



Cursed with the Dragon Prince

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: The clan needs me as their queen. During a storm at sea, I'm tossed overboard, and my family abandons me. Stranded, I wake on a beach of black sand, discovering I'm far from my human home and marooned on the Isles of Fae. I'm found by a dragon fae, a powerful prince, who upon seeing me, is consumed by rage, chasing me into a dark cave. Despite his terrifying strength, I learn he is as lonely as I am, and soon, he craves me as I lust for him. Except we remain divided, bound to the roles expected by his clan. They call me the Blessed One. Their deity has cursed them for their king's transgressions, but if I survive the rites of queenship—surrendering my future, risking my life—I can end their curse. My family did abandon me. The offer is tempting. Even if I survive these deadly rites, I'm still at the mercy of a disgruntled clan and their dragon prince.

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Part One: Arrival

Awakening

Reina

I stir, covered with salt and sand.

It's dried on my lips, crusting my eyes shut. My throat is so thick it's a struggle to swallow, and when I curl my fingers, pain radiates from each knuckle as my flesh cracks.

I grab a fistful of the earth that supports me. A beach.

I'm alive, for now, stranded on an unknown beach. By all accounts, I should be dead. After all, the entire village says I'm cursed.

Yet I survived the stormy sea, stranded after being tossed overboard. When the waves took me, my brother didn't turn the boat around—he refused to risk himself to save me.

My stomach lurches with the memory—the vigor of waves, rhythmic ups and downs, the crashing and rising. The fear.

Treading water while drowning, I watched my family's fishing vessel drift farther and farther, swept into the storm, and with no land in sight, I knew it could be my end.

But it wasn't.

Once again, I've proven myself a survivor.

As a child, I was jealous of my brother. I longed to travel the seas like he did, to sail beyond our small village and discover whether other lands were like ours.

My father told me I was stupid for wanting that. A woman could stay safe at shore. Why would I want to leave? He would never understand there was little safety in a world controlled by men—men like him, my brother, and my former husband.

From the moment the village saw my birthmark—a patch of purple scales, at the hollow on the base of my neck, a shiny blight between my clavicles—they called me cursed.

My mother died upon my birth; that was the first strike against me. The scaled blemish was the second.

The third strike came years later. My father finally convinced a man to take me as his wife, but ten years later, I still hadn't conceived a child. We divorced, and now he has a younger wife, already pregnant.

Barren, they called me. Cursed.

Even my sister-in-law declared I was an unfit companion for my nieces, insisting I focus on housework. I longed to help with the children, to help nurture them, but she spirited them away, warning them I was dangerous. She feared my curse could contaminate them too.

No wonder my brother allowed the sea to claim me.

I'm not trained as a fisherman, and I was only allowed on his ship because he was desperate for the labor. Since our father's death and my divorce, I have been merely an extra set of hands to him.

As soon as the waves threw me overboard, I understood that my survival depended on me.

Sometimes I wonder why I'm so determined to live.

Lost to the stormy sea, I floated, preserving energy. I swam, pulling myself up from the depths. I progressed and recovered. Repeat and regress.

At some point, hope becomes lunacy—believing survival is possible when all evidence suggests otherwise.

Float, swim, rest. Work, wait, and repeat.

The storm passed, but the dark clouds remained. Without the sun, I didn't know my way to the village, so I swam toward warmer water.

I must have passed out because I don't remember seeing land.

Now salt dries my skin as I lie on a sandy beach. My body is worn and wasted; I have no idea where I've been stranded.

Regardless, it's my time to rise.

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Fright

Reina

Each twitch of my body lights my nerves with agony. At least I can grit my teeth and grunt through the pain. Hands and feet first. Then my arms. Inch by painful inch, I force my body to stir.

Lapping waves sound with a steady lull that threatens to pull me back to sleep. Surrendering to nonexistence sounds comfortable, but there's no safety in it. It takes effort, but I squeeze my aching muscles, forcing myself to stay conscious and focus on my surroundings.

My feet are dry, so the tide must have ebbed since leaving me here. I don't feel rain, so the storm must have stopped. Listening, I hear the chirps of sea birds.

This beach smells of sea and sulfur, and it's this scent that tells me I'm stranded somewhere strange. It doesn't smell like seaweed and fish; it doesn't smell like home.

The scent should force my human nose to wrinkle with disgust, but sulfur has never bothered me. Instead, it smells of misplaced memories, inflaming my scaled birthmark to itch and warming my heart with a fondness I can't recollect.

Finally, I can rub my face, clearing the crust from my eyes. But once they're open, I wince, squeezing my eyelids shut. When did the sun become so bright? I need to face the world, but I can't keep my eyes open...

“Raaarh!” The cry of a beast vibrates the air. Terrifying and frenzied, it makes my body shake.

Fear replaces pain as adrenaline surges through me, granting me the strength to rise. My eyes strain to open, tears falling as I’m overstimulated by bright sky and dark sand.

Rising to my knees, I swallow down the bile threatening to rise, and after a few stumbles, I manage to stand. Taking my first few steps, I wobble and stumble back to the black sand.

“Raaarh!”

The monstrous sound seems to surround me—I’ve never heard an animal so impossibly loud. Renewed fright rushes into me, and somehow, I’m standing again.

I struggle to see the distinction between sea and land. The ocean is expansive and bright, but with it at my back, I see mountains—no, they’re volcanoes.

They rise, forming a jagged silhouette against the inland horizon and dark cliffs that line most of the beach. Where the land is flat, it’s covered with a thin moss, a vibrant green.

My heart sinks as my vision improves. There are no trees nor bushes—there is no cover. And even if I had a place to hide, I’m not fast. It’s difficult to stay upright for more than a few steps.

A shadow passes over me, quickly running along the beach, when I hear the beast cry for a third time. “Raaarh!”

This time, the clamor is even louder, and my whole body shakes, pressured by the

beast's hunting cry. They're so very, very close to me.

If I can't run... can't hide... I turn to face the sky.

By Teyr. I'm hunted by a dragon.

I've been marooned in the Isles of Fae.

The dragon is bigger than my family's fishing boat. Most of his scales are ruddy red, rich as the earth, while streaks of gold form lines along the length of his body.

I'm trapped under his shadow, stunned while he nears, his large form blocking the sun. His long graceful neck turns, like he's curiously considering me. If the stories are true, there's intelligence behind his eyes, driven by motives beyond my comprehension.

He obstructs the sun, coming closer, and I face him as he approaches. I'm not brave because I'm courageous; I'm fearless because I feel stunned.

The red dragon is so massive that he has to tuck his wings to fit along the beach's breadth. The sand spreads, giving way under the weight of his taloned feet.

He whips his neck around and faces me. His nostrils are as large as my thumb, and as he inhales, sniffing me, they expand even further.

Mouth widening, he seems to grin, revealing teeth as big as my hand. He lazily blinks a hazel eye rimmed with gold.

As I take him in, my heart skips a beat. Once, a whale washed upon the shore of the fishing village. It was the biggest creature I had ever seen, but now, this dragon claims a tier of majesty that is his own.

He's so terrifying that he's beautiful.

His great eye blinks again, and his jaw tightens like he's made a decision. His wings arch and rise into the air, tightening and growing smaller as he leans back, standing on his rear feet.

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The transformation is fast, completed within a moment, and soon a man's sharp jawline replaces a dragon's maw, while tight muscles replace scales. A short tuft of black hair frames his gold-rimmed hazel eyes. He's taller, more muscular than any man I've known.

A dragon fae stands before me; the only thing he wears is a pair of loose red pants so light they billow in the sea breeze. His skin is a golden brown, rich as his dragon scales and accented with streaks of gold, and along his collarbones and chest, small red scales shimmer.

My fingers drift to my neck. The texture of his scales... They're like...mine.

I swallow. The Isles of Fae are as diverse as their inhabitants. Each island has such unique history, story, and lore that travelers' tales have left me unprepared to be shipwrecked here.

When he speaks, his voice rumbles like his dragon's roar. "Human."

Now he seems more man than beast. My awe subsides, replaced by the instinct to flee.

He's terrifying, and I can't resist the urge to survive. Fear is stronger than pain—I run.

Drakon

She's terrified.

And she has every right to be afraid—she's human. Because of her species, she should be terrified of this entire island, my clan, and above all, me. My clan has not been kind to humans, and my bloodline has been the worst.

We are the dragon fae, created for life on these volatile lands by the isle herself, Wisp. A deity who has cursed our clan.

It's a curse only a human can lift.

And she's clearly more than just another human. Her ebony skin parallels Wisp's obsidian stones, and her deep brown glinting eyes hint to an intelligence I presume she often has to hide. Long dark braids hold her hair back, efficient and tidy.

But it's the glistening of her purple scales that gives her away.

She's more than human. She's better than them. Her clan must be terrified of her, because I'm awed.

Between a long skirt and sleeved blouse, she's well covered, but the clothes are worn and cut in places, allowing me glimpses of her breathtaking skin.

My chest burns with the instinct to claim her, trap her now and ensure the salvation of my clan—only common sense makes me hesitate. Disaster struck the last human who reached our shores.

Still, the want, the need, remains. This human could determine our future, and like my fathers before me, I'm hesitant to let the opportunity slip through my claws.

Deep down, I know my desire is more than that... I want her. My heart stirs, and I know it's the desire I've long cautioned myself against.

I try to resist.

But when she runs, my dark instincts win, and I give chase.

Dark

Reina

His eyes shift, gold rims turning red, and I sprint away. Running from the ocean, I dart across the dark sand.

My heart pounds as I approach the obsidian cliffs. Maybe it's possible to scale them? I don't know what that will accomplish.

Fortunately, as I reach the stone, I see opportunity.

There is a narrow crevice in the cliff wall. I might be able to slip through, but I doubt the dragon fae will be able to follow.

He roars, sand shifting as he runs.

With no time for second-guessing, I wrap my hands around the jagged edge and throw my weight forward, shimmying slightly to fit through the narrow opening.

The cavern is bigger than I thought, and I tumble down, scraping against the jagged wall. My arms and feet sting as I succumb to the cavern's darkness.

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The pain might have been worth it.

The dragon fae claws at the entrance, blocking the light shining through the crevice. He can't fit through the small opening, and he bangs against the side, making the stone tremble, but the crack does not widen.

I watch him struggle, heaving to catch my breath, and in time, we're both certain—he's stuck on the other side.

Giving up, he growls, the sound echoing through my cave, and as he steps aside, the distant light returns.

My heart is still racing, and the rush of triumph quickly fades—I don't think I can climb back out. I might be trapped in this dark cave, cornered into a crevice that, for all I know, the dragon fae is still watching.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I deepen my breaths. The constriction around my chest loosens, and some of the tension fades. I'll find my way out. I haven't survived the stormy sea and escaped a dragon fae only to die in a damn cave.

As my eyes adjust, I follow the scarce rays of light, realizing this cavern goes even farther back. It narrows into a tunnel, but I can't see its end. Maybe there's another opening, another way out, if I'm brave enough to venture into the dark.

Walking will be tough. The ground is rough, and I've lost my shoes. Fortunately, my skirt is long, and I rip it shorter, using scraps to form makeshift shoes. They're not much, and I still whimper when I stand, but it's an improvement.

With one hand braced against the wall, I carefully walk deeper into the cave. After a few dozen steps, the light ebbs away, rendering my vision useless.

I stretch my other hand to the side, and it brushes the wall on the opposite side. By tracing upward, I touch the ceiling.

Without light to guide me, my movements are cautious and slow. I can't afford to damage my feet any further, and I test each step before placing my weight. The effort is a trudge, but nonetheless, I move forward.

Time loses context as I delve into the depths.

If my bearings are right, this tunnel is my only path, free from forks and decisions. I'm moving in one direction—deeper into the volcanic mountains.

Still, there's no end in sight. My path continues without a destination, and I stumble. As I tire, I stagger more often.

When I next trip, I land on my hands. Pain wells up.

I'm never getting out of here. Fear rushes me.

Again, my breaths turn shallow, and the pain in my feet returns, tenfold what it was before. The panic worsens when I look around, eyes wide, desperate to see anything.

I'm disoriented, ungrounded.

For minutes, I work through the discomfort, calming myself until finally, I make the difficult decision to rest.

If I'm stumbling, I'll only hurt myself more.

I settle against the cavern's wall and pull my knees to my chest as I close my eyes.

It's just as dark behind my eyelids. The only difference is now my vision sparks—I've become so desperate for light that I've started imagining it.

I beg sleep to claim me, but I'm too alert and scared, stirring whenever I drift away. Eventually, I lose myself in a timeless haze...

My consciousness becomes buoyant, bouncing in the waves. Drifting, I'm drowning again. My hands paddle, pulling me to the surface, but my nails scrape against bedrock. I'm no longer submerged in the sea—it's the earth eating me.

This cave becomes the isle's maw, and it consumes me.

In the belly of the isle, a dragon appears.

Her scales are a shimmery white, her body longer and skinnier than the red dragon. Instead of wings, she wiggles on the air like a snake, levitating before me.

She's breathtaking, but in a different way than the dragon fae. The red dragon was terrifying and extraordinary, but the power that emanates from this white dragon is...divine.

Her energy is one I've known my entire life.

"I can help you," she says. Her calm words wrap around me like a heavy, warm blanket, while the vibrations of her voice strengthen me, nourish me.

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Reality tugs at me, lifting me from the dream. My feet hurt again. Only the pain isn't as bad as before, and the dream's aching sense of safety continues to sate me. I do feel reinvigorated.

Instinctively, I open my eyes, forgetting that there is nothing to see... Except something has changed.

Tiny white lights spark farther down the tunnel—fireflies. They swarm and expand, their lights shifting on and off. Each one moves unpredictably, but together, they're lighting my way.

Light

Reina

The fireflies lead me to the end of the tunnel. The walls, ceiling, and floor meet, forming a barrier that blocks my way. Then they fade, leaving me at a dead end.

Darkness returns, and with it, my panic. Each fear that haunted me during my long walk returns. Am I trapped? Will the dragon fae give chase? Can I find water?

The vanishing light makes everything bleak, and I groan, a desperate, frightened plea. Why me?

My body gives way to violent shaking as my fingers scurry, searching the walls.

There has to be a way out.

My fingers don't find the exit, but as my eyes adjust to total darkness, I see a faint new light. There's another much smaller tunnel, and light leaks from the other side.

I shimmy my body into the crevice and barely fit, the rocks pushing against me. I'm afraid of being buried alive, but the light encourages me, and I crawl forward.

My fingers curl around a rocky edge as the tunnel opens up.

The light remains faint. This exit hasn't led me back to the beach, and instead, I enter a gigantic cave.

I didn't know this was possible, that mountains could be hollow, forming a chamber this large.

The rock floor is so smooth it's reflective, and the ceiling stretches above, barely visible in the low light. Dull fae lights, steadier than candlelight, are built into the walls.

Long tables and benches fill the room, reminding me of the community hall in the village—where we gather, staying warm during the worst of the winter's storms. The dim lights cast much of the large hall in shadow, but best that I can tell, the cavern is large enough for a moderate population.

It's empty now, but the sense of life lingers—faint scents of cooked meat, empty glasses left on a table. This is the dragon fae's great hall—they live within the caverns of the volcanoes.

I'm lucky nobody is here.

A fresh burst of fear drives me to scurry back into the crevice. I hide myself while I continue to study my surroundings.

My gaze locks on to the throne at the far side of the cavern. The large golden chair rests upon a jutting dais of obsidian. It seems important—it also seems abandoned. All signs of activity are on the opposite side of the hall.

The throne has the air of being unkempt, diminished and dull. And it also... seizes my attention.

Now that my gaze has locked upon it, it's hard to pull myself away. It beckons me, asking me to come closer. It reminds me of the white dragon...

I'm about to leave the cave, but hearing footsteps, the sound of low voices, I halt, shimmying deeper into the cave instead.

Drakon

“A human? Are you sure?” Kaliyah asks.

Our clan's elder is the only one I've told what happened—she's the only one I trust.

The human escaped, slipping into the isle's cavernous system. Lava tubes weave throughout Wisp, forming labyrinthine tunnels within the isle. Some, like the one she slipped into, aren't easily accessible.

I am furious to have lost her. The rush might have passed, but my irritation remains.

Kaliyah walks beside me, her gait unbalanced as she favors her better hip. Even with the assistance of her cane, she moves slowly, but I let her choose the pace, thankful that despite the late hour, she responded to my pleas for advice.

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“She seems hurt. We need to help her,” I continue. “She was... frightened.”

The elder stares at me, her deep, dark eyes scrutinizing. She knows there is more to my story than I have said.

“Ifrightened her,” I admit.

She still waits, refusing to look away until I say it all.

Lowering my voice, I admit the worst. “I chased her, stirred by the dragon’s rush.”

Her eyebrows rise as she absorbs this final, critical confession. She pauses—and the hesitation drives my heart to pound. Will she reject me for this? Then I’d be truly alone. She is one of the few members of our clan who doesn’t punish me with isolation for the decisions of my youth.

My dragon’s rush presents another complication, one that echoes with the actions of my father and grandfather. It’s a rage that runs so strong in my royal lineage that our throne has been empty for a century.

The clan no longer approves of the dragon’s rush. They do not like that it lies within me. Since my youth, I’velearned to keep it in check, but negotiating with an instinct is never easy.

I was furious when the human slipped into the crevice, moving beyond my reach. It’s a good thing she escaped. The barrier ended the rush, keeping her safe on the other side.

Thank Wisp. With the prayer, I cast my gaze upon the empty throne.

Finally, Kaliyah nods, calmly taking this news. I'm relieved. She catches my gaze and glances at the throne too. "We must avoid another tragedy."

"I'm worried I already started one."

She waves my fears away. "Drakon, you are not your father."

It's not the first time she's reminded me of this, but the lesson doesn't stick. I rushed after the human, scaring her because of instincts I should have controlled.

"Did you catch her scent?"

"Yes." The human smelled of eucalyptus, like fresh perspective. I can remember it so clearly... it's almost like I can smell it.

Wait—I do smell her. My nostrils flare.

"She's near," I whisper.

Kaliyah's gaze traverses the large great hall, wandering to the far wall, where there is a slim crevice where faelings used to hide.

"There," I snarl.

The scent ignites me. It stirs the rush, ready to be inflamed after so recently being left unsatisfied. Blood rushes to my head. My clan needs their prince to hunt down this human and—

No.

I stop myself, but only after my wings have been extended, after I've bounded over the long tables, making it halfway down the great hall.

I turn around. Kaliyah hasn't budged—she can't keep up.

I hear shifting, the sound of scrambling. The human must have seen me, and I've frightened her again. She's trying to flee.

“Go to her,” Kaliyah instructs me. “And this time, communicate.”

Communication is not my strength, but I will try. This woman is injured and hurt—she needs water and bandages. I need to convince her it's safe to rise from the tunnel, that my clan, despite our marred history, means her no harm.

I shake the dragon's rush from my body, putting space between the instinct and me.

Kaliyah calls after me, “Drakon, you are not destined to repeat your father's mistakes.”

Truce

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Reina

The two dragon fae see me. Or at least, they suspect I'm hidden in this crevice. First, he turns in my direction, and her gaze quickly follows.

While I couldn't hear what they were saying, I've watched them since they entered the hall. I'm sure that the male is the one who scared me. I will never forget the gleam of his red scales.

His companion has gray hairs and a slight limp, so I assume she's much older than him. She seems to be someone the male trusts for advice. His bent posture shows me a new insecurity, an uncertainty that almost makes him less frightening. Almost.

Because now that he looks at me with ferocious hunger, I tremble. He rushes toward me and leaps over a table. He jumps, catching himself on wings that sprout from his back.

He's definitely still terrifying.

I rush deeper into the narrow tunnel, squirming my body backward, desperate to put space between myself and the dragon fae. Except retreating into darkness scares me too, and so I stop just out of reach.

"Human," he says.

I could pretend I'm not here. But he sniffs loudly, and I suspect he can smell me. I'm trapped... Talking won't hurt.

“Yes?” I squeak.

His voice is deep and authoritative, but he doesn’t say much. “Come out,” is all.

Unsure of where to turn for safety, I stay quiet. Retreating is bleak. No food, no water. I could use his help.

“I’ll give my oath,” he continues. The words seem to surprise him, and he has to confirm them, even to himself. “Yes. An oath that I will protect you.”

A fae oath. I have heard of this, a special promise made with the Isles as their witness—vows with consequences for anyone who breaks them.

“Do it,” I reply.

He seems surprised. Whether it’s because I’m agreeable or that he’ll have to follow through on his offer, I’m not sure.

“I, Drakon, grandson of Ichor, the last king of my clan, will keep you from harm. I swear it upon our Isle of Wisp.”

Wisp. So that’s where I am.

When he invokes the land, the stones surrounding me warm, as if they’re sealing the deal, and either my eyes are playing tricks on me, or there is a flicker of fireflies.

I swallow, letting the words of safety settle within me. They had a depth of truth I’ve never witnessed before, and the prospect that such vows are possible makes me tremble. My former husband once gave a vow to care for me—fae oaths make human promises seem shallow.

“Okay,” I accept.

When I crawl out of the crevice, he’s there, catching me before I stumble to the floor. I’m freed from the dark cave, but I’m not sure what I’ve been liberated into.

I squirm, but he doesn’t set me down. Instead he frowns, his gaze homed in on my feet. The tatters of fabric that I’ve wrapped around them have all but fallen off, baring patches of both wet and dry blood. They look worse than I imagined. Pain blooms anew.

“You’re hurt,” he rasps, pulling me closer to his chest. His skin is hot, like a furnace burns within his chest, and I’m drawn closer, disregarding the fear of being burned.

He gave me his oath. I justify my tentative trust.

I stop resisting. He’s right—I am hurt. And if he’s willing to carry me, my feet need the rest. I’m uncomfortable surrendering to a stranger’s embrace, but he supports me all the same.

“Drakon?” I ask. “That’s your name?”

He nods. His gaze locks on my face, and I find his gold-rimmed hazel eyes warm, not frightening like before.

“I’m Reina,” I tell him. A queen’s name—my mother’s dying wish. Father liked to remind me that it was a silly name, too regal for a fishing family like us, but he didn’t deny her wish, even after he saw my purple scaled birthmark.

“Rein-a,” Drakon says my name, slowing on each syllable. I like the way he says it—without the disdain my village showed. Spoken by his deep voice, it finally sounds like the name of a queen.

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He holds me close, without speaking, and we hold each other's gaze. I don't know what he sees in me, but studying him, I discover much more than I expected.

He's strong and fearsome, his grip firm. He's uncertain, and his lip quivers. The way he looks at me, like I'm someone... special.

I don't know how long we've held still, lost in this strange moment, but soon the female reaches us. The elder moves slower than him, only favoring her wings for short bursts.

"Hello," she says, her voice creaky. "I'm Kaliyah, the clan's elder. Welcome."

"I'm Reina," I reply.

"What a beautiful name. Welcome to Wisp. We're a small isle, far from the main Isles of Fae, but our clan will be happy to care for you. Drakon tells me he found you on the beach."

I nod. She is talkative, compared to stoic Drakon, and while I have countless questions, my body surrenders to the promise of safety.

I yawn, my jaw spreading wide as relaxation sates my body. Drakon holds me closer as I drift.

"I see," the elder continues. "There's much to explain, but the hour is late, and you need rest. Drakon will see to your immediate needs, and we can talk in the morning." Her focus then drifts to Drakon, and she gives him directions for my care.

“You’re in excellent hands,” she concludes, assuring me—though I think she might be speaking to Drakon too. “I’ll be back in the morning,” she says, departing.

Drakon follows her instructions. He does so silently, and I let him work as I fall deeper into a slumbering haze.

First he carries me to the obsidian dais, settling me not far from the throne, and then he flies about the great hall, gathering the things Kaliyah suggested.

I cast my gaze about, but I’m too tired to move. From this close, the golden throne seems neglected—scratched and dirty.

There must be a window nearby, because I hear the rushing waves.

The sound lulls me as Drakon retrieves plush pillows and thick blankets. Kaliyah told him to build a nest for me, and I thought she meant something for birds. However, what Drakon constructs becomes more luxurious with every addition, and by the time he’s done, I’m eager to climb into it.

While he works, I collect myself, and I’m able to sit up by the time he presents a tray laden with water and food. He’s brought washcloths, salves, and bandages.

I reach for the water first, forcing myself to take a few cautious sips when I’d rather down the entire thing. Gulp and swallow. It’s a relief that my stomach doesn’t complain.

He’s brought me an assortment of nuts and dried fruit; some of it I recognize, but other offerings are strange to me. I take small bites, and upon finding the nut too dry, allow myself another sip of water.

He pushes the food closer to me. “Eat,” he says.

“Soon,” I reply. “I don’t want to be sick.”

I don’t think he quite understands, but he agrees, setting the food back on the tray. He hands me a damp washcloth. “For cleaning,” he explains.

I rub the salt from my face, running the cloth down my neck. It’s a simple pleasure, but delectable all the same.

Something tickles. Drakon is holding my foot!

“Hey!” I kick him away.

He picks up the salve from the tray. “This will help.”

I squirm, but he has a point. I’m exhausted, unsure whether I can properly clean my own feet. “Okay,” I agree.

It stings when he pulls off the fabric, my blood sticking to the strips, and I fight the instinct to pull away from him.

With another damp cloth, he cleans my feet, clearing the dirt and dried blood. He’s gentle, but even so, it aches.

“Thank you,” I manage through gritted teeth. I focus on my breath, waiting for the worst of the pain to pass.

Soon he finishes clearing the debris from both of my feet. I inspect them, relieved to discover none of the scratches are terribly long or deep. Drakon was meticulous in his cleaning, and while they look red and raw, I don’t think I’m at risk of infection.

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Once he sees I'm satisfied, he picks up the salve and bandages. He rubs the medication into my feet, and gently massaging, he spreads the salve across the wounds.

He glances up at me, checking that I'm okay, and I nod my approval. I'm no longer ticklish, the pressure of his hands now reassuring.

I watch him work. His red and gold scales catch the light, his chest chiseled and firm. His abs shift as he moves, and I follow the line of them, my eyes dipping to the waistband of his pants. I blush, my mind wandering, wondering what he might have hidden there...

Because everywhere else, he is much more than a man—he isn't one. He's a dragon fae. Like my birthmark, he's scaled.

He has no need for shoes, not with those roughened feet, and yet from the tender way he cares for mine, my softness feels seen.

He appraises my feet with a final inspection, and pleased, he reaches for the bandages. Slow and steady, he wraps my feet. He asks if it's too tight or too loose, but beyond that simple feedback, we do not speak.

As he works, I stare at his arched ears, the perfect oval of his face coming to his sharp jawline. His short dark hair is thick and healthy. His nostrils are elongated, reminiscent of his dragon form.

Eventually, he's satisfied.

He offers me more water, then food. I accept both.

I'm not used to being coddled, and I fight the instinct to protest. The way he handles me, like I'm the most precious treasure, stops me. With him, it feels safe to surrender.

My body is not well. I need help.

I should be terrified. I've been thrown overboard and left for dead. And I know there's a dragon within him, one that rushed me on the beach. One that clawed against stone when I hid in the cave.

I know he's dangerous, and maybe it's foolish, but I'm not scared.

He picks me up, helping me into the nest, and he pulls the blankets over me, checking that I'm supported by the pillows.

"Sleep," he says, standing over me.

He steps away, taking a seat at the edge of the dais.

I'm tempted to protest, to ask him to stay close, but I'm too tired to speak. I wrap the blanket around me, close my eyes, and drift away...

Drakon

She sleeps. Her chest rises and falls. She shivers. If I crawled into her nest, I could wrap my body around her—I would keep her warm.

I cover her with another blanket instead.

Her feet were so soft, her body vulnerable. When I cleaned her feet, every moment

was my apology. If I hadn't lost control and chased after her, maybe she wouldn't have fled, running through a rough cave on such tender soles. I hope to win her forgiveness.

She should be more afraid of me.

Kaliyah insisted on leaving me with her. She made it clear that until morning, Reina is my responsibility—the elder trusts me more than I trust myself.

Now I've done what I can to encourage the human's recovery. Food and drink. Cleaned wounds and bandages.

I apologize through my actions because I don't know how to speak to her. She shares my language, yes, but she is not of my world. She is a human woman, likely one who has never visited the isles. My clan barely accepts me—how could this woman understand?

Word of her arrival would have leaked by now. Someone would have smelled her, realized a human was on our shores. We need her, desperately, but I'm hesitant to expose this delicate female to the maws of my dragon clan.

My rush caused enough damage.

Tomorrow, the clan will arrive for breakfast, and Kaliyah will present Reina with the Maledictum, its petals lava-red and thorns dangerous green. Tomorrow.

I can't protect her forever.

But for now, she sleeps. For now, she's protected.

Maledictum

Reina

It is the dead of night when I next stir. The darkness is thick like a blanket, stiff and heavy. The sea's cold mist penetrates my skin. I'm covered in countless blankets—Drakon must have kept piling them on.

Despite the cold, for the first time since I woke on the beach, I feel alert. I piece together the events of the day, shuffling scattered details into order, attempting to make sense of it all. I've stumbled into something strange, something dangerous.

The fresh wave of terror makes me shiver, except the emotion has become fatigued, no longer overpowering. I'm wrapped in a cocoon of blankets and there's no immediate danger. Muscle by muscle, I coax my body back into sleepy relaxation.

Kalayah said we would talk in the morning, only that's hours from now. If I can, I'd like to gain my bearings between now and then. I need to reclaim my sense of self.

My mouth is dry, but Drakon left the water nearby. I sit up, letting the blanket slouch as I take a long drink.

Drakon watches from the edge of the dais, and while he cocks his head, watching me, he does not approach.

I run my hands against my feet, testing them. I'm sore, but nothing stings. The fae salve works better than human remedies, and already, I think I can walk.

Wrapping a blanket around myself, I rise from the nest. Drakon stands too, keeping his distance. I suspect I can trust him—he's given me his oath—but I can't never forget who or what he is. Dragon fae. The male who chased me into a cave.

I can't leave everything up to others—I need to learn what I can.

With cautious steps, I approach the source of the sounding waves, where the sea breeze whispers into this giant cave. I pass through a short grand hallway behind the throne, and discover a balcony large enough for several dragons. It overlooks the vast, empty ocean.

The stars twinkle above, and reflections of the two moons glitter in the sea. It's a steep drop to the black-sand beach where waves crash against obsidian cliffs.

This balcony is one of many, all carved into the volcanoes. Each is large enough for a dragon to land, though I stand upon the grandest one.

The balcony has no banister—dragon fae don't need one—so I walk as close to the edge as I dare and turn around, taking in the isle.

Wisp is composed of countless volcanoes; the entire island seems to be made from them. Craggy canyons form between the rough peaks. Many are still and quiet, but several volcanoes are active.

Lava, a mixture of bold reds and ruddy black, streams from their peaks. Even in the dead of night, it's luminous. The molten river streams down the volcano's side, only darkening where it meets the beach. The island expands as the lava becomes stone—I'm watching the isle grow bigger.

If escape is my goal, this balcony isn't my route. The beach is far beneath me, and I'm in no shape to descend. Even if I reached the beach, where would I go?

I'm marooned. On Wisp.

Wisp. I've heard of it before, on the village's maps of the sea. The island is tiny, practically a speck, barely above the Rift but separated from the other Isles of Fae. Even if I could scale these cliffs, there is nowhere for me to swim. Without help, I will be trapped here.

My village never concerned itself with Wisp. What mattered most was staying south of the Rift—who knew what fae sea monsters lived north of the division—and my family focused on the mundane.

Yet I was curious. As a child, when I first saw the map, I pointed and asked, "Who lives on Wisp?" Nobody knew, nobody cared, and my question was soon swept aside for more practical concerns.

During adolescence, I would consider that mysterious island, knowing better than to ask. Eventually, as an adult, I put the question aside, my life filled with practical concerns too.

Based on the moons' positions, I suspect this balcony faces south, and I'm looking toward my home. If I squint, maybe I can see the landmass of the human continent.

It's the only home I've ever known, even with a family that named me cursed. I've never been so far away, and my gaze is drawn to the familiar.

My fingers brush my purple scaled birthmark. When I was young enough to wonder about Wisp, I also hoped these scales were special. Another belief stricken from me, particularly when my barrenness confirmed I was cursed.

With a deep breath, I absorb the endless horizon for a final second before turning my back to the sea. I return to the great cave. Drakon follows, still keeping his distance.

He remains silent as a shadow.

Next, I inspect the golden throne. I've never seen so much gold in a single piece, but despite its value, the throne doesn't seem rich or splendid. It's misbalanced and inconsistent. Broken in small places. While some patches gleam, others are marred. Filigree details have been rubbed smooth.

The worst of the damage is a red gash clawed across the throne's back. Dragon fae claws. There, the throne is a deep bloody red, shifting with the same texture as lava.

The scar shifts, as if it's breathing. I suppose if it is a true fae throne, it is alive, in its way. The stories say the Isles are alive, divinities who share their powers with the fae, connecting to their inhabitants through their thrones.

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If that's true, then this throne is Wisp. The shifting lava reflects the heartbeat of this isle.

I blink.

My gaze is drawn to the seat of the throne... Strange, I swear that wasn't there before.

A rose. It lies upon the seat.

It's vibrant, contrasting with the decaying throne. The stem is vivid green and studded with large, sharp thorns. The petals are a bright red, shifting with bright golden hues.

I'm reminded of fireflies... I find my fingers reaching for it.

It's beautiful, and I am compelled.

I resist, and my hands twitch, but it's not enough. I'm drawn by something more than beauty, a... need. A compulsion. The fireflies dance around the throne, and the calling deepens, hot in my blood, accelerating my heart.

My fingertips brush the petals of the tantalizing rose.

Too late, someone touches my arm. A voice rumbles behind me. "What are you doing?"

It's him.

I startle and try to pull away, but I can't release the rose. I'm pulled closer instead—I clutch the stem, two-handed. My fists tighten, and the thorns pierce my palms with sharp pain. Wet, hot blood pools between my hands.

He sniffs, taking in the metallic tang. With his face so scrunched, he looks angry, and I'm reminded of how he appeared on the beach. Ferocious. The kindness he has shown me fades, consumed by this darker creature lurking within.

“Drakon?” I ask.

He growls but holds his body rigid. Muscles tense with rage, he does not act. And then something shifts, the moment passing, and he overcomes the beast within.

He softens, his lips parting. “It is done,” he whispers.

Gently, he wraps his hands around mine. He's careful not to shift my palms. Even so, I whimper as the thorns shift deeper into my skin. I can't let go; I only grip it tighter.

My blood leaks from my cupped hands, streaming down the rose's stem. The color is bolder than it should be, my blood taking on the same golden-red hue as the rose's bloom.

I should be scared. A dragon stands over me, and I'm clutching some sort of enchanted flower, but I don't feel trapped.

Fireflies surround us. I'm safe.

—drip—

The first drop of my blood falls to the floor. It vanishes as it strikes, turning to smoke. Eucalyptus blooms on the air, a smell I recognize as mine, even if I've never smelled

this way before.

—drip, drip—

It happens again. I'm not imagining this. My blood turns to smoke as my scent rises.

I sniff the air, discovering countless new sensations. The scents I can detect broaden and deepen. Drakon smells like a hearth—balsam and char. My vision shifts next, and the darkness seems brighter than before. And finally, my palms no longer hurt where I'm pierced by thorns, like my skin is toughening.

The drip, drip, drip of my blood echoes through the hall.

I meet Drakon's gaze. "What have I done?" I ask, voice trembling.

His fingers caress mine, still holding me, holding the rose. He takes a moment, searching for words, and by the time he speaks, I can't understand.

I'm overwhelmed.

My skin itches—starting with my scaled birthmark and wandering up my neck, then down my back. Muscles pulse and relax. Something cracks, sounding like bone. I'm vibrating, down to the marrow, shifts pulsating throughout my being.

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I'm still clutching the rose.

My hands are numb, all except the pressure of thorns. My blood goes drip, drip. Part of me wants to panic, and part of me... wants to let go. My knees wobble.

Drakon shifts, and releasing my hands, he picks me up. I tremble.

"What's... happening?" My tongue slurs over the words.

My vision tunnels around him as I watch his lips move.

I shouldn't have touched the rose, the rose, rose, rose...

Drakon's words find me. "The Maledictum blessed you."

Maledictum. He means the rose. A blessing? I'm cursed.

Wisp led me here. She's guided me. She's in the fireflies.

Sensations stabilize, and distress becomes familiar.

This is the transformation I've been waiting for.

Transformation isn't meant to be comfortable.

Within the chaos, I accept the isle's support.

I inhale, and the fireflies enter my lungs.

My eyelids grow heavy with surrender.

I barely hear them, the other voices.

“Drakon, what have you done?”

Drakon

“Scorpia,” I say, bowing my head, acknowledging my aunt.

I’m holding Reina to my chest. She clutches the Maledictum, and her lifeblood mixes with Wisp’s, smearing across my chest before it drips to the floor. Now that the fireflies have faded, all that remains is the evidence of my sins.

Reina’s scent fills the air, informing every resident of our island that the Blessed One has arrived. Our third and final attempt to break our curse has begun.

Everything happened so fast. I’ve done what I can to comfort her, and now that unconsciousness has taken her, she will not feel the pain. Her cheeks are flushed, her breaths coming in pants. I shift toward the makeshift nest and settle her into it.

The Maledictum has started doling out its blessing, and the process will continue until Reina’s transformation is complete.

She needs security, rest, and time.

I face my aunt. “I did nothing.” In truth, I’m furious this happened under my watch. Kaliyah has locked the Maledictum away for decades, and we failed to anticipate Wisp having the power to move the rose at will. “Wisp chose her,” I justify.

Scorpia isn't swayed. "Kaliyah was wrong to trust you with such an important matter."

"What's done is done."

She tilts her chin, trying to look down her nose like she did when I was a faeling. "Fine. As you say, Wisp has chosen. But remember this," she begins her threat. "If shedies, the blood is on your hands. If she dies, I will destroy you."

"Agreed." There's no reason to deny her this vengeance, but if Reina dies, Wisp will smite me before Scorpia has the chance. I've already sworn my oath to the divine land.

Deconstruction

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Reina

I walk on magma, but my feet do not burn.

They're not even bandaged. Not anymore. Not here.

This seems like a dream, but it's not. My dreams aren't this vivid. I dream in black and white—this lava is red.

Like the rose. The Maledictum.

I'm still clutching it, somewhere the thorns embed my skin. Elsewhere, my body is resting. I don't think I'm in danger. For a time, I sensed a heated debate. Drakon was protective of me, but the moment has passed.

My skin itches, and I squint my eyes open. My vision is blurry, my eyelids gunky, and I'm too tired to move. I'm not alone. I smell him; Drakon is near, balsam and char. I also smell others. Many,manymore dragon fae are near.

There is a drumbeat, and the cave resonates, a womb that nourishes me—the golden throne whispers,“Hello.” Whatever is happening, it needs my surrender. Resistance will hinder the process, and I flow, drifting back into the dream.

I walk on magma, but my feet do not burn.

The red liquid bubbles and churns, a burning lake within a volcanic caldera. The molten rock speaks through hisses and bubbles. “You've arrived.”

I breathe in, filling my lungs with sulfur. The scent of misplaced memories that makes my scales burn. There's a rushing sound as a bubble breaks the surface of the magma pool. It sprays my skin but does no harm. All the same, I flinch.

I run fingers along my skin, finding it scaly and tough. It's the texture of my birthmark. "Did you curse me?" I ask.

"You're my Blessed One," the volcano rumbles. "I would never curse you."

Before I can form a reply, my feet are pulled under, and the lava consumes me whole.

Drakon

Even deep in the volcanoes, the midday sun warms the great hall. My clan holds vigil around Reina's sleeping form. A steady drumbeat, following the rhythm of a beating heart, unites us despite our divisions.

We wait for Reina to stir. What happens next is up to her.

Kaliyah and Scorpia had a heated debate, and Scorpia wanders through the clan, asking questions and discovering who else is offended by this order of events.

I can't waste my strength on her drama.

My focus is on Reina. I offer her strength instead.

Her scales have spread, starting with that spot at the base of her neck. They're purple, shimmering and shiny, their polish fresh as new growth. They spread to her collarbones and cheekbones, to the back of her hands. Her flesh toughens, and when she rises, she'll find her feet healed.

A human turned dragon fae.

Wisp's Blessed One.

She's the third and final one my clan will call by that name. The last two died long ago, and ever since, Scorpia has been determined that we would never attempt to break our curse again. My aunt has rid this isle of every human who has stepped upon it—some of the clan believes she is right to do so.

As for the rest, they're hopeful.

It's possible that Reina will break our curse.

As for myself, I support her with my vigil.

Soon she'll be reborn.

Part Two: Transformation

Awakening

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Reina

The next time I stir, it's with vigor. In a burst of power, my mind is bright, my body rested.

I wake from a dream that wasn't one, and the last thing I remember was the lava deconstructing me. It burned me down to the bones, numbing me to remake me. Remade into... what? I rise from the transformation, my heartbeat syncing to the pounding of a drum as I return to consciousness.

Immediately, I'm overwhelmed by sensation.

I'm weighed down by blankets. I turn my cheek, feeling the silky pillow beneath it. I slide against it, catching scales—

Scales?

Panicked, I rub my face, discovering my cheekbones are now rough. My fingers drift down to my old birthmark, confirming that my dream was true and it has spread. I rub the scaly skin of my collarbones.

I'm desperate to inspect the rest of my body when I realize I have an audience; the dragon fae are watching me. I freeze. The drumbeat stops, and a hush sweeps through the crowd. My heart races and my stomach churns.

They've been holding vigil for me. This concept of vigil strikes me as strange—the knowledge isn't mine, but my mind understands what it means. There's more

information, evidence that my shift runs deeper than skin, adding to my anxiety. What have I become?

The great hall is brighter than before, daylight seeping through the hallway behind me. I've been sleeping on the dais, not far from the throne—the Maledictum returned to its seat.

My clan has moved benches so they face the dais, the throne, and me. During the vigil, they've been meditating, supporting me.

Clan. The word takes on more meaning. I understood it meant community, but the concept feels more complete now that I'm connected to it.

Only my clan is far too small. This can't be everyone—this great hall could serve a thousand, but I estimate only a couple hundred are gathered here. And yet... these are the ones who remain.

My gaze wanders the room, examining the chamber with a different perspective. Most of the long tables are dusty from disuse or shoved aside in favor of creating open space. The clan seems to favor a subset of the giant cave, clustering on the opposite side—far from the throne.

Why are there so few of them? I'm worried, and it's a concern that isn't just mine. The fear rises from the cavern, the throne, linked to my knowledge of clan and vigil.

The scales on my skin are strange, but this deeper awareness is... incomprehensible. I didn't invite it, and while the understanding is useful, I'm scared. I'm accessing information that isn't mine, feeling emotions that don't match my experience.

It's the fireflies. Realizing that, I wonder if I'm going mad.

Because I know it's Wisp's knowledge flowing into me. She told me I'm her Blessed One, but by Teyr, I can only grasp the fringe of what that means—champion, savior, and queen.

It's overwhelming.

My head pounds, my scalp becoming tight. Despite the gigantic cavern, it's somehow difficult to breathe.

I need fresh air. I need out of here.

Ignoring the clan, I run past the throne, through the hallway, and onto the balcony. My new strong body is quick, and within moments, I'm taking a breath of sea air, desperate to calm my panic before it begins.

My cheeks flush with embarrassment—I can't imagine what my clan must think of that. I woke and immediately ran.

“Reina.”

It's Drakon. I spin around to face him, wringing my sweaty hands. I'm shaking my head, my lips twisting with uncertain words.

“You're safe,” he says.

I want to argue with him—I do not know what is happening to me, and that can't possibly be safe—except his eyes are wide with concern, and when I meet his gaze, he helps me settle. I take another breath, this one less rushed than the last.

He shows his palms, stepping toward me, signaling peace. Still holding my gaze, he nods in time with my breaths, helping me through each one. My panic ebbs, my

shoulders softening.

“Better?” he asks.

“A little.” With another gigantic sigh, more of the anxiety passes.

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Drakon waits, standing beside me. And side by side, we look upon the Nearbright Sea. Despite standing in the same place as the night before, the sun casts everything in a different light.

A breeze wafts over my skin, kissing my scales, and I breathe through the strange sensations, my brain spinning to keep pace. I tap my clawed fingertips against the flesh of my other forearm, listening to the clink of talon on scale, finding reassurance in the pressure of my own touch.

I'm changed. This body is still me.

Like the other dragon fae, the scales don't cover my skin. Instead, they form long lines following the lengths of my limbs. I'm colored with hues of bold purple and softer pink.

I check my palms, running my fingertips against the places where the Maledictum's thorns pierced me, but while there are nearly invisible scars, I'm healed.

My new flesh is tougher than my human skin. And I discover my feet are naturally protected, scaled and callused. My body protects me in ways it couldn't before.

"What happened?" I ask, glancing at Drakon from the corner of my eye.

"For a time, you've become dragon fae," he answers. "You'll be able to shift and fly."

To become a dragon, to fly. It sounds breathtaking that my body could now carry such

power within. Except... “What do you mean, for a time?”

“It depends on your decision.”

“I don’t understand.”

He swallows, still not much for talking.

“What do I have to decide?” I ask.

He nods, encouraging himself to speak. Then he points to the countless balconies. Like the great hall, there is far more space than there are dragon fae. “The clan used to be larger, before my grandfather clawed Wisp’s throne and started the curse.”

“I saw the throne,” I reply, remembering where the gold turned red. “Does your grandfather lead the clan?”

“He was our final king. He died after damaging the throne.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Drakon shakes his head. “He wasn’t a good leader. Kaliyah is our elder, but she is not connected to Wisp, not in the way a monarch would be.”

“And the curse?” I prompt when he grows silent again.

“Barrenness,” he answers. “Wisp has turned her back on us. Ever since that day, we have borne no children. I was a faeling when the curse began, and a century later, I’m still the youngest of our clan.”

Their cause strikes me, rubbing salt in a wound that I don’t know how to heal. “What

is my role in this?”

He turns to me, his eyes wide with hope. “Only a human can end the curse. A human who forsakes their former life, claims their dragon fae body, and becomes our monarch. So either you walk away, become human again, and we’ve spent our last chance to be redeemed or... you become our queen.”

I swallow. It’s a lot to take in. “Last chance?” I ask. “There were others?”

“You’re the third human Wisp has blessed. We only have three chances.”

“What happened to the others?”

He doesn’t answer, not quickly. And I don’t press him. I’ve already learned more than I can comprehend.

Every point he’s made is affirmed by my internal knowledge—Wisp’s knowledge. Our connection isn’t so clear she can communicate why she did such a thing, but I know he’s not deceptive.

Drakon never elaborates on what happened to the others. “I’ve given my oath to keep you safe,” he says instead. “And I will be true to my word.”

I’m reassured enough, at least for the moment, and I put my questioning aside. I need to be, to observe how my fate has shifted. It’s enough to make my head spin. My body is stronger than ever, and I’m with a clan that values me, needs me. I have a male’s oath of safety in the trials that are to come.

Maybe this is the opportunity I’ve been praying for.

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I'm intrigued by the possibility.

And try as I might to deny it, I'm drawn to Drakon too, no longer afraid of his strength, and my gaze settles on his lips. They're tougher than a man's, and my fingers drift to my own mouth, checking that my lips have thickened too. Despite the roughness, they're still sensitive, and my lips tingle where my claw presses into them.

Drakon's chest stills when I do, like he's holding his breath as I hold mine too. My throat tightens with a reaction I barely recognize. Desire.

I haven't felt desire since before I was married, a young woman who only had daydreams of lovemaking, back before my former husband taught me sex didn't need to be pleasurable.

My heart flutters as Drakon's gaze rakes up and down my body, and I'm left wondering what has changed. Because I'm trying to learn him by heart, fighting the urge to touch his scales and test whether they feel like mine. I want to know if his lips are as sensitive as mine.

I take a step closer, and he does the same. A shiver runs down my spine as he reaches for my face, cupping my chin in his palm. I tremble at his touch.

He towers over me, and I step into his shadow, sliding my hand around his waist. I examine the dense muscles of his back as he holds me against his chest, pressing my face flush against him. I hold my breath, holding his scent in my lungs.

My heart pounds louder. This feels nice—the pleasure surprising but welcome.

“Ahem.”

We’re interrupted, and I flush, feeling caught in something immoral. But when I turn to see who spied us, I find Kaliyah. She’s... smiling.

The elder offers a glass of ruby red drink. “I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she says, “but the clan is hoping you’re ready to return.”

Drakon swallows, his embarrassment mirroring mine, but he doesn’t seem as penitent. My stomach twists in knots, desperate to end this lust before it grows. At home, being caught in such an embrace would start rumors, adding injury to my already ruined reputation. However, Kaliyah seems more amused than judgmental.

The whole situation stuns me. The flame of desire seemed lost with my youth, but whatever just happened with Drakon felt...good. Good enough that it chases away the creeping shame—there are bigger problems to face.

“This should calm you,” Kaliyah says, handing me the juice.

I accept, taking a sip. My tastebuds find flavors I’ve never noticed before, and once again, I’m reminded of how different my new existence is. Taste and smell and skin. Every sensation is new.

It’s still overwhelming. But I’m past the panic, and it also becomes... interesting.

My curiosity is further fueled by that sense of home I didn’t know I was lacking. I thought home was with a family that avoided me, afraid my scales would spread. Home was a place of necessary security, with food in my belly and a roof over my head.

“We’re going to have a banquet,” Kaliyah says. “But first, I’ll take you to the thermae

so you can bathe. I'll bring you clean clothes, and we can talk. As for you, Drakon, please help with the preparations."

He nods, clearly trusting me to her care. The elder smiles encouragingly, and I suspect she might answer my questions more completely and with less distraction than quiet, sensual Drakon.

I finish the drink, steeling myself by contemplating the horizon. In the clear daylight, I'm certain I can see the distant continent. It's familiar, and I'm drawn to it, but I force my gaze back to the obsidian lava-streaked volcanoes that cover the island.

By the time I finish the drink and return to the central cavern, I'm a little more grounded.

Kaliyah leads, while Drakon follows me. Single file, we enter the hall, step down from the dais, and weave through the crowd. The clan shifts, making space as Kaliyah walks to one of the several tunnels connected to the central cavern.

The dragon fae keep a respectful distance as I pass, bowing their heads. Some look at me with awe—an expression that I mirror, taking them in. Their scales are in countless colors, from vibrant pinks and deep browns to sea greens and vivid blues, every shade highlighting a unique beauty of their golden-brown skin.

There is one other with red scales, the same hue as Drakon, and she scoffs as we pass. She looks at me directly, her face grim. Long parallel scars are clawed into her arm, from shoulder to wrist. They are old, the skin irrevocably damaged but healed.

"Aunt Scorpia," Drakon greets her.

Her scowl moves past me and settles on him. While some members of the clan appraised me uncertainly, she's the first one who makes me feel afraid.

That look. It's possible she despises me, or maybe Drakon—it's hard to tell. Goose bumps, not the good kind, run down my spine.

Kaliyah frowns but does little to intervene. "I'll talk with Reina as she bathes, and we will return for the banquet," she instructs, leading me away from Drakon.

Drakon

Reina is a sight to be seen, remade with her purple and pink scales, a blessing that was forced upon her. Once she overcame her distress, she seemed pleased with the transition. Gone is the fearful woman I chased into a cave, and I'm relieved to see she wears the transformation well.

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She remains nervous, yes, but beneath that, I sense a wonder and intrigue. She's curious to learn all that she is.

My own curiosity makes my throat tighten. Her embrace was... unexpected. Recalling it makes my heart race, but it's no longer the thrill of the dragon's rush. I'm beating with something new. An...affection.

Her poise amazes me, and I want to worship the ground she stands on. I've never had cause for such exaltation before—I was born to the dark days of the clan, the curse starting when I was a faeling. Not many years later, my father made our situation worse. I've had little reason for hope, but Reina has changed everything.

It's dangerous to become attached to Wisp's Blessed One. I should worry that I've become smitten.

She's smiling even now, despite Scorpia's gruff greeting, as she follows Kaliyah from the hall. And when she looks back at me, rounding the corner, her face flushes as she meets my gaze. I nod encouragingly, telling my lovestruck heart that I must stay behind—I need to let her go and trust Kaliyah will care for her.

Hope is a powerful thing, and upon facing Scorpia's scowl, I understand why I've never dared feel it.

“Don't be stupid,” my aunt warns, seeing the adoration in my eyes.

I don't reply—I can't. My aunt has her reasons to say that, and they're scarred upon her arm. Scars I can never undo.

Thermae

Reina

I follow Kaliyah, my skin prickling as Drakon's gaze trails after me, and when I glance back, our eyes catching, I catch him memorizing me.

The sensation is hard to shake, but I train my focus on Kaliyah. Drakon wouldn't leave me in her care if he didn't trust her, and besides, she's easy to trust. A calm demeanor radiates from her, her sapphire scales cooling the warmer tones of her skin. Drakon called her their leader.

"Elder Kaliyah," I address her with a bow of my head.

"Please call me Kaliyah. We have no titles, not since our last king." She is quick to correct me. "I lead our clan, but I have not completed the ascension rite. You, however... you could be our queen, should you choose to end our curse and survive the rites."

"What do these rites involve?" I ask, nervous about what is expected from me.

She shakes her head. "The rite of Wisp's throne is a mystery that only our monarchs know. A secret none have shared. All I know is that should you attempt the trial, you'll sit upon the throne, and that if you survive, you'll rise as queen."

"Survive?" I ask, my voice quivering.

She is silent for several seconds before answering, "It is a dangerous thing, to sit upon Wisp's throne, so before you can attempt such a thing, you must strengthen your dragon form by the rite of swimming in the magma of our great caldera."

“Won’t I burn?”

“Not as a dragon, once you learn to master the form.”

I swallow. Two rites. A swim in the caldera followed by the mystery of Wisp’s throne. She’s right—my survival can’t be taken for granted.

Nevertheless, she smiles. “If you choose to leave, nobody in our clan will stop you—we are willing to succumb to the curse, becoming the last of our clan. We will not force these trials upon you.”

I’m quiet as she leads me through the tunnels. Our travel is reminiscent of my dark journey the day before, but everything is different. The light is low, but my shifted eyes have adjusted to darkness.

The floor isn’t rough but instead worn down by countless feet over countless centuries. Carved doors line the walls, junctures splitting to other tunnels, some of them walled closed. If Kaliyah did not guide my way, I would become lost. We pass archways leading to large chambers, some of which are storage or community spaces, but most are empty, dusty, and under-furnished. Once again, I see that this cavernous system is too large for the current clan.

Kaliyah stops at a set of large wooden doors and pushes them open. Steam wafts across the threshold, warming me as my scales glisten in the mist. She leads me across the threshold.

The thermae is an enormous cavern filled with naturally heated pools. The tallest of the hot baths line the back wall, water falling from their ledges, forming a second tier of smaller basins. Water also slides down these walls, pooling into a third and final hot spring that fills the bulk of the chamber. The water gleams in hues of aqua blue.

Stalactites drip from the ceiling, the cavern textured on every surface, as soft shadows form under fae lights hidden inside crevices. The space is barely illuminated, too dark for human eyes, but the effect is welcoming.

Kaliyah leads me down a side tunnel, revealing several private bathing chambers to the side. She shows me how to use the flowing water, hands me a bathing suit, and leaves, indicating I should use the shower to clean my skin before entering the pools.

When she closes the door behind her, I'm alone for the first time since waking.

I strip, removing ruined clothes, to find my body in a cleaner, healthier condition than it has any right to be. I have been thrown into the sea, crusted with sea salt, and covered with sand. My skin was flaky and dry, my feet torn and bloody.

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I knew my feet had healed, but taking in the rest of me, steals my breath. The dragon fae call me the Blessed One, and this miracle does not feel like a curse.

Running my fingers along my scales, I find them everywhere. Forearms to shoulders, shoulder-bone to hip bones. They cup my breasts, sensually angling down my curves.

I'm beautiful.

I've never thought that before.

My former husband said I was acceptable when my dowry was decided, and given my strange birthmark, acceptable had been a compliment. At least until I was found barren.

I tried not to let it bother me—I couldn't afford unnecessary doubt. Thankfully, I'm strong and capable. Not every woman is suited to the demanding life of a fisherman's wife. If I've been vain, it's because of my strength.

Now I'm awed by my beauty. My shape is still my own—soft curves pillowing hardened muscle—but the scales armor me, the pink hues make me delicate.

I'm transfixed, trusting my body in a new way. It's intimidating to accept that this new skin fits. There's no logic to it, yet I can't deny my increasing comfort in this new body.

The scaled birthmark was my beginning, and when the sea swept me overboard, I found rebirth. And if I'm to transform, grow wings, and become a dragon, there is

more to come. These thoughts are strange, so I narrow my focus, scrubbing my scales clean.

Kaliyah gave me a bathing suit, and I put it on, finding it to be smaller than my underwear, showing far more skin than I'm accustomed to, but it covers the essential parts. Its color matches the darker purples of my scales, and even underdressed, with hot steam kissing my exposed skin, I feel like royalty.

By the time I return to the *thermae*, Kaliyah waits in the largest pool. She floats, supported by the mineral water. She is beautiful—all the dragon fae are. Her sapphire scales sparkle as she looks at peace.

Upon seeing me, she smiles. "Come on in, the water's warm. And it'll do your muscles some good—I can't imagine your transformation was easy."

Stepping down the well-worn stone steps, I slip into the water. It splashes against me, so different from the sea waves that threatened to swallow me whole. "The *thermae* is beautiful," I say.

"The *thermae* is Wisp's gift," she replies. "Built during the second century of Queen Prima's reign, long before the curse. That the *thermae* remain—untouched and splendid—reminds me that despite our curse, Wisp has not abandoned our clan. There is hope."

She looks at me, her lip quivering like she's afraid to show what my appearance, the Blessed One, might mean to her.

The sight makes me uncomfortable, yet I nod all the same, tight-lipped. Water laps around me, warm and inviting, and sucking in a heavy breath, I surrender my body to the waters. Weight falls from me, and I become buoyant.

Kaliyah leans back with a long sigh, signaling it isn't time to talk. Not yet. First, we must rest.

At first, the silence unnerves me, and I float, unaccustomed to pausing. I've been struggling, drowning, transforming... I've shifted from a cursed woman to a Blessed One.

I don't quite understand the details, but I know the future of this clan depends on my decision—to walk away, claim their throne, or die trying. This is not a role I'm comfortable playing. For too long, I've been a burden to my family, barely able to justify my existence.

Yet, like the mineral water lifting me to the surface now, I feel supported. I know I'm tied to Wisp. It's said that the Isles of Fae aren't magical because of the fae, but the fae are magical because of the Isles. I never understood what that meant—until now.

Wisp's tether spreads through every single scale. She's the voice inside me that knows this is home and clan. It's a connection that should be unnerving, but after so many years of feeling lost, I welcome it. There are worse fates than becoming fae.

Here, nobody knows I'm barren. Here, it doesn't matter. Now I'm granted a decision with the potency of life, and it's a power I've sought my entire life. Finally, I can hold still. I can float... Supported by mineral water, I lose track of time, and my panic fades.

I might be cursed, but life remains within me. The clan might be cursed, but I see the evidence of their previous bounty. Once, this isle was filled with life.

At least it was, until something happened.

I recall the violent slash upon the throne, where it is lava-red like the Maledictum that

chose me, and I stand, claiming my feet in the buoyant mineral water, as I ask, “Why did Wisp curse you?”

She hums, sitting taller in the water, sorting out how to answer. “Drakon’s grandfather made a poor decision, influenced by the dragon’s rush,” she begins. “But Wisp’s tale begins long ago... A short time after Mother Ocean and Father Sky gave themselves to the act of creation, a final isle formed.”

I scrunch my brows. This isn’t the story I know. “I thought Mother Ocean and Father Sky created all the Isles of Fae.”

“Not Wisp,” she explains. “Wisp was born later, when our great volcanoes rose from the sea, forming a new isle. Like all the isles, Wisp longed for inhabitants, fae who could wield her magic. But with her late birth, after the rush of creation, Wisp missed the opportunity to create common fae. She was lonely, steadily growing the island through her volcanoes. We’re told it was then that Wisp bonded with the Nearbright Sea, her single companion, until after centuries of growth, she grew strong enough to create her own people—the dragon fae.

“Life was difficult for our ancestors. Wisp wielded the power of raw earth, forming caverns to shelter her creation, but there was no land to farm. Only fish.

“We dragon fae are hungry beasts, more so than other fae, with our fiery bodies and beastly dragon forms, and we quickly stripped the seas of their harvest. Wisp worried that she’d made a mistake, creating such a voracious fae upon her limited lands. She consulted the Nearbright Sea, who told her of rich farmlands on the other isles, where fae produced more food than they could consume. You need something to trade, the sea advised the land.

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“At this time, a clever queen sat upon Wisp’s throne. Queen Prima was bold enough to swim in magma pools and fly to the other isles. Together, they plotted the creation of dragon crystal.

“We still make dragon crystal, to this very day, in the heart of our volcanoes, crafting Wisp’s special magma—rich with sand and minerals. Since the process relies on the impervious skin of our dragon forms, no other fae can produce this. The resulting glass is valued for its clarity and durability, a necessary resource when building homes for the fae.

“Soon the Nearbright Sea brought Wisp her first merchant, and when Queen Prima demonstrated the potential of the crystal, the first trade deal was sealed. Word of this specialty glass spread throughout the isles, its trade becoming a reliable source of food. Finally, our clan could expand, filling the vast caverns that you now see.”

She stops there, and though she clearly has more to say, I appreciate the pause. My mind soaks this in. She lies back and floats, her gray hair fanning away from her. I try to relax, but my mind races—the world is new. There is much to take in.

I admire the cave with new appreciation. These exquisite details don’t simply form in Wisp’s caves—the isle crafted them herself. Wisp is beyond my comprehension, and yet she fills my future. Maybe my past too.

The scales at my neck, my empty womb... If Wisp could influence the Nearbright Sea to bring her a merchant, did she give me my birthmark, my curse? Did she ask the sea to throw me overboard, delivering me to these shores? There are too many coincidences to simply dismiss. Was this always my destiny—did I ever have a

choice?

These are questions I'm not ready to ask, and I keep my focus on the next chapter of this tale. "What changed?" I ask. "You still haven't explained the curse."

She's quiet, but I know she hears my question, and she muses her thoughts, swimming toward a wall and sitting upon a ledge. Her feet sway in the warm water as I look up to her, expectant for the next story she's about to share.

"Countless generations have passed since that first merchant and the glory days of dragon crystal. Our once legendary creation has become ubiquitous, so durable that there is no longer demand. Our once explosive trade slowed to a trickle.

"King Ichor, Drakon's grandfather, ascended to the throne under such dwindling conditions, vowing change. He would innovate something new, he said, something novel the merchants would crave.

"The following year, he isolated himself in one of our calderas, manufacturing Wisp's magma into something new. He was never the same after that, but from his madness, ingenuity was born. When King Ichor rose, he carried the first dragon blade.

"Like our crystal, the metal was nearly unbreakable. It was keen and difficult to dull, a vast improvement over other fae weapons. In total, he manufactured seven swords and one dagger, the dragon blades, and prepared for the next merchant to visit our shores.

"At the time, we were ecstatic, unsuspecting that Wisp disapproved of this creation, despising how he warped her mantle into a weapon. But only our king could commune with her, and he refused to relay her warnings until it was too late.

“We celebrated the day he sold that first batch of dragon blades, acquiring a hefty sum. Except as the merchant sailed on the horizon, the magma pools spat, Wisp bubbling at the abuse of her magma. The volcanoes rumbled as Wisp lashed out.

“Whispers spread amongst the clan, knowing something was wrong, and together we confronted King Ichor in the greathall. He faced us, seated upon Wisp’s throne, still refusing to communicate the nature of Wisp’s displeasure, when the curse took hold.

“Ropes of magma tied our king to his throne, welding his body to the golden chair. His eyes grew white, and no longer himself, Wisp took command of his body, speaking through him. ‘I curse you,’ the isle began. ‘Your king ignored me, trading weapons to merchants, despite my disapproval. And so I take your king and curse your clan—he violated my magma, and in exchange, I take your power of creation. You will bear no more children.’

“The hall grew silent then—all except Drakon, who cried out, an infant, the final faeling born to our clan.”

I swallow, the pain of their curse one that’s dear to me, and I grow tense, angry that any deity would curse a people this way—a clan they mothered. A deity that... I’m connected to. “But you can break the curse,” I counter. “Through me.”

Kaliyah nods. “Wisp continued, ‘You will have three chances to break this curse, to find a ruler worthy of my throne—someone willing to give up everything to join your clan. I will transform three humans into dragon fae, granting them the opportunity to swim in my caldera, to attempt the ascension rite. If you can convince them you’re worthy—if they can pass the rites—I will forgive your king’s abuse and lift this curse.’

“Her words spoken, Wisp tightened her grasp on our final king, absorbing him into the very throne in which he sat. He protested, his claws ripping at the

throne—damaging it. The throne bled, red lava pooling upon its seat, and from Wisp’s blood, she created the Maledictum, a lava-red rose with the thorns to transform three humans.”

A cold breeze passes through the chamber, chilling me, even in the warm water. Only it can’t be a true breeze—we’re enclosed.

I feel empowered—I feel taken advantage of, stripped of my former life and flung into something I can’t understand.

“You’re our last chance to break this curse,” she finishes.

But I still have questions. “What happened before, to the other humans?”

“The first human preferred to return to the human continent. As for the second...” Her expression darkens. “She successfully claimed her dragon form before dying during the ascension rite. There is more to say, only it’s not my story to tell. It’s Scorpia’s—and Drakon’s.”

I nod, recalling how the two of them stared at each other. Scorpia’s anger drove Drakon to defensiveness. Despite his strength, he wilted under her critical gaze. Like my appearance meant he had done something wrong.

Kaliyah continues, “Many decades have passed since those dark days. Our clan is even smaller now as more leave for livelier shores. For all these decades, I’ve kept the Maledictum hidden, delaying until the right opportunity—” she meets my gaze, and I wish I didn’t see hope in her expression “—and it seems the opportunity found you.”

I swallow. It’s silent again, and my thoughts race. I lie back upon the mineral water, floating. I squeeze my eyes shut and open them again, staring at the stalactites on the

ceiling. There are no words to tell Kaliyah how I never wanted this.

But I cannot drift forever, and eventually my stomach grumbles. I'm reminded of why we're here.

“You said there will be a banquet?” I ask, rising from the water.

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“Yes,” she agrees, not quite missing my hesitancy. “They should be ready, and it is time you introduced yourself to the clan.”

Banquet

Drakon

I can’t take my eyes off her.

Her loveliness begins with her smile, a confidence she carries in her new body, an eagerness to wield her scales. I long to worship her. Hers is a beauty that spreads to every dimple on her body, displayed by the rosy-pink skirts that hit every curve, slits expanding up the length of her legs, showing her full thighs. Her sensuality was always there, even as a human, but now, she puts it on parade—she does not shy away.

Only it’s not her grandeur homing my gaze on her. No, it’s my fear.

Scorpia is acting suspicious. My aunt questions members of the clan, especially those who have sided with her before. They’re skeptical of how Reina was chosen—suggesting I’m at fault for not intervening when the Maledictum appeared. There are even rumors that I brought her the Maledictum myself.

The clan had agreed, decades ago, to delay this third and final attempt to break the curse. I would not violate such an agreement. Except I never imagined the Wisp would present the Maledictum upon the throne, compelling Reina to touch it without granting the clan time to deliberate. Wisp surprised all of us, and I’m the one under

question.

I resolve to clear the air over dinner, encouraging Reina to share her version of events with Scorpia. The clan must put this matter behind us if we're to allow Reina the chance to meet us and choose.

My heart stops—Reina glanced at me—and I forget about clan politics. I'm enamored, completely and utterly. The sight of her destroys me, and I have been unmade.

I should fear adoration like this. This power she has over me—Scorpia may turn it against me, echoing our history.

Reina

Drakon and I haven't seen each other in hours, but it feels like ages. My skin tingles where he touched me, wishing to return to his embrace.

I try to keep my spine straight, to stretch my focus to the entire clan. I want to make my every step steady, but the way Drakon looks at me makes me want to writhe my hips, to pull him away and discover where that embrace might have gone.

The instinct shocks me. I've never felt this way.

Nor have I ever been clothed like this. Kaliyah dressed me in rosy-pink, and countless thin gossamer skirts swirl around my ankles with long slits that run up my thighs. I wear a tight bodice that hugs my chest, lifting and shaping my breasts, leaving the middle of my belly exposed.

The clan applauds as I enter the great hall, and the sensation is heady—it's nice to sparkle. It's how I imagine my brother and former husband might have felt upon

returning home with a fruitful harvest from the sea.

I should fear adoration like this. Their fate depends on what I decide. There are clearly politics afoot, secrets I haven't been told. The last Blessed One died—my life is at stake.

Yet, when I scan the crowd, most of them are smiling. There are a few—Scorpia nearest among them—that clap lamely, their faces taut.

Kaliyah leads me to a long table, offering me a seat at its head, and when the applause dies down, it is replaced by chatter. As I sit, there's the shuffling of benches as the rest of the clan settles too. Thus, the banquet begins.

Kaliyah settles on the bench to my right, with Drakon on her other side. I'm reassured that they're near, especially when Scorpia settles to my left. She nods to acknowledge me, but her scowl remains.

The clan fills seven of the long tables, all near the wall farthest from the throne. Several dragon fae emerge from small doorways, running hot dishes from the kitchen to the table. The joyful chatter continues, but nobody touches the food, not yet.

Soon platters cover the table, carrying scents of roasted meats and spiced vegetables. One platter is filled with fruit, and I lick my lips at the sight of an orange, bright and bold. It's served with other fruits I don't recognize with red and blue skins. Despite the strange food, my tummy rumbles.

"Strawberry and blueberry," Scorpia says. "I don't think many humans have them."

There's a mash made from a tuber that reminds me of a potato and an array of cooked vegetables I half recognize. Baskets of warm bread are distributed throughout the long table.

There's a cooked fish I don't recognize. "Whitescale fish," Scorpia explains. "They favor the warmer waters around Wisp and rarely travel beyond the Nearbright Sea."

Pitchers of drinks are brought forth. One is a fruit-infused water, and the other is a sort of wine. Scorpia provides me the names for each of them, adding a warning that the second is alcoholic and that neither should be consumed before the toast.

For all Scorpia's dark looks and grumbling, she's helpful, and she must see surprise on my face, for she quirks her lips—the closest she's come to a smile. "You're not the first human to be confused by our food. I've... helped another before." Her eyes squint, her gaze growing distant, bittersweet with memory.

I glance from her to Drakon, increasingly determined to learn what happened between them, only I'm too overwhelmed by the food to ask. The smells are inviting and strange, furthering my sense of home-that-isn't-home.

Soon food covers the tables and most of the servers have taken their seats, joining us, yet nobody touches the food. Still, we're waiting...

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There's a ruckus, a rumble of excitement. The last of the servers leaves the kitchens—including the one I think is the head chef. With wide grins on their faces, they carry platters of skewered meat. The first of the skewers is placed upon my plate before they walk about the tables, ensuring they distribute the skewers amongst the clan.

“Monitor meat,” Scorpia explains. “Giant lizards we've learned to farm.”

Considering the celebration, they're clearly prized livestock, the meat prepared for special occasions. The last time someone slaughtered an animal in my honor was my wedding, back when I had the sanguinity that follows women of childbearing age. We celebrated then, when there was hope.

My heart shakes with the memory, recalling how I saw my new husband with curiosity, thankful he wanted me despite my strange mark. I believed I'd be pregnant within the year, caring for my beautiful baby while he worked the sea. It was to become my life.

I have made my own path since then. Or at least, I've tried. I still grieve the loss of a child I never had, my gaze locked on the northern horizon—toward Wisp. I swallow. Was this always my fate?

I'm not sure whether I'm celebrating the end of my former life or the start of something new, but I inhale the enticing scent of cooked meat, knowing nothing will be the same.

The last of the meat is served, but still no one eats. They look expectantly at the head

of the table, and when the last of the servers settles, Kaliyah stands.

“Tonight we welcome Reina, the Blessed One,” she addresses the clan. “Her transformation starts a great transition for our clan, one that I understand may come as a surprise.”

Scorpia laughs, sounding derisive, as she stares down Drakon. She seems to blame him for this, yet he holds her gaze, brows raised, almost apologetic. He doesn’t back down.

“As for me,” Kaliyah continues, “I see this as a grand opportunity to learn our fate. We will rise from the limbo that has held us stagnant for decades, and together, we will face our fate.”

“You set this up,” Scorpia whispers, her voice growing louder as she realizes the others are listening. “You and Drakon together. You broke our agreement to delay this—encouraging her transformation without consulting the clan.”

Kaliyah blinks.

Scorpia grins, knowing she is being heard, and continues, speaking louder. “Even if it is as they claim, that the Maledictum appeared on the throne, I blame Drakon for his negligence. He never should have been guarding the human alone.”

Drakon growls, his eyes flashing red as his body tenses. But he hesitates, swallows down the aggression, and stands to address the clan. “I would like to take this opportunity to apologize that Reina touched the Maledictum under my watch. Wisp compelled her. To be clear, it was never my intent for her to become the Blessed One without the clan’s approval.”

Hushed whispers fill the chamber, and I can sense the clan is trying to make up their

minds, unsure of whom to believe.

I'm not grasping the nuances of the debate, but if the clan needs clarity, I can speak for myself. I stand. "I think Wisp chose me long ago," I say.

My voice sounds like a squeak—I'm not used to addressing a crowd. Scorpia raises an eyebrow, her smirk growing larger the longer I stay silent, failing to find words to follow the first.

Eventually the hall quiets, and I swallow, wetting my dry throat. I've spent my life allowing others to speak for me, existing in the crannies of society. For the first time, I have power, a power I've been hungry for. Only now that it's in my grasp, I don't know how to wield it. Words fail me.

Scorpia laughs, making my stomach twist. She speaks since I cannot. "Reina is like a mouse—see how she squeaks! She can't possibly face the throne's rite and survive. We do not want another human's death on our hands. Let us tell Reina to move on and leave our clan, let us be forever cursed. It is the best way. This banquet is nothing but a hopeful charade."

A growl gathers in my throat, but Drakon is driven to speak first, his anger rising faster. He slams his fist on the table. "Reina is far more than she seems."

His provocation is met with disdain from the clan, many of whom give way to hushed whispers while a few shout out, urging him to remain calm. It seems he has overstepped.

Meanwhile, I'm still standing, mouth gaping.

"I..." I start again. "I want to give you a chance," I whisper.

Why? Why do I bluster now? A flush claims my face.

Scorpia chuckles again, and a few join her.

The growl in my chest rises to something useful. My lips part, and a guttural sound escapes me. I cry, “Wisp chose me long ago with a scaled birthmark. When the Maledictum appeared, I was compelled to touch it—my arrival is no trick. And while I’m confused, I’m eager to learn. If I choose to break your curse, I am not afraid of facing the throne’s rite.”

Finally, my words shift Scorpia’s mood, her laughter receding into a scowl. She shrugs, declining to respond, and turns to Kaliyah, who has remained standing despite the disruptions.

Kaliyah lifts her drink, and the clan does the same. I mirror them, avoiding the alcohol and selecting the infused water. The elder gives a final toast. “To Reina, our Blessed One.”

“To Reina,” the clan returns.

It’s strange to drink a toast to myself, but my throat is dry, and I lift the cup to my lips. The drink is too sour, too much lemon, I think, and my lips pucker.

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Scorpia smiles as I set my cup down, while Drakon holds his cup under his nose. His nostrils flare as he stares at Scorpia with alarm.

My chest becomes tight. My vision blurs.

“I... I don’t feel well.” My words are becoming slurred.

Scorpia stands, a twisted smile reaching her lips. “Don’t waste your breath. It was a nice speech, but I’m sending you back home. Relax, this will all be over soon.”

I don’t seem to have a choice—I’m tumbling, falling against the back of my chair. The water I drank, it was...toosour. Poisoned. My body feels distant as I sink back. All I want is to sleep...

And I’m not the only one. Others are slumping too. Most of the clan has fallen to Scorpia’s deceit. Only a few sit upright, while those who knew this scheme rise, prepared to fight.

Drakon’s eyes stay wide. He’s okay—or at least, he seems alert, his cup undisturbed. “Cyran poison,” he whispers.

Kaliyah has fallen too, and she looks at him, blinking several times. Then she holds my gaze, giving Drakon a command. “Take Reina. And run.”

Drakon

I don’t want to leave Kaliyah, the clan, but the elder is right. This isn’t the time for

fighting, but retreat. Scorpia had this well planned. It's a miracle my sensitive nose detected something was off, warning me off the drink.

I react, taking the best path forward. My wings form, expanding wide, as I lift Reina's limp form into my arms. Her eyes haven't quite closed, but the strength is gone from her body. My back is exposed to Scorpia, and I quickly turn to face her. I snarl, making my point clear.

"Don't you dare follow me," I warn, flapping my wings and finding lift. I race for the balcony. I'll keep Reina safe. There's a place I know...

"Don't let them escape," Scorpia commands her subordinates.

I brace myself, allowing my rage to take hold. I prepare to injure members of my clan for the sake of escape, hating how my dragon's rush can protect Reina, but at the cost of my clan's safety. This is not a comfortable thing, but Kaliyah asked it of me, and I will do my duty.

I'm holding Reina too tight, and my claws press into her skin. I force my hands to loosen, battling the consumption of my rage. She's aware, in a distant way—I'm certain of it when she gasps.

Fireflies spark, rising from her mouth, like those I saw around the throne. They surround us, forming a barrier between Reina and Scorpia's followers. Wisp. The isle aids our escape.

Relieved, I struggle against my rage, urging it to hush—it would rather fight than run. Successful, I hold Reina tight in my arms, and we escape, leaving the clan in Scorpia's claws.

Awakening

Reina

My stomach grumbles, reminding me that despite dinner's wonderful smell, I never had the chance to eat.

Warm blankets cover me, and I'm reminded of the nest Drakon built for me near the throne. Is that where I am? It's hard to open my eyes.

Now I remember. I never had the chance to eat because Scorpia poisoned me. It's confusing, but I remember Drakon taking me away, and my last drifting memories are from his arms. I remember glinting light, the return of fireflies...

I'm sluggish to wake, drifting in and out of sleep, but in time, hunger helps me rise.

This cave is new, smelling different from the rest. Like the air has been still too long, becoming stale, but that's changing. A breezeway has been opened.

When I can keep my eyes open, I take stock of this much smaller cavern. The nest is in a lower section, near the back, and daylight streams from the cavern's mouth, passing through another room to reach me. Someone left a waterskin near the nest, and while I'm thirsty, the poison is still thick in my throat, and I don't drink.

In time, I rise, struggling to balance, wobbling more than I'd like. My mind is slow and thoughts dreary—whatever the cyran poison did to me, it hasn't left my system. Not completely.

I stumble my way out of the nest and step into the main cave. This one has bins for storage, a roughly cut bench, a matching table, and not much else.

Dusk's dim light streams through the rock-hewn doorway, drawing me closer, and when I find myself standing upon a small ledge, I gasp. I'm much higher than

expected.

The cliff wall is sharp, making it a long fall to the canyon's basin and the stream of lava that flows through it. Dusky skies illuminate the narrow canyon while the brightest stars greet me with a jarring clarity—my body still torn between fatigue and rising fears. The ocean pounds into the seaside cliffs, crashing where the canyon meets an abrupt end.

It's strange how my fear doesn't escalate when I look down. Maybe it's part of becoming dragon fae. There is no reason to fear heights if I have wings—wings I don't know how to use.

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I cannot even trust my fear.

Still, as my stomach growls again and my throat complains of thirst, I'm reminded that I'm alive, and the sensation runs down my spine, pulling forth a smile for my lips.

Part of this feels like freedom.

The sensation is laced with guilt—shouldn't I want to return home? Isn't that what home is? Scorpia was so convinced I should return home she poisoned the clan.

How fast everything changed... Is the clan safe? I think I was the only one swept away, taken by Drakon...

Where is he?

He's left me alone in this cavern, and I don't think it's possible to descend without help.

Except my longing for him is larger than that. I need him to explain what happened because I can't quite parse out the details. What could have happened before that was so terrible Scorpia would refuse my help, enforcing her objectives by poisoning the clan?

Overlooking the canyon, a glint of red draws my attention. While I've been waiting, Drakon has hidden in plain sight, still in shadow. I know it's him because I'll never forget his imposing dragon form.

His strong neck lashes out, snapping as he claims a waterfowl in his jaw. He shakes, breaking the bird's spine, and it goes limp. He carries it loosely in his maw, rising to meet me.

I'm awed as he nears. The brilliant red of his scales is shocking against the darker red of his webbed wings and his golden lines. The sight of him no longer makes my heart race in fear—now it pounds in excitement.

He is majestic.

The dragon lands, dropping the waterfowl and shifting to fae form as his talons scratch the earth. I quiver at the sudden return of his manly body, my gaze drawn to his defined chest.

“You must be hungry,” he says, walking into the cavern, dragging the bird by its neck.

My throat is too dry, and I'm too awed to reply, watching as he focuses on the task at hand, first digging through the storage containers and then defeathering the bird.

I watch his hands—how his scales sparkle as he does this simple task. My mind wanders to our embrace, wondering where his hands might explore, wishing my lips had found his.

We're together now. Isolated from the clan.

My knees wobble, and finally, I'm afraid of these heights—how far might I fall for him? I'm not prepared for the trenches of attraction.

As the years passed and my barrenness became increasingly apparent, my former husband's touch became rough. But watching Drakon handle our dinner, I'm certain

his caresses would be kind. He has sustenance, and I'm ravenous.

Food is a simple gesture that drives to my heart. My brother never fed me without complaining that I was an extra mouth, even when I prepared the meal myself. Drakon wears a soft smile as he provides for me.

"Can I help?" I ask. "I can manage a knife. Or maybe start a fire?"

"Rest," he orders. "There will be no need for fire."

I hesitate—I've grown tired of resting. The effects of the poison have ebbed.

Seeing this, he nods, indicating a heavy black pot. "Can you empty a waterskin into it? I'm preparing stew."

The cave transforms into our kitchen. While he instructs, I obey, and we fall into a quiet rhythm. There are root vegetables and the potato-like tuber. I chop them up while he finishes preparing the bird.

I'm tempted to break our silence, to settle the storm of questions within me, but this mundane focus is calming, bracing me for the conversation that is to come.

I still don't see a source of heat. "How are we planning to cook it without fire? We can't... eat raw meat." I gasp. "Or can we?"

"As dragons, we can digest raw food, but those bodies are far more ravenous." He doesn't quench my curiosity. "That pot is a fae good. It will heat the food."

I examine the pot with new intrigue, finding it cold. "How do I turn it on?"

"I'll show you," Drakon replies.

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He finishes with the waterfowl, adding the meat to the pot. My stomach growls anew—I'm eager for this dinner we're creating.

He lowers his lips closer to the pot. "Step back," he instructs.

Once I'm safely away, he breathes upon it, a long, slow exhale. His breath is hot, not quite the flame of a dragon, but fervent all the same. I quiver, still surprised he is no normal man.

Like a catching fire, the pot stays hot of its own accord. Drakon finds a long wooden spoon, spins it clockwise three times, and it stands up straight. It continues to stir without assistance.

He digs through the stores, pulling forth salt and seasoning. He adds a little of each. There's no more help needed from me, and I feel secure enough to settle my dry throat. I settle upon the bench, sipping from a waterskin, as I watch Drakon shifting through our supplies.

There's nothing more to do. The pot might be magical, but it still takes time to heat that much water, to cook that much meat. Drakon hands me some sort of ration. "It won't taste good. But it's nutritious."

I accept, and he settles, eating a second ration himself. He fidgets, clearly not ready for stillness either. The bustle of cooking had been a welcome distraction.

For a while we're silent, eating our rations. He's right, it's not tasty, but it settles my stomach. As my body becomes increasingly alert, my need for understanding grows.

I've fallen overboard, wandered through a dark cave, and turned into a dragon fae. I've been poisoned.

At least I'm not alone.

"Thank you," I tell Drakon, "for taking me from Scorpia."

He nods, his lips tightening, debating the right thing to say. He chooses not to speak.

I continue, "It feels like most of the poison has left my system..." I breathe. "Scorpia did this because of me, didn't she?"

Now he speaks, correcting me. "It's not your fault."

His words surprise me. I'm used to accepting blame; it's comfortable to do so. "Still, I feel responsible."

He scoffs, and I'm reminded of how Scorpia blames him for my transformation, as if he could have stopped me from touching the Maledictum.

It's difficult to justify that Wisp has marked me since birth. "Is the clan safe?" I ask instead. "From the poison?"

"Cyran poison is a light sedative, the effects passing in about a day. Like you, the clan will recover, but I can't see the scope of Scorpia's plans, especially since she failed to capture you."

"Oh."

"Hopefully we will learn soon." He points to a palm-sized blue stone. "That's a speaking stone, linked to one Kaliyah carries. We will check it at sunrise and sunset,

as is custom. There was no message from her at sunset, but presumably, she was still recovering. I hope to hear from her in the morning.”

So we’re in the dark, with no information about the clan. I still worry, but watching his brow furrow with doubt, I don’t question him further—he’s nervous too.

“Scorpia wants me,” I say. “She wants to send me home before I risk the caldera or the throne’s rite. Why?”

He takes a long moment to reply, and for a time, I worry the words will never come. His eventual answer is simple. “She wants to send you home because she loved the second human to become the Blessed One.”

“Loved?” I ask, recalling how kindly Scorpia introduced the food.

“It didn’t end well.”

I glance at the stew, just starting to simmer. Kaliyah trusts Drakon, but I know there’s something darker here. “What happened between you and Scorpia?” My voice quivers.

He blinks, his gaze trailing the stirring spoon. “She and my father had a disagreement. In my youthful haughtiness, I took my father’s side. It was the wrong decision.”

“Your father?” I ask. “Was he at the banquet?”

“He has passed,” Drakon explains, continuing before I can question further. “As for my mother, she fell in love with a better male than my father and now lives on another isle, hoping to start a new brood. I visit on occasion. Scorpia is my only family that remains.”

I sense he's simplifying matters, but this also feels like truth. I'm not ready to press him further—he's feeding me, granting immediate safety. We're terrified together, and this is enough.

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If I wanted to return home, I trust him to release me. Except I don't want to leave, not yet. This situation makes something within me flutter. The potential of wings pushes my shoulder blades to expand, stretching and testing the possibility.

My body might be rebuilt, but I'm not sure I can be remade. All my life, I've been limited by roles. First as a daughter, a wife, and finally, an unwanted sister. Limitations are all I know, and while my shoulders might expand, my stomach constricts.

Wisp requires that I surrender everything to end the curse. My broken family in exchange for this divided clan of dragon fae. With Scorpia's poison so recent, the prospect of staying seems dire. How can an outsider become a queen? If my body isn't built to bear children, how can I nurture the clan into healing?

Home isn't great, but it's the home that I know.

We're quiet again, this time for even longer. For the sake of doing something, I check the stew, finding the waterfowl still needs much more time. The evening grows long, and we're waiting to eat.

"What do you think happens next?" I ask, turning to face him.

"It's up to you," he replies. "If you're ready to leave, everything will be as Scorpia wishes."

"Or?" I prompt.

His eyes lift from the cavern floor, reaching for mine. My stomach flutters, my gaze trailing the red scales of his cheekbones to land on his gold-rimmed eyes. “Or we stay here, together. This cave is my secret, and Scorpia won’t find us.”

“I want that,” I reply too quickly and add. “I mean, I need more time to consider.”

If I’m considering this opportunity, it should be because I need a new life, but holding his gaze, I face the truth: I’ll stay because I want to remain by his side.

Drakon

She should not trust me. Nobody should. Not with my dragon’s rush. After she ran from me at the beach, she never should have looked back. My darkest colors showed that day, the worst of me, willing to do anything in pursuit of a prize.

But Kaliyah, with her unwarranted trust, has placed me here. First when I watched Reina sleep, unable to help when the Maledictum appeared, and now, giving Reina a chance to decide what she wants without Scorpia’s interventions.

Despite my unworthiness, she’s under my care.

I can’t imagine what she must be experiencing—from shipwrecked to frightened, transformed and then poisoned—I long to comfort her.

Aching for her, recalling our embrace, I shouldn’t be the one staying by her side. I’m dangerous. Like my father and grandfather before—the clan reminds of this heritage every day.

And yet, even after I chased her and despite Scorpia’s deceit, she doesn’t fear me. Selfishly, it’s a relief. Her company soothes me, a kindness I’ve longed for, the salve I need.

I've tried not to worry her, but concern chokes at me. Kaliyah—my clan. Scorpia did something unthinkable to claim the upper hand. What will she be willing to do next? Hopefully we can speak with someone, anyone, come morning.

The shock of it all narrows my focus on survival, simplifying the next step forward. First, I found us shelter, bringing Reina to my secret dragon's hoard, a hovel I claimed decades ago, for times when I needed to be alone. Now I'm providing food.

While the stew cooks, there's no distraction. Just Reina, her eyes wide with a shock that's all her own. I don't know how to comfort her.

Neither of us is okay. That much is clear to me. That much is reasonable.

Her body shakes, like she's cold. I retrieve a blanket from the sleeping chamber, but when I offer it to her, she shakes her head. This isn't what she needs.

"Can you..." She swallows, her throat bobbing as she questions her own words, gazing into my soul with her deep brown eyes. "Can you hold me?"

Touch. My body softens at the thought, craving it. I need this too. Needing to deny her, closing myself off, I step back.

She lifts a hand, raising it toward me, an offering. "I want to trust you," she whispers, almost to herself.

I want that too. I can't say it, and the words lodge in my throat.

Still, she extends her hand. Her offer stands.

This time, I reply by stepping closer, wrapping her hand in mine. Our scales brush, sliding like silk, when I settle on the bench beside her. I wrap my arm around

her shoulder—she hesitates, unsure, and then cuddles closer, settling her head against my bare chest.

It feels natural, us, entwined like this. As the stew simmers, my fears are lightened, muscle by muscle. My burden is no longer one I carry alone.

Flight

Reina

I stir to morning twilight, rising earlier than Drakon, my legs tangled with his while I curl closer, fitting into the crook of his arm. Since he wrapped his arm around my shoulder, we've seldom broken contact.

I'm terrified, but his body reassures me, calming my instinct to break down under the duress. And I suspect our connection does something similar to him.

He speaks only when necessary, and while I expect to find the silence strange, I'm not bothered. My thoughts can't sort their way into words either, and while our tongues remain tied, our bodies speak volumes.

I watch his chest rising and falling, cuddling closer so I can listen to the steady beat of his heart. He's impossibly warm, and over the night, I've shoved most of the blankets away.

My gaze drifts to the waistband of his pants, where his muscled stomach turns to a V, my morning mind wandering lustily. This wondering and wanting should scare me—it's wanton and wrong—but the heat soothes me. We're intimate, safe, and warm within a chaotic world.

It's only temporary, I tell myself. I can't possibly stay here. Neither can he. One day, these moments will be memories, and so, by dawn's growing blush, I memorize him.

“Sunrise approaches,” he whispers, a sigh rumbling through his chest.

I’m about to sit up, but he tightens his grip, pulling me closer. For a final moment, we tighten, clenching like we could be bound together, hidden from the day. Only the sun insists on rising, and so we must do the same. Our fingers linger, soft touches maintaining subtle contact, as we leave the nest behind.

I’m still wearing the rosy-pink skirts, the matching bodice tight upon my chest. The gossamer fabric is wrinkled from sleep, my breasts straining against their confines. There’s little else to wear. Drakon has spare pants packed away, billowy and loose, but this cavern is a space prepared for himself, and there’s no clothing to fit me.

He is confident no one can find us—for decades, no one has found him here. It’s cozy, everything a little too small, and the confines keep us close.

As the sun shows, Drakon sits at the table and clutches the blue stone. Speaking stones are a luxury on the human continent, and this is the first one I’ve seen.

From his increasing agitation, the tapping of his fingers, I watch his growing frustration as the stone does nothing. He continues to wait, hoping, until I’m certain it’s too late—there is no update from the clan.

“We’ll try again at sunset,” he eventually says, clutching the stone. Worries crease his face, and I sit next to him, running my fingers down his back. He doesn’t balk at my caress, and his tension leaves under my touch.

“They might need more time,” I say, hoping it’s true, because I follow it with my confession. “I’m not ready to go back, to let Scorpia make my decision for me. I want...”

He looks at me, and I lose track of my words; there are countless wants I’ve stopped

hungering for.

“I want to fly,” I say.

He holds my gaze, setting the stone aside to focus on me, and I sink onto the bench. Leaning closer, he promises, “By sunset, you will fly.”

And thus, our work begins.

My transformation continues, and today, I explore my winged form, the intermediate body between my humanoid and dragon ones. Drakon explains that it’s a good place to start—the shape offering the familiar dexterity of my humanoid one.

However, mastering this transformation is only my first step. If I’m to swim in Wisp’s caldera, I must master my dragon form too.

Our heartaches haven’t dissipated. We’re both weighed down by our circumstances, but when we take the next step forward, departing the cavern for the ledge overlooking the canyon, we discover blue skies.

The volcanic valley is filled with black stones and sharp edges, a thin lava river running through its center. A fall looks deadly, and without my self-preserving fear of falling, my body embraces the possibility of flight.

Drakon has extended and withdrawn his wings several times now, not only preparing to catch me, but because he’s uncertain of how to describe the shift.

He was the last born to the clan, and there wasn’t a younger faeling for him to teach.

Fortunately, some part of this seems intuitive. In the same way Wisp’s knowledge reaches me, my new body is trying to describe something too. I almost know what to

do.

My wingblades—what Drakon calls my shoulder blades—tingle, nerves alight and ready to be called into action. The bodice cuts low on the back, exposing my flesh to the breeze.

Wingblades aching, eager for expansion, it's time.

“I'm ready,” I tell him.

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He nods, leaving his webbed wings wide. His brow furrows as he nods, settling his hand on my shoulder as we stand face to face.

I relax my neck, releasing tension through my shoulders. All I have to do is surrender—my wings are cramped and fervent. Wisp's reassuring calm wraps around my chest and radiates up my shoulders until I become so light, I rise to my tiptoes.

Exhaling, I settle, and the sensation sighs out of me, rippling down my back. My wings expand.

They rustle, rushing, eager to stretch

They extend too far.

My wingtips press against the cavern's wall, but I can't stop. They're still expanding, my wingspan much larger than I expected.

The force of it pushes me off balance. Already on my toes, it's easy to stumble. I stagger, tottering over the ledge. I'm falling...

down...

down...

down...

I close in on the jagged rocks, already wincing. In my eagerness to spread my wings,

I didn't think about how to wield their power.

Desperate, I try holding them wide—the wind rushes against them, and I want to soar—but I'm caught in a nosedive and can't find lift.

"Tighten your core. Arch your back," Drakon commands.

I do as he says, and while my fall slows, I'm still crashing. The rocks seem bigger this close, the lava hotter.

Drakon wraps his arms around me, and I stop just above ground. The rocks shine in the sunlight as I celebrate my escape. He lifts me up, supporting me, until we're suspended in the center of our protected canyon.

I'm safe.

My breath heaves and body shakes. Nothing like a death-defying fall to invigorate every cell of my being. My throat rumbles, and suddenly I'm laughing.

That was...thrilling.

"Careful," Drakon chides.

I might be laughing, but he's clearly not. I scared him. His seriousness settles me, and my laughter stills. I steady myself in his arms, my feet dangling as my slackened wings depend on his support.

We're stationary upon the air, and I see my wings are shades of purple, complementing the royal purples and light pink hues of my scales. The ribbing is dark and moody, the webbing vibrant.

Scales, wings, and a torn, gossamer skirt—what would my family say if they saw me liberated this way? This transformation has cemented the space between us.

Grief chokes through me, making me shudder as loss cycles through me. My heart pulses, the emotions mingling throughout my blood until a screaming sob wrenches from my throat.

I howl, alive and dead and reborn.

Through it all, Drakon holds me. He's not afraid of my screaming, and it's a relief to no longer screech into my pillow. As screams turn to sobs, he waits, supporting me over black rocks that shimmer and lava that hisses.

My outrage becomes determination, and I flick my wings, turning them up and out, twisting down and low. Every movement is work, and often, my body doesn't quite obey, but the effort of learning focuses me.

Drakon seems encouraged, and he returns me to the ledge of our cavern. He stays in the air, holding a position opposite me, and we face each other—me on earth and him on air—as he reviews wing positions.

Some postures are better for lifting, others for gliding. He shows me how to turn, practicing left and then right. We practice from the safety of the ledge, and I mirror his movements, tweaking until he's satisfied. We build a routine, exercising my wings from one posture to the next, and I memorize them in my body.

Soon he adds another exercise, telling me to shift, pulling the wings in and out, practicing changing my body on command. I expand and contract, my wingtips brushing against the cavern's wall as I learn my wingspan.

It tries my patience, the fatigue and repetition—the constantly getting

something wrong—but the promise of flight is enchanting. The work is our distraction from the silent clan.

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By the time we're satisfied with my control, I'm achy and sore. The sun approaches noon, and I'm eager for something different, a new way to progress.

"When do you think I can fly?" I ask Drakon.

He considers it for a moment, then gives a new command, "Turn around."

He is now my teacher, and I do as he asks, but still I wonder, "Why?"

His hands wrap around my waist. "I'll assist you."

Before I can object, he lifts me off my feet. We soar upward, him lifting me, until we're even with the canyon's lip. The obsidian glints with sharp edges, and my fearful instinct is to pull my wings tight.

"Don't panic," he assures me. "I've got you."

I strain, keeping my wings extended. He's right—this isn't the time to make myself small.

He glides, a smooth descent from our height. "I want you to feel the wind under your wings."

It takes all my self-control not to clench, but as I ease in, I discover the rush of wind isn't pinning me in a nosedive. My wings sit above the breeze, catching the air and gliding. Drakon soars over me, still holding my waist. I'm not moving independently, but all the same... I'm flying.

The more I relax, the easier the effort becomes, and I'm almost having fun by the time we reach the canyon's end, where the lava meets the sea.

"Again?" he asks.

"Again," I agree.

We repeat this—him lifting us up and gliding down together—and my confidence blooms. With control, flying feels so different from falling, and the sharp rocks no longer matter.

We rise from our fifth practice round, and I shimmy my waist, wiggling against his hands. "I want to try on my own," I say.

"No." He sets me down on the ledge. "Rest first."

My body protests, spiked with adrenaline. "But—"

"You'll be stronger after a break," he insists. He's right, so I soothe my flushed body, retracting my wings into me.

"If I'm resting, you're resting too." I lead him back to the sleeping cavern, my heart pounding as he stays close.

We share a small lunch, and soon we retreat to the nest, resting side by side. While I close my eyes, sleep eludes me—it's impossible, enveloped by him, my nostrils filled by balsam and char. He holds me, spooning his stomach against my back, my fingers dance against his arms, caressing him, learning every scale.

His body is taut, his muscles a firm reminder that I'm protected and safe. I'm acutely aware my bodice barely covers my back and his chest is bare. My thighs clench, and

the bodice tightens, constricting me.

He nuzzles into the back of my neck, his warm breath running down my spine, and I can no longer delay. My body demands I take action, and I turn over, facing him.

Surprised, his eyes dip, his gaze brushing my swollen breasts before returning to my lips. His mouth trembles as he swallows.

Holding my breath, I reach for him, brushing my fingers over the scales of his cheekbones. I edge my lips closer, daring him to kiss me. I beg for it.

All at once, he darts forward, taking possession of my mouth. My lips run against his, hot with the contact, as my back arches, pressing my belly against his. My hands find his wingblades, and I'm rewarded when he shivers under my touch.

He's hungry, and so am I. I draw his tongue into my mouth, finding it rougher and firmer than a man's. I explore, learning where it comes to a fork, and he teases my lip between his teeth.

He is muscle and strength, power and promise.

Instinct drives me forward, and I become daring, tracing his chest until my hands hug his waist. He drops his mouth to kiss my exposed cleavage and moans into me, raising a hand to cup my breast. He squeezes gently—then hard.

I gasp, and he grins, lifting to kiss my lips again. My fingertips dance over his waistband. He's responsive, swaying as my fingers dip beneath.

His bulge presses against my stomach, and my core clenches.

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Teyr, I fucking want him.

Only this pressure, it's... it's...not okay.

He's not human—he's not my husband. My whole body freezes up, and I pull away, gasping and moaning, hips writhing as my body begs me to surrender to pleasure.

Drakon glances across my face, struggling to interpret, and I struggle with words, my body and mind warring against each other.

“Slower,” I swallow, hoping for compromise. I wrap my hands around his back, kissing his lips. “I'm... not ready.”

“Okay.”

He brushes his lips behind my ear, kissing me sweetly. When he lays another soft kiss upon my mouth, I open my lips, welcoming him.

We kiss deeply, lovingly and long, keeping our hands more chaste. This won't release the tension building within me, but at least the shame vanishes, freeing me from the cycles of doubt.

Maybe I shouldn't be encouraging this; our bodies are closer than our minds, but I don't want to stop. These kisses are the sweetest I've ever endured.

At some point, we slide apart, with my head upon his chest and his arm around me, holding me there. For a long while, we remain, my body heavy, fatigued from

training and the denial of pleasure. Finally, sleep finds me.

When I next stir, the sun is heavy on the horizon with the weight of late afternoon. There's not much daylight remaining, and I'm eager to take to the sky.

I kiss Drakon awake, planting each one upon his chest, his neck, his cheek. "I'm ready," I say, finally kissing his lips. "I want to fly."

Sleepily, he blinks at me, but with a glance at the waning light, he is stirred to action. "You're ready," he agrees.

Standing upon the ledge, the lava glows below us, but I swallow my fears. I summon my wings and practice the positions I've learned. The rest was helpful, every muscle stronger than before.

I'm rushing to start, refusing to give doubt the chance to catch up. Drakon seems more nervous than me, bracing to catch me should I fall, and yet he nods encouragingly, trusting I'm ready.

I'm about to lose my nerve, so I don't delay. I flap once, then twice, growing light on my feet.

When Drakon held me, I largely kept my wings pinned in place, gliding, learning the feel of wind against their webbing. Now I lift myself, raising power with each beat of my wings.

It's work, more than I'm used to, but with a grunt, I tap into my budding strength, generating force. The whoosh of each wingbeat, the pressure of air, each sensation emboldens me, and I gain height, rising under my own power.

Drakon watches from the ledge, wings expanded, near but not hovering.

I gain height and tilt downward, starting my flight with an easy glide. It's thrilling to do this on my own, and I quickly begin testing my limits.

I bank left and right, and discovering I've drifted too low, I rise a little higher with two careful flaps from my wings. With a wild grin, I try something new.

I lean forward, pulling my wings closer to my back.

And I dive.

Awhoopescapes my lips. The wind rushes over me as I surrender to the chaos—my fears have no sway.

Pulling out of the dive is easy, and I give myself a large clearance from the rocky valley and lift myself a little higher, shaking, vacating the stress from my liberated limbs.

Only then do I realize Drakon is frowning.

He left the ledge, diving after me. Now he faces me, arms crossed and brows furrowed. His eyes darken, a red shade fading away as he glowers at me.

"Don't do that," he snaps.

I didn't mean to scare him.

My actions surprised me too, diving like that, committing to this experience so completely. "Next time, I'll warn you," I offer in apology.

“Good,” he grunts, still frustrated.

When we lock gazes, there’s nothing more to say, and except for the beat of our wings, everything becomes silent.

Time slows as we hover, the reality of this moment crashing into me—I’m supporting myself on the air, having a conversation, while trusting my wings to keep me afloat. Already, it’s nearly like walking.

It’s heady, this power, and my gaze dips to his lips, and the memories of our kisses pulse through my being. Earlier, I denied my instincts...

His gaze narrows like he’s craving this too.

In the next moment, we’re upon each other. Tilting my wings out of the way of his, I wrap my arms around him. Like before, he holds me aloft, but this time, we’re stomach to stomach, pinned together by our embrace.

Mouths open, tongues dart as we learn each other in scintillating ways. He is forceful and forgiving, harsh but hesitant, sensitive enough to know when to stop before I become irritated. He knows my limits better than I do, and he challenges me in every regard.

One hand cups my butt, and his other arm is around my back. My legs wrap around his waist, pressing against him. I’m becoming frustrated, antsy for more, and in the glorious aftermath of my flight, my old insecurities cannot take hold.

He senses my yearning, and it must match his own, for he leads me back to the ledge. We shift, retracting our wings and retreating to solid ground.

He carries me into the cavern, and we're sprawled within the nest. I pin Drakon with straddled legs, and with my skirts sprawling, only his pants come between us. There's no hiding his bulge or the way I writhe upon it.

My core is hot, but a new fear is growing. Passionate lovemaking? I'm not sure what I'm doing.

The pressure of his lips reassures me, the trust of his tongue. That he allows me to keep this position above him—I'm in control—deepens my sense of safety.

My memories flash. By now, my former husband would have flipped me over and begun his duty. By the end, that's all there was between us—duty.

This passion is different, wiping the past away.

Drakon's fingers run through my braids, rubbing my scalp, wandering down their lengths to brush my clavicle. As he touches the scales there, I shiver, finding them extra sensitive, my nerves quivering beneath his touch.

My nipples pebble, making the bodice unbearably tight. I yank at it, finally freeing my breasts.

He groans at the sight, running a finger along the newly exposed skin, and he squeezes. I moan, pressing the sensitive nubs against his chest.

Then I'm rocking myself upon him, rubbing myself against him. This fabric between us...it's in my way.

He's following my lead, and I'm not sure how to tell him I'm ready to slip off these clothes. My hand drifts downward, fingertips grazing over his muscled abdomen as I go lower, fingers under his pants. He moans into my mouth, and I drift my hand lower, seeking—

“Hello? Drakon?”

The voice rises from the blue stone. Neither of us responds, but we're frozen, leaving me reaching out, searching for him, as the speaker continues.

“Are you there?” Kaliyah asks.

Practice

Drakon

Kaliyah's voice springs from the speaking stone, landing like a bucket of ice water, startling us from this lusty daze. We're plunged into the darker cavern of our reality.

Time stops as we soak everything in.

Reina's eyes widen, her body freezing, still straddled over me, clenching the waistband of my pants. Her bodice lies near my head, and my hand cups her breast, tweaking her nipple.

Memories of the last minutes rush through me—the fear of her falling, and the rush of her rising. The fervency of our kisses. We're disheveled. Caught up in everything, we lost track of time, and she sits upon my heavy cock.

She swallows, blinking uncertainly, as she takes another breath. Decidedly, she shifts to the side, breasts bouncing as she sits back on her heels, the high slits of her skirt

showing her rounded thighs. I could lose myself in her beauty, and she's eyeing me as if she could do the same.

"Drakon?" the speaking stone continues.

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Reina snaps to action, pulling her discarded bodice to her chest, cheeks flushing.

Somehow, I pull myself together and seize the speaking stone. “Yes,” I rasp out. I clear my throat. “I’m here.”

“Drakon.” Kaliyah sighs with relief. “You’re okay. Is Reina with you?”

Hopefully, the clan’s elder doesn’t realize what she interrupted. I don’t need her input to know this liaison between Reina and myself is unwise. The clan has witnessed what can happen if the Blessed One chooses a lover.

Concern helps me shake off the lingering desire.

“Are you safe?” I ask Kaliyah.

Reina sits nearby, listening. She rests a hand on my thigh—I don’t know if she’s comforting herself or me.

“Scorpia is confining us in the great hall. Enough agree with her that she can maintain control. She says we’re her hostages—if you bring Reina back, she promises everything can return to normal.”

“Are you safe?” I ask again.

“Yes, I believe so...” There is more that goes unsaid, but I understand—neither of us expected Scorpia to poison the clan. Anything seems possible. “Scorpia knows I can reach you, and I suspect she’s allowing me to send you this message.”

What she doesn't say is that she's likely being overheard. "I understand," I reply.

"I need to know if Reina wants to continue this journey. If she's ready to end this, return to Scorpia now. Then we can all move on, accepting the curse. However, if she wants to pursue the throne, I won't let Scorpia stop her."

"I want this," Reina rushes to say. "Or at least I want more time."

Kaliyah's quiet, and I can't tell if she's thrilled at the news or disappointed. Her next words are stiff. "Then practice with Drakon," she instructs. "Learn to shift and fly. I will tend to the clan."

There's more that she isn't saying, but this time, I can't interpret her silence. "Sunrise and sunset?" I ask, confirming when we will next speak.

"Sunrise and sunset," Kaliyah agrees.

The stone becomes silent, dead in my hand, and my imagination runs rampant, wondering what Scorpia has planned. As the fear threatens to rouse the dragon's rush, I clench the speaking stone in my fist.

Before it can consume me, Reina touches my arm. Not sensually, but warmly. Comforting. She sees my unease, the looming rage, but instead of running, she embraces me. My hand opens, my heart loosening.

Reina

The next few days pass in a flurry of wings and flight. Practice, practice, practice. We pause only to rest and eat, then replenish and practice again. Every evening, every morning, we hear from Kaliyah. Her updates are simple—there isn't much to say.

When we rest, we cuddle. Our bodies gravitate together, soothing our shared uneasiness, except the rampant passion hasn't returned. Something shifted after Kaliyah's message, reminding us of our duties, establishing a barrier that wasn't there before—we don't even kiss.

We don't talk about why. I feel rejected. I feel relieved.

The clan is in danger. Our relationship is complicated. We don't want to this to be messier than it already is. And while the air is riddled with unresolved tension, I'm not ready to tear it down. I doubt my own desire.

Desire seems wild, out of control. When I had him pinned under me, straddling him, I wanted him. Desperately.

Passion has always been unnecessary, inconvenient. Only with Drakon as eager as me, the years of self-denial fade away. My body knows sex is normal, and as we cuddle, my mind rewires, unlearning.

I tell him things, and he listens, sometimes even asking questions. There's much about my world he doesn't know, and explaining it to him helps me unravel my previous life.

I explain my mother's death in childbirth, the curse of my birthmark. Admitting how I hoped to have children, to nurture them as I wasn't, I confess how I was married off as a young woman to a man who discarded me. I confess how desperately I wanted my child, to shower them in love and acceptance.

I speak of grief because motherhood never found me.

In time, I share how my brother shamed me for returning, making me the least of his household.

I don't cry. At least, not until I mention my nieces. They're the ones I miss. Even when their mother shooed us apart, I turned their thimbleweed bouquets into flower crowns.

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“It was paranoia. Fear of something strange. I know that,” I say, but understanding never fixed the pain.

As the days pass, my clothes become ravaged, the skirts’ slits broken open to the waistband. It’s nice, in its way—I adore the rush of the wind, the sun kissing my skin. Allowing the sensations to heal me, I displace the belief that my skin is scandalous, my body cursed.

The fifth morning starts like the rest. Grounded by the steady beat of crashing waves, wrapped within Drakon’s arms, I am warm.

Today, we’ll practice my dragon form.

Yesterday, I shifted completely for the first time, embracing the dragon within me. She was easy to find, waiting for her opportunity to rise.

My dragon is beautiful, with scales of deep purple and dusty rose. With her long, graceful neck and spiny tail, she’s regal and awe inspiring.

Now this canyon feels small, lacking the space to spread my wings. Drakon wants to travel to another canyon, one he believes will be a safe place to practice. Soon I will be prepared for my swim in Wisp’s caldera.

I inhale deeply, nuzzling Drakon’s chest. He replies, tugging me closer, tangling his legs with mine.

We slowly stir, separating our limbs to stand, stumbling to our makeshift kitchen. We

eat nuts and dried fruit, watching the sunrise, listening as the birds grow louder. Waiting, we glance at the still-silent speaking stone.

Our hands rest on the table, pinkies touching.

“Drakon?”

It isn't Kaliyah. Eyes widening, body tensing, Drakon lunges, grasping the stone. “Where's Kaliyah?”

Silence.

He tries again. “Who am I speaking to?”

“It's Caydon,” they whisper.

“It is good to hear from you. I hope you are well.” Drakon frowns. “But where is Kaliyah?”

“She's... unwell.” They sigh, and I lean closer. “We suspect Scorpia poisoned her again.”

“What?” Drakon growls.

“Scorpia has grown tired of waiting. She wants to force your return.”

Fury reddens Drakon's eyes. “I never thought she would threaten Kaliyah.”

“None of us expected this,” Caydon agrees.

Drakon taps his fingers on the table, glancing at me. He's asking for my input, my

permission to proceed.

“I’m ready,” I whisper, and when it comes out hoarse, I clear my throat and continue.
“Let’s go to the caldera. Today.”

The decision feels impulsive, but I don’t retract the words. For once, my body and mind agree; further delay and practice would be helpful, but it’s not necessary.

Drakon holds my gaze for a long second, deciding, and his muscles ripple as the weight of this decision swells through him.

I hold his stare, determination tightening my face.

“You are ready,” he agrees. “Today, we will visit the caldera.”

My stomach knots, pleased and terrified that my risky plan has his approval.

“I must go. Talk at Sunset.” Caydon rushes their words, then pauses, slowing to say,
“And Reina, may Wisp guard your journey.” The connection dies.

Drakon’s eyes close briefly, his lips echoing the prayer.

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May Wisp guard my journey, I repeat it too, tugging at her within me. Please, I can't do this alone.

Caldera

Drakon

Plans made and risks evaluated, our journey begins. We return my secret cavern to the state it was in before our arrival, with everything in storage.

We stand in the main room, and Reina gives the space one final scan. "Somehow, it feels like saying goodbye to home. Our... nest."

I grunt my agreement, though I never imagined my secluded cave could become a love nest. Love. I think that's what I feel for her. A great affection building in my chest, a truth we're afraid to speak.

I wish I had words, but she is the Blessed One, and I carry father's legacy. There should be no attraction between us.

She says she's ready to face the caldera, and while I have given my honest support, I cannot be completely comfortable with this. She has allowed herself to be rushed, all for the sake of my clan.

My clan doesn't deserve her. I certainly don't.

These are fears I cannot speak, so I swallow them instead, fearing how much darker

the world would bewithout her in it, especially with these words still lodged in my throat.

“It was a perfect nest,” I agree.

Hands entwined, we leave. Flying from the ledge, we soar away.

Reina

While Drakon leads me to another canyon, my heart palpitates. Flying feels easy, but it's the transformation that intimidates me—trusting scales for a swim in a burning pool.

We fly to another tunnel-like cavern, like the one I lost myself in. Lava tubes, Drakon calls them, another of Wisp's countless cavernous creations. This one provides a lesser-known route into Wisp's largest caldera.

We assume some of Scorpia's followers may be stationed nearby and hope this tunnel will give us an advantage. The plan is to slip in and out, performing this rite without detection.

In silence, we crest another mountainous vein and dip into the next canyon. Drakon dives, pointing toward an awning in the black obsidian rock. He leads us to the mouth of the tunnel, and I follow him into darkness.

The path is narrow, and we both retract our wings. After a few steps, it's pitch black, and the tomb-like path challenges my improved vision.

My heart thuds and my body trembles, recalling my last journey through a dark cave—the same hopelessness that ate at me then threatens to consume me anew.

Do I really think I could become a queen? It's laughable.

All the same, Drakon helps, holding my hand, reminding me I'm not alone.

The hike claims my entire focus. There are fallen boulders to traipse and shelves we need to scale. Thankfully, I now have scaled feet.

Suddenly, the tunnel narrows, and Drakon stops. In the darkness, his hand searches for mine. Then his mouth lowers, lips touching my ear in a whisper. "I believe we are there."

I squeeze his hand in silent acknowledgement.

"I'll go first. Scout it out."

He stalks through a narrow opening and disappears through the crevice. He leaves me alone in a dark cave, but strangely, I no longer feel afraid.

Wisp surrounds me, this tunnel a vein where magma once flowed. Connecting to the divinity is easier here, like listening for a heartbeat, a rhythm that resonates, surrounding me, evidence that she is alive.

This is the closest I've felt to Wisp since my transformation, her awareness fading to the background while I tested my wings against the air. Now that I'm alone, she returns with a rush, her thoughts and emotions becoming mine.

She still loves the clan.

When King Ichor broke her trust, she reacted with a mother's rage, frustrated that children misbehave and presuming she led them astray. Now she grieves, regretting her curse.

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Just as I question my right to be queen, she questions her right to be a deity, questioning her ability to nurture her clan.

All these thoughts—and more I can't articulate—stream through me. Wisp fills me with a numbing tangle of emotions, most of which I can't relate to. I don't know what it's like to be an isle, to have birthed a clan.

The fireflies return, streaming out from the cavern walls, surrounding me in her light. They coalesce, forming the shape of the white dragon I once dreamed of, and I find myself in her company, awe and terror and doubt shifting within me. There is much to discuss, but my tongue is tied.

Eventually, my fingers brush against the scales at the base of my neck. Despite my new body, the scales remain familiar, unchanged. "Can I ask a question?" I ask.

The white dragon tilts her head and silently replies, "Yes."

"You said you didn't curse me. But did you choose me?"

Wisp stays quiet, the dragon stilling.

"Because these scales at my neck, my fascination with this isle—I wasn't shipwrecked here by chance, was I? Did you... Did you draw me here intentionally?"

For too many heartbeats, her silence continues.

"I don't know," she finally replies.

“What do you mean?” I speak fast, afraid to pause, to question the wisdom of raging at a deity. “How can you not know? This thing that made me this way—I never asked for it. My family called me cursed for it.”

When she still doesn’t answer, the worst of my questions finds its way to the tip of my tongue. “Did you cause my barrenness?”

I think she did it.

Because she still isn’t answering.

Fury makes me tense. My fists tighten as my face scrunches, fighting the urge to cry. No—no! “Did... Did you curse me?” I ask again.

She’s prompted to reply, “It was not intended as a curse.”

I’m gripped by rage as she continues.

“I am bound to this land, but the Nearbright Sea is my friend. I sought her help when the dragon fae stagnated, refusing to nominate a third candidate to break my curse. I granted her powers of scales and obsidian, instructing her to mark a human—a mark that would toughen them, making them courageous enough to lead this clan.” Her voice grows quiet as she finishes. “I needed someone willing to leave their home, someone inclined to choose me.”

“This—You—”

I choke on the words I can’t find.

Her confession is a betrayal. Maybe she didn’t curse me directly, but she granted another deity this power, ensuring I was toughened by life with reason to leave.

Her demands created me.

“I never had a choice in this.”

She offers little comfort. “You have a choice now.”

There’s so much I want to say—berating her negligence, her abuse of power. She determined my life, making choices that decided the trajectory of my future.

When the tears come, “I wanted to become a mother,” is all I can whisper.

I’m desperate to shower my babe with an affection I never knew. Every child was kept at arm’s length, denying me at least the release of supporting others, for fear my curse was contagious. Dark laughter escapes my lips—what foolery. It wasn’t contagious.

This curse was always only mine.

Footsteps sound farther down the tunnel, and the dragon vanishes, fireflies scattering as my interlude with Wisp comes to an end.

Confusion brims my thoughts. I’m about to attempt one of Wisp’s rites, swimming in deadly magma. Is such a deity worth the risk?

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Drakon whispers like nothing has changed. “The rest of the tunnel is clear. Unfortunately, Scorpia is expecting us. She and two of her followers are above the volcano’s mouth, expecting our approach from the sky.”

I listen, but my ears are buzzing, and it’s difficult to understand. Just minutes ago, I felt resolute. And now...

He squeezes my hand. “Everything okay?” he asks. “If you have changed your mind, we can go.”

Choices. He offers them to me, again and again. It makes my eyes water anew—his respect, it means more all the time.

“I’m fine,” I manage, my lips tilting in a smile now that he’s here. “Just... speaking with Wisp.”

Together we sneak forward, reaching the point where the tunnel opens to a gigantic chamber. The magma pool fills the base of the caldera, ruddy and luminous, and the liquid mantle shifts through shades of oranges and reds. It boils, spurting earth in sudden bursts.

Once this environment, rife with sulfur and sizzling heat, would have stunned my human body. Now my body reacts like a homecoming, battling my newfound resentment with Wisp.

This magma pool is the lifeblood of the isle, and I steel myself, preparing to embrace it. This rite is not the throne, I justify. When I’ve overcome this, no longer reeling from

this newest revelation, I can make my next decision.

Scorpia and her patrol fly far above the mouth of the volcano. They're facing away, toward the empty sky.

"I'll hide there." Drakon points to our left, indicating a dark crevice. "If they see you, I'll be in position to divert them."

I hope it doesn't come to that. "I'll be quick."

"If you are ready, I'll take my position and give you a hand signal to start."

"Almost ready," I breathe. "I... I need a moment."

The enormity of the moment imposes upon me, and my heart races. Breath hitching, I search for calm.

Wisp is everywhere, even without the fireflies, omnipresent in her caldera, and while she no longer shapes distinct words, she offers me support.

I hesitate, both needing her and fearing her.

"What's wrong?" Drakon asks.

I don't know what to say, and my fingers trace my birthmark.

"Do you want to do this?"

"Yes," I say, the word resonating within me as true. "I want this. I do." I don't like it, but I am who I've become, influenced by how I was made. And I want to proceed.

Conditionally, I accept Wisp's assistance. I'll do this, but I cannot commit to the throne rite, I try telling her.

Something clicks—either from my resolve or Wisp's support, and my panic ebbs, replaced with level-headed clarity.

Flicking my gaze to the crevice Drakon indicated, I mentally rehearse the steps of this operation.

"I'm ready," I tell him.

He doesn't doubt me a second time. His lips purse, his eyes wandering across my face before settling, meeting mine.

"Reina." He says my name like he's already addressing a queen. "I care for you. More than I know how to say."

These are words I wanted to hear, articulating what I already knew. "I care for you too."

He kisses me—a soft, swift press, his lips meet mine.

Then he's gone.

I press my fingers to my lips, still feeling him there as my gaze trails after him. Drakon sprouts his striking red wings and flies to the crevice, settling himself within. I want to cling to the sight of him, but my focus narrows, centering on my task. I brace myself, and when Drakon gives his signal, I begin.

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With no more time for fear, I leap from the lava tunnel, open my wings, and launch myself into the air. My wings erupt at my command, finding purchase upon the air. Aiming for the caldera's center, I give my next command. Dragon, I need you.

She rises, and I blossom. Like a flower, I expand, exchanging soft skin for scaly armor. I become her, growing her fire in my chest, a power I still don't know how to wield.

Drakon was supposed to teach me fire breathing today, until our change of plan, but it is not a necessary skill for this rite.

Confident my body will survive unscathed, I dive. Wisp rejoices as I submerge into her mantle, and behind my shut eyes, I see a glimpse of fireflies.

As I pass the surface, my body ripples as I claim my new form. I pass the rite.

Now the molten earth churns about me, heat blistering. My scales protect me, and I am not burned.

For a moment, I float, luxuriating in this victory.

Surrendering, my wrath fades, and Wisp's fiery desires seem less controlling, more promising. It is comforting, not hating her for making me this way, embracing the strength her wishes gave me.

Despising my circumstances, I love what I am. The contradiction settles, comfortable when I no longer resist.

I cannot linger, and too soon, I rise. Reaching for the surface, I flap my wings. Only the magma is too thick, and it presses me, weighing me down. I become stuck, submerged, my wingbeats too weak for me to rise.

Terror streaks through me anew, and I scramble, beating my wings frantically, spraying magma. The mantle swells under me, a bubble forming, granting me a lift. Wisp presses me upward, urging me farewell.

It works. My wings catch, and I fly up and out, escaping the mantle. With my building momentum, the last of the molten earth drips from my scales. I rush toward the tunnel Drakon and I entered through—but something is wrong.

Glancing at the darkened crevice, I discover Drakon is gone. There's a ruckus raging above me. Looking up, I see both Drakon and Scorpia in their red dragon forms.

They gnash and tear into each other, and while he's bigger and stronger, he's also holding back, keeping his rage in check. Scorpia breathes vicious fire while he refrains. He's not fighting to win, not against his aunt.

Scorpia's followers stand on the caldera's edge, still in their fae form, allowing the dragons to duel.

I rush upward, but they're blocking me in, making it impossible to rise past the volcano's mouth. Upon my approach, the duel pauses, Drakon and Scorpia circling one another. I steady myself upon the air, looking for a way to escape.

"Run," Drakon commands me. "I'll distract her. Go to the nest!"

"Don't let her escape!" Scorpia shouts to her followers. "I will deal with my nephew."

I do not want to leave Drakon. Once again, Scorpia blocks my path. If not for her obstruction, I would have performed this rite after more practice, with the clan supporting me, instead of hiding with Drakon. I'm eager to know my potential clan—to make decisions based upon experiences with the community—but again and again, she makes it difficult to do my duty.

Tension streaks through my body, and my dragon form contracts, a fire burning in my chest. My exhales become smoky, fiery with frustration.

“Let me pass!” I shout my command. “Scorpia, stop!”

“I will not,” she snarls at me, fire huffing from her nose. She's restless, furious, and eager to charge Drakon.

I know Drakon is right—escape is a good plan.

But Scorpia's resistance is irritating.

“Stop this,” I snarl at her again. “I don't want to return to the humans!”

“But you must leave. If my Alinae had to die, then we deserve this curse. Leave and let us succumb.”

Alinae? I hadn't heard her name yet. The last Blessed One, the one Scorpia loved.

At my hesitation, she laughs, a dry cackle. “Drakon still hasn't confessed, has he?”

I glance at him, understanding his resistance to fight Scorpia in a new light. I have pieces when I need the full story—the way he submits to her is an omission of terrible guilt. “Can we please talk—”

“No. You shall not break our curse, and you must return to the human continent. The Isles of Fae are no place for a human.” Scorpia closes in on Drakon, addressing him. “My nephew, as my brother’s son and my father’s descendant, you have inherited their dragon’s rush and are not worthy of this decision. Reina must leave, and you must step aside.”

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I close the distance between her and me—she notices and laughs. She treats my role in this as inconsequential, like I’m pretending to have any power over this outcome.

Now I am certain—this isn’t about me. She’s too ensnared by the past to have a vision for the future.

The smoke rising from her nostrils darkens, and she focuses her sight on Drakon. Her body braces, ready to charge.

He’s not fighting back.

I don’t know what comes over me.

Maybe I’m just tired of others making decisions about my life. First, Wisp made me different. Then there was my father, my former husband, and finally, my brother.

And now Scorpia. She tries my patience, and when she charges Drakon...

Fire bursts from me.

My jaw unhinges, and the caustic flame streams forth, uncontrollable and unstable. It’s not painful, not compared to everything else I’ve endured, but once it’s started, I can’t stop. I can barely aim.

The sensation is confusing and overwhelming and—

“She needs help!” Drakon shouts, his voice sounding far, far away.

Instinctively, I seek his advice and turn to him. In my confusion, I face him without orienting my flame. He rushes to me, and...

...and...

Sparks kiss his scales. I watch, helpless, as the tongues of my flame whip up around his form. My fire consumes him.

He falls from the sky, dropping past me and into the magma. Terrified, I dive after him, and only then does my fire stop.

Except I'm tugged away. Scorpia grabs me by the tail, pulling me back.

"He's gone, you fool," she says.

My throat lodges, and I tremble.

Scorpia braces me against her, whispering in my ear, "This is your fault."

I watch, helpless, as he falls into the lava pool, the magma splashing. "Drakon—" I seize up.

"Dead, because of you. Now go. Fly to your home and return to your human form—that will end this once and for all. Fly home, and don't you dare return."

Endings

Reina

I'm screeching, sobbing.

Scorpia's right. I can't stay. Not after this.

I crane my neck and let the wingbeats take me away.

Flying south, I aim for Valterra, in the direction that once was home. A new type of remorse fills me with the thought of returning there. After what I've done, I don't know how to continue with the clan, but I'm not ready to return to my family.

All my life, patriarch's logic has dictated my future, and since becoming dragon fae, my fire burns hotter than before. Drakon treated me with more respect than any male, and I fear I'll no longer fit into my former life.

My fire starts to taste like revenge, destruction and grief hot on my tongue, and I wonder how the fishing village might fear me as I've become.

The thought of returning home and showing off this form... it does appeal to me. My dragon has a fury that's entirely her own, and in the wake of losing Drakon, she's ravenous to use that pain to destroy those who have hurt me. I didn't deserve their wrath, and it's tempting to reward them with vengeance.

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These are thoughts that scare me.

Wisp's presence weakens as I fly farther and farther away. She's calling me back, and while I pretend not to hear, the truth is that I'm too numb to listen.

As the rage and fear fade, my wings slow, and I level out into a glide. As I continue farther south, my uncertainty grows.

In the aftermath, I'm questioning everything. I only saw Drakon fall into the pool—it was Scorpia who told me he was gone. In the spur of the moment, I trusted her, believed her when she blamed everything on me. Did she lie, using the opportunity to capitalize on my heightened emotions, deceiving me, convincing me to leave? The question turns my stomach and frustrates me. I'm unable to tell fact from fiction.

Only I've already flown so far away, and I'm not sure I have the courage to turn around.

So while my doubt quivers, it's not that strong, and with each flap of my wings, I near my former home. As I home in on my destination, it becomes difficult to change my direction.

The Rift—that boundary between fae and human, magic and mundane—is easy to perceive when my tenuous connection with Wisp is severed. In her absence, I feel some truth in Scorpia's words—that when I transform here, I'll become fully human, losing my fae and dragon forms, and the clan's curse will become inescapable.

At some point, the Nearbright Sea has shifted too, turning from the fairer fae sea to

the harsher waters north of Valterra. Gusts blow against my wings, and I work harder, righting myself.

Steadying, I learn a new beat, a new method of flying. More time and distance pass, and the farther I travel from Wisp, the more my decision solidifies. I can't possibly turn back now.

The mainland nears. But first, I reach a boat.

Not just any boat; my family's vessel. I know it well, the white sail now yellowed. Fluttering above it, there are three smaller flags, two red and one brown, my family's signal. My body tenses in recognition—not that long ago, I was tossed overboard from that deck.

The sight of my family's boat shocks me, but curiosity drives me closer. The deck is full, with more passengers than it usually carries. That's not the only strange detail—the fishing nets aren't cast.

The passengers are unidentifiable, but even from this distance, I know they see me. They shuffle about, and I hear screams. They don't see me, Reina—they see a dragon.

I terrify them. With my giant form, claws, and fangs, I don't even need my fire to intimidate them. They do not know that they intimidate me too.

Because I'm now close enough to determine the nature of this voyage. With the sea so calm, it's a safe day for funeral rites. A wreath hangs upon a stand at the head of the boat, signifying a person lost at sea.

Everyone is there.

My brother stands closest to the wreath, overseeing the proceedings. My sister-in-law

clutches at my nieces, looking daggers at my dragon. My former husband is there with his young, pregnant wife who shrinks into his side.

This is my funeral.

I'm certain of it because of the wreath. It is built from thimbleweed flowers. My nieces would pluck bouquets of it, much to the annoyance of their mother, and when she tossed the flowers aside, I weaved them flower crowns. The memory brings tears to my dragon eyes, big globs of water.

It's a silly thing, really.

Because honestly, it wasn't all bad, my life with this family. There was laughter and occasionally joy. Survival and companionship. There was a cruelty learned from superstitions and prejudice that persist in a village they'll never leave—a village where I was never meant to belong.

Whether it's pity or sentimentality, I am certain that I have no desire to burn their boat down.

Despite my nostalgia, not all my reflections are sweet, and smoke still huffs from my nostrils. More than ever, I understand how they neglected me, teaching me I had no value. Scars aside, it's almost laughable now, knowing a deity begged the sea for my existence.

Almost laughable—I'm too bitter to find it funny.

My nieces capture my affection, how they wiggle and squirm, curious despite their mother's admonitions of my draconian wickedness.

For moments now, I've stayed several body lengths away, watching them as they

watch me. Slowly, their postures relax as we reach a standoff.

I lower myself, skirting the sea on the side of the fishing vessel. My enormous belly becomes my boat, my wings sails, and with my spindly neck lifted above the water, I steady my gaze on my family.

They're gawking at me. Which is reasonable, I suppose, and I try to speak, but south of the Rift, my words become a dragon's caw.

With time, they ease, accepting my presence, and Reina's funeral continues with a dragon in attendance.

Since I cannot speak, I listen.

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As is custom, my brother leads the ceremony. He names me as a sister and aunt—and as a former wife. At the mention of my former husband, his new wife shifts her hand protectively to her pregnant belly.

She never did like me, but I can't blame her for that. I had wondered if our dynamic could shift after she gave birth, once she had evidence that she was the better wife. Then maybe she wouldn't need to spite me.

It was easy for me to hate her too, because of what she symbolized, even if she wasn't the true target of my ire. Unlike my father, she didn't shove me into a husband's arms when I started my cycle, telling me to be thankful someone would take me at all. Unlike my brother, she didn't berate me for returning home a failure.

She's simply the other woman I was taught to hate.

For the first time, she eyes me with curious uncertainty, and I think my gaze says the same.

Despite their mother's chastising, my nieces crowd the ship's edge, pointing and chattering to one another. Wide-eyed, they look upon me, finding beauty. The older one cocks her head, her mouth forming my name, and when the younger ones hear her, they agree, recognizing me in their childlike way.

This whole scene is strange, detached, seen from my dragon-shaped eyes.

Ignoring his children's babble, my brother continues speaking, his words generic. There's nothing of note about me, nothing unique he wants to say. Once he's prattled

for an acceptable time, he'll pick up the wreath and throw it into the sea, saying good riddance, let the funeral rite be done.

To them, I've died, and these men no longer have power over me. It's liberating. A freedom I refuse to surrender. Certainty settles within me, becoming stability—whatever happens next, I will not return from the dead.

I'm never going back.

My dragon cries as I grieve the family that never wanted me and the nieces who deserved more.

I'm not going back!The words raise my spirit. Lifting my neck, my dragon shrieks.My wings are flapping, my tail propelling me from the water.

I do not need to stay through my funeral. This rite is for their closure, not mine. Yet I hesitate for a time, looking back for a final moment, holding a position near the boat. Narrowing my gaze, hoping everyone will remember the day a dragon appeared at Reina's funeral.

The girls climb on the ship's edge, edging closer. In the chaos, my oldest niece seizes the thimbleweed wreath from her father and throws it into the sea. She exclaims, "Reina is beautiful and free!"

I preen under her praise, extending my long neck. Looking to the sky, I release a victorious breath of fire.

Free.

That's me.

Longing

Reina

During my arduous flight home, the southern winds beat away my exuberance until all I have is raw determination.

With great relief, I cross the Rift, the isle's magic returning along with calmer air. Tired and tattered, the fear of what lies ahead looms, like Wisp, upon the horizon.

My fire killed Drakon. My family has given me up for dead. I'm in no state to confront Scorpia or meet with the clan. I'm not even sure whether I want to attempt the throne's rite. All I'm certain of is that if I don't stay on Wisp, I want to secure transportation to somewhere else.

Humans can find ways to live on the Isles of Fae, right? They must, because I don't think I can live in Valterra after this.

I resolve to give myself time.

It's mid-afternoon by the time I reach the isle, soaring to Drakon's cavern and finding it packed up, just as we left it. As I step into it, without his company, our nest feels cold, empty like a tomb.

Still, I square my shoulders and get to work. There are routines I've adopted during my days with Drakon, and I numbly rely on them now.

Scorpia said it was all my fault...I wish she had given me time to learn my dragon body, to understand my fire.

I make quick work, catching a waterfowl for my dinner, another stew. It's

bittersweet—every step of the process reminds me of Drakon, but I suck the marrow out of the memory. Memories are all I'll have.

Memories of Drakon. Memories of Valterra.

My future is painfully bright, filled with thrones and fae.

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Preparing the stew grounds me. Clean the bird. Make the stock. Even the self-heating pot has become familiar. How quickly I've adapted to this different life—I'm more versatile than I think.

By the time sunset approaches, the stew is softly simmering. Drakon took the speaking stone with him, and it's strange, knowing that the day ends without touching base with Kaliyah. I hope she's all right. I can't imagine losing her too, another loss to this damn curse.

With my feet dangling over the ledge, I watch the sky, gold turning to purple. The fading light soothes me, a reminder that death is inevitable in life.

It's a terribly beautiful evening, and I can't help but hope—finding it in sunrises, in birth. I'm upon a land that has become infertile, in a body that is barren, but today, I saw my nieces, a pregnant belly. Maybe I was disallowed the position of motherhood, but in sunset's glow, I find rhythm in my womb.

I still generate life. There is hope. Even when I can't see it, can't feel it, I create new reasons to hope.

Even when Drakon is...

Drakon is...dead.

A shadow blocks the sun. Large and ominous, the details impossible to make out. I lift my hand to shade my eyes and squint.

It's one of the dragon fae.

Someone must have found me!

I jump to action, summoning my wings and bracing myself for the confrontation that is to come. Even if it's Scorpia, I resolve to stand my ground. There is work I need to finish.

Only...It's Drakon.

He flies to me, relief softening his face. I fly to meet him, pulling him into a desperate embrace, weeping into his shoulder. I shake my head, rubbing my wet cheeks against his chest.

"You're alive. I thought... I thought..."

Drakon nuzzles my braids, his fingertips whispering over my body, confirming I'm there. Likewise, the scent of balsam and char settles me. This is not a dream.

We speak simultaneously. "I thought I lost you—"

"Scorpia lied," I say. "She said you were dead."

"Your flames stunned me, and when I woke, Scorpia said the rite went poorly. That Wisp scared you away. She told me you flew home."

"I did fly home," I confess sheepishly. "I saw my family holding my funeral and came back."

"You saw your own funeral?" he whispers, shocked.

“Yes, and I’m... ready to let them go.” I lift my chin and meet his gaze, and he holds it like I’m the most valuable person in his life. Easing into the sensation, I loosen the internal knots telling me I don’t deserve to be treated this way. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Nor I you.”

I’m breathless. We could curse at Scorpia and her manipulations to drive us apart, but the words are a waste of breath. Instead, my gaze flicks across his face, taking him in with relief.

We survived—we found each other.

“But why did you return?” he asks. “You could have flown anywhere. You didn’t have to return to our broken clan.”

“I wasn’t ready to leave.”

There’s much more I need to explain, much I want to ask. Except, as I’m blanketed by the heat of his body, words are too slow to express my needs.

We’re nose to nose, breaths hitching. With a beat of my wings, I close the distance, pressing a peck upon his lips.

He replies with an insistence entirely his own, requiring more from me, pushing my mouth open to devour me. His demands fuel my needs, and I reply, nibbling at his lip. Our kisses consume us.

I thought he was dead, and now I burn for life. After days of boundaries, of comfort and cuddling, we’ve unleashed our fire.

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Mere kissing will not be enough to sate me.

My core clenches, feeling empty. Taking the lead, my hands wander across his chest and down his stomach, fingers dipping beneath his waistband. My asking touch lingers on his hips, waiting for his response.

He meets my advances with claims of his own. His tongue traces my neck, forming a line from ear to collarbone. My spine arches as he continues, mouth lowering.

His lips land on the exposed top of my breasts, and I paw at my worn bodice, tossing it aside. At the sight of my naked chest, he growls, the sound vibrating through me as his tongue finds my dusky nipple.

A mewl escapes my lips, encouraging him as he presses me with more kisses, his hand palming my breast. More, more, more, my impatient heart beats. Sex isn't new, but making love is.

He tugs at my skirts, and I wiggle myself free. He liberates me, throwing the gossamer cloth into the cavern as we keep to the air.

The breeze tickles my skin, and it strikes me—we're still in the canyon, that I'm naked but for my underwear. The crashing waves, the magma below, the beauty of this isle surround us. This lust should degrade me, the nudity a disgrace, but that shame belongs to a life I've shed.

Let Wisp be my witness—I feel alive. I tug off my underwear, baring myself, finding freedom.

Drakon's eyes bulge as he takes me in, his mouth gaping, and I preen under his startled attention. He hisses, then dives.

Again, his lips are upon me. This time he drops lower, tracing his tongue down my abdomen and laying kisses on my hip.

His hands wrap around me, cupping my butt, and as he plants a single lingering kiss at the V of my crux, my thighs tremble and clench. I'm hot with anticipation as he pushes my thighs apart. The cool air brushes my warm folds as his tongue rushes forward, sliding into my center.

By Teyr...

My hips hitch. My wings catch.

"Fuck," I gasp.

To my uncertainty, to my excitement, my expletive encourages him. He looks up at me with a wild grin.

He repositions himself, flying so his mouth lies between my widened thighs. I buckle under the flick of his tongue. I've never been this sensitive before, every nerve eager to fire. The sensation arrives with more need, more heat.

He swipes his tongue against me again, and this time, he keeps his mouth in contact, sucking. He swirls his tongue against my clit, and I come undone, squirming upon him. Worked until my eyes hood, I lose track of everything but the energy building within me. I could come already. I rarely orgasm, but if he keeps working me like this...

My hips buck—

He pauses to breathe, and when a frustrated cry escapes my lips, he has the audacity to laugh. And then I'm laughing too.

The sunlight and breeze kiss my body, adding to the symphony of his touches. He's worshiping me like a queen. Only as I drift in my carnal haze... I realize he's still clothed.

That won't do.

His bulge is undeniable. I've been curious for days.

Now I'm the one switching our positions, heady and lustful with the power of control. I kiss his hipbone and tug at his waistband until his pants come loose. Careless, I pull them away, and the fabric flutters, falling to the depths of the canyon.

His musk blooms on the air, and I suck in my breath, taking him in. His long, thick member is erect, arching from him, a drop of precum glistening on the tip. The flesh is taut, the tip strained. Red scales glisten, roughening his shaft.

I moan at the thought of them rubbing me from within and throw my lips upon him. The pressure of his member fills my mouth, and I open wide. He's salty like the sea on a summer day, and I lap him in. I press against his base, and as his hips pump, I take him deeper.

I didn't know kissing a cock could make me feel good. It's an act I've been told to perform but never enjoyed. Until now.

This time, I initiated it. I want this. Judging from the way he's tensing, he's enjoying it too. I smile, with him between my lips, flooded by this newfound power.

I rub myself, one hand pressed against my opening, thumb thumping my clit. And

when he realizes what I'm doing, he reaches down, touching me. He runs his hands through my braids, tracing the sensitive scales of my neck. He cups my breasts, tracing circles over my nipples, tweaking the tips.

It's more sensations than I can process. Lips, tits, and clit. Teyr, I'm lost.

He pulses within my mouth and then tugs himself out. "I want to be inside you when I come," he whispers.

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The sudden shift stuns me and is quickly overcome. “Please,” I beg.

Drakon

My aching cock twitches, frustrated, when I pull away. The air seems far too cold, and I miss the pressure of Reina’s mouth, but entering her will be worth the discomfort.

My wings carry a steady beat. We’re still flying, hovering within the deserted canyon, with sea, land, and sun as our witnesses. My back arches, craving this intimacy. Blood pulses through my cock, my whole body flushed, as I savor the wonder of life.

Reina blinks several times, breath heaving, and her throat bobs. Her purple scales, edged with pink, shine in the golden light, and my gaze traces down them—cheekbone to collarbone, they shadow her plump breasts and outline her soft stomach, highlighting her hipbones. My eyes fix on her crotch, and I lick my lips. She tastes sweet as fruit.

I lift her to me, indicating she should hold her wings tight while I’ll keep mine wide. She understands my meaning as my hands lower, bracing her soft ass while she straddles my hips. Her legs spread wide.

Her folds open for me, dewy and wet. Eucalyptus floods my nostrils—my hips jerk, and we join.

Reina

His stem is hot, the tip warm as he enters. The heat fills me, pressuring me on all sides. Pulling myself closer to his chest, I invite him deeper.

His length fills me completely, and when his molten member twitches, his scales rubbing within me, I moan. That's the spot.

With him seated inside me, holding there, another new need rises—I want wild fucking; thrusting and speed—for him to jab into me at a demanding pace.

The wanton desire shocks me, making me hotter, and I wrap my legs around him, bracing.

He understands what I want. Damn, he delivers.

His hips gyrate and pulse. Thrust in and out.

He pierces me. Tip and scales stroke my insides.

We drive toward our ecstasy.

His wings provide lift, while mine ease some of the burden. It seems strangely natural, having sex upon the air, and yet my once-human mind latches on to the thrill of it.

We're flying, and we're fucking. It's insane. It's divine.

My urge is building, and I'm about to come. My hips jolt. My core clenches. Maybe I'm lost, but we're lost together.

I spear myself upon him, breaking the beat of our drive to pull him deep, deep within me. With the sudden shift, he startles, mouth gaping and eyes wide. Slowly, I pull

away, lifting until his member has almost left me, and then I plunge, throwing my hips to his.

His tip, his scales, squeeze into me. We're wetter now, my sheath widened, and he goes deeper than before. I consume him, and my core fills with his pressure.

He pulls away, thrusts again, striking me.

I burst. He moans and then quivers. I clench around him as he spasms within me, hips thrusting and shaft pulsating. As he spends himself, the gush slams into me with fresh jolts of pleasure.

We ride the wave of release, finding rhythm in every pulse.

It's peaceful here, despite the frenzy. Our bodies roar, riding one another, while our minds soar. Fears and doubts can't find us here, and pleasure lands instead. We rock ourselves, milking our moment.

Eventually we settle, coming to a stop, my core clenching a few final times in soothing surges. Completion sates me, and Drakon sighs. His gaze clears as he meets mine.

"That was good," he says.

"So good," I agree.

He lifts me into an embrace, pulling out of me, letting his juices drip down my thighs.

A giddy happiness finds me, rising like a dream. I wiggle my breasts against his firm chest while his hands massage my ass. I nuzzle his neck and take a deep breath.

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Unbidden, tears reach my eyes.

It's been a day from hell. A day of treacherous transformations and loss. The future seems like an impossible sight.

Yet now, I soar.

Communication

Reina

Arms wrapped around one another, we return to the cavern, finding the soup hot and ready. If I were still human, it would burn my tongue, but I'm no longer limited by such things. We portion our bowls, taking sustenance for our spent bodies, our lingering gazes caressing the other's skin.

We have no reason to dress, so we remain exposed. It gives me time to study him, and I know he's examining me. It's peaceful, learning one another in another way, seasoning our meal with intimacy.

We eat in silence, but there's so much I want to ask. I've told him about my family, about my life before. We've shared sex like I've never known, but there is still much I don't know about him.

"You're not much of a talker, are you?" I ask. "Especially with your experiences, your ideas."

He shrugs. “There are few who want to listen.”

“Why not? Is it because you were the last one born before the curse?”

“That is part of it.”

“What’s the rest?”

His hand tightens upon his spoon, becoming a fist.

“What happened to Alinae, the second Blessed One?” I press.

Drakon glances to the entrance. He stirs his soup, fiddling with his food.

I let him distract himself. I’m patient because I trust that when he finds the words, he won’t lie.

“She arrived, much like you, shipwrecked upon our beach,” he eventually begins. “We were a different clan then, and we eagerly welcomed her—my father most of all.”

“Your father? What was he like?”

“Arrogant, haughty, like my grandfather before him. And after the throne absorbed my grandfather, my father proclaimed himself our new king, without ever passing the throne’s rite.

“He called me his prince, claiming we had to protect our future, at any cost—and Alinae was the opportunity he needed.

“After her transformation, she stayed with us for months, deliberating whether she

would attempt the throne's rite. It was during that time that she and Scorpia fell in love, and my father decided she shouldn't have a choice."

I swallow, nodding along, nonreactive though I'm nervous, unsure of where this story is headed. I've heard Scorpia's warnings, seen her scars.

"One night, over dinner, at the end of the third month, Alinae announced she intended to delay another month. Her words... they drove my father to the dragon's rush."

Whispering, I ask, "What exactly is the dragon's rush?"

It's a difficult question, and he's silent for several minutes, gripping his spoon so tightly that it breaks in two. He frowns, staring at the pieces.

His eventual answer is hesitant, the words broken, spoken from far away. "The dragon's rush is a condition of my bloodline. A berserker's rage, set off when we become angry."

"It's why you didn't want to fight Scorpia, isn't it? And the day you chased me on the beach, your eyes rimmed with red instead of gold. That's the rush, right?"

"Yes." He breathes the word slowly through a clenched jaw. Talking about it has put him on edge.

I wait several breaths before asking, "What happened to Alinae?"

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Gaze distant, he looks at the wall behind me. “Father dragged her from the dinner table, thrusting her upon the throne.” After a swallow he continues, “Scorpia fought for her lover, and obeying my father, I fought Scorpia.”

I fill in the blanks. “You were consumed by the rush?”

“Yes. And in such a rage, I clawed her arm, scarring her. I might have done more if the clan hadn’t intervened.” His face flickers from rage to fear, lost in the memory. I set a hand over his, but he pulls away. “As for Alinae, she died during her forced throne’s rite, her body consumed by the throne.”

Swallowing, I could almost imagine it was me, forced upon the throne. I’m already scared by this rite, and to face it without the dignity of choice...

He bangs a fist on the table. “It shouldn’t have happened that way. She should have been prepared—the clan could have supported her progression with a vigil. In the rush, none of the usual precautions were taken, and it was not Alinae’s weakness that killed her—it was mine.”

“And your father’s,” I remind him. “You were a youth—”

“What does it matter?” he snaps. “I still did it. If I had joined forces with Scorpia, and together, we had faced my father... maybe everything would have been different. The clan has not forgiven me.”

I’ve seen it, how they blame him. Everyone except Kaliyah. He says his mother left soon after, but... “What happened to your father?”

“In Wisp’s anger, the isle bound him to her throne, pinning him with magma ropes. Like my grandfather, like Alinae, he was absorbed.”

For a time, we’re silent again. It’s a tragic history, a single event that left behind a grieving lover, a conflicted princeling, and a disenchanting clan.

Surprisingly, it’s Drakon who speaks next. “Despite your return today, I do not assume you’ll attempt the throne’s rite. Especially with everything you’ve learned. I will not coerce you. I’m not...”

“You’re not your father,” I finish the sentence for him.

“Are you sure?” he asks, eyes wide. It’s the question that has haunted him his entire life. When he continues, he rushes the words, speaking doubts he has held for decades. “Because I have the rush. I chased you when you first arrived, terrifying you, driving you down that cave.”

“I understand, but... I trust you.”

He laughs. His eyes glint, and I catch the hint of red. “Are you sure it’s safe to trust me? I would not advise it. My father and grandfather made desperate decisions that cost lives. How can I be different from them?”

His muscles tense. Honestly, part of me is scared of him, my chest tightening. It’s disconcerting, watching him shift from broody silence to anger, like a switch.

Maybe he is like his fathers before. Maybe Scorpia is right. He’s quiet because he doesn’t trust himself to speak. Broody because he doesn’t know a better way.

The red in his eyes grows.

“You should go,” he growls.

I will go, I decide, but playing with fire, I linger for a few moments more. I rise from the bench and lift my hands, signaling peace. “Hear me out. Please, Drakon. You’ve proven you’re different.”

He huffs, his body tensing. He doubts me.

My heart races. I care about him, believing he’s better than he thinks he is, but this is the rage. I need to be cautious.

Except... he can’t hurt me.

“That’s why you gave me an oath of protection,” I realize. “The moment Kaliyah put you in charge of my care.”

He grunts. “I would rather die at Wisp’s hand than hurt you.” Suddenly, his oath has a new gravity, given to me because he doesn’t trust himself.

I take a step closer to him, meeting his eyes, red fully rimming his hazel coloring. “And that’s it,” I say. “That’s why you’re different from your father and grandfather. You might have this rush, but you don’t want to hurt anyone.”

He snarls, eager to move past me and flee. The space between us shrinks, and heat—unnatural dragon heat—radiates from his chest.

I step closer, blocking his way.

“What are you doing?” he shouts. “Let me leave. This will only put both of us in harm’s way.”

His nostrils are flaring, but I don't think it's with anger.

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He's afraid. Afraid of being like his father, his grandfather. That the generations of males before him have paved an inescapable path of destruction. It's not a trait unique to the dragon fae. I have seen a similar fear from men before—a fear that if they can't rage to take up space, they'll mean nothing at all.

When facing such fear, I've always backed down. Maybe it's because I was smaller then, maybe it's because I care for him, but today, I don't shy away.

I spout my wings, completely blocking his way

He huffs. If I'm wrong, if things escalate, I brace myself, reading to let him go.

"You're not a monster," I say. "I'm sorry that your clan taught you that your words have no value. That a decision of your youth—one encouraged by your father—should stain your future."

"What if they're right?" he shouts. "What if my bloodline is my destiny? What if I cannot be different?"

"You are not bound to your history." My hand drifts to the scales on my neck, the deviation that was my curse. "Just as I'm not who my family said I was. We can shape our own destinies, turning curses into blessings."

"Blessings?" he asks.

I nod. My throat tightens as I stumble through the idea. "And maybe it's not always possible. We can't force positivity onto every misfortune. But sometimes... we just

need to look at a situation differently.”

I remember how my nieces admired my dragon form, like my presence was the deliverance they hungered for. Thinking of them, the barriers between us... grief strikes me anew.

“I’m not saying it’s easy,” I admit. “But maybe we can learn to find the good with practice.”

His muscles are still taut, and I worry my words have glanced off him. Did I become so focused on my journey that I lost track of where it ran parallel to his?

“What does this have to do with anything?” he asks.

“Maybe your bloodline hasn’t cursed you—maybe it gave you the perspective to overcome it.”

He’s quiet now. I’m not sure he accepts my logic, but he’s calming, the red shifting back to gold. Taking half a step back, I invite fresh air between us.

I’m not cursed. I test out the words, fingertips brushing my oldest scales. Are they smoother than I remember, or have I changed? Tracing a heart in the hollow at the base of my neck, I practice loving what I was taught to hate.

I feel...light.

Drakon’s eyes are rapt upon me, watching me do this silly thing. Embarrassed, I drop my hand, but he catches my palm, clutching it between both of his.

Lifting my fingers to his lips, he tenderly kisses them. “Thank you,” he whispers, not quite meeting my gaze.

Cupping his chin in my other hand, I push it up, encouraging him to look at me. When our eyes meet, I find the redness has faded, and the golden rim to his hazel eyes returned.

“Promise me one thing,” I ask.

“What?”

“Never be afraid to speak to me. I want to hear you. Your doubts and fears. Your ambitions and dreams. I want to know you, to learn it all.”

He swallows. “I... I’ll have to learn.”

“I’ll be learning with you.”

My whole day brightens when the corners of his lips turn upward, and he says, “Then we will figure it out together.”

Part Three: Claim

Awakening

Drakon

I stir, the predawn light illuminating Reina’s naked body. She’s awake, her eyes wide and thoughtful. She has something to say, but for now, she lets me hold her, caress her. In the silence, I study her, memorizing the placement of every scale. Nuzzling her braids, I take deep breaths, mingling memory with her scent. I’ve spent the whole night trying to learn her—and it still hasn’t been enough.

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It would be so easy to cover her with my wings, cage her in, and never let her go. It is an instinct I must swallow with every second.

“I’ve decided,” she whispers. “I want to attempt the throne’s rite. Today. No more delay.”

My stomach sinks as I clutch her closer. “I will not stop you.”

“I’ll be okay,” she assures me.

We both know it’s an empty promise, and my eyes squeeze shut. She didn’t see Alinae consumed by the throne, or how her death ruined Scorpia. If I could, I would take Reina’s place, taking the risk upon myself.

At the very least, I can tell her how I feel. “I’ve lived for a century, and in all those years, nobody has seen me as you do. There has been nobody I have longed to protect as I do you. Even as I admire your courage, I would rather you leave this isle, live on. Do not risk your life. I want to encourage you—I want to stop you.”

“I know.”

“It makes me wonder, is this... love?”

“Love?” She breathes the word, then chuckles. “I wouldn’t know the meaning of it.”

I’m not sure I would either. Gently, I kiss her neck, her cheeks, worshiping her with my lips as my words fail me.

“I’m sorry, to take this risk,” she whispers. “To put you through this. You’ve been my foundation, and... if it’s possible, I might love you too.”

My breath hitches. “Then don’t go.”

“I need to do this. Confront Wisp. Please understand.”

Her jaw is set, beautiful in her determination. There are layers between Wisp and the Blessed One that I cannot comprehend. “I don’t understand,” I admit. “But I trust you to do what is right.”

Confrontation

Reina

We fly to the central caverns, Drakon leading our return to the clan. The countless balconies carved into the volcanic stone are reminiscent of my first night on Wisp, and yet, as I fly under the power of my own wings, my perspective is irrevocably changed.

Wisp. Home. Clan.

Everything has new meaning.

We fly to the largest balcony, approaching the great hall and the throne within. Several dragon fae are posted outside the doors, and when they look up at us and point, I take the cue—flying ahead of Drakon, becoming the leader.

Swallowing, I gird myself with confidence I don’t quite feel. It’s with great relief that I land gracefully, the cool stone under my bare feet. My rosy-pink skirts are torn and dirty, but I keep my spine straight as a would-be queen.

Retracting my wings, I signal that we arrive in peace, while Drakon keeps himself braced, wings wide. I resist the instinct to glance back—it's enough to know he is there if we need to retreat.

“I'm here to speak with Scorpia,” I command the guards.

They glance at one another, and without talking, someone disappears into the great hall. The rest brace themselves, eyeing Drakon, readying for a fight.

We wait, and I work through each breath, clearing myself of doubt.

Scorpia marches onto the balcony, expanding her wings, making her presence known. Several more dragon fae follow, greatly outnumbering Drakon and myself. I take a few steps back, nearing the ledge.

“I want to claim the throne.” I make my intentions clear.

Scorpia's nose scrunches. “Why? It could kill you. What has my fool of a nephew said to convince you?”

“It's a risk of my choosing,” I counter, keeping a tremor from my voice. “And if you deny me this choice, you're no different from those before.”

She stomps closer. “That doesn't answer my question. Why?”

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“I need a new family, a new clan.”

She laughs. “And you chose us?” The guards join in, chortling too. “This clan is so broken I raised insurrection.”

“I understand.”

“Drakon has filled your head with lies.”

Drakon must bristle, for I hear his snarl.

“He told me of Alinae,” I explain. “That he fought you in a rage while his father forced her upon the throne. Is there more I should know?”

“Then you understand you are risking your life for us. If you need a new family, look elsewhere. We’re broken.”

“Every community is broken, but yours is a brokenness that suits mine.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m barren, Scorpia,” I say, blinking out tears as I pronounce my greatest shame. “I can’t have children.”

Scorpia scoffs—my confession has no impact. “What of it? This clan is cursed not to have children.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, struggling to explain. “All my life, I’ve lived in a community that ostracized me because of this barrenness, calling me cursed. This is my chance to live with a clan that can understand this pain. This is an opportunity to bring life to your clan when I cannot create it myself.”

She swallows, staying tense.

“Scorpia, I’m here because I want to end your curse.”

My words echo, repeated by the surrounding dragon fae. Wings shifting, they seem intrigued by my promise.

Scorpia hears it too, and her face hardens.

Rushing, I continue with a whisper, “You said Alinae’s death must mean something. And if I could tell you the purpose of losing her, I would... But if you let me attempt this, I promise to never forget what she meant to you.”

My words hang in the air, feeling ineffective. There is no compensation for the past, and Scorpia’s pain is beyond my comprehension.

Scorpia frowns. She casts her gaze upon the surrounding dragon fae, their stirrings of hopefulness. Her jaw loosens ever so slightly.

“Fine,” she grits out, stepping aside, waving me toward the great hall.

“Thank you.”

She huffs. “Don’t thank me. You’re the one risking her life.”

Drakon stays close as I lead our way through the hallway and into the great hall.

Stepping on the obsidian dais, I face the throne.

It seems bigger. More intimidating.

Everything is different now.

The throne glistens, gold glinting in greeting. The gash upon the throne is no longer an enigma but a warning. My gaze settles on the red rose Maledictum, still resting upon its seat, the thorns still tinged with my blood.

Wisp is waiting.

No longer stumbling with torn and bleeding feet, I approach Wisp's throne with purpose, grounding into my resolve. I'm not doing this for Wisp, nor am I doing it for Drakon. Or Kaliyah. Or even the clan.

This risk, I'm taking it for me.

The clan is contained within this hall, Scorpia's guards standing at the entrance. At first, they welcome me with disbelief and stirring, but soon there is the clamor of chatter and even a few cheers. Nevertheless, I see the cost of Scorpia's control—they're tired, worn down, with hooded eyes and bent spines.

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Kaliyah's approach is slow, her limp more pronounced than before. If I become queen, there will be much work to do, healing my clan.

If I become queen.

"Reina," Drakon whispers, and when he reaches for my hand, I let him hold it. The clan looks upon us as I turn to face him, to hear his plea. "Come back to me."

My lips tremble, and I blink back tears. He's done much to protect me, to give me this chance. What happens next isn't his responsibility.

"I release you from your oath," I say, squeezing his hand.

"Don't," he snarls.

I cup his chin in my palm. "And I'll make a new promise in its place, one to do everything in my power to survive this, to return to you."

"There is no need for such an oath." He bows his head, holding my gaze. "Reina, you are already my queen."

My heart melts. He adores me, something I thought impossible. "I'll be okay," I assure him.

Scorpia scoffs, witnessing our moment, overhearing our words, but we don't let go.

By the time Kaliyah reaches the dais, the clan has come closer, clustering around the

elder. They help her rise, to join us on the obsidian dais.

Her attention is rapt upon me. “Reina, is it your intention to attempt the throne’s rite?”

“It is.”

“Very well.”

Kaliyah raises her arms, shouting to the clan. “You heard her. Prepare for the vigil. Let us begin.”

At her words, the clan breaks into movement, presumably preparing for the vigil, but I struggle to perceive what they’re doing.

The throne draws my attention, the Maledictum upon its seat. The vivid green stem and sharp thorns, the bright petals with golden hues. The fireflies have returned, their light subtle, only there for me.

Like before, it is beautiful, and I am compelled.

Surrendering to a summons only I can hear, I squeeze Drakon’s hand one final time and let him go. Striding to the throne, I pick up the rose and clench the stem, thorns pricking at my fingers. My body glides, needing little direction from me as I settle, sitting upon Wisp’s throne.

Drakon steps closer, his dark gaze concerned. Somewhere, there’s the first beat of a drum.

“Trust me,” I try to say, but words cannot fall from my unconscious lips.

Wisp

Reina

I walk on magma, but my feet do not burn.

The caldera is Wisp's heart, and I'm entombed by its beats. The hot earth oscillates, splashing my ankles. Everything shakes, ripples becoming waves as rocks crumble, the caldera breaking. Magma spews, covering me, becoming solid, catching me like a net, pulling me...

down...

down...

down...

Into the belly of Wisp, I'm dragged through molten earth. The magma enters my lungs, burning my soul. Pieces of me are pulled apart, scoured, and returned. Again and again, I'm torn apart, body, mind, and soul. The process of rebuilding consumes an eternity, and I lose myself every time I'm rebuilt. I'm broken and I become, again and again.

I persist—survival doesn't depend on strength of will but on my ability to endure, and I learned perseverance from a lifetime of neglect.

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Eventually, finally, once I'm so numb I barely sense it, the pain does dull, fading. I feel my body again, becoming whole, and I settle into a new state of being.

I stand alone in the great hall. Only it's empty, the tables gone and the clan absent. The magma pool I fell through is above me, casting the ceiling in shifting red light.

I no longer sit upon the throne—I face it.

The throne morphs, claiming a new shape. The gold becomes molten; it gathers mass and grows. This time, Wisp forms herself from metal, claiming the form of a massive gilded dragon. Formed from gold, she's far more frightening than fireflies. Her snakelike form writhes upon the air, different from the dragon fae. She has no wings, but she has no need for them, as divinity drips from the graceful perfection of her glinting form.

Standing on her hind legs, she stretches her long neck, nose touching the glowing ceiling. She shifts and sways and then settles, lowering her head to meet me at eye level.

She blinks, examining me. Curiosity shines in her bright eyes as sweet smoke puffs from her slitted nostrils. Fear strikes my heart as I struggle to comprehend the immensity of her power. Awe and terror fill me, freezing me in place.

“You came.” Her brows rise in surprise.

At first, it's hard to respond, but pain grounds me, the stab of thorns. I clutch the Maledictum, and it encourages me. “Of course I came. I can't have children because

of you.”

“I thought you hated me.”

“But can’t you... fix me?”

“If it were so easy, I would have revoked my curse on the dragon fae long ago.”

“But I didn’t ask for this—you forced it upon me when you asked the sea to find your queen.” Anger gathers within me, and I grit my teeth. “You are a deity. How are you so unfit?”

She studies me, and I’m still not sure she gets it—that she’s responsible for circumstances that led to my neglect.

Working through my rage, I circle toward my goal. “With all your mighty power, I’m here to ensure you learn one thing: blessings can cause as much damage as curses.”

Listening, a doubt creases her perfect brow. Seeing it there, my fury fades. I remember Kaliyah’s story. That Wisp was born long after the other isles were made. Mother Ocean and Father Sky were already gone, and her siblings had already created the first fae. Wisp was born alone, different.

“I can’t pretend to understand what it’s like to be you,” I whisper. “I just wish... I wish you hadn’t chosen me.”

She slithers forward until she’s beside me, and together we face the dais. The golden throne has returned, and we stare at its empty seat.

“You do not fear me. And it is why I need you.”

My lips part, stunned.

“I never asked to be made, my volcanoes breaching the surface of the sea, and now, as the magma keeps rising, all I can do is direct it, reform it. Maybe I never should have created the dragon fae, and perhaps that’s why I cursed them, encouraging them to leave my shores. But even in my wrath, I knew it was wrong... And that is why I sought a queen, a mother. Someone who could teach me what I don’t understand.”

Her voice quivers. She’s still a child, in her way, and it softens me. She wants someone to care for her. “I can be the queen you need.”

The deity blinks, hope in her gilded eyes—and surprise. “Are you truly willing? After everything I’ve done to you?”

“Call it blessing or curse, I arrived at these shores. Now I’m here, choosing this rite of my own free will. I thought it foolish to face you, to try teaching you something, but you’ve listened.”

As I speak, I lift my palm, stepping closer to her, and Wisp responds, leaning closer. It’s warm, this close to her, like the healing waters of the thermae.

I settle my hand upon her cheek, her scales silky soft, and she leans into my touch. “Dear Wisp, I want to care for you—to help you. I will become your queen.”

“Then I approve. You may face the rite.”

“Wait—” when did her tail surround me? “—that wasn’t the rite? The pain in the magma? Us, talking?”

“I’m sorry. The throne’s rite is beyond even me. It is a test of the land, governed by Teyr and Gloom. Good luck, sweet Reina. The sea has chosen well.”

She wraps me tight, and my body vanishes.

Drakon

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As Reina's eyes close, I'm unable to look away.

The throne welds itself to her—legs, torso, and back transmuting to gold. The gold spreads to her flesh, gilding her as it consumes her. Her scent fades, becoming metallic. She stops breathing, and the sight of her silent chest unhinges something in me.

I'm afraid.

I wish she had run away.

I should have chased her away.

"It was her choice," Scorpia whispers. "Don't blame yourself for what happens next."

Clenching my jaw, I stop myself from gnashing my teeth at her. "Minutes ago, you accused me of providing her with misinformation."

"Can you fault me for checking?"

No. I can't. Not if she felt for Alinae what I feel for Reina. If Reina had been the one forced upon that throne, if I'd been forced to watch her be consumed... I would have done anything to prevent that tragedy from happening again.

"I am not my father."

Scorpia frowns, slow to respond, and our moment is weighed down by the throne.

Reina remains silent and may remain that way for hours before we learn if she passes the throne's rite.

"No, Drakon, you are not your father. If you were, you wouldn't have let her attempt this."

I'm unsettled, how this affirms my newly born fear and its accompanying instinct to hide Reina away, ensuring she is safe within a cage. Yet my aunt sees me in a fresh light, because I have not acted on this impulse.

She runs her fingers along her arm, tracing the scar I gave her. "It is difficult to forgive. It means accepting that the past is unchangeable, that it's time to move forward. And I'm still furious—" she clenches her bicep, clawing into her own arm "—so fucking furious. But perhaps my fury has been misplaced, so focused upon you."

I still, silent under her evaluation, my gaze homed in on Reina.

"I wish you would speak more," she continues. "And I apologize for the part I played in that. For the future... if there is a future for our clan, I will do my part to ensure you are heard."

Words fail me. Scorpia's confession, an acceptance I had long thought impossible, only glances at the surface of my senses. My emotions are tangled with Reina, imagining what pains she could be experiencing, until I'm numb.

Seeing this, she pats my shoulder once, then twice, and steps aside. "We should talk more. When it is over. Until then, let us join the vigil. Together, the clan will support her."

She's right—this is how I can be with Reina now; this is what we failed to do for

Alinae—and I follow my aunt, stepping down from the dais, and we settle, sitting side by side, our gazes locked on the throne.

Kaliyah leads the clan, drumming a meditative beat, leading a series of humming and chants. The air thickens as incense is lit, and time becomes hazy, lost to a hypnotic daze. Together, we unite, the clan becoming one.

We sway, we wait, and we help our queen to return.

Reina

I become ethereal. It's not the pain that drives me to the edge; it's the lack of self. I'm eviscerated, individuality lost as my body vanishes. No longer me, I'm becoming...more.

My spirit rises, and I look down upon the throne—the true one, with the clan facing it—experiencing their vigil as Wisp does. I see from every angle, hear and smell their presence. There's another sensation too, as if I can feel the color of life forces, one composed of textures. Smooth scales and pointy barbs. Flame and power. Confidence, arrogance, and hunger.

They're within me, the womb of Wisp's great hall. The isle admires her creation—they frustrate her. She's conflicted, doubting her capability to nurture them. She sees them with love and hate, with frustration and fear.

Wisp's doubt swirls, spiraling. How is a curse a blessing, a blessing a curse? Was she ever worthy of a clan? Her spiraling doubts expand, spitting fire, accelerating.

“All communities have struggles,” my soul speaks. “And each individual has the capability to grow. The journey begins when we forgive ourselves.”

With the words, she calms, her spitting fire settling, as the deity becomes a warming hearth. Somewhere, I hear the beating of a steady drumbeat. Wisp's clan settles into her calmed protection. She aids them, aiding me.

Resolved, my spirit rises higher still, merging with Wisp. Becoming her, I learn how it feels to be land. The feel of the waves washing over pebbles and sand. The pitter-patter of creatures, their feet thumping upon my stone. I sway with the trees and speak to the sea. Magma rises within me, overflowing, transforming as it massages my surface in molten rivers.

Expanding, my soul becomes and becomes and becomes... until, after a time, I steady, looking down upon the land from high above. Wisp sprawls beneath me, her countless volcanoes spewing lava that crashes into the sea. She's furious and strong, courageous and impertinent, isolated and compassionate.

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She becomes me as I become her. We become something more. I could lose myself here—I long to lose myself here. Committing my individuality to the void, I could be unleashed. In the clouds, I taste freedom, released from the constraints of my broken, barren body.

But a drum beats, calling me home.

I'm tempted to ignore it. To stay here, liberated.

To descend means becoming queen of a clan I hardly know. I will not be a perfect queen—I will make mistakes. Is it wrong to claim a power I don't know how to wield? A power that will weigh me down when I feel so light. Becoming mortal again after experiencing divinity seems inadequate.

If I return, I will fail. Not always. But sometimes.

The drum beats again. The mortals chant for my return.

From high above, my divine eye sharpens, focusing not on my body, gilded by Wisp and sedated on her throne, but upon a dragon fae...

Drakon. Even from here, I remember his name.

His lip quivers, his gaze fixed. The way he looks upon my body... on me.

That's love. An adoration I've barely begun to experience. From my first taste, I thirst for more. To share a mortal life, chapter by chapter, with someone who can see

me as he does, showing him that he has more value than he knows.

I want that. More than I want this void.

The drum beats, the rhythm guiding my descent.

There will be mistakes when I become queen, but if I'm wise, my contributions will outweigh my flaws. As I forgive my past, I resolve to forgive my future.

I will become queen.

Resolution resounds within, and I touch upon an expansive web, connecting to the universe. It's within me, above me, through me. I connect to every land, every being. Epiphany strikes, whispering the reason for everything in a language I cannot comprehend, before letting me go.

Heart beating in sync with a drum, I open my eyes.

Awakening

I've been unmade and remade, transforming and shifting countless times over my life, but no matter how many times I awaken, the work of becoming is never complete.

My eyes open, my gaze centered on Drakon, steadying on him as his lips part in a relieved sigh. Time stills as the moment of my return hovers between us.

I'm back. I'm alive.

His love guided my return.

Gasping for breath, I exercise my lungs, reclaiming my existence. I feel small—I feel powerful. It's strange, having physical sensations again.

Through it all, my sense of Wisp remains, the land and the deity accessible to me, though not as deeply. She has become an intimate part of me, accessible in my mind as I've become her vassal, her mother.

Drakon rises cautiously, and though I want to keep my focus upon him, Wisp draws my attention beyond, to the clan supporting me. Kaliyah still beats the drum, summoning my return with the steady power of a heartbeat.

The vast clan looks up to me. My clan.

With a prick to my fingers, I look down at my hands, still holding the Maledictum. Guided by Wisp, I grasp the next step that must be taken.

“By this token, I lift the curse.” I whisper it as I tug at the rose, pulling a single petal from the stem. When I toss it aside, the petal floats nearby. “By this token, I lift the curse.” I say it again, plucking the second petal. This one levitates too.

I do it, again and again, disarming the Maledictum as I surround myself with lava-red petals. With the pluck of each petal, I recall every step that brought me here.

My mother. My father. My former husband. My brother. I peel each layer away, letting them go. Barren. Cursed. I release my old identities.

I recall waking on Wisp's black sands, the way the salt parched my skin, my body dry and wasted. How I had to be reshaped in order to rise—poisoned to witness the divisions of my clan. I've witnessed my funeral and risen the next morning, Drakon at my side.

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Holding his gaze, I pluck the final petal. My jaw tightens as a deep knowing fills me—my body is permanently transformed, yet some damage remains. I do not know if I can conceive a child. Only time will tell.

The acceptance of grief chokes me as I release the last petal and clutch the bare stem. I clear my throat, absorbing the pain, letting it pass.

Sitting taller, like a queen, I press my back to Wisp's throne, allowing her power to flow into me. When I lift my arms, the petals spiral around me, and I raise my gaze past my dragon prince and settle it upon the ceiling of Wisp's great hall.

Wisp speaks through me. "By accepting a new leader, your curse has been broken and a new era can begin."

Shooting upward, the petals rise. Bursting like fireworks, they turn to sparks. Glittering ashes scatter upon the clan.

While the clan watches the display in awe, Drakon's gaze remains rapt upon me. As the rush of Wisp's power ebbs, leaving me weak, his attention soothes me.

I'm still clutching the thorny stem, bleeding slightly where it pricks me. A drop falls to the ground, scented with eucalyptus, and seeing this, he rises, steps upon the dais, and kneels at my feet.

Stretching out his hands, he cups mine, and prying at my fingers, he helps me relax my grip. "I want to offer you another vow."

“There’s no need! I’m okay. Just...changed.” Words elude me. It’s a struggle to describe what I’ve become, what it is to be Queen of Wisp. She’s within me, part of me. I sit within the womb of her great hall, gathered with her clan, facing the impossible responsibilities of guiding a deity and leading a clan.

He squeezes my hand. “You are changed. And that is why I must offer a new vow.”

I shake my head, but he continues.

“I, Drakon, lover of Reina, the queen of my clan, vow that so long as she allows me in her service, I will guard her, protect her. Love her. May I support her, aiding her rise as queen.”

Tingles run up my spine as Wisp preens, eager to accept this vow of loyalty, but she waits, seeking my advice before accepting.

My instinct is to shy away from his commitment, but a smile tugs on his lips. To him, I’m not barren or broken. I’m not even valuable because I’m blessed. He treasures me because he can see the best in me. His vow is proof of that.

I cup his chin. “I accept your vow on one condition.”

“What is it, my queen?”

I lean forward until we’re brow to brow. “Say your mind, speak with me—each and every day. I need a companion and lover, advisor and friend. Someone I can talk with who speaks plainly in reply. Someone I can trust to tell the truth.”

He holds my gaze, soaking up my words, my requests, like this is everything he has wanted. “I agree.”

Wisp accepts his vow, and the power of it settles within me. The thorny stem shifts, the Maledictum taking a new form.

The stem lengthens, thorns vanishing as it thins into strands. Weaving, the cords twist and turn, becoming two circlets—rings.

Wisp explains, speaking through me, “So long as you both wear these rings, the vow holds. May you become a dragon prince and his queen.”

With her blessing, silence settles between us. I take the smaller ring, settling it upon my finger, while Drakon does the same with the thicker one. Hands brushing, our fingers examine the other’s palm, testing the weight of our rings. Satisfied we’re no longer alone, our hands intertwine.

Together, we rise.

Epilogue

One Decade Later

Reina

The great hall is bustling, the clan gathering as the dinner hour approaches. Smells of food waft from the kitchens, making everyone’s stomachs growl. The faelings run between the banquet tables, flying over them, as their cries fill the hall with the sound of laughter.

From my throne, I watch as my niblings try to join in, learning the other’s games. My mother-in-law visits with her young brood, Drakon’s half-siblings. Her children are part dragon fae, their wings more suitable to gliding than flight, but with their greater skills in magic, they intrigue the other faelings.

Drakon, his mother, and her mate watch from nearby, chatting with ease. Their visit has been a success, and we're already planning next year's visit to Dawn Court, where they live.

It's amazing, watching how fae grow. Their development of magic adds an entire element to childhood. I try to relate, in my different way, coming into my power so late. Every week I teach a lesson.

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I tell them about magic, flying, and life.

None of them fear me. Instead, they clamor for my attention. Nobody really calls me queen. Amongst the clan, I'm aunt. Soon, I'll have many more nibblings.

"We can reopen another wing of the cavern," I tell Kaliyah, sitting beside me. "Wisp's renovations are nearly done."

"Excellent."

When news of my ascension spread, many dragon fae returned to Wisp's shores. Between them and the expansion of existing families, the clan reclaims the old, abandoned tunnels. The caverns grow louder, livelier, every day.

"We may want to consider opening more wings if trade continues to boom," Kaliyah adds.

I nod my agreement. Once again, dragon crystal is valuable. With the help of my human experience, we have found merchants willing to take our crystal south of the Rift, selling it to the humans. Other fae have followed my lead, and in the years since, trade between the Isles of Fae and Valterra has boomed, our goods increasingly valued by our human neighbors.

The expanded trade route has changed everything, fostering the continued development of fae goods. Not only is Wisp entering a new economic era, but so is the entirety of the Isles of Fae.

Still, Wisp worries about the dragon blades, the seven swords and single dagger that King Ichor made. She is still angered, remembering how he betrayed her trust, abusing her gifts for his gain when she failed to provide for the clan in a different way.

The deity remains critical of herself for the curse and apologetic for blessing me. My pardon came faster than her self-forgiveness. She continues to learn, gaining experiences now that she can live through a monarch. My single lifetime, long as it now is, still feels too short to teach everything the young deity needs to know.

The golden throne shines anew as our connection strengthens, the isle more virile than before. It's only partly true, what they say, that the fae are magical because of the isles. Now I know it goes both ways—the fae compound the isles' magic, adding to their power, tied to them. Wisp thrives with her clan.

I'm thriving too, in my way, and I smile at the thought, watching Drakon. We're a small family, him and me, yet our connection is ironclad, essential, especially in our darkest days. Our strength will be essential as we face the new trials ahead.

Suddenly, Wisp speaks through me. "Scorpia approaches."

"What a relief," Kaliyah sighs, and I nod my agreement. Scorpia has been gone for two weeks, though she estimated this mission would take her one.

I wave to Drakon, and he joins us, wrapping an arm around my waist as we walk to the balcony.

Scorpia's red dragon form approaches, her cry echoing amongst the volcanoes. She swoops over us, dropping a sword from her claws, and shifts.

I drop to my knees, examining the weapon. The dark, steely metal is well-polished,

its edges glinting and sharp. Wisp rumbles, confirming the return of the first dragon blade.

Drakon grabs my shoulder, inhaling sharply at the sight. Kaliyah nears as Scorpia does the same. All our gazes focus upon the forbidden blade.

“You did it,” I say to Scorpia, my voice hushed with awe.

She scoffs. “We still have a long journey ahead of us if we’re to collect all of them.”

“Patience,” I urge. “One at a time.”

“But we’re not the only ones searching!”

I look up, meeting her furrowed face. “Who?”

“The Starlit King wants them too. The young upstart who just claimed the throne.”

I nod, pursing my lips. The Starlit King—his isle closest to the human port—has become essential in establishing the trade routes our clan now depends upon. It’s unfortunate his pursuit of power places him at direct odds with our quest to retrieve all the blades.

“It is a problem for another day. You’ve done well. Dinner will be served soon. Take a rest. Celebrate your victory with the clan.” I reach out, grabbing the blade’s hilt. It’s icy and cold, and with my contact, Wisp grows agitated. “Drakon and I will lock this away.”

Shifting, I take my winged form as Drakon does the same. I ascend, carrying the sword with me.

“I’ll take care of this,” I promise Wisp, soothing her. She’ll adjust to the blade in time. “It’s a new era,” I remind her.

While her presence is with me everywhere, our connection is strongest in some regions—the great hall, the thermae, the caldera. Our link can weaken too, including the rooms Drakon and I share.

The monarchs before me understood the value of occasional distance between isle and ruler, and therefore, they worked with Wisp to build a special suite of rooms where we can feel apart.

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Sword in my hand, Drakon and I fly toward the dormant volcano that houses our apartment. With Scorpia's return, it's decided. There's something I'm ready to tell him.

Drakon

We linger in our private hot pool, the sword now stored on the ledge behind the waterfall. The falling water will scald a regular fae, and we're satisfied that this location will guard Wisp from her self-contempt and deter any thieves.

Our thermae is smaller than the communal one, the single waterfall pouring hot water into this pool before it spews out, forming a stream through the apartment that tumbles over the balcony, misting as it falls into the sea.

When I was a child, I lived in these apartments, but they were colder then. Warmth and kindness follow in Reina's wake, and she fills the space with furs and art, accumulating quite the collection from the isles beyond. She's eclectic and clever, thoughtful in the arrangement as she makes our home our own.

She floats upon the mineral water, her exposed breasts brushing the surface, as I watch, my back against the wall. I admire her, how she's grown more beautiful and confident with every passing year. My gaze traces her body, urging my fingers to do the same.

No longer able to resist, I swim closer, pulling her body against mine, my engorged cock pressing against her back. Responsive, she moans, wiggling her butt against my thighs and laying her neck upon my shoulder.

I kiss her cheek. “We should go to dinner.”

“We should,” she agrees. “But first...”

Pointedly, she faces me, spreading her legs to straddle me, and my hips rock as I grind against her. She rubs herself against my swollen member, running her hands down my chest, my pelvic bone, until she’s stroking me with her hands. I gasp under her touch, nibble at her ear, and whisper, “I will undo you.”

Wrapping my hands under her butt, I pick her up and set her upon the ledge as I splay her thighs wide. My fingers wander higher until I’m pressing her folds open, and leaning forward, I take her with my tongue. Through the years, I’ve never tired of her taste. I prod her apex, flicking her nub with my tongue.

She leans back on her hands, squirming and writhing to the point that I must pin her in place, deeply kissing her swollen slit.

When she comes, it’s a struggle to keep my focus upon her, my ears filled by the sound of her pleasure.

And when it’s over... I keep going.

“That’s enough,” she gasps, breathily pushing my shoulders away.

Rising upward to face her, I lick her belly as I go, pausing only to thump my tongue against her nipple. “Are you sure?”

“N-no.” Her lips part, her eyes hooding. She’s half-sated, half-roused. Still wet. “But there’s something I want to tell you.”

I cock my head, curious.

“I think I’m pregnant.”

My lips part. When her womb did not wake during our first years together, despite ravenous lovemaking, we both assumed it might never happen. Gaze homing on her belly, I slide my hand across her flat womb.

“It’s still early...”

I kiss her there too.

“I’m afraid.”

Looking up, I see her scrunched face, and I rise again, kissing the tears from her cheeks. “Fear is normal. And I have mine too, what if...”

“What if they inherit your rush?” she asks.

I nod.

“If they inherit the dragon’s rush, then their father will show them how to manage. I know it.”

I stumble over the word, testing it out. “Father.”

She points to her chest. “And me... a mother.” She chuckles.

“What fine parents we will be,” I growl, and with a grin, I wrap her in my arms and shift.

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After a few flaps of my wings, I settle her on a nearby lounge covered in furs. When I lay her upon its surface, she spreads her thighs, stretching her arms and arching her back. My female luxuriates as I enter her.

My Reina, my queen. My mate, the mother of my child-to-be.

From my first thrust, she grips tight, crying out. My need grows, tinged with her wonderful news, and my thrusts grow increasingly wild, desperate to sate our hunger.

I angle my hips, ensuring my scales rub her inner spot as she sways, matching my tempo, lengthening my thrusts. Together, we ride the brink—pleasure and pain, chase and release—rising toward climax.

We fly. We soar.

Riding waves of pleasure, we become breathless, lucid in the afterglow. I twitch one last time, and she wiggles her hips, milking the final moment. As I slide out of her, our juices mingle on her thighs, and I brush my lips against her brow, rolling over to my back.

She turns to her side, lazily tracing my chest with her fingertips. No matter how many times we've connected our bodies in this way, I never tire of the struggle of sex, the rush of release, the afterglow... I've become possessive, hoarding experience until it becomes expertise.

"Is it different?" I ask. "Now that you've conceived?"

“I don’t know. I’m still adjusting. It’s unreal. I was prepared for it to never happen.”

“Me too,” I muse.

“Long as our lives may be, you would have been enough.”

“I like that,” I growl, kissing her brow. “You are my everything.”

We hold one another’s gaze, new identities settling like our heaving chests. She smiles; she nods. She’ll be the perfect mother.

“What happens next?” I ask.

“Now, we become something more.”