've taken my money and all my jewelry, you held me hostage with no one to talk to and made me sleep on a stone floor in a room with no ceiling, you've made me miss out on *weeks*' worth of pay, you nearly killed my kid—"

Rusyard actually winces. "Ah yes," he says delicately. "I was...well, frankly, I expected them to have to amputate, so I suppose you got lucky

there. Still, I hadn't meant for that to happen. Dreadfully sorry about that."

"Thanks," I say dryly. "I still have to learn how to write left-handed now."

Maryse flushes, and squeezes Rusyard's arm. "It's...well, at least it's all over. He's back and he won't have to do anything like that ever again. We can go home and try to work on damage control. Come up with some story for where the dragon went."

His eyebrow twitches. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, obviously they'll be relieved Ker'kachin is gone, but they'll have questions about where a massive dragon got off to and why he left behind a mountain of gold. They're going to investigate that, and I doubt Cornelis will stop until he has an answer he's satisfied with."

"Oh, it doesn't matter what Cornelis thinks," he scoffs.

"Um, it sort of does. I never got around to mentioning this before, but... he's captain now."

"Wait, he *what*?"

"Vikker's dead, remember?" I say. "Cornelis was next in the chain of command, so they put him in charge."

"Oh good," Mother groans. "Just what we needed. Your asshole son in charge of an army."

He lets out a low whistle and shakes his head. "Things really did get out of hand, didn't they? Cornelis as captain...heaven help us all. I tried my best with the boy, but... It's strange, I know he's an adult and I can't control his actions, but still, I can't help but feel like this mess is my responsibility."

Mother and I both stare at him, and even Maryse gives him a sidelong *look* for that.

He ignores this entirely, instead kneeling down to scoop the necklace off the floor. He stares at it, a small smile curving his lips, before stowing it in his pocket.

My heart freezes. *That can't be good.*

"I'm surprised you want to keep that thing," I say. "Given the situation it got you into."

He looks up, surprise flickering in his eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. It's been incredibly useful, and I'm very glad to have it back." Glancing around the room, he lets out a satisfied hum at the treasure trove he's acquired before looking to Maryse. "We'll need to move all of this in a way that guarantees no one will get suspicious."

Wait. He doesn't honestly think he gets to *keep* all his stolen wealth, does

he?

Maryse recoils, blinking in surprise. “I...” She trails off before clearing her throat. “I’m sorry, you... Pa, there’s no way we can keep all of this.”

“I don’t see why not.” He scoffs. “We worked hard enough to acquire it.”

“Yes, but it was... It was for keeping things running at home and finding a way to change you back, and now we’ve done that, so...”

Mother snorts. “Tell me, exactly how much of that gold actually went into funding your transformation?” she asks, narrowing her eyes at Rusyard. “What avenue of research required you to ransack an entire city?”

“Well, that’s the nice thing about money,” he says. “It doesn’t require you to stick to the letter of the original plan in order to work for you. Especially not when you have lots of it.”

Maryse shifts uneasily on her feet. “Pa, think this through. There’s so much money here, we’ll never be able to put it all in your vault without people noticing something’s wrong, and once people notice the dragon isn’t around anymore, they’ll come up to the castle and investigate. We can’t sell any of the jewelry or they’ll notice if those items turn up on the market. It’s... We can maybe get away with taking a little, but I think we should cut our losses and distance ourselves from this as much as we can.”

“Oh, come on, dear, don’t be so pessimistic.” He waves a hand. “I can outmaneuver the townsguard anytime, especially now that Cornelis is their leader. And these two”—he gestures to Mother and me—“won’t say a word. The story is absurd without proof.”

“But the money would *provide* proof. We can’t have it tied to us, that’s what I’m trying to tell you! And a lot of people are in really big trouble because of us; we have to help get things back to normal.”

“I don’t bother myself with people who don’t concern me. And anyway,” he continues, “we won’t have to worry about them investigating the dragon’s disappearance, because he’s not going to disappear. Not yet, anyhow.”

A heavy stone hits the bottom of my stomach with a devastating *thud*. When Maryse described her father to me, I wasn’t sure what to make of him. Now that I know him, I’m sickened by what I see.

“What?” Maryse asks, her voice unusually high.

“Ker’kachin has proven to be a useful tool for us. The problem was I couldn’t hide him away when I needed to. At least, not until I got the necklace back.” He looks to me, and smiles. “Thank you.”

I’m going to throw up. Or cry. Or something.

I want to let go of Mother and let her take another swing at him, I want to run away, I want to punch him myself, I...

"Pa, what are you saying? They're planning to kill you! Things are already awful, and if they find out *you're* Ker'kachin, everything will get worse."

"They won't find out," he says soothingly, reaching out to touch her cheek. "And they won't kill me, either. I won't let them. We are going to get out of this without giving up everything I've worked for."

"But..."

"No buts. Give me time to figure out what we need to do." His voice is firm, and to my surprise, she closes her mouth and looks away immediately. Rusyard moves toward me, and I instinctively take a step back. He chuckles. "Easy, easy. I won't bite."

I say nothing, but Mother mutters "*asshole*" under her breath. He ignores her.

"Obviously, now that I have a means to change back, I no longer need the townsguard to bring me an artifact—or whatever fake they dug up. So, the town is in no immediate danger of being burned down. That ought to please you."

"But *they* don't know that," I say. "The easiest way to put a stop to all this is if the dragon just disappears and we—"

"I propose we solve a couple problems at once. It's nearly the new moon, is it not? How about you and I stage a little show?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we fight—faking it this time, of course, no real danger to you—and then have a confrontation during which you, using your words alone, persuade Ker'kachin not to attack and agree to a peaceful coexistence with the city, like he had before the artifact business."

"Peaceful?" Mother repeats. "You call all that *peaceful*?"

He doesn't so much as glance her way, and continues to address me. "That way, we both get what we want. I keep the money I've earned and don't have to explain Ker'kachin's disappearance, the townsguard backs off, I've bought myself some time to find a way to deal with the money, and you get to be a hero."

"I didn't come here to be a hero," I say. "I came here to stop you from hurting anyone."

"And how has that worked out for you?"

I flinch but don't respond.



“If I were you, Miss Meer, I’d take the offer. You’ll be paid for your services, and people will love you for persuading the mean old dragon to leave them alone for the time being.” He smiles, quite satisfied with himself. “Imagine the sort of work you could get if you build a good reputation here. You could make yourself useful all over the country, be very comfortable while you were at it.”

My breathing is shaky, and my hand reflexively curls into a fist. “Give me the necklace, and I’ll leave you to do what you want with the money. But Ker’kachin can’t come back. Ever.”

He raises his eyebrows briefly, opening his mouth to speak. Words fail him, and he closes his mouth once more before looking me over.

“I understand. You need a little time to sleep on it,” he finally says. “We’ve got a couple days. Leave me and my daughter to discuss our own matters, and you and I can talk once you’ve come around.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“We’ll see.” He steps back, wrapping an arm around his daughter’s shoulders. Where minutes ago she looked so happy and relaxed, she’s now tense and rigid. Her gaze remains fixed on the floor with a troubled expression. “Just as a show of goodwill, you can take Juna with you. Tell everyone you negotiated her release. That ought to keep them impressed and distracted for at least a day or so.”

“She *can* take me?” Mother sounds outright insulted. “Like you’re doing us this great act of charity.”

“*Don’t* try my patience, Juna.” His words are like shards of broken glass against the skin, and a flicker of the dragon returns to his gaze. “I’ll put behind us the fact that you attacked me like an animal, since I understand you can be foolish when you’re in shock. But don’t forget what I’m capable of when I’m not receiving my due respect.”

At that, he looks pointedly to me, and a shudder passes over Maryse’s face. Mother inhales sharply, but looks away from him.

“Come on, Lotte,” she says quietly. “Let’s get out of here.”

I nod numbly, but can’t stop myself from sparing one last horrified look at Maryse. She meets my eye for a second, during which she mouths, *Go*, but then she looks away again.

Doing as I’m told, I turn to leave on legs filled with wet sand, following Mother’s lead.

The air feels thick and putrid, and the sense of victory and joy I felt earlier

is completely gone, so hollowed out from within me that it feels like it was never there at all.

I can't bring myself to smile when Mother steps into fresh air and sunlight again for the first time in weeks, taking deep breaths and savoring it all.

I can't bring myself to feel happy that Maryse has her father back, or that the town won't be burned down.

It doesn't matter what good came of this. Not in the long run.

In the end, all I've done is hand more power over to that beast of a man, and I don't deserve to take any solace or sense of pride from that.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Mother's ankle has gotten mostly better, but it's still a bit too much to ask her to walk all the way to her apartment right now.

So I take her to my room at the boardinghouse, where she collapses to sit on the end of my bed.

We remain in silence for a minute before she simply says, "I need a drink. What do they have on tap here?"

"Um, they have some mead, but you..." I trail off.

She's always been fond of her beer and wine, but it got out of hand after Papa died. Nana finally had me help her remove all the alcohol from the house when Mother was at work one day, but even that didn't put a stop to it. I don't dare bring any of that up right now, though, not after she's been through so much.

Still, she seems to read my mind. "Indulge me this once, will you?" she asks. "I promise not to go overboard with it, but I think I've earned a single glass, given everything. Don't you?"

I hesitate, desperately reaching for the word *no*, but coming up empty. Instead, what I say is, "All right," and I find myself going back downstairs to the kitchen.

When I return, having carefully brought a small half glass of mead up the stairs, she takes it immediately and drains it in two gulps.

Setting the glass down on the bedside table, she comments, "That tastes absolutely vile. Thank you." A sigh escapes her before she looks up at me. "So...Rusyard can be a real fucker when he wants to be."

"I noticed." I sit down next to her, shoulders slumping. "Oh, Mother, what did I *do*?"

"For starters, you got me out of that shithole, so thank you for that."

"I also handed the super-powerful magic thing back to the despotic

dragon.”

“Well, yes, you also did do that.”

I groan, covering my face.

“Look, you did what you had to,” she says. “Now he’s not gonna set the town on fire, that’s always a good place to start.”

“But he’s got what he wants,” I say. “I have no leverage.”

“Hate to break it to you, honey, but you didn’t have any leverage before.” She shrugs. “I mean, what were you gonna do, make him promise not to burn anything down once he had the necklace back and hope he stuck to it? It may come as a shock to you that he’s not exactly a man of his word.”

“What am I going to do?”

“You’ll have to figure that out.”

My heart hurts a little bit. It’s ridiculous and completely over-idealistic, but a tiny part of me was hoping she’d say something like, “We’ll figure that out.” That same part was hoping my mother would pull me into a hug, tell me she’d help me fix this. *“Don’t worry, Lotte, I’m on your side, no matter what.”*

Even in my imagination, those words sound unnatural in my mother’s voice.

She runs a hand through her tangled and greasy hair, grumbling, “I honestly should’ve figured Rusyard was involved somehow. Self-centered thief, terrible temper, plus that kid of his coming around? I’m amazed I didn’t get it sooner.”

“To be fair, I don’t think anyone could reasonably expect you to predict your...friend was turning into a dragon.”

“That man is absolutely not my friend.”

“Well, no, I can’t imagine he is now. But what about before? Maryse told me you guys knew each other before all this started.”

“He was a convenient ally at times,” she admits. “Some jobs require an extra set of hands, and he has access to a lot of information that’s sometimes useful. The books he kept in his house, plus his other business contacts. It was always good to be cordial in case I needed to ask a favor. I think he found me occasionally amusing.”

“He knew you were from Rosburnt. When he first learned my name, he asked if I was from there... I think he pieced together I must’ve been your daughter right away. Did...did you ever tell him about me? Or Papa?”

She doesn’t answer right away, rubbing the back of her neck.

"I mentioned that I'm a widow," she finally says. "And I suppose Rosburnt came up once or twice, and I may have let it slip that I'm a mother."

"But you never talked about us much?" I ask, heart sinking.

"I told you, I...preferred to keep separate parts of my life separate."

Blinking away tears, I stare at the blank wall in front of me, so I don't have to look at her. Neither of us speak for what feels like hours.

Finally, I ask, "Why didn't you talk to me?"

She shakes her head. "Don't start."

"No." The bite in my voice is enough to make her flinch. I turn to face her. "I'm beyond wanting an apology, but you owe me at least a single word of explanation. Why did you stop writing, Mother?"

"Because..." She squeezes her eyes shut. "You know why. Losing Jasper was too much."

"I lost him too." My voice breaks. "I thought we could at least be miserable together."

"That was no good. I wasn't a mother to you anymore, not without him. And the mere thought of you was painful. You...you were too much of what he was, and also not enough."

It's one thing to suspect you aren't enough for your mother. It's another to hear it.

My bottom lip begins to tremble, but she continues, even as her eyes open and she sees the look on my face.

"I'll still love you, of course. I don't know what else to do," she says. "But I haven't been able to be a mother, and you haven't needed one for a long time, anyway."

"That's not true!" I force back a sob. "I did need—I still need a mother. I'm not done growing up, and I certainly wasn't when you left me. You could've—you could've tried."

"I *did* try." For the first time, a flicker of hurt passes through her eyes. "What do you think I was doing the first few months after your father died?"

"Mostly taking your grief out on me."

She flicks her gaze away. "I suppose I ought to be proud of you. You're a proper professional and you've finally the strength to stand up to me. For whatever it's worth, Lotte, none of this is because I don't love you."

"You don't love me *enough*. Or I'm not enough for you to love."

"That's how you're choosing to see it."

I stand, turning my back on her so she won't see the tears starting to spill.

“I’m glad you’re alive,” I say. “But I think you should go.”

“Oh, don’t be like that.” Her tone is dismissive, desperately sweeping the conversation under the rug, never to be examined again. “Look, now that we’re back in contact, I’m open to trying to talk more. I won’t move back to Rosburnt, but I’m sure Anneke and Scyler will be desperate to have you come back for a visit every now and then. We can see each other then, and I’ll write, if you like.”

“But you aren’t interested in being my parent.”

She pauses. “I don’t see what good that would do,” she says softly. “I love you, but I’ve obviously not been the mother you wanted or needed me to be. Maybe it’d be best if we...leave that stage of our relationship behind us. Start fresh.”

“You want to be my friend instead?” I ask.

“If you’d let me.”

I sniffle before a short, bitter laugh escapes me. “No offense, Juna, but from what I’ve seen, you’re not exactly the sort of person I want to be my friend.”

Behind me, I hear a short exhale, and then, “All right.” She stands, and her footsteps move toward the door, but before she goes, she pauses and adds, “I’ll go see if Anneke has an extra bed for me. Thank you for getting me out of there.”

With that, my mother leaves the room, closing the door behind her.

As soon as she’s gone, I sink to the floor, the tears flooding down my face without restraint now. What have I done?

For years, all I’ve wanted is my mother back, and now, when she’s offered, I sent her away. Am I really that much a fool?

I try to wipe my eyes, try to breathe. There’s pain, of course, pain and anger and a lot of blame to go around. But somewhere, buried underneath all that, is a sense of relief.

I feel lighter now, but I can’t tell if that’s because a weight’s been lifted off me, or because I cut a hole into myself. I think it’d be easier if she said she didn’t care about me, never cared about me. Or apologized and promised to do better.

But she didn’t, and she won’t.

This is the mother I have, and, even if she’s no longer going to hang like a fog over my life, I do have to make peace with that.

And so, I sit here, sobbing like a child, and allow myself to both revel and

despair in the fact that, at least in this moment, I'm on my own.

## Chapter Thirty

I'm woken by the sound of someone pounding on the door.

Groaning, I peer out from underneath the covers, and see that the sun's begun to rise, the sky a dispassionate blue gray.

I crawled into bed early last night and fell asleep almost instantly. I was hoping that somehow, going to bed would make everything magically fix itself in the morning and I'd feel better. But I don't.

Whoever's at the door knocks again, the noise rapid and booming.

"I'm coming," I call, reaching for a pair of trousers I threw over the nightstand before bed. "I have to get dressed."

"Hurry up with it," a man's voice barks.

I freeze in place. *Cornelis*.

I'd nearly forgotten I robbed his fiancée yesterday.

"If you're not out here in the next minute, I'm breaking down the door."

"Don-don't you think that's a little excessive?" I stammer, getting dressed as quickly as I can. I take a couple deep breaths, bracing myself, before going to the door and opening it.

Waiting for me is Cornelis in full uniform, along with one guard, who looks about as thrilled as I am to be dragged out this early in the morning.

I sigh. "I guess I know what you're here for."

He smiles, looking remarkably like his father. "Lotte Meer, by order of the townsguard, in the name of the council of this city and King Maikel IV, I hereby arrest you for theft."

I step outside and close the door behind me. "Let's go."

He deflates, the smile slipping off his face, looking downright disappointed.

I suppose he was hoping I'd put up a fight. But there's really no point.

There's no way I could possibly outrun him if I wanted to. Where would I



go? Out the window? His jaw clenching with annoyance, he grabs me by the paralyzed arm, and we head down the stairs, him pulling me along while the other guard follows.

Fortunately, not too many people are awake at this hour, so only a couple are around to witness my arrest. They look on with vague interest, but no one says anything. There's a horse and a small wagon parked outside.

Cornelis pulls me to sit with him in the wagon, still keeping a hold on my arm that would probably hurt if I had any feeling left in that limb. I guess the bruises tomorrow will tell me how bad it is. The other guard climbs onto the horse and begins the ride back to the townsguard offices.

"I have to say, I didn't expect this to go this easily," Cornelis says. "I thought you'd at least be smart enough to skip town."

"Not until my job is over," I say, glancing at the castle.

Is Rusyard there now, and in what form? Did Maryse manage to get some sleep? Is she all right?

"Norah was very upset. She liked you, and this is how you repay her?"

I cringe. "I am genuinely sorry about all this, for what little that's worth. I'll apologize to her, too, of course." I watch him for a minute, before I say, "I'd offer to pay to replace the necklace, but I suppose you'd have to guess the amount, wouldn't you?"

"What do you mean?" His eyes remain on the road ahead, but his voice drops to a low mutter, as if he's afraid of being overheard.

"I mean, considering where you got the necklace," I lower my voice in kind, "you didn't pay anything at all, right? I wonder if Norah knows that?"

He exhales slowly. "You don't know what you're talking about, and even if you did, these are serious accusations, Meer." Cornelis looks me in the eye, his gaze cold and unwavering. "I would certainly hope you have some proof."

"What happened to the other things you took from Maryse's house?"

"I had nothing to do with it, so I wouldn't know where those items went. She never filed an official report of a break-in, no doubt because she had stolen goods in her possession. If I had to guess, those items are long gone, probably sold to people who have enough sense not to speak against their suppliers."

"Especially if their supplier is a member of the townsguard."

"Rest assured, no one who swore to protect this city would ever abuse their position in such a manner. Which is good. If there were any such figures, I

can't imagine they would hesitate to make your life *extremely* unpleasant."

I shiver and turn away from him. He appears satisfied with this, and we don't speak for the rest of the ride.

With nothing else to think about, I ponder how getting arrested is going to wreck things. A first-time offense, the theft of a single necklace—surely, they won't keep me locked up too long for that? Anyone who didn't know what the necklace was would think it was cheap costume jewelry, easily replaced for ten or twenty jere.

Surely they'll let me go if I offer to pay, right?

Unless, of course, the captain of the townsguard is a corrupt asshole who hates me.

...

The holding cell isn't too crowded today, which gives me nothing to do except sit, stare at the wall, and wonder how long I'm going to be stuck here.

My bail's too high for me to pay it on my own, and it's not like I'd be allowed to go and get the money myself. One guard did agree to let Scyler know I'm here as soon as they come into work, so the best I can hope for is that they'll help me figure this out.

I don't want to have to ask them to pay for it, and I certainly would pay them back as soon as I was able. I can't sit here for weeks, not with everything going on.

I wonder if Mother actually went to stay with Anneke last night. Or maybe she skipped town before anyone could see her and ask any questions about how she escaped. It's not like she'd be any help either way.

A sigh escapes me as I lean my head back against the wall, closing my eyes. Alone with my thoughts really isn't anywhere I want to be right now. I wonder how Maryse could stand it.

I try to imagine she's here with me, but it's no good. She's inimitable, even in my mind.

I hope she's okay.

The hours drag on, though I have no way of knowing for sure how long I'm here. There are no windows or clocks in this room, and I see little point in asking the guard the time. It won't make the minutes pass any faster.

The only sure sign I get that time is going by at all is that every now and then, the guards change posts. Every time someone is called back upstairs, someone new arriving to take their place, they look relieved. I suppose this

must be the most boring job in the building most days.

I've taken to scraping my fingernail lightly against the stone wall, for the barest amount of physical activity, when I hear footsteps and a woman saying, "Meer. Your bail's been paid."

I look up, surprised, as she unlocks the cell door and swings it open, gesturing me to follow her. Standing on stiff legs, I do as I'm told, going back upstairs.

"You'll have to speak to a magistrate about your sentence next week," she says. "Understand that it'll be that much worse for you if you don't show up."

"Yes, ma'am. But who—?"

My question is answered for me when we step into the entrance area, and I see Scyler and Danil standing, waiting for me.

I let out a relieved sigh and rush toward them, greeting them each with a quick hug. I nearly cringe when I hug Scyler; they're oddly damp. I lean back to look at their face and see that, despite the chilly weather, their brown skin is glistening like they've been running. Danil looks similarly exhausted, his hair damp from sweat.

"Thank you," I say. "I promise, I'll pay you back—"

"Wasn't us," Scyler says. "Maryse heard you'd been arrested before we did. She came to the restaurant around noon to drop off the money for your bail, said we should keep whatever was left."

I blush. She really did that for me? I wish she was here so I could thank her, give her a hug, see if she's okay.

Scyler doesn't notice the look on my face. "We've been running around town all day, trying to get supplies where they need to go—we went back to the restaurant to sit down only half an hour ago, but then Ma told us Maryse came by, so, well, here we are."

I cringe. I hate that I deprived them of a well-earned break. "I'm sorry. Thank you for coming to get me. Did Maryse say how she knew what happened? And how long was I down there?"

"It's nearly four now," Danil says. "My guess would be that she heard it from someone who heard it from the captain."

"Apparently," Scyler says, "he's quite proud he managed to arrest the kid who stole from his house in broad daylight." They squint at me, before giving me a single good slap upside the head.

"Ouch!"

“What were you *thinking*?” They sound less angry and more appalled by my foolishness, which is fair. “If I have to be related to a criminal, can I at least be related to one who keeps some plausible deniability? Now you’re gonna have a record, and have to pay a big fine, at the very *least*, and for what? Just to piss Cornelis off?”

“No, that’s not why...” I glance around and lower my voice. “Listen, can we talk somewhere private? It’s about what Maryse told us the other day.”

We go outside and find the stables empty.

Ducking inside, I take another paranoid look around before whispering, “So, Danil, I don’t know how much they told you—”

“Maryse’s absentee father was absent because he turned into a dragon and got stuck,” he says, waving his hand. “Scy brought me up to speed as soon as they heard.”

“Does anyone else know?” I ask.

“No.”

“Good. Good.” I give them as short a summary of the last twenty-four hours as I can possibly manage, though I leave out the discussion I had with Mother. I really don’t want to rip those wounds open right now. So I end the story with my arrest, and how Cornelis indirectly admitted he’s the one who broke into Maryse’s house.

After a long pause, Scyler simply says, “Well, shit.”

Danil leans back against the stable wall, looking worried. “I never liked him,” he says, “but I admit, I’m surprised to hear he’s a criminal. He was so proud of breaking away from the family business.”

“I guess the apple didn’t fall too far from that particular tree,” Scyler says, tucking a stray lock of hair behind their ear. “We have to find some way to get that necklace away from him if we’re ever going to put a stop to this. And we can’t tell Cornelis. I think Maryse is right that finding out Ker’kachin is his father will only make things worse, and if Rusyard is willing to call a truce for now, we need to take it.”

“Is there no way to remove him from his position?” I ask, sorely missing Captain Vikker. “I mean, he’s biased and unreasonable, that has to be grounds, right?”

“Not without the interference of the council, and they’re a bit busy dealing with the city-wide crisis. Until this all blows over, we’re stuck with him, unless he *really* messes up and forces them to act. Or, you know, he dies.”

“*Darling*,” Danil reprimands.

“What? I’m not saying he *should* die, I’m saying that if he did, they’d probably have to replace him with, I don’t know, a paperweight or something.”

“Look, Lotte, until your court date, the thing I think you should focus on is trying to persuade Rusyard to let the whole thing go, maybe leave town,” he says. “Stay out of the captain’s way. You cannot risk getting in worse trouble, so let us run interference here. I know there are others in the townsguard who do not like that he was promoted; we may be able to get some of them to help us.”

I nod. “Okay.”

“Do you know where Maryse is?” Scyler asks. “Wherever she is, I’m betting that’s where Rusyard is hunkering down until he feels he can reveal himself.”

“No. I haven’t seen her since I left the castle yesterday. She may have come back to the boardinghouse, but I was in bed pretty early—and then I was, well, in jail.”

“Find her. If her father won’t talk to you, he’ll at least talk to her, and I think she’ll talk to you. And try not to rack up any more charges while you’re at it, okay?”

...

Maryse isn’t at the pawn shop, which is the first place I check, but when I knock on her door at the boardinghouse, I’m pleasantly surprised by her door swinging open.

Her hair’s a mess and her eyes are tired, but when she sees me, she manages something close to a smile. I smile back, joy surging through me at the sight of her, in spite of everything.

“You’re back,” she says, sounding relieved.

Before I can respond, she’s seized me by the front of my shirt and pulled me in, throwing her arms around me and burying her face in my shoulder. I stumble, flushed at the sudden affection and warmth, but hug her back, closing my eyes.

Any anger and resentment is forgotten, at least for the time being. For now, I’m so happy to have her here, safe and in my arms.

We stand there like this for a few minutes, not saying anything, holding each other, before she pulls away and leads me into her apartment.

“Is your father here?” I ask, sitting down on the couch.

She joins me. “Back at the castle. He didn’t want to leave the money unsupervised for longer than he had to, so we went this morning, and he told me to come back on my own. Said he’d be back for dinner.”

“I guess that explains where you got money for bail.” I nudge her in the arm. “Thank you, by the way. Scyler and Danil got me out a little while ago. I’ll pay you back as soon as—”

“Don’t worry about that,” she says quickly. “You got me my father back, the least I could do is post your bail.”

“Did your father see it that way?”

She looks at the floor. “He doesn’t know. I took the money when he was distracted. It’s a lot harder for him to watch the whole room as a human. I thought about asking him, but I figured it’d be better to beg forgiveness for taking it without permission than for disobeying him. Either way, I wasn’t going to leave you there.”

“Thank you,” I say again.

“Of course.”

Our eyes meet, and for a few seconds, all the noise in my head stops, and I forget why we’re here and everything that’s happened. It’s only us.

I can’t kiss her now. Can I? No. Bad idea. I shouldn’t. Right?

We both look away at once, and I cough, remembering myself.

“What does your father plan to do?” I ask.

“Honestly? I don’t know. I think... I think I can convince him to leave town, at least for a while, if we can find a way to take the money with us.”

I sigh. “Maryse, you know that’s a pretty big ‘if.’”

“There *has* to be a way. And—and once I find it, he’ll...he’ll go peacefully, and he won’t hurt anyone else. He won’t hurt you again. I won’t let him.”

I wish I could do or say something to make her feel better. That desperate look in her eyes makes my heart hurt. I never want Maryse to feel this awful.

My hand comes up to touch her cheek, and to my surprise, she doesn’t pull away. “It’s not your fault, what he chooses to do.”

“I helped him do it. That’s my fault.”

“Well...yes. But right now? His refusal to back off, that’s all him. I know you’re doing what you can, but it isn’t your fault if he won’t do the right thing.”

“He...” Her eyes are somehow full of both hope and fear. “Pa loves me, and that’s been enough before. It’s been enough to make him listen, make

him show mercy. It has to be enough now because that's all I have to work with."

"Maryse..."

She reaches up to touch my hand, interlacing our fingers and squeezing gently for a few seconds before resting our hands in her lap. I stare at them as she says, "I hate to say this, but it may be safest for you to—I mean, I know you don't want to hear this, but Pa offered you a quick and easy out and I think you should take it."

After a moment of shock, I slowly pull my hand away from hers.

"You know I can't do that."

"Sure you can." She sounds desperate, touching my wrist and trying to get me to look her in the eye. "Be a hero, take the money and *run*. He won't bother you, no one will. He can't hurt you anymore if you leave, and I can't make the same promise if you stay." Then, softly, she adds, "I can't stand to lose you, Lotte."

I stare down at the floor, taking a deep breath. It's almost funny. I'd have given anything to hear Maryse say that, but not like this.

"When he...when he attacked you, and I thought you might die, I was so afraid, and I never want to feel that way again," she says. "And I don't want to be stuck in between you and my father. I...care about you both so much, and I—"

"I care about you, too." *Care* is an understatement. "But I can't leave and let him keep people under his thumb like this."

Rusyard might not stop until he's dead.

The thought is sudden, and sends a chill through me. I don't want to hurt anyone, not even someone like Rusyard.

But what do you do when it's the only way to stop more suffering?

"You talk like he's a monster," Maryse says.

I don't know what to say to that. I certainly can't say what I'm thinking.

Anyone who's done what Rusyard has done, anyone who'd put his own daughter through this...

Well. *Monster* seems like as good a word as any.

After a pause, I clear my throat, standing and pulling her up with me. "Let's see if supper's ready yet," I suggest. "They gave me a tiny block of cheese and a couple slices of plain bread for lunch in the holding cell. I'm starving. And you shouldn't just sit here worrying about your father."

"I haven't *just* been doing that," she protests, but she accompanies me to

the dining room anyway.

Unfortunately, my plans of sitting and enjoying our meal in companionable silence, or maybe talking about anything except either of our parents, are dashed the second we step inside the room.

Sitting at one of the tables, enjoying a bowl of hot lentil soup, is Rusyard.

It might actually be a good thing there's not much in my stomach right now. The mere sight of him sends a wave of nausea through me.

He's shaved and changed clothes since I saw him last, wearing a smart but simple suede tunic. The necklace that has caused so much trouble now hangs around his neck, looking completely inoffensive and harmless.

He looks up when he hears our footsteps, and smiles upon spotting Maryse. She smiles back, but I can see the corners of her mouth shaking ever so slightly.

We get our bowls and bread from the kitchen and take the bench opposite him. I stir my soup and avoid looking him in the eye. Not because I'm afraid—I'm not afraid anymore, dammit, I am *not*—but because I'm angry.

He doesn't seem to notice, or perhaps he simply doesn't care what I think.

"Hello, Maryse. Meer," he says. "Did the two of you know how many people assumed I was dead because I dropped off the face of the earth for a few months? Well, 'assumed' is being charitable, a surprising number said they *hoped*, but still."

"I think *everyone* thought you were dead," Maryse says. "Cornelis, Letja, and Horats certainly did. They were counting the days until it was legal."

"Mm, I'm aware." An irritated glint makes its way into his eyes. "I spoke to Letja and Horats this afternoon, let them know I'm back. I wish I could say they were happy to see me. They'll tell Cornelis soon enough, I'm sure. If not, I will—let him know he's not getting one coin from my vault."

"So he won't be able to shut me out?" The relief in her voice is palpable.

"Hm? Oh no. No, he won't." He reaches for her plate and takes her piece of bread, taking a bite before saying, "The real problem we have to worry about right now is that we have to find some way to stop him from—well, doing what he wants to do."

He glances around the room warily, but no one seems to be paying much attention to us.

There are murmurs, though, little snippets of other people's conversations, that catch my attention.

"No one's sure what the townsguard is planning—"



“Did the Dragontongue manage to reach a peace with that monster?”

“Is it true things are quiet by the castle? Is it true the smell of sulfur is fading?”

Rusyard’s voice forces my attention away from the whispers and my increasing heartbeat. “Have you given my suggestion any more thought?”

“No.” I shove another spoonful of lentils into my mouth.

“Well, clock’s ticking. I hope we can put all this unpleasantness behind us.”

As we eat, Rusyard and Maryse discuss different business partners they’ll need to alert to his reappearance, names I don’t recognize. I stay silent, picking at my food, still getting the hang of eating left-handed, and trying to relax.

He has no need to start a fight with me right now, and if he wanted to hurt me, he wouldn’t do it here. Everything’s fine. I can relax. Everything is fine.

Maybe it’s all in my imagination, but there’s a certain rigidity and tension in Maryse’s posture and movements, like she’s a piece of machinery gone rusty.

A few days ago, I would’ve been sure that the return of her father would’ve made her happy, more at ease. But that was before I knew who he was.

No matter what she says about being able to get him to see reason, about having faith in him, the hesitation in her voice and the nervous energy in her eyes tell a different story.

If I was displeased to see Rusyard, that’s nothing compared to the sour-tasting disgust I feel when the door swings open again, bringing in a gust of wind as well as Cornelis.

Since being promoted, his uniform has come to include a more ornate coat, as well as several additional medals that jangle when he walks. I never saw Vikker wear any such thing.

Just as I feared, he looks around the room and begins coming toward our table when he spots me. Maryse’s eyes widen when she sees him, glancing from him to their father and back again, but she doesn’t say anything.

Rusyard begins to turn in his seat, but as soon as he spots who it is out of the corner of his eye, he shifts back to his previous position and reaches for the necklace. With a movement so quick and light I never would’ve spotted it if I weren’t looking right at him, he hides the stone underneath his shirt.

“There you are, Meer, I was—” Cornelis breaks off mid-sentence when he finally notices Rusyard and knocks into the table with a small grunt. Frozen

in place, he stares at his father, who stares right back at him. His face is boyish and horrified. Finally, his voice escapes in a croak. “Pa?”

“Hello, Cornelis. I heard you got a fancy new title in my absence. Hope you didn’t cause any trouble getting it.”

The surprise falls away from his face, replaced by grim acceptance. “So you’ve heard about our troubles, then?”

“Your sister was filling me in.”

Cornelis’s gray eyes flick toward Maryse, and a small frown creases his brow when he sees her practically shrinking into herself and looking for a place to hide. I can’t blame him for his confusion. I’ve known Maryse for only a few weeks, and this is absolutely nothing like I’ve come to expect from her.

“Well, I’m sure you can tell how much you’ve been missed,” he finally says. “Where’ve you been?”

“Here and there.”

“In jail?”

“No.”

“Wish your daughter could say the same. You know we all thought you were dead?”

“I’ve been told as much.” He chuckles. “Try not to look so disappointed for the sake of my pride, would you? If you want to get rid of me, you’ll have to do it yourself.”

“Don’t tempt me.” He looks to me. “Meer, are you aware that your mother has been released?”

I nod. “Ker’kachin agreed to let her go last night.”

“And is there any particular reason this development was not immediately reported to the townsguard?”

That almost makes me laugh out loud. Pick a number! But I don’t say that. Instead, I say, “No. No particular reason. I was tired, I guess.”

“Guard Prins informed me their aunt was freed, and I thought they had to be mistaken until they told me they heard it from you personally. An oversight I’m sure you won’t let happen again.”

“Yes...an oversight.”

Cornelis clenches his jaw. “How lucky that you and Maryse both got a parent back in the same night.”

I shift in my seat, trying not to look too guilty. “I guess it is.”

“Pa, you and Juna Meer are friends, are you not?”

Rusyard represses a snort of laughter. “The last time she saw me, she punched me.”

“Well, you keep very odd company. I know you two have worked together in the past.”

“Yes, we have,” he says idly. “I may see if she’s interested in working with me again.”

“The townsguard thanks you for the heads-up.” He looks back at me. “Don’t miss your court date, Meer.”

“I won’t.”

Cornelis nods to his father and sister and then leaves without another word.

The second he’s gone, both Maryse and I let out simultaneous sighs of relief. I push away my bowl, no longer hungry.

“He knows,” Maryse says.

“Don’t be ridiculous. He couldn’t know,” Rusyard replies.

I think they’re both right. There’s no way Cornelis could know the truth about Ker’kachin—there’s no way anyone in the loop would’ve told him. But anyone can see that this whole situation is weird. He certainly has to have figured out that *something* is going on.

Eventually, Rusyard gets to his feet, saying, “Well, I’m headed off to work. There’s a lot to figure out and a lot to get done before our deadline hits. Maryse, come catch up with me when you’re done here.”

“I will.”

“And Meer, think over my offer, will you? You stand to gain a lot from it.”

I nod, unable to speak. There’s no way I can accept his devil’s bargain, but I do need to think the matter over. I can’t screw this up, I can’t make any more mistakes. There’s too much to lose, for everyone involved.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Maryse and I find each other early the next morning and quickly come to the agreement that we need a plan.

She's still certain that Cornelis knows more than he's letting on, and I have to agree with her. The best thing for Rusyard would be to let the money go and slip away from the whole mess quietly. The real trick is convincing him of that.

"Is he always this stubborn?" I ask.

We're walking toward the antiques shop now.

Both of us were out of bed before sunrise, having similar trouble sleeping peacefully. She has no idea where Rusyard slept. Maybe he slept in the back room of the shop, maybe he stayed among his hoard of treasure, or maybe he hasn't slept at all. All she knows is that she's to meet him so they can discuss their next move. I doubt he's aware I'll be coming along.

"Not to the extent of foolishness, but yes." Her arms are crossed, hugging herself in her upset, her shoulders slack. It's an unpleasant change from the thief who walked down these streets as if they were paved just for her. "He fights for everything he wants and fights harder to keep what he has. But he usually knows when to cut his losses and run. I...I don't know what's gotten into him. Maybe he's gotten used to being too big to lose."

My reply quickly fades from my mind when we turn the corner and Basvaan Family Antiquities and Fine Goods comes into view.

It's one of many shops along this street, squeezed tightly together in brick boxes. All of them are closed, some looking as though they may never reopen, except for the antiques shop.

There are still boards over the windows, but the door hangs ominously open, beckoning us in while simultaneously encouraging us to run away.

We exchange a look, and no discussion is needed. Without so much as a

word, we both break into a sprint, dashing across the road and up the steps.

Maryse is first inside, and I follow behind her, gasping when I see that a lantern sitting on the counter is already lit. That's not the only thing on the counter, either. There's a small collection of jewelry, necklaces and earrings and brooches, all of which look fairly valuable. The gems on them glitter and shine in the dim light, and I immediately think of the dragon's hoard. But why am I looking at them now?

Rusyard could easily be here. That's possible, isn't it?

But he doesn't strike me as the sort to leave the door open, certainly not with expensive goods lying around.

Maryse's eyes dart, her discomfort apparent, before she calls out, her voice frayed and unsure. "Pa?"

We both jump at the sound of footsteps coming from the back room, and without thinking I take a half step forward, reaching to grip Maryse's arm.

The door swings open, and my heart hits the bottom of my stomach when Cornelis steps out. He's in uniform but looks like he's been up for hours. I suddenly notice the black cloak he wore yesterday tossed onto a chair, crumpled and forgotten.

"Hello, Maryse. Miss Meer." He steps behind the counter, moving with ease. I try to picture him as a boy, working here with his family, but no matter what, I can see him only as someone who shouldn't be here. "I was hoping he'd be with you. I have some questions."

"What's going on?" I ask, because Maryse has gone completely rigid and is staring at the items on the counter.

"What's going on is that I'm tired of waiting around to see what my father and this one are going to do. I'd rather stop them doing it—and I hope you realize, if you stand in the way of that, you're in direct conflict with the law." He scoops up one of the pieces of jewelry, an elaborate collar dripping with emeralds. "Tell me, Meer, do you recognize this?"

"No," I say, which is the truth. "Should I?"

"Mm, I suppose you would've been a little preoccupied last time you were in the room with it. This piece belongs to Councilwoman Shere. When we were first forced to start giving tithes, she was the first to volunteer to give up her own personal possessions—this included. For months it's been sitting in that pit of wasted gold. And now I find it here. What do you make of that?"

What I make of that is that Rusyard's ego has officially outgrown his foresight.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“I can’t confirm yet whether the other items were also taken from the dragon’s hoard,” he says, “but I’m willing to place my bets. In any case, finding out for certain will be easy enough; we keep records of everything taken for the tithe payments.”

Without thinking, my hand slides down Maryse’s arm to grip her hand, and to my surprise, she laces our fingers and gives me a squeeze. She still isn’t looking at me or her brother, and there’s a distinctly panicked look in her eye, like a rabbit cornered by a fox.

“Do you have any idea the trouble Pa is in if he doesn’t have a good explanation for all of this?”

Finally, she speaks, simply saying, “Yes.”

Footsteps come from behind us, the door creaking as someone knocks into it. Looking over my shoulder, I see Rusyard stop and stand in the entrance, tilting his head curiously at the scene before him.

“Well,” he finally says. “I suppose you didn’t come here to wish me a good morning?”

“You’ve gotten rusty in your absence, Pa.” Cornelis gestures to the items on the counter with a cold smile. “I couldn’t believe I found these so easily after coming in here. I can only imagine what I’d find if I could figure out where you’re staying.”

Rusyard walks closer, and a familiar silver chain is barely visible, peeking out from beneath his shirt. I swallow, hoping Cornelis doesn’t notice it. That would be about the only way to make this situation worse.

“Cheap costume jewelry,” Rusyard says. “Is that what you’re so proud of finding?”

“No. There’s something else.” He disappears behind the counter again, kneeling and reappearing holding a wooden crate in his hands. With some difficulty, he carries it out to show us.

I frown. It’s an ordinary crate, there must be dozens like it in the shop.

Cornelis sets it on the ground with a *thunk* and kicks off the lid, and my heart stops for a second as I see the fireworks, the rudimentary explosives that were planted in the castle before Maryse removed them.

The three of us stare at the crate while Cornelis stands there, satisfied and furious. Rusyard’s face holds no expression, save for the way his jaw clenches. He steals a look at Maryse.

My blood runs cold, and I instinctively squeeze her fingers tighter.

We're in so much trouble.

So, so much trouble and the worst part is, I'm pretty sure Maryse is going to take the most heat. I don't want that to happen; I don't want her to be arrested or worse. All I want to do is pull her out of here and run far, far away, leave Morwassen's Pass and never look back.

"I gave strict orders that the weaponry placed was not to be removed," Cornelis says. "So how on earth did it end up here?"

No one answers him, none of us daring to breathe so much as a word that could incriminate us.

"Meer?" He looks at me, and I avoid his gaze. "You want to tell me anything?"

"No."

"Listen." He takes a step toward me, and I instinctively step back. "You don't want to cover for these two. They'll both throw you to the wolves the second you quit being useful. If you know anything, now's your chance to talk."

"I don't know anything."

"Bullshit."

We stare at each other.

I tilt my chin upward in an attempt at seeming confident, but the truth is, I think my knees might give out. Maryse's thumb rubs the back of my hand, and I try to focus on that feeling. It's the sole anchor I have.

"Think this through," he says. "If you don't tell me what's happening, I'll have more than enough cause to arrest *you*. Again."

A chill passes over me. "What?"

"You're the only person who has access and regularly goes into that place and comes out alive, besides Maryse. Pa was legally missing until a few days ago, so until I get that figured out, nothing would hold up against him in court—even the items being here leads a clearer path back to Maryse than him."

"That's right," Maryse speaks up, her voice brittle. "It leads back to me. No one would ever believe Lotte was involved."

"Oh, I doubt anyone would think she did this alone. But you always did prefer to work with an accomplice. Maybe with *him* gone"—he flashes his eyes toward Rusyard—"you decided to recruit someone who could help you with bigger scores. Provide her with a place to stash the loot and means to sell it. After all, you were both seen at the King's Auction, and now she has a criminal charge on her record." He laughs, and the sound makes me cringe.

“Hell, as I’m saying it, even I’m starting to wonder if it might be true!”

His gaze lowers to where we’re holding hands, and he tilts his head. My face flushes, but I don’t let go.

“You two plan to take the money and run off into the sunset together, is that it? Makes a compelling story for a magistrate.”

For a second, I worry that she’ll pull her hand away, but she doesn’t. She only holds mine tighter.

“Lotte didn’t do this, and you know it,” she says. “Leave her out of this.”

“Gladly. So long as she tells me what did happen.”

“Go to Hell,” I say.

“Fine. Remember when you’re rotting in prison for the next several years, I tried to give you an out.” He seizes me by the arm, forcing me from Maryse’s grasp. She reaches out and brushes her fingers against mine, desperately attempting to pull me back. “I can’t believe I get to do this again. Lotte Meer, by order of the townsguard, in the name of council of this city and King Maikel IV, I hereby arrest—”

“Let go of her!”

Maryse rushes toward us, forcing herself between Cornelis and me to try to shove him off me. I stumble backward, bumping into a shelf, as my arm is freed from his grip.

Cornelis sneers at her before grabbing her squarely by the shoulders and throwing her to the ground with ease. Her light frame slams against the crate before she flops to the floor, a pained shout escaping her. Cornelis reaches for me again, but I’m too fast for him, kneeling down next to Maryse. She sits up, rubbing her shoulder and cringing.

“Are you all right?” I ask.

“Here, let me help.” From above me comes Rusyard’s voice. He leans down, extending a hand to Maryse, which she takes. He’s begun to pull her to her feet when Cornelis and I spot the same thing at the same time.

The necklace has fallen out from under Rusyard’s shirt, the turquoise teardrop plain as day, glinting in the candlelight.

It’s not until he’s straightened up, Maryse back on steady footing, that he notices us watching him. Astonishment lights Cornelis’s eyes as he stares at the necklace.

I don’t dare speak or breathe.

Rusyard follows his son’s gaze, and so does Maryse, and she goes pale as they both realize what’s happened.



After several seconds of absolute quiet, Rusyard finally finds words. “Oh dear.”

“Where did you get that thing?” Cornelis seems to have forgotten all about Maryse and me, stalking toward his father and leaving us to back up against the counter.

“You know I’m not going to tell you that,” Rusyard says, dropping all attempts at feigning ignorance now. “And if you’re as smart as I hope any child of mine would be, you’ll leave right now and forget about all this.”

“That sounded like a threat.”

“Oh, it was.” He takes a step forward. Cornelis is far taller than he is, but his presence is such that it makes his son look like he’s only a child. “You don’t want to arrest me, and you don’t want to annoy me any more than you already have. I suggest you leave us alone.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Come on, kid.” He gives his son a smile that betrays no love or warmth, clapping him on the shoulder. “Try to be smart about this. You don’t want to get deeper into this mess. Forget what you saw here, and I’ll give you a cut of whatever I can get for the jewelry. What do you say?”

Cornelis’s gray eyes narrow, and he straightens up with carefully cultivated dignity. “You should’ve thought of that five years ago,” he says. “Keep your money. Most of it will be mine once you die, anyway.”

The smile falls from Rusyard’s face as quickly as it came. “Well, that’s disappointing to hear.” He looks to Maryse. “Come on.”

Not waiting for her response, he turns on his heel and walks outside.

After a moment of stunned stillness, Cornelis chases after him, dashing down the stairs to follow at his heels. Maryse and I are last, hurrying outside but keeping a safe distance.

“What is he doing?” I mutter in her ear.

“I wish I knew,” she whispers back.

Out on the street, we’re bathed in sunlight and fresh air, much different from the oppressively claustrophobic darkness of the shop.

The street is full of people preparing to face another day, some pulling carts or carrying their supplies. A handful slow their pace or stop walking to watch, noticing the altercation.

Cornelis’s face has gone red, and he grabs his father by the arm, stopping him in his tracks.

“Let go of us,” Rusyard says quietly. Something in his words makes me

want to curl into myself. Maryse feels it, too, huddling closer to me and watching with trepidation.

“I no longer take orders from you. And you’ve nowhere to run this time. Rusyard Basvaan, by order of the townsguard—” He doesn’t get to finish his sentence. He cuts himself off in confusion when Rusyard reaches to unclasp the necklace and hold it in his hands, dangling it in front of him. He makes a grab for it, only for Rusyard to yank it away with a cruel smile.

And then, Rusyard looks past his son, right at Maryse, and says, “Catch.”

She blinks. “Catch—?”

In the space of a single second, the necklace goes from resting in his grasp to falling rapidly to the ground, and that flash of bright light bursts from where he stands.

A few gasps and cries ring in my ears as I squint against the glow, and Maryse lets go of my hand, diving forward.

A woman screams as my vision comes back, and I gasp, a hand flying to cover my mouth, when I see Ker’kachin, standing at his full height over Cornelis and Maryse.

She’s on the ground, taking advantage of her brother’s shock to find the necklace and scoop it up, stowing it in her pocket. I stumble forward, grabbing her and pulling her back.

All around me are frightened, confused people, some staying where they are and watching with fascination and terror, others turning and running. In the distance, I hear the sounds of doors opening, closing, and locking, of shouts and cries of bewilderment.

The world bursts into chaos, but the four of us remain right where we are. It’s as if we’re the figures in the center of a snow globe, unmoving as a blizzard rages on around us. Cornelis is frozen, his jaw dropped and his eyes fixed on the dragon, whose hot breath comes out in heavy and feral pants.

With great reluctance, I let go of Maryse and step forward to tug at Cornelis’s arm. “Come on. You’ll want to get out of here.”

He doesn’t get a chance to take my advice or discard it. Reaching a massive claw forward, Ker’kachin—Rusyard—grabs Cornelis and drags him forward. Lifting him off the ground is a pathetically easy endeavor, and all Cornelis can do is kick uselessly and try to wriggle free while the dragon examines him.

Finally, he stands back on his hind legs, still squeezing him tightly.

“Pa, stop!” Maryse’s cry goes unanswered as he unfurls his wings.

Having seen him only in the castle, I've never gotten a chance to see his full wingspan until now. It's truly massive, as to be expected of a dragon this size. The tips of his wings slam into buildings, breaking some windows, causing roof tiles to fall to the ground.

Shouts from the people inside aren't enough to tear my gaze away from him.

Like his scales, his wings are red fading into gray, and they are beautiful, lacking any tears or sign of injury. They beat once, twice, three times, sending gusts of wind strong enough to upset some potted plants on a windowsill.

Lifting off the ground, Ker'kachin rises several feet in the air, still grasping his son, who has stopped kicking and moved on to begging for his life.

"Pa—please—I don't want to—please—" His voice is strained as he coughs and sputters. "Pa, please, let me go—let me go, *please...*"

Ker'kachin doesn't go too far, only hovering above the rooftops, and he stares at the man whose life he holds in his claws, debating whether or not to take it away.

"Pa!" Maryse calls again. "Please, don't do this! You'll regret it, you know you will!"

He continues to hover, squeezing Cornelis tightly, before finally, he seems to reconsider. When he positions himself to come back to the ground, the last of the stragglers in the street decide to make a run for it in case he goes for them next. He makes a landing that shakes the earth, but he doesn't let go of Cornelis.

Instead, he fixes those hate-filled eyes on me. "Tell Maryse to find us at the castle," he snarls. "She's to come alone."

I nod limply. He tosses Cornelis to the ground, knocking him around like a ragdoll with a single swipe of his tail, which also takes out several carts and booths that people abandoned when they saw him. Cornelis lies on the ground, coughing, but Ker'kachin isn't done with me yet.

"Make sure she knows not to keep us waiting. She's got a lot to make up for, getting us caught and drawing attention from *him*."

I flinch at the words, and nod, despite knowing that there's no way I'll ever repeat them to her. It would break her heart.

Flapping his wings once more, the dragon rises into the sky and takes off, flying over the city. Screams ring out from the distance as he disappears toward the castle, leaving us standing in a vacant street with only the sound

of our own shallow breath.

Slowly, Cornelis gets to his feet. He stares at the sky, at the empty space the dragon occupied before he shifts his gaze to us. “I hope you’re not expecting a thank-you,” he snaps. His eyes are bloodshot and full of fire.

“Never from you,” Maryse replies.

“Good.” He glances back upward and then mutters, “I have to go to the office and let everyone know the situation. I’ll deal with the two of you later.” He turns and walks away, limping.

My chest and throat feel tight, and I have to squeeze my eyes shut and physically force myself to breathe. The fear is subsiding, but it’s replaced by an overwhelming feeling of dread. What will happen now?

What will happen to Maryse?

I open my eyes slowly and watch her. She’s trembling. I reach toward her, wanting to pull her to me in an embrace, wanting to tell her everything will be okay, even if it’s a lie, but she’s too shaken to notice.

“Are you okay?” I finally ask.

She’s hugging her arms. “He’ll be wanting to talk to me. I should...” She trails off before looking down at the ground. “I’ll talk to him. I’ll fix this. He... You saw, he listens to me sometimes. He’ll listen if I find the right way to say it.”

“Maryse...Maryse, this isn’t—”

“I have to go.” Quick and restless, she leaves, darting down a side street, no doubt headed toward the castle.

It takes several minutes of standing there alone, trying to breathe, before I can bring myself to move.

I have to go let Scyler and Danil know what’s happened. Walking with heavy limbs and a hollow feeling in my chest, I keep repeating to myself, I have to keep going.

That’s my only choice. I have to keep going.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Maryse isn't at supper that night, but maybe that's a good thing. Ever since this morning, the whole city's been alight with news spreading faster than any disease.

Between eyewitness accounts and bits of gossip that have been passed around, people have pieced together that the dragon, the great and fearsome Ker'kachin, is actually Rusyard Basvaan.

I spent the day at Pim's Table with Anneke and Edmond, helping manage things in their makeshift shelter. Mostly I was tasked with helping distribute food and water to people as needed, and to get ingredients while Anneke and Rafe cooked. I stopped by Maryse's apartment too, but she wasn't there.

Ker'kachin hasn't been spotted since he went back to the castle yesterday, but people have been on edge ever since, expecting a reappearance. Even the few early birds I can usually trust to see up and about at this hour seem to have decided to stay home.

The quiet is troubling, and it's all wrong. Cities are meant to be awake and alive at all hours, especially a city like this one. I hate to see it so dormant.

After much internal debate, I decide to go see Cornelis. Little as I want to talk to him, we do need a plan. And he's unruly enough that I will feel much safer if I know what he's up to.

When I get to the townsguard offices, I'm greeted with a flurry of activity.

It looks like every single guard in the city is here, or maybe that's how it feels, because so many of them are moving with a nervous energy about the building.

The man at the front desk tells me the captain is busy and unable to speak with anyone. He's able to direct me to Scyler, whom I find out back, helping another guard load massive amounts of gunpowder into a cart. They wipe sweat from their brow, their hair in a loose braid.

I jog toward Scyler, grabbing them by the arm. “What’s going on?”

“Lotte?” They glance around. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I know, but I wanted to talk to you about...whatever this is.” I gesture toward the cart.

They let out a sigh, before calling to the other guard that they’ll be back in a minute. They lead me a few feet away, standing in the shadow of the building and out of earshot of anyone else. “Cornelis is not telling anyone anything. Just that we’re going to the castle tonight armed to the teeth. I asked him what the plan is, and he told me to do as he says and trust him.”

My stomach drops. *Trust Cornelis?* The idea is ridiculous on its face.

“Do you?”

“Of course not,” they scoff. “But I don’t know what to do. Hard to run interference against a plan when you don’t know what the plan is. Has Maryse said anything about what Rusyard’s up to?”

“I haven’t seen Maryse since yesterday morning.”

They frown. “That’s odd. She would’ve had to go back to the boardinghouse to sleep, wouldn’t she?”

“That’s what I thought. I mean, maybe I missed her, but...I don’t know. I don’t like this. Any of this.”

“No. Nor do I.”

“Can you just...not go?” I ask, feeling hopeful yet naive as I say it.

Scyler tilts their head. “Kiddo.” Their voice is surprisingly gentle, and they place a steadying hand on my shoulder. “I’m gonna survive. Come on, what do you take me for? I’ll be fine.”

“I know you’re trained and everything, but you know what Ker’kachin is capable of, and he’s probably *really* pissed right now. I don’t...I don’t want anything to happen to you, or Danil. Can’t you two try to stay out of it?”

“No.” Their blunt response doesn’t really come as a surprise, but it still causes dread to drift into my mind like fog. “We both knew something like this would be asked of us. It’s part of the job. I can’t abandon everyone else to face that monster while I hunker down to save my own hide.”

I can’t bring myself to respond, my gaze falling to stare at the ground.

“Ah, chin up. Danil and I are made of stronger stuff than you realize. We’ll be okay.”

It’s a nice thought. I wish I could get myself to believe it.

Slowly, I realize what I need to do.

I don’t like it, it scares the living daylights out of me, and it may not be the

smartest course of action. But it's also the *only* course of action.

"I'm going, too," I say, looking up at their face once more. I want my voice to be firm and confident, but instead it's every bit as anxious as I feel on the inside. Even so, I refuse to let my gaze waver.

Scyler's eyes widen, and they rapidly shake their head. "Absolutely not," they say, as if this resolves the matter entirely.

"You know I should."

"I'm not letting you walk into danger when you don't have to. I'm not letting you get yourself killed!" I simply stare at them, raising my eyebrows and tilting my head in response, but they huff. "Yes, I'm a hypocrite. I don't care. You're not going."

"Look," I say, "if you're going to go deal with the big, scary dragon, wouldn't it make more sense to bring someone who can *talk* to the big, scary dragon?"

"I'm pretty sure he's beyond negotiating, Lotte."

"I know, but a translator may still come in handy."

They purse their lips, but say nothing. They bow their head, obviously thinking very hard, before they finally ask, "If I say 'no,' are you going to show up to help anyway?"

"Probably," I admit.

"Then I guess the best thing I can hope for is keeping you close so I can keep you safe."

"Looks that way."

Scyler exhales, leaning their head back and rolling their eyes toward the heavens. "I was never supposed to be the responsible one," they say to no one in particular. "How did this happen to me?"

...

Scyler isn't speaking to me.

When they and Danil came to collect me before going to meet the other guards, they didn't respond to my greeting beyond a wordless glower. Their oak-colored eyes could've given me frostbite. All my other attempts at conversation have gotten more or less the same result. I guess they're a little angry, which is fair.

But I'll make it up to them. I'll help. I have to help.

My hair's currently stuffed inside an old, dented helmet that feels a little too tight, and I keep having to roll up my sleeves. Danil snuck a spare

uniform out of the offices and brought it to me to change into. I look like a proper soldier in the townsguard purple, especially once I put on the cape and helmet. The only thing I'm missing is a sword.

I tried one last time to knock on Maryse's door before we left, but there was still no response.

No one really notices me or glances my way as I arrive at the townsguard offices with Scyler and Danil as the sun begins to set.

The sky is a violent and hateful shade of red, with the stars slowly beginning to appear and shimmer ever so faintly in the distance. The moon remains conspicuously absent.

An absolute mob of guards swarms the office and the street outside, all anxiously pacing, absentmindedly touching their weapons. Some try to calm their nervous horses, while others make final assessments of the weaponry that's been loaded into carts and wagons.

For the first time, I see two massive cannons loaded into carts pulled by draft horses. Some of the higher-ranking officers have guns on their hips. They look as though they've never been fired, and their owners keep peering at them, as if they don't quite know what they're looking at. As I follow Scyler and Danil, I hear mutterings and whispered conversations of those gathered.

"Still no idea what—"

"Has anyone heard—?"

"—wouldn't tell me anything—"

Near the front of the crowd, Cornelis sits atop a pure white steed, looking downright regal as he watches over everything. A rusted gun, small and simple, rests on one hip, and like always, his sword rests on the other.

His horse, like most of them, is pulling a wagon, though I can't see what's inside. There are a couple barrels; I'm guessing they're full of gunpowder or extra arrows or something. But there's something else, covered by a tarp.

I squint, trying to get a sense of the shape of whatever's underneath there, but before I can look for too long, Danil touches my shoulder, a calloused hand giving me a gentle pat.

"Come on," he says quietly. "We can't risk you being spotted."

I nod and we blend into the crowd. Everyone's too preoccupied with their own nerves to look closely at me, even when they knock into me.

After a few minutes, a whistle from the front prompts everyone to start moving toward the castle.



Looking around, I see that the windows and doors on all the buildings have been shut. Every now and then, I see someone looking out from behind the glass. One woman who watches us is crying. Is she frightened we won't come back, or more worried about what will happen to her and the city if this goes wrong?

"Listen," Scyler says. I look up at them, surprised they're speaking to me after an hour of the silent treatment. "I don't know what'll happen up there. I know you want to be helpful, but if I tell you to run, you turn and you *run*. Understand?"

"Scy..."

"Do you understand?"

I swallow and nod. "Yes."

"Good."

The walk to the castle is long and scored by the occasional whispers and mutterings of those around me, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't afraid. As the castle gets closer and closer, I look at the people I'm with and try not to imagine their bodies, dead and broken like Vikker's, strewn on the ground like pieces of debris after a hurricane.

A few meters away from the castle, in a painfully quiet sea of people, Cornelis joins us.

The crowd parts to let him and his horse pulling the cart through.

We all watch as Cornelis gets off his horse. Raising a hand, he calls out to us, without a hint of fear of being heard by the beast hiding within.

"This all comes to a stop tonight," he says, voice calm and clear. "If we are lucky, all the weaponry I asked you to bring won't be necessary, and we'll be able to end this quickly. But, if we must fight, I am ordering you all to give it everything you've got. No restraint, no mercy. If he resists, you are not to try to bring him in alive. Tonight, we put an end to this by *any means necessary*."

I shiver, and all around me, I see people tense and nod grimly.

"For the city, in the name of our king and country," he continues, "we will put an end to this. Stand by."

This is met with a chorus of "yes sirs," which swallow up my shaky exhale.

Soldiers, including Scyler and Danil, all reach for their swords or guns, not drawing them yet, but having them ready.

I crane my neck to see over the people ahead of me. Cornelis nods to two men I recognize from my meetings with Vikker—I think they must've been

just below him in the chain of command. They go to the cart he was pulling with his horse, and reach to pull the tarp away.

Instantly, gasps and exclamations fill the air. It's not until the two men forcefully hoist the cargo out of the cart that I see what's got everyone so worked up.

Stumbling, gagged and blindfolded, with her hands bound behind her, is Maryse.

I gasp, and without thinking, I push past the people in front of me to get closer to the front of the crowd. I hear Scyler mutter something and take off after me, and I trust Danil is right behind them, but I don't stop moving. I can't.

The fear I felt before has been replaced by absolute fury, the kind that could start wars and end kingdoms. My blood pumps through me, feeling like fire that threatens to burn me from the inside out, and I don't realize I've started shoving people aside in my haste until one of them swears at me.

"Maryse—" I call out, but before I can say another word, a hand claps over my mouth and an arm pulls me back. I grunt and struggle before realizing Danil has caught up to me, hugging me against his chest.

"Not the time," Scyler says, appearing next to me. When I look at them, the first thing I notice is the putrid venom in their gaze, which they've fixed squarely on Cornelis. "That son of a bitch."

Danil lets me go and I glance at them both desperately. "We have to get her out of here."

Before any of us can begin to think of how to do that, Cornelis motions for his two lackeys to follow him. They do, bringing Maryse along with them. She kicks and wriggles, trying to break free, but they keep a firm hold on her, dragging her like a sack of oats.

Most of the soldiers are hanging back, looking nervous, but a handful follow a couple feet behind the three men and their hostage.

I don't know if they want to see what's going on, if they want to protect their captain, or if they're eager for a good fight.

Moving slower now, Danil, Scyler and I make our way to the front of that group. If Cornelis were to glance over his shoulder, he'd surely spot me. But he doesn't.

Instead, he reaches the door to the castle, pokes his head inside, and shouts, his voice echoing down the stone chamber.

"Come outside," he barks, as if his father is a new recruit he can order

about. “We have much to discuss. And kindly come outside as a human.”

This is met with silence for a couple seconds before a low growl emerges from the pathway. A couple people back up, but I square my shoulders and stay where I am.

My gaze falls on Maryse, who’s gone deathly still in her captor’s grip.

Cornelis doesn’t flinch. “I’ve brought an incentive, since I thought you’d make this difficult.” He looks to one of his men and nods, and he takes the gag off Maryse, giving her a rough nudge on the back of the head.

She gasps and pants, making another attempt at escape, but they’re too strong for her. Her knees are trembling, but she manages to remain upright. Finally, she calls out, “Pa...I’m sorry...”

With a single, graceful movement, Cornelis unsheathes his sword.

The people around me gasp, one crying out, “No!” as he takes his sister from the other two men and pulls her against him, resting the blade under her chin.

Backing up, he calls out, “You know I’ll do it, Rusyard. I’d love to be rid of either one of you. You’ve thirty seconds.”

We’re all completely still and silent for what may as well be forever.

I want nothing more than to run over there, to knock Cornelis and his weapon away and get Maryse out of here, but I can’t. I can’t do a thing without risking her life. Without risking everyone’s lives. All I can do is watch, bite back tears, and pray.

Finally, after several agonizing seconds, the sound of footsteps draws closer from within. And, sending a wave of surprise and disbelief through the crowd, Rusyard steps out the door, his face grim.

He hasn’t changed clothes since yesterday, though the necklace now hangs around his neck once more. His gray eyes scan the crowd, and for a brief second, his gaze falls on me. He squints, making eye contact, and I simply shake my head, pleading silently for him to understand and listen. Fortunately, his gaze shifts to Maryse. His jaw clenches before he looks to Cornelis.

“Blackmail and, I presume, kidnapping. Very fitting behavior for an officer,” he says.

“I really hope you, of all men, don’t intend to lecture me on shaky morals.” Cornelis presses his blade tighter against Maryse’s pale neck. She winces and shrinks into herself. “All I do is for the good of this city. The safety of a common little thief is insignificant compared to that.”

Rusyard's lip twitches, a brief sneer flashing across his face. "You said you wanted to talk. So, talk."

"You're going to walk out of here with me, leaving the stolen treasure behind for the townsguard to reclaim, and you are going to stand trial for your crimes, after which I am sure you'll be sentenced to a lifetime in prison. Times like these, I wish we hadn't done away with public executions. But watching you waste away the rest of your life in a cell underground will be consolation enough."

He scoffs. "And why would I do that?"

"Because I have your favorite." He gives Maryse a squeeze, a brotherly hug with all the affection of a bear trap. "Turn yourself in now, or she dies."

My breath halts in my chest. He can't mean that. Surely he must be bluffing. He would never be able to keep his position, and surely, *surely*, he wouldn't murder his own sister, would he?

Maryse has gone limp like a ragdoll, and if it weren't for Cornelis holding her, she'd probably collapse to the ground. But she remains in his grasp, and her hands are shaking.

Even with the blindfold covering her eyes, I can tell that she's on the edge of tears. She certainly doesn't believe this is a bluff. And, no matter what I desperately try to convince myself of, I can't quite bring myself to believe that, either.

Looking away from her feels impossible, but I finally force myself to join everyone else in staring at Rusyard. The entire crowd is holding its breath, waiting to hear what he'll say. Waiting to hear him surrender.

The seconds that go by are excruciating, each one feeling longer than the last, until finally he says, "If you kill her, you lose all leverage. And besides, you don't have the guts. You can't do it."

Cornelis's eyes are alight with fury, and he snarls, "Don't ever tell me what I can or cannot do," before he raises his sword and makes a single, clean swipe across Maryse's cheek. His blade leaves behind a gash that bleeds ruby red, causing her to cry out in pain.

Rusyard flinches but says nothing, averting his gaze.

Everything inside me burns. I hate him. I hate them both.

Cornelis stares at him, panting like an exhausted animal, and presses his bloodstained blade to her neck once more, not quite digging into the skin, but close enough that only the slightest bit of pressure would open a vein.

"Pa!" Maryse lets out a strangled cry. For the first time since I've met her,

she sounds like a child. “Pa, please!”

He takes a breath. “Is there not another arrangement we could—?”

“She’s your *daughter*!”

For a split second I wonder who said that, before I realize the words came flying out of my own mouth. Loud, angry, and borderline hysterical, they catch everyone off guard as several people notice my presence for the first time.

Among those startled is Cornelis, whose grasp on Maryse loosens as he looks over his shoulder to gape at me. Maryse ducks, darting from underneath his arms and stumbling forward, trying to run. With her arms still tied behind her back, she can’t take her blindfold off, so she’s left at a severe disadvantage as Cornelis lunges forward to try to grab her.

Scyler and I are already moving, Scyler reaches him before me and jumps on his back, their arms around his neck. He bucks and shakes like a mule while I dash past them toward Maryse.

Rusyard is on the move as well, but he goes right past Maryse, pausing only briefly to glance at her before moving on.

Panting, I reach her as he begins to go past a wrestling Scyler and Cornelis.

Reaching up, I rip the blindfold from her eyes, moving so roughly I’m afraid I’ve hurt her.

Her blood smears onto my hand and across her face, and she hisses as I accidentally touch her wound. Her eyes are red and watery, and we stare at each other, silent and full of things to say, when we hear the gunshot.

Maryse lets out a yelp, and I whirl around to see Rusyard collapsed on the ground, bleeding profusely from a hole in his back.

I’ve never seen a gun used before.

The injury isn’t like an arrow wound. It’s smaller, but deeper, causing him to writhe and cry out in pain. Looking to his left, I see Cornelis, hunched over from Scyler clinging to his back. They’ve both gone still, staring in shock that he actually managed to shoot Rusyard. His arm is still outstretched, pistol in hand.

The noise caused people to shout, but that turns to screaming when there’s a flash of light.

In the second it takes for the change to happen, something small and hard hits me on the forehead. I yelp, my good hand flying up to touch where it hit me, but I find no injury or cause of the hurt. When my vision comes back, I briefly glance at the ground to see if I can find out what it was, but my

attention is quickly drawn to something else.

So much happens in the next ten seconds that my eyes can hardly keep up.

Ker'kachin lets out a roar that could wake the dead as he rears his head back. He's still bleeding, but the wound that was crippling to the man is a mere annoyance to the dragon.

Many of the guards ready their weapons, while others simply turn and take off running.

A couple fire arrows that land and lodge themselves in the thick scales, but he doesn't seem to notice. He unfurls his wings and screams, wordless and furious, and lashes his tail across the crowd, sending many people to the ground. One man who got the brunt of it is thrown several feet, flying through the air before crashing to the dirt.

The next person who dares to take a shot at him is a woman who, with trembling hands, fires an arrow that manages to hit him in the throat. After ripping it out with a claw and crushing it to pieces, Ker'kachin reaches for her and, within seconds, snaps her neck and throws her, sending her corpse flying meters away.

Cornelis finally manages to shake Scyler off, sending them falling to the ground. Danil hurries to help them to their feet, while Cornelis loads his gun again and takes aim.

He manages to fire off one more shot, which barely grazes the dragon's ear, before Ker'kachin swerves his head around to stare at him, lowering it so they're a mere foot apart.

Cornelis doesn't flinch, but doesn't look away or lower his weapon. He stares at the beast, at his father, with hatred that has sustained him for I don't know how long.

Ker'kachin's lips curl back to reveal those teeth, those teeth that will haunt my nightmares for the rest of my life, and I realize he's smiling.

Then his mouth opens and he lunges forward, and Cornelis doesn't stand a chance.

I've scarcely had this thought flash through my mind before I hear Maryse scream, and then I'm screaming, too, because Cornelis's entire body has disappeared into the jagged maw.

Maryse looks away, burying her face in my shoulder as she whimpers and shudders, but, much as I'd like to look anywhere else, I can't.

My gaze is transfixed as I watch Ker'kachin grind his teeth into the soft flesh and fragile bones of his son, splitting him apart and tearing him into a

mess of blood and muscle and viscera.

The first bite alone would've put an end to it for Cornelis. The rest of us aren't so lucky.

Dragons can't eat meat, and humans are, from a certain perspective, just meat. So when he's decided he's satisfied, a process that takes five thoroughly enjoyed bites, Ker'kachin spits pieces of Cornelis out onto the grass, covered in saliva and blood. I squeeze my eyes shut when I get too good of a look at what must've been part of a leg. It didn't look like anything that had ever been part of a human body. It looked...well, like meat.

Three massive gusts of wind cause me to open my eyes again.

Ker'kachin has taken off into the sky, avoiding with magnificent ease the few who still dare to shoot at him, and soars away, toward the forest and out of sight.

Maryse still hasn't looked back up. "Is he...is he..."

I nod. "He's gone," I assure her.

Without any thought or discussion, we sink to the ground that is dampened with blood and debris, as the people all around us burst into panic and fury. While the remaining superior officers yell at everyone to remain calm, some dash toward the castle, and Scyler and Danil run toward us, Maryse and I sit on the ground.

She leans against me, gasping and shuddering and beginning to cry, and I can't help but join her.

Staring at the ground, not daring to look up for fear of what I'll see, something glints and catches my eye. My hand trembles as I reach for it, picking it up and bringing it close to examine it. This must be what hit me in the forehead. It's a piece of a broken silver chain. I frown, confused.

"What the...?" I mutter. I examine it closer, and then, slowly, my memory echoes back to what Rusyard looked like before he transformed into the dragon. What he had on around his neck. "Oh shit."

Horried, numb understanding sinks into me like I'm being boiled alive.

The necklace is broken, which means he can't use it to change back.

He's never going to be human again.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

The whole city is in a state of absolute uproar. In the distance, I hear confused cries and shouts.

With Cornelis dead, it's unclear who, exactly, is in charge now. People break off into their own groups and evade the scene, leaving the four of us to make our way back to the city on our own.

Danil lifts Maryse and me into the cart before mounting the horse, who paws anxiously at the ground, eyes darting confusedly.

The first several houses we pass are empty, having been evacuated days ago. Dark windows look strangely like eyes in the night, staring at us, asking why this had to happen.

I try not to think too much about that. The whole ride back to the city, I keep my arm around Maryse. Neither of us dare speak.

Nestling into her hair, I close my eyes and wish I could fall asleep and wake up to a better day. Instead, I remain awake with her leaning against me, and I decide to be grateful that we are both alive and together. Without realizing I'm doing it, I press a kiss to the top of her head. Blushing, I expect her to pull away, but she doesn't.

It's only when we arrive at Pim's Table, that she manages to speak.

"Why didn't he help me?"

I open my eyes and look down at her, and am startled to see that she's already looking at me. Her green eyes are still shining with tears, and have the weathered and worn-out look of someone who's been through war.

"It's not your fault," I say, because I don't know the answer, just that it wasn't her doing.

"He..." She blinks, bringing a hand up to rub her eyes. "Pa loves me, or always said he did. I thought I was... I did everything he asked, I never doubted him. I've hardly asked for anything and given him everything he



needed from me. He...he must love me after all that, right?"

"Of..." I cut myself off. I almost said *of course he does*, and this morning, I would've been sure that was the thing to say. But now, I'm not so certain. It could be the truth. Or a comforting lie. In the end, all I can say is, "I don't know."

Scyler and Danil get off the horse and tie it to a post outside the restaurant, and come to help us get out of the cart.

"Come on," Scyler says, taking Maryse by the hand and leading her to the door. "My pa will help you with that cut. Then we'll get some food in you."

Scyler's parents gasp and rush to help as soon as they see us, especially the injury on Maryse's face. They take us downstairs, away from the prying eyes of the evacuees, many of whom give Maryse dirty looks. I suppose they all know whose daughter she is.

While Anneke disappears upstairs to prepare a meal for us, we collapse to sit in chairs that feel soft as clouds after the ride in the cart.

Edmond soon joins us, hovering over Maryse with a rag soaked in alcohol.

"Doesn't look like you need stitches," he says, dabbing her wound with the rag and causing her to wince. "But you may have a bit of a scar."

"Thank you," she mumbles. She looks to Scyler, Danil, and me. "Thank you, too. I...I'd probably be dead now if you hadn't..."

I reach over to touch her hand briefly. "We weren't going to let that happen."

She smiles weakly.

Edmond goes to put away the makeshift medical kit and help his wife with the food, and we all sit there, not speaking.

It's almost a full two minutes of quiet before Scyler is finally the one brave enough to break the silence. "What are we going to do?"

"We have to stop him," Maryse says quietly.

We stare at her. I don't think anyone expected her to be the one to say it. She isn't looking at any of us, hugging her arms with her breath becoming shaky.

"He's..." She sighs. "He's never going to go away peacefully. Ever. So we have to stop him."

Danil rubs his chin. "Do you think he will become human again soon? If we could find out where he is hiding and get the necklace away from him, we could arrest him then."

Scyler nods. "We may be able to sneak up on him. If nothing else, he has to

sleep sometime.”

“We can’t do that,” I say.

“What? Why not?” they ask.

“He had the necklace on when he transformed. It broke.”

Danil goes pale. “Which means...”

“He’s stuck.”

The room is once again doused in silence, save for the sound of Maryse trying not to cry.

Finally, it’s Scyler once again who speaks first. “Well. Fuck me, then.”

Footsteps descend the stairs, and Edmond and Anneke appear carrying bowls of soup that smells like cabbage and carrots. As they distribute the food, a third person follows them, but it’s the last person I’d expect to see.

She’s walking much better now, and her cheeks have gotten a little more color back. It looks like she was able to wash her hair, too, having twisted her curls into a manageable bun at the back of her head.

“Mother!” I nearly drop the bowl that I’ve balanced in my lap. It’s hard enough to eat one-handed with a table; without one, it’s an entire ordeal. A bit of hot soup splashes onto my leg and makes me yelp.

She steps onto the landing and looks me up and down. “Why are you dressed like a guard?”

I blink. “Why are you *here*?”

“I was planning to skip town until this whole thing blew over,” she says, walking over to the arm of Danil’s chair and plopping herself down to sit there as if she was invited. “When I saw Rusyard flying overhead, I thought maybe it was better to get to a shelter. This was the only one I knew I wouldn’t get kicked out of. Besides, I thought you might come here—good to get confirmation you’re alive.”

Best not to think about how this is the closest I’ve gotten to an “I love you” from her in several years. There are more important things to deal with right now, even if seeing her makes me want to find a bed to crawl under and hide.

“We’re trying to figure out what to do about Rusyard.” It takes a lot of concentrated effort on my part, but my voice comes out calm and level. Professional. Like she’s only an unruly colleague.

“Well, that seems obvious,” she says with a snort. “Kill him.”

Maryse flinches, and Scyler glares at her. “Juna, shut it.”

“What? I think we’re sort of beyond ‘arrest him and give him a stern talking-to,’ aren’t we?” She gives me a look. “You know I’m right. This isn’t

gonna end any other way.”

I wince and avoid her gaze. Denying it is all I want to do, but I can't.

“For heaven's sake, Juna!” Anneke cries. “The man's daughter is right there.”

“Yes, and she should know better than anyone what I'm talking about.” Mother reaches across to nudge Maryse's shoulder, and it's enough to make me want to rip her arm off. “Come on. Your father's always been a stubborn, egotistical bastard, and now he's a stubborn, egotistical bastard with the power of an army. He'll kill any of us before he stops this. He's got to go.”

“Leave her alone—” I start to say, but Maryse cuts me off.

“She's right.” She looks over to me, her eyes gleaming with desperate sadness. “Lotte, you *know* she's right.”

“I...I do,” I admit. “I do know she's right. But he's still your father.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “He's not. He forfeited that position. I don't know when, but at some point, he decided I was no longer a priority. He quit being my father. And if he won't be my father anymore, I can't afford to think like I'm still his daughter.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I have to look at this like I'd look at it if he were anyone else, and...and if he were anyone else, I'd say we should kill him. So.” Her words are cold and perfectly logical, but her voice is afraid and full of regret.

I blink, tears filling my eyes. “I still hate the idea of killing anyone,” I say. “I know I protect people from dragons, but I protect them from us, too.”

Mother lets out a sigh. “This isn't a human or a dragon, though. Rusyard has made himself into something else entirely. And whatever that something is, he's a threat to everyone.”

Anneke and Edmond look rigid and completely out of their depths.

“Does the townsguard not have a plan?” Anneke asks.

“The townsguard doesn't have a captain,” Scyler says. “Cornelis is dead.”

Mother's eyes widen. “What? How?”

I grimace. “You don't want to know.”

“But—”

“Mother. Trust me.” I sigh, rubbing my temple to try to ease the growing fog in my head. “I'm not sure we have time to wait for things to calm down before Rusyard comes back and starts stirring up more trouble.”

“But he was flying toward the forest,” Edmond says. “Who knows if he's still there or where he's gotten to? You can't go looking for him now, you

have no leads.”

“No,” I admit.

Maryse slowly straightens in her seat, forehead creasing as the wheels in her head turn. “But maybe we could lure him back here. He won’t have gone far; he wouldn’t leave the hoard for that long. We could get his attention.”

“But how?” Scyler asks.

A grim, joyless smile appears on her face. “By threatening the one thing we know he actually cares about.”

...

The plan, much as it can be called one, is completely and thoroughly haphazard.

What few supplies we have, we’ve stolen from the townsguard. There’s a good chance it’s going to get us all killed.

And yet, the fear that flows through me isn’t alone. There’s also fierce, desperate determination for us to succeed and survive. Maybe that can be enough.

Thank the heavens this part of the city is already evacuated.

I’m back in the cart with Maryse, and this time we’re joined by Mother, who shocked us all by insisting that she be allowed to help.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to do this,” I say to her, as the cart shakes and shimmies over the uneven terrain.

On the floor between us is a crate that we picked up from the antiquities shop. Danil and Scyler used the chaos to steal other supplies from the townsguard office without being noticed.

“And miss the chance to give Rusyard some payback?” Mother snorts. “Not a chance.”

We’re almost to the castle now, passing by all the empty houses. The lack of people is still a little creepy, but I remind myself that it’s a blessing. The residents are out of the way, which gives us more room to work. So long as the five of us try to stay alive, this might turn out okay.

Maryse hasn’t said anything since we set off. She sits on the seat next to me, watching the world go by with her chin resting in her hands. I hesitantly touch her shoulder. She tenses, but relaxes when she looks over and sees it’s only me.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“No,” she says. “But that doesn’t really matter. This has to be done.”

“I know. But...no one expects you to feel good about this. I’m sure Scyler and Danil would let you off here if you don’t want—”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to do this. But I have to. I helped him start this; I helped him keep it going as long as he did. I owe it to everyone to help finish it.”

Slowly, I nod. “Okay. But...be careful.”

“You too.” She attempts a smile. “I hope you don’t die.”

I chuckle. “I hope *you* don’t die.”

None of us say anything else until we cross the bridge and arrive at the castle. I let out a long breath. It towers over us, unfeeling and imposing as ever. The stone that makes up the walls is strong, but years of neglect have left the foundation to devolve. And with no one to defend it, there’s nothing to stop us from taking advantage of that.

Pieces of Cornelis’s body are still littered across the ground, left there to rot like roadkill.

I cringe at the sight, and Mother looks disturbed, wincing and averting her gaze. Maryse’s hands begin to shake when she sees what’s left of her brother, but when I ask if she’s all right, she just says, “Ask me when this is over.”

I nod and do my best to follow her lead and ignore it. Easier said than done.

“Should we start planting these?” Mother asks, taking the lid off the crate we got from the antiquities shop. The day he found out the truth about his father and Ker’kachin, Cornelis was so shocked he forgot to confiscate the fireworks Maryse removed from the castle. Now we have a box of explosives to work with.

“Not yet.” I stand and climb off the cart before assisting Maryse. “First we need to lure him back.” I look over to Danil and Scyler. “You ready?”

Scyler nods and retrieves a bow and a bolt of arrows they got from the townsguard offices, a small piece of iron, and a slab of flint. Danil prepares the riskier element. The small crate he took contained gunpowder; he doesn’t need much to do a lot of damage.

I watch, trying not to worry, as he takes two small rags and fills one with gunpowder before tying it shut so it makes a little pouch. He then places the pouch inside the other rag, and ties that to the arrow, letting it hang from below the pointed end.

“How long will that take to burn through the fabric?” I ask nervously.

“Honestly? I have no idea. But not long. Speed will be of the essence. Shall

we get started?” he asks, looking to us all.

We nod, and Scyler gives him a kiss on the cheek.

“For good luck,” they say. “Danil, love of my life...we really don’t need to deal with a wildfire on top of everything else. So try not to miss.”

With that bit of encouragement, they take the flint and iron, and begin striking them together to create a spark.

Mother, Maryse, and I stand about four feet away, watching with uneasy anticipation.

They’re standard fire-starting tools; we’ve all used them, probably hundreds of times over the years. But none of us have ever tried to light a sack full of gunpowder.

I don’t realize Scyler has it lit until they let out a cry of “Oh, oh!” and dash away from Danil, joining us as he takes off.

He readies the arrow as he runs closer to the castle and, as the fabric burns away and my heart begins to pick up its pace, he fires it, aiming directly at the roof.

The stone walls won’t burn. But the wooden tiles on the roof will.

He hits his target, and the arrow plants itself in a tile near the edge of the roof as the gunpowder catches fire, causing an explosion that rings out like the drums of war over the city.

I flinch and cover one of my ears with my good arm, watching as the burst of flame brightens up the dark and, in what feels like a miracle, clings to the wood and begins to burn it away. The fire spreads slowly, but it spreads, and it begins to grow and shine brighter and brighter, smoke beginning to pour from the roof and drifting into the sky.

In the darkness of a moonless night, you can see it dancing in the air, beautiful and frightening.

As soon as the fire is lit, Scyler hurriedly retrieves the other weapons they brought. They give a simple longsword to Mother, who stumbles under its weight, and hand a shorter one to me. It’s light and made to be used with one hand, which is much appreciated, though I’m not sure if it’ll do much more than annoy a dragon. Maryse is given two daggers, which she handles with ease, as if they were made for her.

The flames will have a short lifespan; only as long as it’ll take for them to burn through all the tiles. Luckily, they need to burn for only two minutes when we hear screams and shouts from the city behind us.

At first, I think it’s simply because they’ve seen the fire, but then, I hear

the low, soft thud of wingbeats in the distance. It's a sound I can describe only as deep, rhythmic, and dense, and it's getting closer.

I dare look over my shoulder, and see Ker'kachin, maybe a mile above us in the sky, drawing closer and closer, smoke and steam already pouring from his mouth and nostrils.

The fire won't harm him, but that's okay. It was only a beacon, and it's done its job admirably. Now, it's time for us to do our part.

"He's here!" I call out, before I take off and run toward the castle door for what, no matter how this turns out, will be the last time.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Normally, running *into* a burning building would be something I'd advise against, but with Ker'kachin growing closer by the second, that's exactly what Danil, Maryse, and I do.

Scyler and Mother stay behind, though not far away. Their part comes next. But first, the three of us have to make ourselves bait.

In a way, being back in the castle is a strange relief.

It's nothing if not familiar by this point, and at least the great room is littered with treasure, not human remains. Looking up to where the ceiling should be, I can see the smoke and flames curling against the black sky, causing flickering, uneven light to dance across the room.

An enraged, wordless scream announces the arrival of Ker'kachin, who appears through the flame like a demon crawling up from the pits of torment.

The fire engulfs him briefly, but doesn't burn or hurt him, and he lands on the floor with a massive *thud*, nearly knocking me off-balance.

A growl rumbles from his throat as his crimson gaze rips through all of us. He crouches possessively over a pile of gold, arching his back and swinging his tail so quickly, he hits the wall. "Leave," he snarls, baring his teeth.

"No," I say.

He begins to charge at me, but I dash, putting enough room between him and myself for Danil to fire two arrows, both of which hit him. One lands in his shoulder, causing little more than an irritated grunt, but the other implants itself on the edge of the wound Cornelis gave him. A roar of pain escapes him, and he rears back, eyes closing and giving me time to get out of the way before he lands again, striking the ground with his two front claws.

Moving clumsily and without much thought, I take a wild swing with my sword, taking a chunk off a couple of his scales but not drawing any blood. He swipes at me, grazing my leg and almost grabbing me, but not quite.



Maryse is backed up against the wall, knives in hand as she watches, wide-eyed and terrified.

My breath is short and rapid, barely enough to sustain me as I take another jab at Ker'kachin. I manage to break through the scales and stab him this time, but before I can pull the sword back out, he lowers his head and makes a grab for me with his teeth.

He catches air as I duck, rolling on the floor and out of the way with only a second to spare. I push myself back up to my feet and run as he follows, his tail dragging through the coins that cover the floor.

I reach a wall and begin making my way around the perimeter. It's a large room, but with a massive dragon in the center of it and so much of the space occupied by wealth, there aren't many places I can run—fewer where I can hide.

Ker'kachin lets out a strained cry as he moves, my sword still dug into his skin.

I'm glad it's impeding him at least a little, but without it, I'm completely unarmed and completely defenseless. Danil and Maryse chase after him, each taking hits at him, but he's too focused on me to do much besides yelp and wince in response to each blow.

A cruel and raspy chuckle emerges from him as he backs me into a corner, and he draws his head back like a rattlesnake, preparing to strike. I shrink against the wall, mind racing.

What can I do, what can I do?

I have nothing with which to protect myself, nowhere to go.

Caged and caught, my eyes flick around, desperately searching for something, anything I can use to help.

I have no plan when my gaze falls on a small jewelry chest that lies open, empty, and discarded on the floor. But in the seconds it takes for Ker'kachin to take aim and make a strike at me, I've ducked to the floor.

He overshoots and misses, slamming his horns into the wall like a bull.

He screams, more frustrated than hurt, and rears back again as I get the box in my good arm. My aim isn't nearly as good as Danil's, but it doesn't really need to be.

Taking only a moment to aim, I pitch the box forward as hard as I possibly can. It hits him, clashing against his nose, causing him to flinch. It doesn't actually slow him down, but it does distract him—and right now, that's all I need.

I take advantage of the precious seconds it buys me to run out of the corner, sprinting past Ker'kachin and toward Danil and Maryse.

"Behind me!" Danil orders. He already has another arrow ready to go. He fires once, then twice, both hitting the dragon in the back, and is preparing a third shot when Ker'kachin swings his head around to look directly at him.

Curling smoke seeps from his mouth as he stares at him, but Danil doesn't flinch.

His third arrow strikes a direct hit on the dragon's face, planting itself in the soft skin on the edge of one of his eyes. Danil curses under his breath and backs up, hastily preparing another arrow. In the depths of Ker'kachin's mouth, I see the beginning of a burst of fire.

"Move—move!" I grab Maryse and pull her along behind me, Danil quickly following us as the first stream of flame hits the wall behind where we were standing.

The heat of dragon fire is indescribable. It threatens to decimate everything it touches, and my skin prickles with sweat and overwhelming, scorching fever. The legends say dragon fire was stolen from the core of the earth, burning hot and bright enough to create or end entire worlds. And in this moment, I wonder how I ever doubted it.

The red fire that pours from Ker'kachin's mouth is hypnotic as it tries to engulf us all.

A rumbling from the dragon's throat signals that he's getting ready to hit us again.

We've nowhere to go, and I'm about to hit the ground in a last-ditch effort to avoid the flame, when Maryse spins around and faces the dragon, raising both hands.

"Wait! Wait."

The rumbling ceases, and I stop to watch, desperately reaching out toward Maryse, hoping she'll come with us.

Ker'kachin stares down at her, squinting, eyes flickering in confusion. He looks at her as if she's a place he hasn't been in years, as if he's trying to recall the last time he saw her. There's no hint of recognition in his eyes, not anymore.

Whatever it was that was happening to him that made him less of himself and more of a beast, it's completely taken over now. But there must still be something in there that knows Maryse, or at least, wants to know her, because he doesn't attack her. Not yet, anyway.

“I’m going to get the arrow out,” she says, slowly putting her knives into her belt. I exchange a confused, terrified look with Danil, but she doesn’t look our way. She takes a slow, hesitant step toward Ker’kachin. “Let me help. Let me fix this.”

He curls a lip and growls, but that slowly dies down as she gets closer and reaches toward the arrow. She walks right up to him, closer than I’ve ever dared get, and wraps both hands around the arrow.

“See? I’ve got it,” she says gently.

With a labored tug, she pulls the arrow out of his skin.

And with a swift and remorseless thrust forward, she uses that same arrow to skewer him through the center of his eye.

The scream that rips from his throat is one of absolute agony, but she doesn’t pull away. She leans into it, putting all her weight on the arrow and driving it deeper and deeper into his eye, digging into the socket. When she finally lets go, it’s only so she can grab both of her knives and, with two strikes, plant them both into his other eye.

As he screams and writhes and tries to pull away from her, she clings on, and twists them both, the blades cutting through with a sickening *squelch*.

Danil shouts down the hall to Mother and Scyler. “Now!”

I hurry to grab Maryse and pull her out of the way.

Ker’kachin thrashes wildly, causing the walls to shake. Through the gap in the ceiling, I see still-burning pieces of wood fall from the roof and to the ground.

I cringe, praying they go out before they hit the ground and cause the grass to catch fire, but I don’t have much time to dwell on that. The dragon’s tail swings across the room, and would send me flying if not for the fact that Danil grabs me and Maryse and yanks us both out of the way in time.

Mother and Scyler come in, carrying the string of fireworks, now able to move without fear of being seen. They dash throughout the room, lining the walls with the explosives while Scyler keeps hold of the fuse at the end.

I watch them, hope flooding through me, when my distraction proves to be a mistake.

Both Maryse and Danil manage to duck out of the way as Ker’kachin lunges forward with one of his claws outstretched, but I catch on a fraction of a second too late.

I’m knocked to the ground, on my back, and he pins me, sinking a suffocating amount of weight onto his one claw. Although he can’t see my

struggle, he can feel me kick and try to break free, and he can hear my breath growing shallower and shallower.

He smiles, even as blood pours from his eyes and his movements grow slower, the sheer number of injuries he's sustained finally beginning to catch up with him.

I gasp, trying to keep enough airflow to stay alive, but he simply presses down on my chest tighter.

"Is that the Dragontongue?" he asks.

I don't give him a response. I couldn't if I wanted to; talking would be a waste of precious oxygen. He doesn't seem to need a reply, anyway.

He simply lets out a ragged, pained laugh, and a bit of his blood drips onto me. It's hot and rancid and splatters across one side of my face and into my hair. I stare up at him, still weakly kicking him, a fruitless action.

"We," he hisses, "have been looking forward to a chance to dispose of you for a *very* long time."

## Chapter Thirty-Five

“Lotte!”

Maryse...I can hear Maryse. Her frightened, frantic voice echoes through the room. Behind Ker’kachin, I hear footsteps and the sound of coins and jewels rattling.

“Over here! Over here, you monster!”

But he doesn’t let me go. He doesn’t turn to look and see the source of the commotion.

My chest is burning as I take useless gasps like a fish washed up onshore and desperately hoping it can still somehow live. The fire has turned the castle into an oven, the heat combined with the lack of air blurring my senses. My head feels light and fuzzy. I’m... I’m...

“Hey, Rusyard, come and get me instead!”

The faint sound of someone’s voice allows me to open my eyes again, and I weakly turn my head to see Mother standing near me, striking at the dragon’s claw with her sword, over and over again.

“Come on, you afraid?”

And then, suddenly, the weight on my chest lightens.

He’s still standing over me, but he’s distracted enough to stop pressing down on me, and I’m able to take desperate, grateful gulps of air. I’m still dizzy, but I’m more aware of my surroundings now.

Mother reaches down to scoop up a few coins, and pitches them at the dragon’s face. I would laugh at that if I had the breath. Apparently, we are capable of thinking alike.

Tail flicking with irritation, Ker’kachin lets go of me and sets off chasing Mother instead. He follows the sound of her voice, and she gladly leads him running across the room with several shouted insults more worthy of children in the schoolyard than a battle for the city’s life.

Maryse and Danil pull me to my feet, and I sway and stumble, knocking into her.

“Are you okay?” she asks, reaching up to try to wipe some of his blood off my skin.

I nod weakly. “I’m fine,” I rasp, before taking more deep breaths.

“Your mother has a death wish.” Danil observes her as she continues to holler and scream, encouraging the dragon to chase her through the room while Scyler continues laying the explosives.

A stream of fire floods from the dragon’s mouth, spewing in the general direction of my mother but failing to actually hit her.

She’s smaller and uninjured; she can move much faster than he can in his current condition. Even so, the sudden burst of flame catches her off guard and she trips, crashing to the ground and making a lot of noise as she lands in a pile of coins. Cringing, she forces herself back to her feet as he prepares to try again.

Without thinking, I run toward him, toward where I can still see my sword sticking out of his side. With the use of only one hand, I grab the hilt and plant a foot against the scales, yanking as hard as I can.

It takes all my strength, but I manage to pull it out, causing blood to gush out of the wound and eliciting a shriek from the beast. He whips his head away from my mother and towards me, smoke from his mouth flooding over me.

He opens his mouth, and I can see the fire rushing up from his throat.

I have only two seconds, so I don’t waste a fraction of an instant.

Lunging forward with one arm, I drive my blade into the roof of his mouth, lodging it in as deep as I possibly can before backing up against the wall, watching in horrified fascination as he screams and shakes his head, trying to dislodge it.

One claw comes up to hysterically try to grab at it, but he can’t get ahold of it.

When he snaps his mouth shut on instinct, a muffled and agonized shriek splits my eardrums as he inadvertently drives the sword in deeper. His mouth opens again as he tries to get a fire going, and I can see that the blade’s disappeared entirely, only the hilt of the sword visible now, protruding from the roof of his mouth.

Scyler knocks into me, still holding the fuse in their hand. Their face and hair are damp with sweat, but their eyes are bright and confident.

“Now?” I ask.

“Now,” they say with a nod.

On that word, Mother is the first to run for the exit, dashing down the long corridor back outside. I push Maryse forward, urging her to follow, and she’s the next one gone. Danil grabs me and starts hustling me toward the door while Scyler gets out their iron and flint once more, desperately clashing them together and trying to catch the fuse with a spark.

Ker’kachin’s breathing is ragged and uneven as he limps toward the sound of the flint striking the iron.

“Scyler, look out!”

My shriek causes him look toward us, and he breathes in deeply, trying to gain enough energy for another burst of fire.

Scyler stumbles out of the way, then dashes over to us. They stand next to me, backing up toward the door, before they look down at the fuse in their hand, and then at the dragon. Then, they meet my eye with a questioning tilt of their head.

Am I thinking what they’re thinking?

Yes. Yes, I am.

I nod once, and then say to Danil, “Hit him one more time, then run.”

He frowns, confused, but decides to trust me. Ready to his bow and arrow one final time, he sends the arrow flying toward his face, and doesn’t wait to see it land between his eyes before he turns and takes off down the corridor.

I grab Scyler by the shoulder and pull them to the ground with me as a stream of fire pours from the dragon’s mouth. We hit the stone floor as a massive pillar of heat rages above us. Gritting their teeth, Scyler raises the hand with the end of the fuse in it above their head.

They cry out in pain, pulling their hand back down, and I gasp at the sight of a nasty burn as the fuse hits the floor in front of us. A flicker of burning light catches my attention, and we both look up to see a small ember glowing on the end of the rope, which then rushes forward, up the length of the rope and toward the dynamite laid around the room, leaving a line of blackened ash behind it.

“Let’s go,” Scyler says, and they don’t need to tell me twice.

We clamber to our feet and stumble, practically tripping over each other to get down the hallway. We’re about a foot from the front door when the first bunch of fireworks goes off.

I don’t dare look behind me, but my ears ring with an explosion and stone

shaking and crumbling and falling to the ground, the sound of a dragon's confused grumbling turning to panicked, pained cries as the next explosion happens.

From there, it's like knocking over the first in a house of cards. The explosions grow louder and closer together, and soon, a buzzing drowns out everything else.

Scyler pushes me ahead of them so I'm out before them, and we both burst outside as the floor begins to shake. It's only when my feet hit dirt again that I dare look over my shoulder, back down the corridor as Scyler runs past me toward the others.

Cracks are forming in the walls, breaking through aged paint and stone, and in the distance, I can see the entryway to the great room crumbling and collapsing in on itself.

"Lotte!" Scyler's voice is faint through the ringing in my ears. "Lotte, *MOVE!*"

That breaks me out of my stupor, and my legs decide to work again.

I run forward, moving frantically toward the sound of their voice. I look up and see Maryse, standing at the bridge, waving her arms to get my attention.

I don't think of anything else. I run toward her.

She's lowered her arms and opened them for me by the time I reach her, and I collide with her and find myself enveloped by her as a loud *crack* rings through the air.

We both turn to look, and find ourselves watching in astonishment as the castle folds inward, all the stones that made up its skeleton now falling toward the center of itself. Toward Ker'kachin.

I expected the final collapse to be complete, to shake the earth, but it doesn't.

It's like a waterfall; powerful and too loud to ignore, but not overwhelming.

Watching the castle come down feels like watching a natural disaster that was always meant to happen.

When it finishes, when all goes quiet, and what was once the home of the royal family becomes nothing but a pile of stone, no one speaks.

We stand around, gasping for air and looking at each other as if to ask, now what?

Did we do it? Is anyone going to come after us?

I look around and see the final embers of the fire we started petering out.



A few patches of weeds burn, but Danil and Scyler are able to make quick work of them, stamping them out before they get out of control.

Mother sinks to sit on the dirt, sprawled out on the ground and looking up at the sky. She's shaking, and for a second I think she's crying, but then I realize she's simply dissolved into overwhelmed, relieved laughter, the kind that makes no noise but takes over your whole body.

Maryse and I look at each other, and slowly, I offer her my hand.

"We have to go check," I say.

She nods and takes my hand, and we walk toward the castle together.

Climbing over the piles of broken stone isn't easy, but we help each other.

It doesn't take long for us to find him.

He's pinned beneath the rubble, but not completely covered. His tail still moves limply, flicking the smallest of stones through the air but failing to cause anyone harm. His chest slowly, barely rises and falls as he takes useless, pathetic gasps of air.

Several stones fell directly onto his throat and have forced his head to the ground, lying against the gold, which looks so dull in the darkness.

Maryse's voice is trembling as she speaks to him. "Pa? Pa, do you...do you know it's me?"

He snorts at the sound of her voice, his jaw opening to try to make a grab at her, but he can't move his head and only bites weakly at the air in front of him. He makes a few more attempts before he gives up, coughing, his mouth still open.

I hesitate before reaching forward and grabbing the hilt of my sword.

With him pinned and so close to death, it doesn't take as much effort as I feared to pull it out. He groans, the most pitiful excuse for a flame escaping him, but it fizzles out quickly and doesn't come close to scorching us. The sword is completely caked in blood, and I wince at the sight of it before looking at Maryse.

"You don't want to see this part," I warn her.

"No," she agrees. "But I...I don't want to leave him before..."

I nod. "Okay. I'll...I'll try to make it quick."

We move slowly, and he makes no attempt at stopping us. He just lies there, limp and no longer struggling or fighting. He's not just unrecognizable as Rusyard anymore. He doesn't seem much like Ker'kachin, either.

I stop when I reach the top of his head, standing above where his brain is beneath the scales and bone. Nausea floods through me, but I steel my

resolve and raise the sword, pressing it against his scales. To my surprise, Maryse's hands come up over mine, holding the blade with me. Our eyes meet, and I nod. It'll go faster this way.

"On three," I say. "One...two..."

"Goodbye," she whispers.

*"Three."*

In unison, we both put all our weight on the sword and drive in through the dragon's skull.

It's...awful. Everything about it.

The feeling, the smell, the way his body tenses up and shakes and jolts a few times before going completely still. The way his breath finally stops, and his head droops, and the cold, uneasy feeling of finality that creeps over me.

My hand is shaking as I release the sword, and I step back.

I watch him for any signs of fight or resistance, but there are none.

He's dead.

I finally begin to breathe again as Maryse collapses, falling forward.

She kneels on the stone and throws her arms over the deceased monster, hiding her face.

All is silent and she stays there, not moving. Tears begin to sting at my eyes, and it's useless to try not to shed them.

"Maryse..." I whisper. Hesitantly, I step forward, before kneeling next to her, and laying one hand on her back. "Maryse, I'm so..."

She doesn't let me finish my sentence before she pulls me to her, burying her face in my shoulder as she finally begins to cry.

Her muffled sobs fill the air as she grieves the only father she's ever had, the only father she'll ever know. I hold her close and allow myself to cry in earnest as well, even as I whisper, "I've got you. It'll be okay. I promise, I've got you."

After I don't know how long, Scyler and Danil approach us, saying that other members of the townsguard have arrived and we need to leave this place.

It's only then that I open my eyes, look up, and realize that the sky has gotten lighter.

The sun is going to rise soon.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

We're all taken to the infirmary so we can have our wounds patched and get some rest.

I hold Maryse the entire ride there, but when we're escorted to separate beds, sleep overtakes me quickly. Dreamless and heavy, I stay there for several hours, waking sometime around noon in the clean, antiseptic room I recognize from when I had my arm operated on.

Blinking, I lift my head off my pillow. Touching my face, I find that they've washed the blood off me. Sighing, I feel a sense of relief, and pull back the curtain around my bed.

"Hey, look who's awake!"

Looking to my left, I see Scyler, their burned hand bandaged as they idly leaf through a medical textbook someone left lying about. In the chair next to them is Danil, who snores, his head resting on their bedside table.

"How's your hand?" I ask.

"They said it should heal up in a few weeks, but I'll have a pretty nasty scar." They grin. "Finally, a good story to tell my kids."

I chuckle, just as I hear a small groan coming from my right.

I turn to look as the curtain surrounding the next bed opens, and I see Maryse. She rubs her eyes, sitting up and swinging her legs off the bed. A hand comes up to brush her auburn hair out of her face, a slow exhale escaping her.

"Is it over?" she asks.

"Mostly," Scyler says. "Ker'kachin...he's..."

She grimaces. "Dead. I know."

"I'm sorry."

"It's... Thank you." She sighs and shakes her head. "So now what?"

"Right now, most of the guards have been deployed to clean up the mess

we made and retrieve the money. Hopefully redistribution can start soon. After the...uh, after the body's been removed..." They speak slowly, afraid to set Maryse off, but she says nothing. "After that's been dealt with, they'll start letting people we evacuated go home."

"Oh good." I let out a relieved sigh. "That'll make everyone happy."

"Once we're feeling up to it, we're going to be questioned by whoever's in charge now about what happened."

"I guess we should tell them the truth."

"Probably. Even though the truth involves us going rogue, stealing supplies from the townsguard, starting a fire, and blowing up a historical site. Depending on who got the job, I have a feeling Danil and I will either be promoted or fired."

"The last guy kidnapped me," Maryse says dryly. "I think you'll come out looking okay."

"Oh, and Lotte..." Scyler reaches over to my bedside table and picks up a piece of paper I didn't notice before. They offer it to me. "Juna told me to make sure you read this."

"Oh—" I take it from them, starting to unfold it. "Where is she? Is she okay?"

They cringe. "She's fine, but, well... I think she'll explain it better than I can."

I flatten the paper and read it, completely unsurprised by what I find. My mother's handwriting is made of untidy loops and swirls, but I still remember how to decipher it.

*Lotte—*

*They told me you'd be okay. Looks like we both got lucky; nothing worse than some bruising. My ankle hurts like a bitch. Probably shouldn't have run around on it so much. Oh well.*

*Anyway, Scy mentioned the townsguard wants to talk to us, so I decided to take this as my cue to leave. I'm sure the four of you will be okay (I mean, you did have a theft charge against you, but people probably forgot about that with everything going on; so long as you don't mention it, it'll be fine), but I've had a few too many run-ins with them to feel comfortable.*

*I'm headed out of Morwassen's Pass as soon as I can get supplies for the road, and I'll be staying away for at least a few months. Just until this*

*whole thing blows over. You understand.*

*I'd leave an address but I don't know where I'm going. I doubt I'll find myself in Rosburnt ever again, so this is goodbye for now. My previous offer still stands.*

*We're never going to be the mother-daughter pair you wanted us to be, and I do regret that. But I think I'd like you even if you weren't my kid, and I wouldn't mind having you in my life. If you ever decide you're up for that, feel free to come back into the city or get in contact with Anneke. I'll be back sooner or later, so you can find me then.*

*Stay safe.*

*Your mother*

"Typical," I mutter, half disgusted and half validated.

"What is it?" Maryse asks.

I pass her the note so she can read it, and she lets out a couple "hmms" and an appalled scoff when she reaches the end.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Don't be." I flop back on the bed. "She's certainly consistent."

"It'll take a while for her to get ready for her trip, you may be able to catch up with her before—"

"No." I shake my head. "I'll let her go. I think...I think I may be done with her for good."

"I know you don't want to hear this," Scyler says, "but I'm sorry, kid."

"It's okay," I say, and I'm surprised to find that I mean it.

Juna's made her choice. She's done being my mother. Maybe it's her loss, or maybe not. But I'm quite certain it isn't mine. Maybe someday things will be different; maybe they won't. Either way, I'll be fine.

Danil wakes up soon after, and he and Scyler decide to go and find a medic to see if we can get something to eat before we're questioned, leaving Maryse and me alone. She gets up from her bed and comes to sit down next to me on mine, and we lean against each other, hand-in-hand.

"I'm glad you didn't die," I finally say.

She chuckles weakly. "I'm glad *you* didn't die."

"Are you... How are you doing?"

"I don't know." She shrugs, blinking slowly. "I'm sad, obviously. But I'm also sort of..."

“Relieved?” I guess.

“Is that horrible?”

“No.” I nuzzle the top of her head. “You’re not horrible for being glad the worst of it is over.”

“I feel like I ought to hate him.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Good. Because I don’t. Or maybe I do, but only a little.”

“That’s okay, too.”

We sit there holding each other for a minute before she says, “I wonder if they’re going to pay you.”

I let out a laugh. “I have no idea. I mean, I did do my job, sort of. But I broke who-knows-how-many laws in the process. I may have to cut my losses here.”

“What do you plan to do?”

“Well...” I slowly lift my head off hers, and our eyes meet. “I guess I plan to go home. Back to my grandmother, back to my village, where no one tries to blow anything up or rip off one of my arms.”

A weak smile flashes across her face. “That sounds nice.”

“After that... I don’t know. Maybe after I’ve spent some time at home, and convinced Nana to let me out of her sight again, I’ll go and find the dragons that were driven out of the woods. They’re all over the country now in hiding. They might be glad to hear it’s safe to go home. There’s one in the woods here I’d want to go see, maybe help him get something to eat if I can.”

“Helpful as ever.” Her voice is teasing but laced with affection.

“But of course.”

She hesitates, and then shocks me with her next words. “Could I come with you?”

My jaw drops, and I say nothing, and she quickly continues.

“I won’t if you don’t want me to, but...but I need to find someplace to go outside of the city. There’s nothing left for me in Morwassen’s Pass, and I...I want to start over. And I’d like to start over with you. If that’s okay. But if you’d rather I don’t, I could find—”

“Hey.” I cut her off, a smile creeping its way across my face. “I’d like that.”

“You would?”

“Yes. Come home with me.”

“You sure you’re willing to be stuck with me after...everything?”

“Of course.” I reach up to touch her cheek, feeling myself blush as I do it. “You...you mean a lot to me. You’re far from perfect, but so am I, and I think we’re both better now than we were when we met.”

“Me too,” she says softly. “Lotte, I...I...” She trails off, face flushed.

It’s okay that she can’t find the words, because I don’t need them.

Leaning in, I close the gap between us and press my lips against hers.

Without a moment of hesitation or shock, she responds, kissing me back and wrapping both her arms around my neck, pulling me in closer.

We pull away to breathe before our lips crash together again, and all I care about now is the feeling of her warmth against my body and the beating of her heart, which is the only thing that drowns out mine.

She kisses me again and again and I don’t stop her because I never want her to stop, ever. When we do pull away, we remain inches from each other’s lips, one of her hands slid into my hair, and I smile.

“I love you, Maryse.”

She presses her mouth to mine once more, kissing me only briefly before she pulls away and whispers back, “I love you, too.”

“Come home with me?”

“Yes.” She nods with a soft chuckle. “Yes.” Slowly, her smile fades as she nestles her head in the crook of my neck. “I don’t know...I don’t know if I’ll be any good at this, or if I’m going to be okay after...”

“That’s fine,” I say gently. “We can be not okay together.”

She nods, and when she responds, her voice is like a warm breeze.

“Together.”

...

“Don’t be a stranger, okay?” Anneke presses a full canteen of water into my hand and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

She and Edmond took it upon themselves to cater our entire trip home, so we’ll have bread, cheese, and dried fruit aplenty for the road. Maryse has officially handed in her key at the boardinghouse, having packed the things she deems important and put them in the cart alongside my own.

Things around here have been getting better, even if they’ve been chaotic.

With Cornelis dead, I expected Rusyard’s money to go to Letja. But Scyler tells me that now that the full extent of his crimes are public knowledge, everything in his vault will likely be entirely forfeited, used to help pay for restoration efforts. Not one jere will go back to anyone in the Basvaan family.

It seems unfair to me that Rusyard's children are paying the price for his crimes, and apparently, Norah Howe agrees.

Norah hasn't been seen in public since news of Cornelis's death got out, and she's been refusing all visitors. No one knows when she'll emerge. But Maryse heard from her via a letter, which was hand-delivered by one of the Howes' servants alongside a small bag of jere. According to the letter, she sent some money to Letja and Horats, too.

*Although we won't be family anymore, I know Cornelis would want me to help take care of you. The actions of your father shouldn't deprive you of your security. Please, accept this as a gift from your almost-sister.*

The money isn't extravagant, but it is enough to get started on a journey to a new life.

My feelings about Cornelis as a person aside, my heart does ache for Norah Howe. I pray she'll recover in the coming months and years, and be able to move on to someone else. Someone who deserves her kindness.

After three days of questioning and arguing among the townsguard over what to do with us, the new captain decided not to press charges against Maryse and me and to pay me in full, since I technically acted with permission from two officials.

The officials in question, Scyler and Danil, have both been suspended for two weeks without pay, but their suspension won't officially start until they return to Morwassen's Pass after escorting me home.

We're all prepared for the journey, having made one final stop at Pim's Table, now no longer a shelter and once again a functioning restaurant. Or at least it will be soon enough.

After spending a week straight keeping dozens and dozens of people housed and fed, the Prins family is taking a much-deserved break, but plan to be open for business again within another day or so.

"I'll write you all the time," I promise, giving my aunt a smile. "Thank you so much for...for everything."

She pats my cheek, before going off to say goodbye to Scyler and Danil. I climb into the cart to sit next to Maryse, who looks out at the street, bustling and crowded as ever.

People are in better spirits now. A weight has lifted off them all.

Things may take a while to go back to normal, but efforts to put things right are well underway. For most people, I suppose this will soon be an



unpleasant memory, a story with which to shut up anyone who tries to claim *their* hometown was terrible.

Maryse and me, we won't be able to leave it all behind that easily.

I rest my hand on her knee and give it a squeeze. She looks over at me, and a small smile lights up her face.

"It'll be okay," I say.

"Eventually," she agrees. She reaches a hand over to intertwine her fingers with mine. "Stay with me until it is?"

"I'll stay with you longer than that."

She leans over to kiss me as Danil and Scyler finish saying goodbye to Anneke and she steps back to see us off.

"If you two are going to make out the entire time, you're walking home," Scyler says. Maryse and I blush and pull away from each other.

"Such a romantic," I drone. When I told them Maryse and I are together, about how much I love her and want to spend forever with her, their response was to pretend to dry heave for ten seconds before Danil made them stop. He said he's happy for us.

I think Scyler's happy for us, too, in their own way, but feels that as an older cousin, it's their job to give me a hard time. When they finally got bored of that, they said, "I think you're good for each other."

I think so, too.

"You ready?" Scyler asks us. I nod, and they smile. "Okay. Back to your boring village, then."

They and Danil climb onto their horses, and with that, we begin moving, slowly making our way down the main street and away from the center of the city.

I watch Anneke until she disappears from sight, and as we draw closer to the city limits, I turn my gaze upward toward the skyline. The absence of the castle looming above the other structures is still jarring, and I lived here only for a short time. I can only imagine how strange it must feel for the locals.

"You think you'll ever come back here, Maryse?" Danil asks as we approach the gates that lead from Morwassen's Pass and into the larger world.

"Not unless there's an inheritance with my name on it," she says with a dry laugh.

I wonder if she'll grow to miss it someday, but it clearly won't be today. She doesn't glance over her shoulder for one last look. Or maybe she finds it

easier to not see what she's leaving behind. If that's the case, I lack her willpower.

I turn in my seat to watch the city behind us as we move toward the edge of the woods. It disappears from sight before we get under the first hints of tree cover.

Looking forward once more, I contemplate what the future holds, and I realize I really don't know. But I have a new family, a decent amount of money, and the girl I love with me, and that feels like a good place to start.

My gaze turns to Maryse and, without thinking, I press a kiss to her lips. It's soft and would be gentle, if not for the fact that the cart is bouncing and almost causes us to knock foreheads. As we pull away, though, she's still smiling as if I gave her the most perfect kiss in the world, and that's enough to make me feel like I did.

"You know," I say, "Nana's going to absolutely lose it when we get home and I tell her what happened."

"Which part? The part where you lost use of one arm, the part where you got arrested, or the part where you fell in love with a thief and decided to take her home with you?"

"I was thinking...everything."

"Well," she says, leaning her head against my shoulder, "I'll do what I can to make her like me."

"Oh, don't worry about that. She'll love you because I do."

"Really? I'm told I can be difficult."

I gasp. "No!"

"It's true. Some have even called me infuriating."

"I can't imagine why."

We look at each other, each trying to keep a serious face, but we can keep it up for maybe five seconds before we both break down in giggles. I kiss her once on the forehead before pulling her close, settling in for a long journey home.

"Don't worry," I say. "You're more than worth the trouble."

It's true. Her hand in mine is as good as gold.



# Acknowledgments

When I first came up with the idea for this story, I didn't think it'd ever be much of anything. Now, it's a book. A book! There are so many people to thank for that—no author gets here on their own.

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# About the Author

Erica Hollis (she/her) writes about queer girls and magic, and getting to do that for an actual job is still unreal to her. HEARTS FORGED IN DRAGON FIRE, her debut F/F fantasy romance, is available in June 2023 with Entangled. Erica's other passions include cats, book shopping, anime, fairy tales, and being extremely bad at video games but playing them anyway. Feel free to chat with her via her official twitter [@EHollisAuthor](https://twitter.com/EHollisAuthor)!

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