



# Scaled Hearts

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** He's the stuff of legends and nightmares.

His fire will burn my enemies...  
...And then melt my heart

I've toiled away in the mines all my life to survive.  
But all my hard work has been a waste.

My sister is dying and there's nothing I can do to save her.

Until I hear about rumors of dragons.

An ancient race on Protheke so powerful that maybe they could help me if I were to seek them out.

What else do I have to lose?

But when I meet Angurus, I learn why all other races cower in fear in front of dragons.

He's brutal, yet magnificent. Arrogant and yet so beautiful.  
And he heats me up with one look.

He says he will help my sister, if I help in his own quest.  
I'll do anything, give him anything. Including myself.  
And afterwards, I'll only have one last request.

For him to shoot his fire deep inside me.  
So I can give him some little baby dragonlets.

**Total Pages (Source):** 62

# Page 1

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1

Kelly

“Brockhurst!”

I wince when my name is called.

The voice of Broswin, one of the orc guards, carries over the mine shaft. It reverberates loudly, making my ears ring even before I turn to face him. He stands with his morning star resting casually on his shoulder and leers at me.

I hate that thing. I much rather have the cat o’ nine tails whipping my back than have that hunk of metal scraping against my skin while he swings it full force. Broswin’s never been one to hold back when it comes to punishing us. Even if the crime is something as petty as tardiness.

His hand tightens on the hilt of it when I ask, “Yes, sir?”

“Where’s your sister? She’s late for her shift!”

I hold back another wince.

When I arrived for my shift early this morning, I’d made sure to keep a low profile when grabbing my stuff. Hoping that by doing so, I could avoid any unnecessary questions about my sister’s whereabouts.

Unfortunately with my luck, that wasn't a success.

"She's, um." I shift the pickaxe in my hand, my fingers ache from holding it for so long. "She's ill, sir."

"Is she dying?"

"...No."

"Is she bleeding? Throwing up her own insides?"

I want to sigh. I know exactly where this line of questioning is going. "No, sir."

"Then get her over here or I'll string you both up on the rack."

My body shivers at the mention of that archaic torture device. I've only ever seen one person hung off of it before and even now, ten years later, I still can't get the image of their body slowly tearing apart at the joints and those screams of agony out of my head.

"Yes, sir." I tell Broswin and set my axe down next to my spot in the tunnel to mark it.

I move through the throng of humans that are now turning towards me while I pass through. I'm sure everyone's curious about where my sister could be. It isn't like her to skip out on her shifts like this. In fact, Kara's never had a tardy day in her life, let alone a full on absence.

But today isn't her fault. I made her stay home when we woke up this morning and she still had that nasty fever. The rash on her arm had only grown overnight, worrying me to the point where I'd forced her to stay in bed and rest all day while I

went to our shift.

I told myself that as long as I could get through today without any hiccups, I would have enough money to purchase some salve for my sister's rash from Old Agatha. Herbology medicine has never been my strong suit, but at this point, anything will help.

I ignore the pointed stare from Broswin and head out of the tunnel and into the wider part of the mine shaft. From here, I can feel the breeze coming into the caves from outside. It makes the entire mine shaft smell dank and musty, causing my nose to itch and my eyes to water.

I take the elevator up to the surface, my stomach lurching every time the excavator operator jerks the ropes to pull us up. I hate heights, especially when the ground below me seems near non-existent. As long as I've been working in this mine, I still have no clue how far it reaches to the bottom.

I breathe out a sigh of relief when we finally reach the surface and the gate onto the elevator parts for me to get off. Solid ground has never felt so good beneath my feet.

Heading out into the fresh air, I put my arm over my eyes to shield them from the bright sun.

It's hot today, much hotter than it has been all week according to the calendar Kara and I have been keeping at home. While I hate being down in the mines because of the depressing darkness, I don't mind the chill that comes with it. Especially on days like today.

I make my way to our hut, which is only about a seven minute walk from the mines. It's one of the nicer things about getting a plot closer towards town. While we sacrificed the privacy that living out towards the outskirts provided, it gave us much

easier access once wintertime hit.

I pull the latch back on the front door and push it inward, cool air breezes past me as I step inside. It's much cooler in here than it is out there baking under the hot sun, giving me the much needed reprieve from it.

“Hey!” Kara says from over near the stove-set.

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I smile at her and latch the door back, the smells of freshly cooked eggs making my mouth water.

Our hut isn't very big, giving us just enough room to fit both of our small cots, a small stove-top that is attached to a sink basin, and a loveseat that Kara and I share on our day off while we read and relax.

On the floor near our cots is a small mat where Kara sometimes likes to lounge on the floor when her back is hurting her from working all day.

"You're just in time," she says to me, waving a wooden spoon in the air.

I walk over, spotting that the single pan that we have is filled with some kind of omelet concoction that she's made out of all of the ingredients we've been storing in our ice box that I know are expiring soon.

"Smells good. How are you feeling?"

"Great!" She cuts into the omelet and spoons it onto the plate resting on the lip of the sink basin. "My fever finally broke."

I grab it before it falls off.

"Really? That's good. How's your arm?"

"Oh, it's fine."

With her free hand, she shuts off the stove and pulls the pan off of the burner. I notice almost immediately that it's wrapped in some kind of bandage with only the tips of her fingers being visible.

I frown. "Kara..."

"I'm fine."

I set down my plate on the other side of the sink where the drying rack is. "Let me see."

She turns to me, her eyes slightly wide. It's the look she usually gives me when I've caught her in a white lie or when she's trying to surprise me about something expensive she's bought down at the markets for me.

I hold out my hand to her, flexing my fingers.

My sister lets out a soft sigh before setting the wooden spoon down in the pan. She quickly pulls at the bandage around her arm and hand, freeing it.

I can't help but gasp when she holds it up in the light for me to see.

Her hand is no longer recognizable. Instead, it's been replaced with some kind of monster hand.

Her fingers look longer now, with an extra joint and long black claws that extend out from where her nails once were. Spreading up her skin, all the way up to where her upper forearm is, are black scales that shine to an iridescent blue when she moves her arm.

It could be considered beautiful if not for it being on my own sister's skin and making

her look deformed.

“Oh, Kara...” I breathe out. I don’t know what else to say.

How are we going to fix this?

“I know,” she wraps her hand up again with the bandage. “It doesn’t hurt, though.”

I relax a little at that. It does make me feel better to know that she isn’t in any kind of pain, unlike last night and this morning. And she does have much more color to her since her fever broke.

The only problem now is trying to hide it. If any of the orcs found out she’s been infected, they’ll likely kill her.

“Broswin wants you down in the mines. He sent me back here to come get you.”

Kara shakes her head. “I’m not surprised. Let me pack our food so we can eat while we walk back.”

I nod to her and grab some of the paper palms we have hanging on the drying rack and hand them over to her so that she can wrap our food up.

Since we don’t know how Kara’s infection will react to anything, I’ve been trying to remain as cautious as possible. Getting any kind of medical attention for it is out of the question anyway, so we are on our own with figuring out how best to treat it with what little resources we have.



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It makes me want to kick myself for letting her go off into the mines by herself. If I had told her to stick with me, she would never have found that stupid gemstone.

Cursed stones are always thought of as urban legends, anyway.

They are rumors passed down from miner to miner that no one takes seriously. Especially when it's the elders who are always babbling on about finding one back in the day or knowing someone who has found one with no proof of it being real.

Unfortunately, Kara and I have become acutely aware of how truthful those rumors truly have been this entire time. One touch of that gemstone we've hidden away sent the rash up her arm.

We finish packing up and head out of our hut and down to the mines once more.

Nervousness churns in my stomach while we walk in the hot sun. I glance over a few times at Kara's bandaged arm, knowing that as soon as one of the orcs spots it, they'll be demanding to know what's under there.

Kara nudges me gently with her shoulder. "I'll be okay."

I try to give her a smile, wrapping my arm around her to pull her into a side hug.

"I love you, Kara. I hope you know that."

She smiles brightly. "I know you do, sis. I've never doubted that."

I let her go once we reach the entrance to the mines and leave her to go grab her a set of gear.

There isn't too much that the orcs allow us to have down there in terms of protection, but at least we have hard hats and gloves. As for eye shields and masks that help us breathe through the dust, that part is up to us to make and provide.

When I walk back over, I wait for her to secure our breakfast into the small pouch at her hip before taking the gear out of my hands. I make sure that her gloves are buckled tightly at the base of her elbow. At least with these on, her bandage isn't so obvious.

We get onto the elevator and take the rickety ride down.

My hands clutch the railings tight enough to make the joints in my hands ache the entire way down and I breathe out a sigh of relief as we finally reach the part of the mine our group had been assigned this morning to work on.

"Is it sad to say that I kind of missed it down here?" my sister jokes with me as we step off of the elevator.

I nod to the operator before turning back to her. "I love your sense of humor."

She laughs, catching the attention of Broswin immediately. "Brockhurst! Get back to work!"

Both of us jolt and quickly head over to our section of the mineshaft. "Jeez, you weren't kidding." my sister mumbles to me. "He is in a bad mood."

I grab my axe from where I'd propped it up before I left.

“I told you.”

Behind us, we hear Broswin begin to yell at another set of miners a few yards away from us. I look over to see where they are, noticing that it's the Solange siblings that are now incurring the orc's wrath.

“Hey, did you get the water rations yet?”

I turn back to look at my sister. “No, I forgot. Let me go grab them while Broswin's distracted.”

Setting my axe down once more, I quickly jog around the other miners and over to the small lantern and cooler that have been placed at the mouth of the mineshaft.

Normally, our water breaks are broken up into five minute intervals between pairs—something that is surprisingly considerate given that we aren't expected to provide the water ourselves. But I have a theory that the orcs only do this so that we aren't dropping dead of dehydration every day.

It at least forces them to providesomethingto keep us alive.

I unhook my canteen from my waist and open the cooler to dip it into the fresh water inside, careful to use the handle on it and not let my dirty fingers dip into it by accident and contaminate the water any further than it already is.

I fill my canteen up completely and latch it back onto my hip before flipping the lid of the cooler closed once more.

“Brockhurst! What did I say about getting back to work!”

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Shit.

“Sorry! I—”

I’m cut off by a low rumbling. Just as I turn to see where the noise is coming from, screams erupt and chaos takes over. I gasp and cover my head with my arms, dropping down to the ground when a pickaxe is hurled towards me.

“Arg!” I hear Broswin groan from behind me, followed by a loud thud from his body dropping to the ground.

“Kara!” I yell for her, my voice drowned out by the screams.

But just as suddenly as it started, it stops. The entire shaft goes completely silent. I lift my head slowly and push myself up from the ground. All around me are dead bodies, slain from whatever cosmic energy has just ripped through the mineshaft.

“No...” I mumble. “No, no, no. Kara!!”

I hear a sob in the distance, deeper into the mineshaft. “Kelly...!”

My heart lurches, I grab the lantern from on top of the cooler and race to where we last were standing

“Kara! I’m coming!”

What the hell just happened?

“Kelly!” my sister calls again.

I raise the lantern up high in my hand, spotting her a few feet away from me.

Her axe is clutched in her hand, the end of it coated in blood that is now dripping onto the ground beneath it.

She looks up at me with tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

2

Angurus

“Hello, little one.”

I remember this.

She’s smiling at me. Her eyes, the color of a strike of lightning, glitter from the glow of the fire that surrounds her. There’s a haze over everything though. It’s not a memory, but a dream of a memory.

“You are one of my chosen,” she reaches out, caressing my cheek. I feel warmth infuse my skin at her touch. With her silver hair and matching eyes, I expected her ashen skin to be ice cold, but it’s not. My head nuzzles into her hand. “I have chosen you.”

The Hearthkeeper gazes at me, features soft, ruby-red lips parted in a smile. My head spins at her words. I feel dizzy.

“Chosen?”

“Shhh,” she moves her hand up to smooth back a strand of my hair, tucking it behind my ear. “Worry not, little one. You shall help me usher in a new era.”

Her hand moves down again, the other coming up to cup my cheeks. Her eyes flutter closed and the fire that surrounds her shines more intensely, the color changing from yellow and red to a bright white. I can’t bear to look so I have to close my eyes as well.

“Feel it inside you, little one,” she says as the warmth inside of me erupts into a burst of flames. My entire body is aflame, I can feel the heat lick at my skin.

My eyes fly open in alarm but I’m not burning up. The flames merely tickle pleasantly as they envelop my body head to toe.

“What’s happening?” I ask, lifting my hands to look at the fire that surrounds me.

“You’re changing, little one. You are my chosen child. You will help defeat the monster race.”

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“Me?”

“Yes, you. I can sense the spirit inside of you, the potential. You and my other chosen children will defeat them, the monstrous ones.”

Monstrous ones. “Do you mean the vrakken?” I ask, tilting my head.

“Yes. Those who seek to destroy the dark elves of Protheke,” she nods. Her own body is engulfed in the same flames as mine.

But I am a dark elf. Is she going to destroy me? I don’t understand. “What will happen to me?”

“You’re already changing,” she says, voice soft. “You’re becoming one of my new race.” I look down at my skin. There’s a sheen over it, like glittering scales. I hold my arm up, examining it closer. There’s scales!

“What am I?” The word comes into my head, unbidden.

Dragon. You are dragonkind. You will rule the skies.

A burning pain overtakes me. It’s the pain of a thousand knives in my back and I scream as large, leathery wings erupt from my shoulder blades. My spine shifts, elongating. I feel my gums split and bleed as fangs grow.

My body aches as new joints and bones form. Gnashing my new fangs, I feel my nose and mouth twist and morph. My jaw lengthens into a snout.

Panicking, I scream again but fire bursts out of my throat, scorching the air.

My body continues to grow until my spine can no longer support my weight in the upright position and I fall forward on all fours. My fingers stretch and grow into claws, razor-like tips scraping the floor of my home.

“You are so beautiful,” the Hearthkeeper coos as I feel horns painfully burst out of my head, curling upward. “Your transformation is nearly complete.”

Nearly? How much longer can I endure this pain?

I grow larger and larger until my home breaks apart, unable to accommodate my new size. Wood scrapes my soft underbelly, nicking the skin there, drawing more blood.

I continue to morph, the agony of the change nearly unbearable. I almost pass out a few times. After what seems like hours, the transformation is finally, blissfully complete.

Dragon. This is what it means to be a dragon, I think to myself as I look down at the wreckage of what used to be my home. I tilt my new head back, letting out another scream of fire. I am dragonkind.

“Look at how magnificent you are!” The Hearthkeeper raises her arms over her head, palms facing upward. “Worship your mother, your goddess!”

My life is irrevocably changed with this transformation. I no longer recognize myself. My body is long and lithe, like a likar. I extend my claws out, digging into the earth, ripping up huge chunks of dirt and grass.

“No!” I scream, but it comes out as a roar instead, loud enough to send me reeling.



I lurch backwards, body unused to maneuvering in this form. I try to run but I stumble, my limbs crashing to the ground. I weep—for my old life, for what I have lost.

“My child,” the goddess steps up to me, petting my snout as I gaze at her, fat tears rolling down my nose. “You mustn’t look at this as a curse. It’s a gift from me to you. You are special to me. You are divine now. You have been blessed by one of the Thirteen.”

I sniffle, as much as I can in the form of this dragon, resigning myself to my fate.

I should be grateful. I want to help my goddess, I desire to please her, but it is an enormous request to spend my days as a dragon. I am still quite young in elven years.

“As a reward for your obedience to me, I gift you the ability to move between worlds. You will only have this form part of the time. When you want, you can concentrate and bring yourself back to your former state.”

I exhale and a great cloud of smoke rises from my nostrils, making me go cross-eyed as I watch it lazily drift to the skies. So I can shift back into my own body? I close my eyes, concentrating.

It takes a minute, but soon an icy chill steepes through me as everything begins to morph once more. It doesn’t hurt this time, though, and when I open my eyes, I am much smaller, inside my own body once again.

Except I’m not the same as before. I spot a shard of mirror hanging from the wall and rush over, examining myself. I have a sheen of scales and my body, now naked, looks more dragon than elven.

My ears are longer, more tapered than the typical elf. My white hair now has red

streaks near the temples, which sport the horns of the dragon. And my once piercing blue eyes are now crimson.

It's quite a lot to take in but the goddess comes up to me, enveloping me in a crushing hug. "You must do your duty to me now," she murmurs in my ear. "You must use this form to fight. The monstrous ones will not stop without your help."

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“Thank you,” I say, kneeling for her and giving her a kiss on the hand. “Thank you, my goddess.”

I am strange, different and new but I was blessed by the Hearthkeeper herself and it is my duty now to obey, to help my race.

The goddess’ face twists, her body shifts, and suddenly I’m in a different memory.

The war.

I remember this as well.

There is a legion of us, all blessed by the goddess. We breathe our fire out, burning vrakken as we go. I see the way our flames hurt them more than a dark elf’s spell, and I feel validated in my change as they crumple to the ground, their sun glamour ripped away to cause more damage until they are curled up on the ground and reduced to nearly nothing.

We are winning. Soon we will wipe out the threat!

Fire rains from the skies though. They’ve strategized. They have new ways to stop us.

The first dragon dies and we realize we’re not invulnerable. We’re not indestructible. We can be killed.

We retreat, regroup. We come up with new ways to fight back. We realize we need to be smart so we plan sneak attacks. We raid their encampments, sending whole troops

up in flames.

The vrakken find a way to take us out in the air, though. I watch my fellow dragons fall, killed midair.

It frightens us, so we decide to escape. We want to live.

We flee, flying fast, trying to get as far as possible. As far from home as we can.

We find some place to land, a tiny island that we name Fouuer Island that we claim as our own. We're safe here. Hidden from the enemy. Hidden from the rest of the world.

But I feel shame inside, rather than relief. I have let down the Hearthkeeper. I promised to fight, to use my power to help and instead I was a coward. I escaped. I fled from the war.

I failed her. I can no longer return.

And then, as we strategize and gain courage, we ready ourselves to dive into the fray again. Only to find out that even if we wanted to leave, we couldn't.

The island is sealed with strong magic, hiding us away here. Though fish and shipwrecked pieces wash up under it, even my elven form is too big to slip under the seal. Or maybe it's enchanted to keep only us in. I should be grateful but instead, I'm disappointed. I want my freedom back. I long for my old life.

After some time of testing my body, the magic, and the others around me, I decide to remain in my dragon form and sleep. Warring over the washed up treasures that slip beneath the magic seal don't entertain me anymore, and neither do my once welcomed companions.

I won't wake up until the curse of my existence has been lifted. I will slumber, quietly, until I am free once more.

Things blur and shift once again and I see the volcano before me.

The island was formed by this volcano and only has had a few small scale eruptions in the entire time we've lived here.

I tilt my head, watching the volcano in silence. Without warning, the earth shifts and rumbles under my paws. Lava spews into the sky and the volcano belches smoke and fire, the entire island covered in a thick layer of ash. The ground starts to break apart underneath me, my paws struggling to keep my body aloft.

Everything is a hot, hot heat. The island is on fire. It's so warm that the heat of the eruption burrows under my skin and I jolt.

I'm sent into a panic as I start to come to. My waking isn't part of a memory. It's real. What's happening? Why am I waking up after all these years? The island isn't erupting, despite the dream. The earth feels still under my paws. What has awakened me?

Something prickles at my skin. I don't know what's going on but I sense a shift, a change in the air. It calls out to me, trying to pull me from my dreams.

My thoughts are jumbled. I don't know what's happening. I'm not awake yet, stuck in that state between sleep and consciousness. I want to go back, to fade back into my dreams where it's safe, where nothing but freedom exists for me.

I resent my lost freedom and I don't want to be awake. Perhaps I can find my way back into sleep once more.

I stretch, yawning as I settle my head between my paws once more, rubbing my chin against the earth to get more comfortable. My tail curls tighter against my belly.

Just as the edges of the world start to fade and blur around me once more, I feel it again. It's like a sharp tug that beckons me towards the land of the living. It pushes and prods at me, urging me to wake up.

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It's been so long since I was awake that I don't know what to make of this incessant thrum beneath my skin, this strange sensation that urges me awake. Something in our world is changing.

Something is happening. The magic around the island is shifting. It tingles in my skin, makes my gums itch and my body feel restless.

I don't know what's going on but I do know that sleeping, despite the allure, is no longer the right path.

I haven't been awake in decades, content to slumber my existence away while hoping that one day I would wake up, free and happy once more.

But perhaps that is no longer the right choice. Perhaps it is time for me to rise once again.

It is time for me to wake up.

3

Kelly

I stared at my sister in shock. "What...what..." I can't even get the words out. I don't know what happened here but I know that I can't let Kara take the blame, or get in trouble with the orc guards. I swallow my questions and slip into protective-sister mode.

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do,” I say, plucking the pickaxe from her hands. Kara is tiny. No one will believe that she had anything to do with this. No one was going to even suspect her if I play my cards right.

“You’re going to run and clean yourself up at the well, then you’ll join the other workers in a different part of the mine,” I say, pushing her towards the entrance of this sector. “Be quiet, and pretend you’ve been there all day.”

“But what are you going to do?” Kara asks, eyes wide. “I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

My lips tighten into a thin line. “I’m going to take care of this,” I tell her. “Go, hurry!”

She gives me one last look as she leaves, her body trembling.

This is my fault. If I could have only lied better. I should have told the orc that questioned me that she was bleeding and throwing up. If only I had done a better job, Kara wouldn’t be in this mess.

As the older sister, it’s my job to watch out for her. Our parents worked themselves to death in these mines and I don’t want the same fate for my sister. I need to protect her. So I’m going to clean up this mess and find someone else to blame.

The orcs are stupid, oafish creatures. Their only interest is in mining the hidium and beating their workers down with their selfish cruelty. I can convince them that I stumbled upon the scene by accident, that I was able to talk to one of the villagers before they died and found out what happened.

They’d probably believe me, the dullards.



Squaring my shoulders, I walk over and press the pickaxe into the hands of one of the slain men. I close his stiffening fingers around the axe, ensuring some of the blood drips onto his hands. I step back, making sure that the position is right.

Next, I scan the area. I spot what I'm looking for and pick up a second axe, closing my eyes for a moment to take a deep breath. Wincing, I bring the axe down hard on the dead man's head, sinking it into his skull. It's a clumsy job and anyone looking closely would have questions but it's the best I can do.

I wipe the blood on my hands off on another villager and stand near the entrance, examining the scene. I feel nausea rising in my stomach.

I turn, racing to the front of the mines, finding an orc overseer in Sector 2.

"There's been an incident!" I yell, trying to look upset. "Half a dozen workers are dead in Sector 8!"

"Show us," the overseer grunts, motioning over one of the guards who comes lumbering up. "Lead the way."

I lead the two orcs deeper into the mine, into Sector 8 where the bodies are all laid out, blood everywhere. My stomach rolls at the sight.

"See?" I point it out. "One of the men was dying when I found him. I managed to get him to tell me what happened. It's all because of Flint Lightshot. I heard it from the dying man myself. Flint started this fight and killed them all before fleeing!"

Whether my lies are believable or not, the orcs are too direct and unsophisticated to question me. They believe me straight away and turn to talk to each other. "Lightshot is a tempermental one," the guard nods.

“He’s had those outbursts,” the Overseer agrees. The two men confer for a brief moment longer before the Overseer turns back to me.

“He’ll be punished for this,” the Overseer says to me. “Now get back to work.”

I don’t need to be told twice before I’m scurrying off to keep an eye on Kara in her sector. She’s chosen Sector 3, where she has a few friends from the village.

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“Did you hear the news?” I murmur to Ashley as I resume working. “Flint Lightshot killed half a dozen workers in Sector 8.”

Ashley is known amongst the villagers as quite the gossip-monger and my ploy works. The rumors spread like wildfire and no one even seems to question why Kara and I are suddenly in Sector 3 by the time the guards come to get Flint.

I’m not sorry he’s in trouble. He’s always been a source of tension in the mines and among the villagers. No one will miss him.

I find Kara, who is struggling with her arm, despite the gloves. “It’s getting worse,” she whispers hoarsely to me.

“Just keep your head down for now,” I say. “I’ll find a way to help you.”

Once we’re done for the day, I lead her back to our hut and help her lie down. I sit in the lone chair by our table, wondering what to do.

Is Kara’s disease causing violent outbursts now? I clench my fists, hands shaking. I need to do something before things get even worse.

I don’t know what to do though, I’m at a complete loss. She’s the only family I have left. I can’t lose her. Even if she turns into a monster, I will do whatever it takes to protect her, to keep her safe. I’m so lost in thought that I startle when Kara coughs violently.

I rush over to her side and she looks up at me, face pale. A trickle of blood dribbles

down the side of her mouth and I brush it away.

“Hang in there,” I say, voice weak. “I’ll find a way to help you.”

I need to see Old Agatha. She’s the wisest woman in the village. She might know what to do. She’s lived here a long time, much longer than most. If anyone would have seen something like this before, it would have been her.

She’s a short walk away, a few huts down. Leaving Kara for the moment, I knock on her door and wait patiently as I hear Old Agatha shuffling around. She comes to the door, cracking it open to eye me up.

“Kelly, I expected to see you here,” she states, opening the door to let me slip in behind her as she heads to the fireplace to make a pot of tea for us. “I heard what happened in the mines. I also heard that you’re the one who discovered the scene of the crime.”

She hangs the pot on the iron arm, swinging it over the fire to warm. “The orcs are in an uproar. They say Flint Lightshot is the man behind the incident. But I have a feeling that you know the truth,” she examines me, her eyes keen and focused despite the wrinkles around her face.

I inhale sharply. She’s considered the village Wise Woman for a reason. She’s got a keen sense and always seems to know far more than she should. Sometimes I think she’s got a second sight.

“Can you keep a secret?” I ask, wrapping my arms around my waist.

“No one would believe a doddering old woman anyway,” Agatha says, reaching into the cupboard for two mugs. “Your words are safe with me.”

I draw in a breath, steadying myself. “It wasn’t Flint’s fault,” I admit quietly.

“I had a feeling it wasn’t.” She brings the mugs over to her rickety table. “What really happened?”

“It’s Kara.” I’ve been hiding her sickness for days now, and it’s gotten harder to keep to myself. “We think she’s found a cursed stone.” If anyone were to believe that, it would be Old Agatha. “She’s fallen sick. She had a fever and a rash yesterday. Today, her entire hand is covered in scales.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Agatha agreed as she picked up a jar of loose leaves, spooning them into our mugs. “What really happened in the mines today?”

“I don’t exactly know,” I admit, smoothing a hand across the table. “Honestly. I wasn’t there. I came in afterwards. She was holding the pickaxe, and there was blood everywhere... I only knew I had to keep her safe from the orcs. So I lied.”

“You say her sickness is worsening?” Agatha taps her chin thoughtfully. “I need to think this over.” She gets up, slowly making her way to the pot in the fire so she can take it off and bring it over to us as it whistles.

Agatha is quiet for a good long moment, so long that I open my mouth, on the verge of speaking up before I shut it again. I need to give her space to think.

“I don’t know what to do,” she says finally, as she pours the water into our mugs. “I’ve never heard of a disease or curse that causes violent outbursts and limbs turning scaly.”

I sigh, wrapping my hands around my mug. If Agatha can’t help, we have no hope. I squeeze the mug, staring at the dark leaves as they float to the top.

“That’s not to say that there’s nothing at all to be done,” she adds. My head jerks up and my gaze lands on her. She’s not looking at me, her eyes looking somewhere in the distance. “There’s one thing that you can try—and it’s a long shot, but you could seek out the dragons.”

“Dragons?” I’ve never heard of this.

“They live long lives, centuries even. Some even push three or four hundred years. I’m sure the dragons have accumulated a vast store of knowledge in their time. If they are willing to share, that is.”

The message underlying is clear. There are plenty of old species on Protheka that would never help me.

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“What’s a dragon?”

Old Agatha shakes her head as her mouth quirks up in a rumped grin. “They’re large, fire-breathing lizards, great beasts with wings and claws. They flew the skies a long time ago, before the vrakken went underground. They were said to be the only enemy the vrakken feared.”

Now I know she’s telling stories. Everyone knows the vrakken are a myth. Agatha must be getting a bit dodgy in her old age.

Besides, the idea of giant, fire-breathing lizards is purely crazy. It’s almost impossible to wrap my mind around. Lizards are tiny creatures who hide under rocks and cling to the walls of the mines. They certainly don’t fly.

“No one on Protheka has seen them in a long time. They all fled to an island north of Kaynvu, called Fouuer Island.”

“I’ve never heard of that,” I frown.

“You wouldn’t have. It’s more commonly known as Bloodstorm Peak, for the volcano. Sailors use it as a landmark.”

“So you think the dragons there can help me?” I ask, unable to believe her story.

“I think that’s your best shot. Unfortunately, even though I have a magic touch, even I can’t help with a disease I know nothing about.”

Magic touch? Right. I almost can't contain the chuckle that wants to emerge. Instead, I take a sip of my tea now that it's cooled a bit. Dragons. Mysterious islands. A mythical race.

I take my leave after a while, intending to check on my sister. I bid Agatha goodnight and walk back to the hut, the stories swirling in my head.

Unfortunately, Kara seems weaker. I sit by her side, stroking her forehead as I come to a decision.

I would do anything for her. Even if it means leaving her behind to hunt down these mysterious dragons. I don't know if I can believe Agatha but I don't have much choice. If she can't help me, I need to go where this island is, to see if I can find these creatures who can help me find a way to save my sister.

Later that night, I gather Kara up in my arms and bring her to Agatha's hut. "Will you look after her?" I ask. Agatha doesn't look surprised to see me, her bed already made for Kara.

"Good luck," she says as I kiss Kara's forehead after laying her down. "Don't worry. I'll do what I can to help."

I clasp Agatha's shoulder, squeezing it before heading out. It's dark, so I use the cover of darkness to steal a hoqin. I've only brought a small satchel of supplies so I hope the journey isn't too far.

With one last look at the village, I set off for the distant shore.



The ride to the shore isn't as long as I expected, only a half hour from our village. I've never been here before though, always too busy working or looking after Kara to enjoy a day of pleasure at the beach. It's rocky, with cliffs running along the edge, the sand mixed with stones.

I pull the hoqin up to one of the cliffs, looking out at the waters below. The sky is too dark to see anything along the horizon, so I'll have to barter for information and a compass. I'll need a boat as well. And more food, just in case my meager supplies aren't enough.

As I stare at the waters, I realize just how rash and impulsive this decision was. For the sake of my sister however, I seem to be pulling one crazy stunt after another.

Whatever I have to do, I'll do it. Watching Kara grow weaker, more sickly, more pale and wane is eating at me. I conjure her face in my mind now, the sight of her sallow cheeks and lifeless eyes all the image I need to spur the hoqin along the cliffs, down towards the sands below.

There's not many people here at the shore. It's mostly dark elves. Merchants are loading ships while some traders are out, bargaining with the sailors. I know of other races, from the stories that Old Agatha had told us, but I'd never seen one up close before. They're all beautiful, in an eerie sort of way.

A group of merchants sees me as I approach on hoqinback.

"Ho!" I call out, pulling up in front of them. They're traders, from the looks of things. They wear fine clothing, though the garments have clearly seen better days, and they all sport plenty of jewels. The group looks at me with narrowed gazes and pursed lips.

"I need help!" I call out from atop the hoqin. "I'm seeking assistance."

“You’re not a runaway, are you?” one asks, tilting his head. His dark emerald eyes gleam at me in the bright moonlight.

“No, I’m not a slave,” I say, reaching into my satchel and pulling out my bag of coin.

It was all the money in the world that I’d managed to save. I didn’t even leave anything with Kara. I was so desperate that I brought it all.

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I pull out a few, letting them trickle back into the bag. The coins catch their eyes and their demeanor shifts. They smile at me, some getting back to work loading their ship, others busy unloading the boats.

“We’re from Ter,” the emerald-eyed one says, acting as spokesman for the group. “Humans are free at a stronghold near Ter, and it’s leaking into the city. We’re not used to enslaved humans up here. Some have tried to bargain with us, to help them run away. It’s more trouble than it’s worth getting involved.”

“Well, I’m not a runaway slave,” I straighten up in the saddle. “I’m a mine worker. I need a boat. I’m sailing for Bloodstorm Peak.”

The emerald-eyed one gives me incredulous looks, a chuckle escaping him. He shakes his head. “Why would you ever want to go there? There’s nothing there. It’s not even an island, just a volcano in the sea.”

“I need one big enough to carry me and the hoqin.” I ignore his question and pat the hoqin’s flank. If the rumors are true, then I’ll need this beast to make it up the rocky peak. I won’t be able to traverse it on my own.

“It’s a waste of time,” emerald-eyes says, eyeing my hoqin. “I’d rather trade you for that sturdy beast.”

“Just the boat please,” I insist, stiffening in my seat.

The elves continue their work, only emerald-eyes paying me any mind. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“I live around the Sundered Blade tribe,” I say vaguely, referring to the orc settlement. “I’m on a mission. I just need to get to Bloodstorm Peak.”

“Why do you even want to go to that volcano?” He eyes me up and down. I’ve heard rumors that elves in the southern cities appreciate humans much more than orcs do but I feel uncomfortable with his gaze. Maybe they appreciate us in a different way, with a different use of our bodies.

“I have my reasons,” I say, holding my satchel closer to me. I turn my attention to the merchants who are moving supplies from the boats. There’s definitely one here that they could lend me, but I have to get one to agree.

“What if I told you it was a matter of life or death?” I ask, jumping down from the hoqin to whisper conspiratorially to emerald-eyes.

“You don’t say,” he chuckles, looking unconvinced.

“I need information about a strange disease, and the ancient beasts there may be the only way I can find it. My sister is sick and I need to go there to try to find the cure.”

“I suppose that might be worth say...twenty jeton?” he offers, wrapping a length of rope around his shoulder as he winds it up.

“Twenty?” My stomach drops. I don’t have twenty jeton. I barely have sixty daler, which is only two-thirds of what he’s asking for, and I need some for the rest of the journey. “You couldn’t do it for thirty daler?”

“Thirty daler? Don’t insult me, little human,” he shakes his long, silver hair out of his eyes, going back to winding up the rope. “I’ll do it for forty-five if you’re desperate.”

“Thirty-five,” I say, bargaining.

“Good try. I don’t think so. You’re asking me for my boat. That’s my livelihood.”

“All I have is forty!” I lie. “Take it or leave it!”

“You must really be desperate. Thirty-five daler and the promise of your hoqin if you come back.”

“Deal,” I say, sticking out my hand. He looks at it quizzically. Do elves not shake hands?

Instead, he grasps my arm with his hand, nodding to me. “Deal,” he agrees. “If you make it back in one piece.” He smirks.

“Fine,” I stroke my hoqin’s mane, wondering if I made a mistake with this bargain. I hand him my bag of coins, closing my eyes as he clamps his hand on it. I send up a silent prayer that I’ll make it through this journey without needing more.

“Now, the oars are enchanted,” he says, tilting his head towards the boat. “It’ll make it easy for a puny thing like you to row it, along with that hoqin. Just be careful that you bring my boat back in one piece too.”

I turn away from him, pulling the hoqin towards the boat as I begin to load up some supplies that the elf leaves for me. He’s left me a large bladder of water, plenty of rope and a whole crate of food. Enough to make it to the island and back, if the journey is quick enough.

As I’m loading the supplies, someone taps me from behind. I whirl around, expecting to see emerald-eyes but it’s another human, like me.

“Can I help you?” I ask, body tense.

“My name is Amanda,” she says quickly. “I’m also from Ter. I’ve joined these merchant sailors to sail the seas, so I know a thing or two. I overheard what you’re planning and I just wanted to warn you. You need to know there’s more to the stories of Bloodstorm Peak.”

“Oh?” I raise an eyebrow.

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“Yes,” Amanda leans in close. “You need to be careful, if you’re going to go. I’ve heard of sailors who have gone missing as they pass the island. Nothing good can come from going there.”

“I appreciate your help,” I say, throwing my bag into the boat. “But I’m still going. I have to. It’s not for me, it’s for my sister. I’ll be okay. I’ve worked in the mines since I was a child, I’m strong and I’m capable. I can handle myself.”

“Good luck then,” she squeezes my arm and nods. It’s nice to have someone wishing me luck and I nod back as I push off of the shore, the hoqin tied up so he doesn’t try to escape.

It’s a clear night, nearly cloudless and the moon shines bright in the sky. The waters are relatively calm as I row. It’s not hard but neither is it completely effortless. I have a long way to go before I arrive.

As I row, my compass in my lap, I stare up at the twinkling stars, contemplating my mission.

What in the world will it be like to meet a dragon? Are they giant, evil lizard beings? Or are they more like the orcs, simple-minded and dumb? I can’t wrap my brain around what they look like. All I can picture is the lizards that cling to the walls of the mine, except with wings.

The thought amuses me. I imagine one of the tiny lizards flying around in the faces of the orcs and I let out a chuckle. The hoqin looks at me, tilting his head and letting out a whoosh of air from his nostrils, as though he is questioning my sanity.

I pray the dragons have wisdom, like Agatha says. I pray they know what my sister's disease is, and how to cure it. They're my last and only hope. If I can't help her, I don't know what I'll do.

She's all I have left in the world. After our parents died, I had to grow up fast to be strong for Kara. Without her, I don't know what my purpose is. I feel as adrift as this boat as I think about losing her.

I only stay at the encampment for her. If not for Kara I might have run away long ago. I wouldn't have minded being like Amanda and joining an elven merchant ship to explore the world, or making my way down south, to Ter, where I've heard there's a safe place for humans.

Kara was always too sickly to leave the orc camp, though. She was always prone to the odd cold or infection and struggled with sickness of the lungs from time to time. She even had a bad reaction to an insect bite once. Old Agatha had to cook something up that took the swelling down.

I'm glad I left Kara in her hands. Agatha has been something like a grandmother figure to all the children of our village, growing up. It isn't uncommon for children to lose their parents in mining accidents or to Miner's Lung.

I was resourceful enough to get us by when our parents died but I knew Kara, on her own, wouldn't have made it. That's why I have to help her. She needs me. She will always need me and I need to stay at the mining camp for her.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I don't even notice when the boat hits the shores of the island, scraping along the sharp, jagged rocks. It startles me out of my thoughts, making me jump. I sit up, guiding the boat to a nearby outcropping, where I can tie it to a large rock.



I guide the hoqin out of the boat, loading up my satchel with what supplies I can carry, looping the bladder around my shoulder as well.

Climbing on the hoqin once more, I scan the island. It's much bigger than the stories made it seem. Perhaps no one got close enough to map it out? I take in a deep breath, struggling with the weight of the humidity in the air.

It's warm here, very hot. Hot enough for beads of perspiration to dot my brow as we travel along the rocky shoreline. There's also ash everywhere, sending up little clouds of dust under our feet as we move.

I glance up, looking at the volcano. There's no signs yet of any life. I need to travel further inland to find the Dragons, I'm sure. That is, if they even exist. I'm starting to doubt the stories. Have I traveled all this way for nothing?

Squaring my shoulders, I decide that until I've explored every inch of the island, I won't call off my mission just yet.

5

Angurus

I feel something prickling at my skin, rippling over me as I blink myself awake. Consciousness comes quickly as I look around my environment, wondering for a moment where I am.

It's been so long since I was awake that I've nearly forgotten. I'm inside of my cave, the place I claimed as my own long before the other dragons claimed their own spots on the island.

There weren't many of us at first. After so many died in the battles with the Vrakken,

the few of us left fled. So many were taken that it was a long while before our population grew at all.

There were hardly any female dragons. The Hearthkeeper seemed to want only the strongest fighters, so it made sense that she only selected the strongest of our race, including the few strongest women. This meant that mating wasn't really a thing that happened, at least among our people.

I disagreed with their stance on mating. If the Hearthkeeper desired the strongest fighters, the strongest dragons should have been mates. It didn't matter what I thought, however. So the second, and even the third generation were birthed by unmated sires and dams and everyone grew up in a communal environment.

Hence why I stayed high up in the mountains. I didn't get along with my fellow dragons the way the others did. The populace considered me grumpy and bitter, but I preferred to think of myself as independent-minded. I didn't need others to function. I was happy being on my own, waiting for my freedom from this island.

We quickly learned that dragon-elves lives are shortened by the amount of magic needed to sustain our forms. We only live a few centuries before dying out. As a younger elf when I was turned, I was now one of the elder dragons on the island, despite knowing I would be a young adult still if I had been left in my original form.

It's why I am so much more attuned to our land. I can feel the way it thrums with magic. I can feel when the magic shifts and changes. Like right now—I'm certain the thrum of energy I felt is real, not just the lingering remnants of my dreams.

I cock my head, letting the magic wash over me once more, feeling for the subtle changes. There it is; it's like a note out of tune or a soldier out of step. It's hitting me harder now.

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What's going on? My curiosity is piqued at this. I wonder if it's something to do with my fellow brethren. Or maybe it's a shipwreck!

That thought has me lifting my head and lumbering to my feet. Maybe I'll go down to the shore to check it out. I haven't been down there in so long. I could frighten some wayward sailors or steal their supplies for my own.

Not that I needed them. I couldn't go anywhere and I was sustained on the fish that got caught under the magical seal. Still, it might be fun to antagonize them for washing ashore.

On the other hand, it might be another competition. The thought of being involved in a dragon competition bored me to tears. Our kind think of everything as a competition, including the right to breed with the female dragons. They love to compete in everything, from who can bellow the loudest, to who can blow the biggest plume of fire...or even who has the biggest balls.

Exhausting, if you ask me. I like my solitude. Not to mention that their combined magic can stir up a firestorm that would wipe out all the surface vegetation once they got carried away. It takes absolutely decades for the vegetation to grow back when that happens, and it's annoying because it also prevents many of the fish from successfully breeding as well, meaning I'm forced to hibernate longer.

I hope they're not out there causing a ruckus. I find most of my fellow dragons irritating nowadays. I'm getting cantankerous in my old age. Not that I'm old, but by dragon standards I'm getting a bit up there. I'd probably be in my mid six-hundreds in elven years by now, if we had the same lifespan.

Most of the other dragons are practically children to me. They're young and full of life. They don't know, or remember the war that we fought, that we fled from. All they know is dragonkind. Their existence is this island and their lives revolve around being dragons.

I suppose if I was born a dragon on this island, I wouldn't care about anything but my own amusements either. I still remember the days before the change, before this place, though. The memories are dim, hazy in my brain but they still exist.

I recall the days of living as an important elf in a family that was prominent in the wars. We had only been a few generations in as I grew up, so early in our making from the Thirteen, but we still had servants and luxuries that I long for now.

It was a different time. I wonder now if the same nobility rule there. It's been a few centuries since we left.

My eldest servants would be long dead by now. Some of the younger ones would have probably moved on to work for the King, or one of the nearby Dukes. I miss my manservant. He was a good sort, very loyal.

When the Hearthkeeper appeared to me, I was alone that day. I had sent my servants off to enjoy a nearby festival, content to spend time at home, simply reading for the day. I'm glad they weren't there when the Hearthkeeper appeared. They would have been crushed when I destroyed the manor.

I wonder if they ever tried to figure out what happened to me? Perhaps they thought a beast ravaged the house and took me away with it. I don't know but I can't help thinking of my old life and mourning what I lost.

Even though the blessings of being a dragon are great, the downsides are also great. In the end, I would rather leave this island and have my freedom once more.

There's something to be said for the elven life I left behind.

When we first came here, the island seemed like a paradise. Lush vegetation as far as the eye could see. Rivers of water that flowed down the rocky volcano, pouring off into beautiful waterfalls and pooling at the base of the volcano into luxurious swimming holes.

We enjoyed the fruits of the land, the warm climate, the tropical atmosphere...but it soon turned into a luxurious prison – at least for me. I could no longer look at the waterfalls and see their majesty. I couldn't admire the lush vegetation, the rich, abundant greenery and beautiful flowers, all that managed to grow here. It felt like a vast stretch of endless sameness, everywhere I looked.

Once upon a time, I was young and carefree. I thought that living a long, long life in paradise was the dream. Only now I see the reality. All I want is to slumber, to be left alone in my cave. If not for the other dragons causing the occasional mayhem with the weather, or younglings sneaking up to play tricks on Angurus the Grumpy, I might have forgotten I wasn't alone here.

Alone was what I wanted. I was too old and tired for company anymore. Even if I'd thought about wanting company, with the way the female dragons drove off any notion of mating unless the potential suitor defeated all others in combat, it didn't seem worth it, trying to fight for their hand.

So for now, I stayed in my cave, content with my existence, content to slumber away my days.

But I had stirred because something changed in the atmosphere. Now, as I settle back down, I wonder if I imagined it. Was it part of my dreams after all? I cock my head to the side, listening intently. Nothing is there. It hardly seems worth it to investigate, either. I'm too old and ornery to bother getting up.

Sitting back down, I yawn and stretch my wings, fluttering them for a moment to shake off the dust. My sleep was disturbed for no good reason. I hope it wasn't a youngling trying to impress his friends by messing with me. I'll really give him what for if it was. They'll have to learn to leave me well enough alone.

I scratch my belly with one extended claw. My scales need a good shedding soon. I have to claw them off and shed the old ones once every fifteen years or so and I've let it go far too long since I was asleep. I scrape a few off my belly now, licking over the new, tender flesh underneath. I need to scrape them all off, clean myself up and then sleep for a while to let my flesh heal and harden once more.

I learned the hard way what happens if I let it go too long. I was once stuck inside my skin for two years, in immense pain, because I was too stubborn to ask for help. I finally caved and asked one of my only friends, Ryzzur, to help me shed.

I can still hear his incessant laughter. "Stubborn as always, then?" He'd said as I bellowed his name from the top of the mountain. "What would have you done if I'd gone as coarse as you? If I was determined to stay in my cave."

"I guess I'd live out my days doing what I have been: sleeping."

Ryzzur had paused as he reached for me. "Well, it sounds like you don't really need my help then."

"Dammit, Ryzzur!" I grit my teeth, annoyed at how it itched. "Just get me out of here and stop being an ass."

"Ah," he said as he scraped a layer free, and I sighed at the cool air rushing in. "It seems the years of solitude didn't ruin your bedside manners after all."

And he teased me as he set me free, insisting that I owed him. I was forced to the

base of the mountain that night to see the new dragons I had been avoiding.

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It wasn't an experience I was keen on repeating. Besides, he had probably passed on by now, I'm sure. He was older than I was when we arrived on the Island.

I shuffle forward a little, dragging myself into my favorite spot in the cave to rest. I get comfortable, circling around three times like a cat before I curl into a circle, tucking my tail close by. I think I'll just go back to sleep for now. No point in being awake, right?

I close my eyes and rest my head on my paws once more when I hear the noise again. It definitely doesn't sound like a dragon youngling though.

Oh. Maybe it's an explorer! It's been quite a long while since I encountered one of those. Rare as it is, sometimes the shipwrecked elves decide to climb the mountains when they survive. A grin spreads across my face and I decide to give whoever is coming a good spook. I have so little fun anymore. This is my only enjoyment.

I'm not really afraid of anything anymore. Being a dragon has killed my fear of much else. The only thing I truly fear is the vrakken and they can't get here. The Hearthkeeper has protected us from their threat.

I know that I'm not afraid of anything but I'm certain whoever is on their way into my cave is going to very much be afraid of me. I heard the last explorer who ventured here babbling about how dragons were supposed to be a myth before I ate him. They don't believe in us anymore. How odd.

Still. This should be fun. I'll wait until they're here, until the moment is right, then I'll spring my trap. They won't even know what hit them, before they're face to face



with the beast of legends.

It's really such a shame that I have to kill them, but they can't be allowed to leave the island. They can't be allowed to speak of our existence.

It's best that we remain a mystery, a legend to them. To protect ourselves, to protect our race. If the vrakken know we're out there still, we could be targets once more.

Sometimes I allow the explorers to remain a part of my horde for a while. I treat them like pets, feed and tend to them a bit to keep them as entertainment for myself. I make them tell me stories and the ones with the best stories get to stick around a while.

Longest I've kept a pet for was about three months before I got bored and did away with him. I don't want to get attached to them. They're all utterly useless at the end of the day anyway.

I settle back down to wait for my prey to enter my lair.

6

Kelly

I head inland, marveling at the size of the island. It's much larger than the stories make it seem—most of the tales talk about the volcano as if it is merely a landmark, but in reality, the volcano only takes up about a third of the island.

There's so much green vegetation here, despite the heat. Or maybe because of it. There's huge flowers the size of my head in all sorts of colors. I see red and orange ones, yellow, purple, even some that look like birds, with beaks! I spot trees that reach up towards the sky before curving to the side, some with fronds so large you could practically use them to thatch a roof.

I'm on a mission though, so I can't stop to admire the scenery. I have to find the dragons here, get them to cure my sister. That's all that matters.

The vegetation grows thicker the deeper I travel. With my trusty hunting knife, I hack away at the limbs and vines that block our path, carefully leading us in the direction of the base of the peak. It's so hot and humid here that my knife feels slippery in my hands and I have to stop several times to wipe my palms on my thighs.

A loud cawing startles me and my head shoots up, looking to see a colorful bird bursting out of the trees, soaring into the air. This is the first bird I've seen since arriving on the island. It's also strangely more quiet than I would have expected for a land teeming with such rich vegetation.

It makes me wonder.

I shake my head and push the hoqin forward, winding my way around the island to get closer to the base. I can't even see the shore anymore from where I'm at. I hope I can find my way back once I'm done.

The path gets harder to traverse and I have to dismount to clear a path every few hundred feet. It makes the journey incredibly slow going. I'm determined not to give up. I promised myself I would explore every inch of the island to find the dragons.

Just as I'm about to start losing hope that I'm actually gaining any significant ground, I realize that I've hit the base, nearly nose-to-nose with a rocky outcropping. There's a narrow, ashy path that seems suspiciously well-trod. It's too narrow to ride the hoqin, so I have to dismount for good.

The hoqin, who I've come to think of as my heroic steed Solionus, whinnies, jerking back a bit. I tug on the reins but he's stubborn about moving forward. I bite my lip before pressing onward.

Solionus whinnies again as we climb and I shush him, trying to concentrate. The ash covers loose rocks and I nearly slip twice just getting onto the path.

Though the path is decently well trodden, it's still difficult to navigate. Solionus and I have to pick our way over fallen logs and destroyed trees.

As I turn the corner I find myself facing a steep incline to get to the next part of the path. Bracing myself against Solionus, we work our way up the hill. My foot slips out from under me and it's all I can do to hang on as I start to fall over the side. The only thing that saves me is hanging on tightly to his reins.

I muster up the strength to climb back up over the edge, getting to my feet as I brush debris off of me. Solionus whinnies softly, as though he's relieved to see me.

The next thing I know, I'm several hundred feet up, facing a rudimentary rope bridge that is the only thing connecting the path over a large chasm.

I swallow, holding my breath as I step onto the bridge with one foot, testing it. I need to make sure it will hold both our weight as we cross. It's rickety and worn down by the elements, several planks are missing in random spots and the rope holding it on the other side looks a bit frayed.

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The test plank holds my weight, so I tilt my head upward, taking in a deep breath. The sky is so clear here. I'd be in awe if I had time.

Carefully, slowly, I pick my way across the bridge. It's a curious sight, a bridge on an island with flying lizards. I wonder who constructed this bridge, and why it's here at all.

The crossing is nearly over and I feel as though I can breathe again when suddenly the plank I step on snaps in half under me and my foot goes straight through! As I pull it up, the entire bridge sways and the rope at the end starts to fray even more.

"No!" I yell, watching the rope with wide eyes. I hadn't come all this way just to die! I had to make it across! With nearly inhuman speed, I rush the both of us to the end, praying no more of the bridge breaks.

It only takes seconds to cross but it feels like hours and I fall down, happy to be on solid ground once more. I have to take a few deep, heaving breaths before I find the strength to stand once more but I resume my journey, more determined than ever.

The higher I get, the colder the air feels. I shiver, wishing for a cloak. I reach a ledge where I spot the opening of a massive, yawning cavern. Despite the chill, warm air blasts from the cave, defying all logic.

Should I go inside, I wonder? Something tells me that the answers I'm seeking are inside that cave.

I pull on Solionus' reins but he whinnies, rising up on his hind legs, yanking

backwards. “Calm down. I’m sure it’s fine,” I say, trying to console him. He whinnies again, trying to break free from my grip.

“Okay, okay,” I say, petting his neck. “You stay out here then, scaredy-hoqin.” There’s a tree a dozen steps away and I walk him over, tying him to it so he won’t get lost or fall off the mountain.

Opening my bag, I look inside for a flint. I pick up a thick branch and tie a strip of cloth around it before striking the flint against a rock and light the torch, turning back to the cavern.

As I head inside, I realize I have no idea what I’m doing. Something has drawn me inside though, and I intend to find out what. Taking a step forward, my foot crunches something under me and I leap away, my entire body going cold.

My torch illuminates the ground and I gasp. It looks like the armor of the orcs at home, but it’s all melted and twisted up. I reach out, touching it and a piece breaks off. I drop it like it scalds me and step backwards, bumping into something else that drops to the ground.

It doesn’t look like Orc armor. I don’t recognize it at all. Is it Dark Elf? It’s hard to tell, as the metal is warped and bent, like it was crushed under heavy weight. Are these the men who created the bridge? Is this why the path seemed so well worn?

I shudder, realizing I’m in more danger than I expected. There are no stories of dragons in my land. No mythical legends of beasts roaming the skies who snatch up unsuspecting animals or people. If the dragons are real—and I’m starting to suspect they are—the only people who might have spread the tales are now dead.

The thought sends a chill down my spine. I take a cautious step forward and spot the glint of a sword. Reaching down, I pick it up from the ashes only to realize it’s

broken in half, the blade now jagged at the end. I toss it down and it clatters, hitting something.

It's another sword, this one a broadsword, nearly half my height. It's bent in half, like someone smashed the ends together. Who could have done such a thing? Was it the dragon?

I'm starting to feel nauseated and I step backwards, accidentally disturbing a pile of ash. A large object rolls out of the pile, down to my feet.

I clap my hand over my mouth, stifling my scream. Oh god! It's a skull!

My feet take me back to the entrance before I realize it and I'm about to head for Solionus and flee for home when I stop myself, swallowing hard. No matter how scared I am, Kara is probably more terrified.

After yesterday – was it yesterday? It seems like a lifetime ago – she had to be out of her mind in fright at what she had done. I can't let her go crazy and die. I just can't. I take a deep breath, steadying myself. Turning around slowly, I venture back to the cave, taking my time as I walk deeper.

I swallow hard at the skull, avoiding it as best I can. I try not to think too hard about the additional piles of ash that I step around as I explore deeper into the cavern.

Another dozen yards in, I stumble upon a massive chamber. The ceilings are much higher here, at least twenty feet high. My torch only lights up about fifteen feet or so ahead of me and the entire chamber is nearly pitch black.

As I venture inside, my steps start to echo. No, not echo...clink? Something is under my feet. Biting my lip, praying I'm not stepping on more dead orc bones, I reach down to examine the floor. I brush a bit of dirt away, picking up something shiny.

Holding it aloft, I examine it with the torch light. It's a red coin with three black triangles overlapping. A riel! I stifle a gasp, wondering if that was the noise I was hearing. Casting my torch downward once again I realize that the entire floor is shiny.

I bend down and run my fingers along the floor. It's not a floor at all! It's more coins of different colors! I recognize the elven coins we use on Kaynvu, the dalers, jetons, ducats, riels, and ipias, but there are others I don't know. Naga maybe?

I stare in amazement. The entire floor is nothing but coins! There's coins as far as the eye can see, heaps and mounds from what my torch illuminates. There's more worth here than I've ever seen in my entire life! There are piles that reach halfway up the wall, mounds the size of an orc, stacks that tower precariously high...

If I was to fill my satchel with the coins, I'd be richer than any of the orcs. I'd be richer than half the dark elf population of Ter! I venture backwards a little, taking in the sheer size of the stash.

Leaning on a stalagmite mound, I bite my lip as I contemplate the thought. I'm not here for money. I'm here to find a cure for my sister. This won't matter if I can't save her. I turn, coming face to face with an eye the size of a basketball.

I jump back, hand over my heart. The creature the eye is attached to lumbers to its feet, the torches on the wall illuminating as it rises.

I realize all at once what Agatha meant by a lizard with claws and wings. There's a dragon in front of me, and it doesn't look happy.

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With all the strength I could muster, I begin to run. The dragon sets chase and I only manage to make it halfway through the chamber before an avalanche of coins starts sliding down from a stack, burying me to my waist. I'm trapped!

The massive head of the creature comes down towards me and I close my eyes. There's nothing I can do to stop the creature from eating me!

7

Angurus

I stare at the tiny female creature in my cave. I saw how she eyed my treasure. She's nothing more than a thief. I should dispatch her on the spot!

Leaning my head down, I pause, studying her. This female is not like any creature I've seen before. Even if she is a thief, she's intriguing. My first instinct is to eat her but if I do, I won't learn anything more about her.

Perhaps she'll satisfy my curiosity like the dark elf explorer I kept with me for all those weeks. She might even be able to last longer than him. I look her over. She's a curious looking creature, much smaller than any of the other races.

She's also got skin the color of the moon and round, small ears. Everything about her is so much smaller than any other creature I've ever seen. She's like a misshapen elf.

Whatever she is, her eyes are tightly closed, as though she's still waiting on me to eat her. I chuckle, snorting a plume of smoke from my nostrils.



“Open your eyes, little one,” I rumble, nudging her. She stands stark still, frozen. I huff. What is this creature to disobey a dragon of my stature?

“I said open your eyes!” I roar. Her eyes fly open, gazing up at me, mouth hanging open and deep brown eyes wide as she takes me in from head to tail.

“You’re real,” she breathes. “You’re a real dragon!”

I snort again, more smoke curling upward. “Obviously. What are you?” I demand. “You’re like a misshapen orc. Or maybe an elf with a skin pigmentation disorder? Though you’re pale enough to be a... No.” I shake my head, not even daring to say the word *vrakken* aloud.

The female puffs up her chest, narrowing her eyes. “I’m not an orc, or an elf. I’m a human.”

“I’ve never heard of your kind.” I flick my tail. Though, as she says it, I do recall some creatures like her before during the war. We’d thought they were rejected *vrakken* soldiers, but maybe not. Maybe they were different from those creatures.

“Well, as far as I know, humans have always been on Protheke,” the female says, standing up straight. “Every race keeps us as slaves. Have you not left this place in many years?”

A part of me wonders if humans are tasty as I look her over. Maybe that’s what the *vrakken* used them for. Her skin is supple, fleshy but smooth. She sports generous curves, with large, thick thighs and a round ass. A tasty treat if I decide to eat her.

“You’ve brought an awfully small satchel for a thief,” I change the subject, nodding my head at her bag, which hardly looks big enough to cart off more than a handful of my coins.

“I’m not a thief,” she juts her chin in the air. “My name is Kelly Brockhurst. I’m from the northern part of Kaynvu, near the orc settlements. I’ve come to seek help from the great Dragons of Legend.”

I can’t help the laughter that bubbles up inside of me, coming out in a great gust of fire that I send towards the ceiling of the cavern. The tiny human jumps away as I shake my head, laughter echoing off the walls of the cave.

“Help? What is help? It means nothing to dragon kind. We’re all out for ourselves here,” I explain. Especially me. I help no one and no one helps me. To be a dragon is to have all hands turned against you, even other dragons.

They see everything as competition. Competition for land, for resources, for food. “Dragon’s don’t help others. You won’t find a single dragon who would be willing to give you aid. All they would be willing to bring you is one thing. Death.”

“I don’t care what happens to me,” she says, balling her hands into fists. “If I die, it doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is that I help my sister.” She takes in a deep breath, letting her fingers relax down by her side once more.

“I’m willing to do whatever it takes. I won’t let her die. I can do anything you want! I’ll even offer myself up. If you help cure my sister, you can eat me. I swear my word!” She thumps a fist over her chest.

“That’s a bold offer from such a weak looking thing,” I reply, flicking my tail again. She is a strange one. She’s tiny but there’s a fierceness to her.

“I request your aid,” she pleads, looking down.

“What is it you seek, little one?” I ask, digging my claws into the dirt floor of my cave. “What is it you’re here for?” Her sister must be in trouble if she came all this

way for help.

“My sister is sick,” the human informs me, voice softer now. “There’s some kind of disease that’s overtaking her, something from a cursed gemstone. I’ve never seen anything like it. Even our village Wise Woman doesn’t know how to help. She spoke of you, told me that the dragons are ancient creatures and might have seen this disease before.”

“If she’s sick, she’s no use,” I continue scratching at the dirt. “We abandon our sick. A sick person is only going to spread the disease to others.” It’s pointless to save someone who is dying here.

“No!” She balls her hands into fists once more. “I would never abandon my sister! She’s all I have. I love her!”

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“Love. That is foolish, little one,” I scoff. “Love is weakness.”

“No it isn’t. You just don’t understand love.” She glares at me and I throw my head back, laughing at her once more. Humans say such silly things.

“I understand love,” I sit up on my haunches. “I love treasure. I love my favorite snack, fresh hoqinflesh. And do you know what I love most?” I carefully make my way forward, pinning her with my gaze as she steps back unconsciously.

“No,” she says, wrapping her arms close to her body. She’s trembling.

“What I love most is tormenting, then slaying, the foolish thieves who encroach on my cave,” I say, giving her a wide, toothy grin.

She gulps audibly, then squares her shoulders. “Well I love my sister more than I could ever love money. Or food. Or even life itself!” she shouts. “Real love means putting others first, above yourself. You wouldn’t understand that. You’ve never put anyone above yourself!”

“You know nothing about me!” I yell, sending out a blast of flames. She jumps away. “You have no idea what I’ve sacrificed in my life!”

She manages to skirt behind a table, away from my flames. “I don’t need to know. You’re selfish. You said it yourself.”

She’s not wrong. Why then do her words prickle at my skin? Why am I bothering to entertain this tiny, useless creature? I huff, staring at her. “And? Is selfishness not

beneficial, in the end? Is it not better to ensure the survival of the community by casting out the sick and weak?"

"That's absurd," Kelly protests. "Only by saving those weaker than us can we truly thrive and survive. Otherwise it's a race to the finish line with no one left!"

"Perhaps it's for the best, if the community can't keep up!" I shoot back. "Only the strongest should remain."

"So you would just let the community die out? I don't understand your logic." Kelly crosses her arms, giving me a look.

"What do I care for community?" I ask, voice gruff. "I am a solitary creature. I have no need for community. If I were to get sick and die, it would neither benefit, nor hurt the other dragons. Doubtful they would even notice I was gone."

Kelly shook her head, letting out an odd little noise. "What?" I demand.

"It's just sad," she said. "You have no sense of community, of family. You don't know what it's like to care for someone, or to have them care for you. I find it all very sad."

"You can't place your human values on dragonkind," I say. "It might be sad for you but it's a way of life for us."

"Still. It must be very lonely," she sighs. I can't stand the way she looks at me. It's like she sees me as a lost pet. I'm not some poor creature to be pitied, I'm a powerful dragon. She has no idea what I'm capable of.

She hums in the silence and I study her further. Her attitude is abhorrent but she's not entirely wrong. I have missed having interesting company lately. The last explorer

who came here was many decades ago.

The girl is interesting enough to keep as a pet but also irritating. She's confusing and I hate dealing with things that confuse me. Normally I just kill them.

"So..." she looks up at me. "Will you consider our deal?"

Oh right. Her deal. The one where she offered to let me eat her in exchange for curing her sister. While interesting, it places far more weight on my side than hers. She will make a tasty snack but hardly worth going through the trouble of tracking down and finding a cure for some stranger.

"I have to think it over," I rumble, settling down once more. Kelly sits at the wooden table, drumming her fingers on top while I think.

"Could you not do that? It's distracting," I grumble.

"I just don't understand what the hold up is," she says. "I'm offering you myself, on a silver platter. All you have to do is save one measly human."

"Yes, and it might end up being more effort than it's worth," I point out. "You're plenty of trouble already."

She quiets down, crossing her arms and looking away. I huff and roll my eyes.

"I don't make decisions like this lightly," I say. "So just sit there like a good girl and let me think in peace."

This is why I was awoken in the first place, I can feel it. I was pushed by the Hearthkeeper herself into waking up because this tiny little human was disturbing the natural order of things on the island.

She is quite intriguing. Her fierce spirit is very dragon-like but her desire to help her sister is uniquely and totally human. Not that I know any other humans, but it certainly isn't very orc-like, nor was it dark elf behavior.

What to do with her? I could simply eat her. That would end all my problems in one go. I wouldn't have to hear any more annoying arguments about the benefits of compassion, for one. And for another, I wouldn't be beholden to her, wouldn't have to carry out her silly 'deal.'

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Then again, there is something about her that stopped me from simply dispatching her the way I had the orc and elven explorers all those times. I don't know why, but I couldn't bring myself to end her so quickly.

This is foolish. I need to make a decision. The human will grow impatient and needy soon, and would demand answers I don't have.

If only the other dragons could see me now. Hah! Angurus the Awful, Angurus the Selfish, sitting here, considering helping another creature in need. I didn't even help the mice or bats who got stuck in my cave. I simply ate them and spat out their bones.

I looked her over once again, noting the way she had her hands clasped together tightly in her lap. Suddenly, I knew what to do with her. I don't know why I hadn't thought of this before. I had just the way to deal with this little problem.

Opening my mouth, I take in a deep breath and blow a raging gout of flames straight at her.

8

Kelly

The dragon's flames shoot at me full force but it's too late to stop them. I squeeze my eyes shut tightly. This is the end. I regret not saying a proper goodbye to Kara but she was asleep when I left.

At least I'm about to die knowing that I did everything in my power to save her. I



throw my hands up to cover my face, not wanting to see the fire as it burns me but nothing seems to be happening. The licking flames warm my skin but I'm not burning.

What? My body isn't on fire? I reach up, patting myself all over and realize it hasn't even curled my hair! My jaw drops and my eyes widen. The dragon just shot me with a full blast of flames and I'm unharmed? Am I magic? The thought is absurd, but so is every other explanation I can think up.

It suddenly dawns on me that the room is far colder than it should be and I look down to see what remains of my clothes in a pile of ash at my feet.

I am stark naked.

The dragon's head moves closer to me, nostrils flaring, and eyes narrowed as he looks me over. The gleam in his eyes has me shifting about. I'm completely exposed before him. Is he going to make me into a tasty snack?

His eyes roam over my body, taking in everything. He lingers on my hips and thighs, on my full breasts, nudging me to turn around so he can inspect my backside as well.

"Yes, yes," he murmurs, seemingly to himself. "Your form pleases me. You will serve quite nicely." His lips curve into a smile, too full of teeth for my liking.

I shrink back. "Serve as what? Dinner?" I demand.

He huffs, a plume of white smoke curling upwards from his nostrils, drifting towards the ceiling. He's amused by me?

"No," he shakes his head. "You said I must be lonely. So you'll serve as my mate."

His eyes twinkle and I stare at him, unblinking. “Your what?”

“My mate,” he says again, though this time his words are more pronounced. “You’ll be a good mate for me. You’re strong, intelligent, capable...and your form is quite enjoyable to me.”

I don’t feel like I comprehend what I’m hearing. I thought this dragon was just an animal—albeit an exotic, intelligent one. Now I realize he was ogling me and I shift, covering myself up with my hands. He huffs again, amused at my attempt to cover up.

“What do you mean, your mate?” My cheeks are red as I glance over his enormous body. “You’d kill me if you tried to mate me.”

His dragon parts are surely as big as my entire body! I would be split in half during a coupling!

Red eyes narrow at me. “Do you love your sister or not?” his voice rises, echoing off the cave walls. “Swear to me that you will be my mate, and I will do all I can to save her. You have my word!”

“I need to think it over,” I cross my arms. “I’m not just going to give myself over to you on a whim!”

“Take your time, little one, but just know that every moment you dither is another moment your sister grows sicker.”

His offer is tempting. I would be lying to myself if I didn’t see how powerful and intelligent he is. He would make a formidable mate.

Still, this is absurd! I cannot become the mate of a dragon! I would be rent in two the

second he entered me!

What does being his mate even mean? Would he force me to stay with him in this dark, dank cave until the end of my days? Would I simply serve him or would I have to service him? I think about asking him the terms but then a thought occurs to me.

“I don’t even know your name!” I scowl and he laughs at my expression. It’s loud and echoes off the walls.

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“I am Angurus the Terrible!” he roars.

I think he’s trying to intimidate me but I just shake my head. “Is that really your name?”

“It’s what they call me,” he insists. I look him over once again, really examining him. Could I do this?

His form, while enormous and scaly, isn’t...awful. He’s got crimson eyes that match his dark red scales and a yellow underbelly. Horns jut out from each side of his head, black and curling. The tips of each wing have a single sharp claw. The wings themselves look leathery and thin, covered in the very finest of hairs, like a bat.

I don’t find him attractive but neither is he as scary as I first thought. I couldn’t imagine making love to him but I could imagine the pleasant conversations we might have. He’s engaging and we’d have spirited debates.

On the other hand, he’s stubborn, aloof and demanding. It would be difficult to be tethered to this beast for the rest of my days. Would I have my freedom?

Not to mention, I had suffered for years under the yoke of the Orcs. Am I merely trading in one monstrous overlord for another?

I don’t know how to make this decision. “What would being your mate entail?” I ask, curious.

“What do you think it will entail?” he demands in a rumbling voice that reaches deep

down inside of me, all the way to my toes. “You’ll be my mate, my companion. You’ll be by my side. In exchange, I’ll protect you and your family, take care of you and give you a life full of riches and comfort.”

I find myself wavering. Be by his side and in exchange, my sister and I will want for nothing? How could I turn him down?

“Will I have to--”

“Yes,” he answered, somehow knowing what I was going to ask before I asked it. I gulped. The idea of becoming his lover was intimidating. I didn’t think I could do it, honestly. I wasn’t a virgin but neither had I ever experienced anything like this.

It made me question the entire decision, frankly. I could suffer being his companion, put myself through the unpleasantness of his company, but doing that, becoming intimate with such a beast? I didn’t have the stomach to handle that idea.

My best bet would be to agree, then put off anything to do with intimacy as long as possible. Fake stomachaches, headaches, pretend to be injured...anything to avoid it.

“Well?” Angurus tilts his head, staring at me. I bite my lip. Am I really considering this? Becoming his mate? His...property? Giving up the possibility of freedom? Trading my life with the orcs for a life with him?

“Yes, I’ll be your mate,” I say, sighing. He smirks, letting out a gout of fire that fills the room.

“Good choice,” he nods. “Wait here.”

I stand, still trying to cover up a bit. It’s cold in here without my clothes. Where is he going?

He doesn't go far, rummaging through his piles of coins. "Where is it?" he mutters to himself. He knocks precious gems aside, moving to another pile. Whatever he's looking for is somewhere deep in his stash.

"Ah, here it is!" He pulls a large chest out of one of the piles of coins, brushing some off the top. "Someone tried to make off with it a few decades back but I burned him to a crisp. Never steal from Angurus the Terrible," he growls.

He drags the chest over to where I'm standing, shoving it in front of me, opening it up. I gasp at the sight. It's full of precious gems—hidium, zanthenite, even the rare nimbius flower gem. I've never seen so many valuable gems in my life.

There's more too, when he shifts the gems aside I see the finest jewels, things that had to have belonged to royal elves. I spot a necklace with a large, clear oster in the center, surrounded by gold petals, like a flower. There's a glimmering crown made of gold with blue zanthenite crystals adorning each spike, glittery gold and silver bracelets, sparkling nimbius earrings, and more. I have the urge to try on the pieces and to play with them as my sister and I did in childhood, with our mother's wooden necklaces.

"What is this?" I ask, staring at the chest of jewels.

"I want to give you something, to signify your status as my mate," he says, digging into the chest. "I know it's in here," he mumbles. "Aha!" He pulls out a ring, holding it out to me.

"A ring?"

"Do you not like it? You can choose another," he says simply.

I'm struck at the sight. The ring is gorgeous! It's black gold, almost the color of coal.

The band is gorgeous with intricate designs on each side that look like scales. The center gem is a purple hidium stone but what makes it unique is that there are small green zanthenites inlaid around the mount that look like they're glowing.

"It's lovely," I admit, taking it from him and slipping it on. I'm surprised he picked it.  
"Thank you."

"It's so others know you belong to me," he said, voice gruff. "So they don't get ideas when they see you."

"I'm not sure anyone has really ever had ideas about me," I say, shaking my head.  
"But as long as this means you'll save my sister, I'll wear it if it makes you happy."

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“I don’t care about happiness, I only care about the status this brings me,” Angurus says, snorting. “I will do what it takes to care for you but in return, you’ll bring me prestige. Dragons don’t have mates, so I’ll be the envy of every dragon on the island.”

I blink. “Really? No one takes mates?”

“No. Female dragons are a rarity and therefore they refuse offers to mate. They prefer to reproduce sans mate.”

“Ah.” That seems sad, too. I’m starting to understand why Angurus is the way he is. The way of life for the dragons seems rather isolated. “Isn’t that lonely then?”

“Hardly!” He laughs. “They like competing for the right to breed with the females.”

“Do they?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Everything is a competition with dragons,” he grumbles. “I am certain they enjoy scrabbling and fighting with each other.”

“I don’t know...” I tap my chin. “I would feel so lonely if all my life was spent competing for a shred of affection.”

“It is just the way it is,” he shifts around, claws digging into the dirt. “I don’t think any of us think any differently.”

“Still,” I look down at the ring. “I think maybe you don’t truly want to be alone,



that's why you want me as your mate."

"You know nothing, little human," he sneers. "I am merely interested in power and prestige."

I doubt that but don't want to provoke him into actually turning me to ash so I stay quiet, rubbing my hands over the goosebumps on my skin.

"So, as your mate, what else do I need to know?" I ask, tilting my chin up to look at him.

He leans his head down to level his gaze with mine. "You'll find out in due time," he smiles, that same toothy grin that sends a shiver up my spine.

9

Angurus

The little human wraps her arms around her naked body, her skin covered in a layer of bumps that remind me of my scales. She shivers and I sigh. She's probably cold.

"You need to take me to your sister," I say, sitting up again. "I have to see the disease for myself if I'm going to identify it and cure her."

"Well, we have to get through the camp without the orcs seeing us," she says, rubbing the flesh of her arms.

"Not a problem," I tilt my chin upwards, my tone light.

"Aren't you worried about the orcs attacking us?" Her brows knit together.

I laugh at her question. “I fear nothing on two legs! But if it worries you, little one, they will never see me coming.”

She stares at me, taking in my form. “How are they possibly not going to see you coming?” she asks, looking incredulous at my large body.

I chuckle again, closing my eyes as I concentrate on shifting back into my disused elven form. I haven’t walked around on two legs in a century so it feels a bit rusty to shift. I’m naked, as shifting is pointless to do with clothing. It always gets torn when I bother wearing anything.

The little human girl gapes at me. “Is this form more pleasing?” I ask, a smirk forming across my lips.

“Ah...” Her voice cracks, then her mouth opens and closes a few times as she looks me over. “It’s...you’re not a dragon?”

“Yes, I am. I’m a dragon-shifter. I have the ability to return to my elven form when I want,” I explain.

Her mouth closes and she nods slowly. She bites her lip, sending a zing down my spine. I enjoy her form and I haven’t been intimate in a very, very long time.

Even if I don’t care about her, I still own her. She’s my property which means I can do anything I want with her, including coupling.

“Do you wish to change the terms of the agreement?” I raise a single eyebrow.

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“N-no,” she stumbles over her words, shaking her head and waving her hands in front of her. “No, it’s fine, I can...I can still handle it.” She can’t tear her gaze from me and I find myself pleased by this.

I shouldn’t care what she thinks of me. She’s going to be my mate whether she wants it or not. Still. Something about her makes me feel for her. I want her to like me. It irks at me that I feel this way so I dismiss my thoughts and instead, I bring my hands together, murmuring an incantation.

Instantly, the ashes around us form themselves back into bones, stitching themselves back together into skeletal forms, then taking on a ghostly appearance.

“O’ servants, arise!” I command them and they follow my orders, beginning to shuffle about to start tidying up my cave. Might as well make my mate comfortable.

A few also start cleaning the table, wiping it down and setting it up for dinner with flatware and plates. The plates are made of bronze, with etched designs, inlaid with red rubals. The flatware is silver, crafted with ornate swirls on the ends. It came from a band of travelers who hoped to loot my cave for more riches.

I glance back to see Kelly backing up into a corner as the servants work. “Are you frightened?” I tilt my head.

“Are they going to harm us?”

“No. Those who were foolish enough to attempt to steal from my horde have been burned for their crimes. They are now forced to serve me for all eternity, at my

command.”

Kelly lets out a little shudder and wraps her arms around herself. “I see.”

The servants work methodically as I watch, amused at their efficiency. Thieves make the best servants. Especially dead ones.

I clap my hands and one of them goes over to a large crate, digging through and producing a few garments. Kelly is busy watching one who is tidying the coins into stacks and when the ghostly servant approaches, she lets out a scream of fright. My heart leaps into my chest at her scream.

Don’t be foolish. She’s just jumpy. Your servants won’t hurt her, I remind myself. The ghostly apparition holds out an elegant, sage green dress to her. She looks it over, glancing at me.

“It’s for you,” I offer. “You look cold.”

She stares at me for several beats and then takes the dress, slipping it on over her body. I briefly mourn the loss of her naked figure but she looks just as good in the dress as she does without clothing.

The dress has long, belled sleeves and a low neckline. It covers her breasts but shows just enough to titillate me. The stiff material of the top cups each mound and wraps around her waist in a corset style. It flows out from around her waist, down to her feet. The material is covered in tiny, intricately embroidered flowers in white, yellow and soft pink. It’s a bit of an older style, from a few decades back but she still looks stunning in it.

I don’t know if I want to keep it on her or rip it off and take her right here and now. I can’t tear my eyes away

. Instead of lingering, I turn away, watching my servants bring me a pair of tight-fitting trousers and a flowing robe, both in black. I leave the robe open to expose the fine hairs of my chest.

I'm then draped in several black and gold chains and a crown of black gold—with green zanthenite that matches my mate's ring—is placed on my head.

I am the master of my domain and this makes me look even more imposing. I hold myself up, showing Kelly my final look.

“What do you think?” I ask, turning in a circle.

I can see the way her pupils dilate as she looks at me, I notice the flush on her cheeks and the rise and fall of her breasts, the deep breath she takes.

“You look fine,” she says, turning away from me to study a painting that one of the servants was in the process of hanging.

“You will address me properly,” I say, voice low. “I am your mate!” I clench my fists, my ire rising. She needs to learn her place; she needs to pay me the respect I deserve.

I saved her from her pathetic life, offered her a way to help her sister and a lifetime of wealth and comfort. The least she could do is show her gratitude!

“Of course, Master,” she says, drawling the word out and curtsying with an exaggerated flounce in her skirts. I roll my eyes.

“Just Angurus,” I inform her. She doesn't need to act high and mighty with me but I don't like her sarcasm either.

“Of course, Angurus,” she amends. Her teeth may be clenched, her posture stiff but I find that I like the way she says my name. It almost sounds like a purr, coming from her. I fight the urge to bend her over the table right here and now and take her from behind.

“Careful,” I warn her. “You might not like what I do if you keep up with your attitude.” I don’t need her to know that I desire her more with each snappy comeback. I want to put her in her place, remind her of who she belongs to.

She shuts up, crossing her arms. Her frown displeases me so I turn my attention to the table. It’s empty, which simply won’t do. I press my palms together, summoning my magic.

The table fills dish by dish with soups, meats, breads, sweets and puddings. I also conjure a bottle of wine, along with two goblets full at each of our place settings. Kelly eyes the table, eyes wide.

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“Do you like the offerings?” I ask, sweeping a hand out.

There’s a tureen of soup, one of likar stew, a plate of bread topped with jam and thin slices of dried tara meat, another plate of whole roasted gallus, sliced thistle slathered in a jellied sauce, rice wrapped in grape leaves, boiled sweetmeats, and various bready desserts and pies.

I could see the way she eyed the spread. She must have never seen so much food before. If I was correct, I suspect she worked for the orcs in their mines. The orcs were a stupid, cretinous race who cared for little else but mining the mineral out of the earth and waging war.

If she was under their thumb, it makes sense she was given little to eat. She looks strong and confident but I suspect it’s been a long time since she had a good meal.

I don’t know why I care about that. What does it matter if she’s got enough to eat? Caring about another is beneath me. I don’t even care for my own kind. What effect does this tiny wisp of a girl have to make me suddenly start to care? I don’t understand.

I felt, at most, fond affection for my servants before I was turned. I was never romantically entwined with another, either.

Living for centuries as a dragon has only made me more self-centered. The Hearthkeeper would be disappointed in me if she could see me, I’m sure.

Was I selfish? Yes, but life itself is about being selfish. I don’t need to care about

Kelly for her to be my mate. I scold myself for such pathetic thoughts and shake myself out of my reverie.

“Come,” I indicate the table. “Join me, won’t you?”

Kelly hesitates. I can see it in her eyes. She is most likely worrying that I poisoned the food, or that it isn’t what it seems.

“The food is delicious, I assure you. Taste it for yourself.” She lingers for a moment and I sigh, growing impatient.

“Get over here. Now,” I order. She gives me a look, chin held high and takes her time coming over to the table. Once she reaches the empty chair though, I stop her. “No.” I push my chair back a little, spreading my thighs. “You will sit on my lap.”

She gives me an incredulous look, freezing in place. I watch her eyes dart back and forth between the empty chair and mine, as though trying to decide what to do.

I watch her, curious. Will she obey like the good girl I know she can be, or will her indomitable will overtake her, will she defy me?

Either way, I will have my way in the end.

10

Kelly

“Come,” Angurus pats his knee. I gape at him, mouth open before gritting my teeth and curling my fingers into fists. If he thinks I’ll degrade myself by sitting in his lap, he’s utterly insane. There’s no way. I don’t have much but I have my dignity.



It doesn't matter that his dark elf form has me nearly weak in the knees. I didn't know all that was hidden away. If I had known, I might have agreed to the terms much quicker.

Nevertheless, I'm uncomfortable with the thought of lowering my dignity by sitting in his lap. He can take that idea and shove it. I had quite enough of obeying this man's orders at the moment.

As I linger, his crimson eyes narrow at me and I tremble. Perhaps I'm being hasty. There's no need to anger the dragon. Besides, I still had my sister to think of.

Life had never given a single damn about what I was comfortable with anyway, so why should it start now? I would do anything for Kara, so I swallow, tentatively approaching.

I must have spent too long dithering because Angurus grabs me by the waist and yanks me towards him, throwing me into his lap where I land with a quiet 'oof.'

I have to shuffle a little to get comfortable and as I move, something hard pokes me in the lower back. Did he have a dagger in his pocket? I shift again and realize that isn't a dagger at all. His body is responding to mine.

I should be offended but instead, much to my dismay, I feel aroused. I loathe to admit my attraction to his elven form, but it's there, bubbling under the surface.

It's pointless to deny that objectively, he is quite attractive. I think any female who looks at him would instantly swoon.

His long hair is icy white, except for the streaks of crimson near the temple that match the color of his dragon scales. His body is large and muscular and having his torso on display is quite distracting as I attempt to calm my racing heart.

“Eat!” Even his deep voice sends sparks up and down my spine. It’s just as deep and rumbling as it was in his dragon form. “You need to eat,” he adds, a touch more gentle.

I am suddenly aware of my own hunger in response to the delicious scents wafting from the table. Everything looks delicious and I turn my attention to the food.

The orcs never fed us well. They’re greedy and selfish, giving themselves the choicest selection of meat and grain and leaving us with the scraps.

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We've had to adapt. We have our own little garden in the village. Old Agatha and a few others tend to it while the rest of us work the mines. We grow what little we can, out of sight of the orcs, and use that to supplement our meals.

It's the only thing that has gotten us through some of the toughest times. The orcs like to periodically take the entire selection of livestock and grain as tribute to their 'generosity,' so sometimes we have nothing except the food in the garden to feed ourselves.

I always made sure Kara had enough, even if it meant sacrificing my share. I did the best I could with what we had. But now, presented with as much food as I can eat, I don't know how to hold back.

Reaching for the soup tureen, I dish out a bowl of stew for myself, along with some roasted gallus, some of the sliced thistle, some of the bread and jam, anything with a large amount of protein since I didn't know when I would eat next.

"Relax," he murmurs, playing with my long hair. "You'll always have enough to eat around me." I gulp, red blossoming over my cheeks. Did I seem too greedy? "You're free to eat whatever you like," he adds, running a hand up my thigh.

Without realizing, I shift so my legs are spread apart. He doesn't move his hands immediately to the space between, though, instead, simply running his hands along the outside, distracting me.

He stops his ministrations, nudging me back to eating. I don't know if it's the hunger or some strange, innate desire to please him but I obey, picking up a spoon to drink

my soup. It's delicious, hearty and thick, brimming with meats and vegetables I'd never even seen before. I gulp it down quickly.

He encourages me to slow down and savor each bite. "Taste your food," he murmurs, winding a strand of hair around a finger. "Enjoy the delicacies."

I take a bite of the thistle, smothered with some kind of sweet sauce, and what tasted like somana. The flavor explodes on my tongue and I moan. Angurus' hands tighten their grip on my thighs and I let out another moan as I take a second bite.

His fingers tug my skirts up over my hips so he has access to my bare skin. They go immediately back to my thighs, skating over the flesh and leaving goosebumps in their wake. I shiver but continue eating. If this is my reward for obedience, perhaps I need to rethink my stance on this whole matter.

I continue eating, stuffing myself full of the rest of the thistle on my plate, a leg of gallus, a pile of potatoes, half the bread and jam from the tray, another bowl of stew and half a bowl of soup, plus some fancy looking cheeses, some of the leaves that contain a tasty rice-and-meat mixture, and half of the sweetbread.

I am already nearly groaning in fullness but Angurus insists I try the delicate looking pastries and desserts. Each bite is more delicious than the last. Truly I will never suffer for want of food if I am to stay with this elf.

I can't possibly eat another bite but Angurus insists that I drink some of the wine. It's cool and refreshing going down my throat, sweet and flavorful.

My limbs relax as he continues to tease and stroke my thighs. It is easily the best meal I'd ever had in my life—the most delicious food and plenty of attention from a handsome man. What more could a girl ask?

My core is definitely feeling a pleasant buzz by the time I am done eating. I notice as I wipe my mouth delicately with a linen napkin that Angurus hasn't partaken. His plate is still empty, his wine glass the only thing he's touched.

Anxiety rises in my stomach, despite the wine. "Are you really going to be able to cure my sister?" What if he has just been fattening me up to eat me? Am I naive in placing my trust in him?

He pulls my hair back from my neck, leaning in close enough for me to feel the ghost of his breath on my skin, the hairs standing up. "Every problem has a solution. Every disease, a cure," he says, kissing me.

I shiver, holding onto the table. "Oh?"

"Yes. If there's something that needs fixing, I can do it. I am a powerful magic wielder, as you can see," he offers. It's curious that his actions belie the words he spoke earlier. He professes not to care about anything but himself.

Despite that, he's been so gentle with me, so tender. He's given me enough to eat, wine to drink, draped me in fine clothing...

"What if you can't find a cure?" I ask instead, trying to hold onto the little of my sanity I have left, the shred of my dignity.

"If no cure is obvious, I will search for one," he says, nibbling the spot below my ear that drives me to grind lightly against him. "I will go to the ends of the earth for my mate."

I can't help the way sparks light up inside me at his words. No one has ever given me this kind of attention before. No one has ever offered to help shoulder my burden, or help lighten my load.

“You would do that for me? Even though we have just met?”

“Yes. I take my promises seriously,” he runs a finger over my leg, dipping into the juncture between my thigh and my mound. “As my mate, you now have access to all the magic at my disposal. Just say the word and I will give you whatever you wish. I would conquer nations for you,” he adds.

My head is spinning. His words are like honey, like a balm and I lap them up. He would really do anything for me? I don’t understand why.

“Aren’t you hungry?” I ask, changing the subject and turning my attention to his empty plate. “You haven’t touched any of the food.”

“Yes, I am hungry,” he says, moving his fingers a little closer to my wet folds. “I hunger, very much.”

“You should eat then,” I say, urging his plate towards him.

“I hunger,” he says, shifting his fingers so his pinky dips into my center. “But not for food.” With those words, he spins me around in his lap, claiming my mouth with a passionate, wet kiss.

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It leaves my toes curling and a fire in my belly as his mouth presses to mine. I drag him closer by the collar of his robes, desire zinging through me at full speed.

“Yes,” I moan, his tongue invading my mouth. He takes what he wants without asking, tangling his tongue around mine, sucking my bottom lip between his and biting down gently. The heat of his skin envelops me, warming me from the inside out.

His hands move to cup my cheeks, angling my mouth so his tongue can access deeper inside of me, so he can fully invade me. It feels like he’s claiming me as his with this kiss.

With a gasp I break away, staring into his dark, hooded eyes. I swear I can almost see flames in the reflection there. I’m breathing hard and I need a minute to think about this.

I shouldn’t be doing this. My only job is to help my sister. I need to focus on that. We should be leaving right now to go back to her. She needs me to stay the course, not to get caught up in the attentions of an attractive dark elf shifter.

I study his expression. He’s smirking but there’s an openness to him that I haven’t seen before. He’s not trying to deceive me, he’s merely hungry for what he thinks belongs to him.

Dragons are strange. I marvel as I reach out to touch his skin. It’s scaled, like in his dragon form, but much smoother, almost like human flesh.

I feel his arousal pressing against me now that we're face to face. It's thick and heavy between his legs and it seems to pulsate with every beat of his heart. He wants me just as badly as I want him.

Why should I keep fighting this growing attraction between us? Why should I protest the desires of my body?

I never let myself have a minute of enjoyment anymore. All my days are spent tending to my sister or working the mines. I don't do anything that doesn't benefit the both of us in some way. Not since...

Don't go there, I scold myself. Give into this. Let yourself get something out of this arrangement. He's offered to give you the world. Let yourself have just this one thing at least. Even if it is only a few minutes of pleasure.

With a groan, I dive back in, kissing him and opening my mouth to his once more. His hands go around my back, dragging me close to him as we give into our desires.

11

Kelly

Although I'm not inexperienced, the rapacious way that Angurus kisses me has me feeling like an absolute virgin. His hands are all over my body, cupping my cheeks, stroking my back, ghosting over my thighs and it's driving me slowly mad.

"Yes," I murmur, my own hands roaming over the hard planes of his chest, feeling his heartbeat racing inside. The power I hold over him is addicting. I want more! I want to reduce him to a begging mess. I bite down on his lip, eliciting a sharp cry and he's lifting me up in his arms, holding me to him.



I cling for dear life, looking down with wide eyes. The ground feels so far away at this height. He reaches out a hand and sweeps away the dishes and the food with one arm.

Much to my surprise, the plates and dishes don't make a mess, nor do they clatter to the ground and break apart. Instead, they simply vanish as they fall, disappearing before they even hit the ground.

I'm too busy being kissed within an inch of my life to marvel at the magic that must have taken, though.

He lays me out on the now empty table, hiking my dress up around my waist as he dives down to open me up, fingers parting my sopping wet folds. He stares at me, eyes wide, a gasp escaping him.

"What?" I ask, squirming. Is there something wrong with me?

"You look delectable," he breathes, rubbing a thumb gently over my clit, which elicits an embarrassing squeak from me. Angurus smiles, doing it again and I squeak once more, face red.

"Seems I've discovered my most precious treasure yet," he rumbles, a kind of purr emanating from his chest. My body melts as he kneels, face inches from my entrance. "I shall now show you how a dragon polishes his treasure."

It's all the warning I get before his tongue is on me, wet and hot as he paints broad strokes from top to bottom, licking up the slick that drips from me with relish. "You taste divine," he pants, face shiny as he looks up at me.

He goes back down, pinpointing the spot that gives me the greatest pleasure, focusing all his attention on it. His lips wrap around it, suckling and pressing the flat of his

tongue as he continues to nibble with his teeth.

“Ah!” I can’t get enough of his mouth. I’ve never had anyone do this before and I feel as though I need to clamp my hands down on the table to hold back from grabbing fistfuls of his hair.

As though sensing my thoughts, Angurus reaches up and grabs my hands, placing them on either side of his head, continuing to work his mouth on my clit with precision.

“You should hold on when you’re being taken for a ride,” he growls. I obey immediately, digging my hands into his long locks.

They’re so soft and silky that I can’t stop from rubbing the strands between my fingers. How does a dragon, locked away in a cave, have such soft hair? With every swipe of his tongue, my hands tighten into the strands more and more and he moans.

He must enjoy the prick of pain and so I tug, pulling on the silken strands and he moans again, which vibrates on my clit, sending waves of pleasure up my spine. Oh gods, yes!

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His tongue slips down to press into my opening, lapping up my slick straight from the source. “By the goddess, you are the best meal I’ve ever had,” he says, breath hot on my thigh. “I’m never eating an inferior meal ever again.”

Wriggling his tongue, he presses deeper, curling it in such a way that has me seeing stars. “Oh, gods!” I cry out again, gripping his hair and shoving him against me. “Don’t stop! Don’t stop!”

“As you wish,” he says, pulling back to readjust my position. He hikes my legs over each of his shoulders, yanking me so my bottom is right at the edge of the table and goes back down to drive his tongue inside of me once more.

I cry out, reaching the edge much quicker than I expected. “I’m so close!” I squeeze my thighs around his head and he lets out a grunt of approval, attacking me with more ferocity. His fingers come up, thumb rubbing over my clit insistently as his pointer and index join his tongue in pleasuring my center.

With shallow thrusts, I rut against his face, desperate to reach my peak. My head is spinning. All I can think about is him, my desire for him, my desperation for him. The texture of the scales on his face have me whining high-pitched in my throat.

I need this, I need him. I can’t get enough! I want this to last for hours, having his tongue inside of me. I squeal again, this time no redness in my cheeks as I feel myself releasing all over him.

“Yes!” I cry out, voice growing hoarse. I’m practically liquid now but he pulls me upright, moving me to a mound of furs that the ghostly servants have laid out for us.

He drops me onto the furs, scooting so his head is between my thighs once more. I can't believe he's got this much stamina! He's licking and sucking when he stops, as though lost in thought.

Without warning, he moves me so I'm on my belly and he's licking my backside, delving up the cleft of my ass with his tongue until it worms its way into me, a constellation of stars exploding behind my eyelids.

"Yes!" I scream again, clutching the furs with my hands. "Gods!" His tongue slides in and out of me, incessantly rubbing over the nerves of the opening until I'm nearly blacking out with pleasure. "Please, don't stop!"

He gently presses a finger into my wet entrance, coating it in my own slick before moving it down to press it into my backside, slipping it in just a few inches.

I didn't think it could feel better but the combination of his tongue and finger are driving me to new heights of pleasure now, making me squirm against the furs. I don't think I can hold out any longer and I let out a low whine as I feel my arousal building to a crescendo.

"I'm close!" I tell him, driving him to repeat his motions over and over, pressing deeper inside of me, stroking over my skin, groping each cheek in his large hands and I'm crying out, slick dripping from me as I peak.

He laps it up until I'm oversensitive and wriggling away. Without a doubt, this man is insatiable.

Turning me over, he moves so he's hovering over me again, greedily kissing me all over like I'm his last meal. He nips at my lips, my cheeks, my neck and my shoulders, lavishing me with affection.

“You’re divine, a goddess,” he purrs, laying beside me as we catch our breaths. “I can’t get enough of your body. You have a body that mortal men would start wars over.”

His words are flattering but I don’t know that many men who desired me enough to start a war for me.

“I want you to sit on my face,” he says, sitting up. “I want to pleasure you while you suffocate me with your magnificent thighs.” I blush at his words. So bold of him.

He moves so he’s laying on the furs, urging me to sit up. “Sit on me, glorious woman,” he orders, pulling and prodding me so I’m forced to hover over his face.

With a slap to my rump, he pushes me down and I let out a startled yelp, settling down atop him. It feels good at first, really good. Even better than when he was using his tongue and fingers on me.

Then he shifts me, huffing in a deep breath and I realize how much better it feels to rock against him. I slide over him again and again, rubbing myself on him as he slips his tongue inside me once more.

Praise the gods above! Not only have I never had this much pleasure before, nor have I experienced anything like this! It is instantly addicting. The way his mouth and tongue work in time with my movements, the way it all feels, the way he willingly debases himself for me...I will never want another lover as long as I live!

I ride his face, my movements getting more and more erratic as I lose myself in the sensations, in the pleasure. Small explosions are bursting inside of me and I can feel myself growing wetter, sliding all over his face now

I don’t know how he doesn’t require air but I continue to move, speeding up as I get

closer and closer to release. Just as I am cresting the edge, he moves, tongue rubbing over my clit and I fall off the cliff as I cry out, collapsing on him.

He moves me to the side, pulling me towards him once more as he kisses my neck. I am almost completely spent. Angurus huffs a laugh at my tired expression and kisses me again.

As we kiss, I can taste myself on him, sort of sweet and syrupy. His hands roam my body, landing on my breasts. Toying with them, he squeezes and gropes them, pressing his fingers into the flesh until it bounces back upon release. He seems fascinated by it.

“What is this flesh?” he asks. “It’s so soft and smooth.”

I’m not sure what he’s asking. “You mean my skin?”

“Ah, skin. Yes, I like your skin. It’s very nice. It is the color of the moon on a dark night. Very pale.”

“Yeah,” I say, chuckling weakly. “It’s from all the time spent underground.”

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“You live underground?” He stiffens for some inexplicable reason.

“No. I work in the mines, for the orcs. I spend most of my days without the sun on my back.”

“That will change. I would like to see the glow of your skin under the bright sun,” he strokes over my shoulder, dipping down to kiss it. “I think you would look like a vision under the sunlight.”

This I doubt. I’m just a plain human who spent way too many years toiling under the thumb of a selfish, greedy race of creatures. I don’t understand his praise.

“I’m not like that,” I mumble, shifting to focus my attention on his exposed chest, running my hands over it.

“Yes you are,” he lifts my chin so I’m looking him in the eyes. “I am only inclined to take the best treasure, the shiniest gems. Therefore, you are also the best of the best. You are the prize in my collection.”

I don’t know how to feel about that but I stop thinking altogether when he moves his hands down to dip between my thighs again, stroking fingers over me once more. I close my eyes, tilting my head back as he moves his fingers almost languidly, setting a slow, lazy pace.

His ministrations do the trick of distracting me from my thoughts and I lift my leg to lay it over his hip, giving him more access to my center as he presses in further, drowning me in pleasure once more.

## Angurus

I watch her writhing under me as I suckle on her tit, lathing my tongue over the pert nipple that hardens beautifully for me. She's lost in the throes of passion and I can't get enough. This woman is unlike any other. I've never been with a female so responsive, so eager.

I pin her hands above her head, biting down, and she lets out a yelp, grinding against me with abandon. She lets out a long, drawn out moan when I pinch her other nipple, squeezing and rolling it between my fingers. I'm being rough with her but she's giving me back everything I'm dishing out.

Her nails dig into my back, raking down and leaving marks behind. "Yes! Mark me as yours!" I order.

The welts she leaves in my flesh sting but the pain is electrifying. I haven't had a lover yet who can keep up. It's more than satisfying and I show her how good I feel by twisting a finger in her hair and tugging on the strands. She moans again.

I don't want to injure her but she lets out such beautiful squeaks. I move a hand down and spank her bottom once, twice and she gasps, arching her back. "Does my little minx enjoy that?" I ask, my voice a purr.

"Yes! Please! More!" she begs me.

"Shall I continue?"

"Yes!"



I throw her over my lap, slapping her cheeks until they're nice and red. They bloom for me so well and I stop for a moment to admire my handiwork, kneading the globes of her flesh with my hands, squeezing her skin until it dimples just to watch it bounce back.

"You're exquisite," I breathe, leaning down to kiss her back. I want to be rough with her, to take and own and possess—but a strange part of me wants to be gentle, to ensure that she enjoys herself and that I don't hurt her.

I'm not usually this considerate with any of my former lovers, I'm not kind or tender. It's not in my nature. What is this woman doing to me?

I rub her abused flesh with my palms, soothing the red skin and then lower myself to kiss over her heated flesh. A high-pitched keen escapes her and her thighs glisten with slickness.

A devilish idea forms in my head and I help her up, encouraging her to sit in front of me. My manhood is throbbing between my legs, having spent all my time focused on her pleasure it's nearly painful for me. I need a little release myself.

Guiding her head down, I rub the shaft along her lips, hissing as she slips me within the confines of her soft mouth. She swallows me down easily, deep into her throat. Is there no limit to what this woman is capable of?

Kelly works her jaw over me and I shudder, already close after a few swipes of her tongue. I won't last long. Without warning, she begins to hollow her cheeks around me, bobbing her head up and down to bring me off.

The warm, wet heat of her mouth on my cock is the only thing I can focus on. One hand goes down to caress my balls, fondling them in her fingers.

Dammit! How is one woman, one human woman so perfect? I can feel my balls drawing up as my release begins and I shove her head down on me, forcing her to drink every drop of seed that escapes.

“Mmmph!” She swallows, milking my cock for every last drop. After a few minutes of cleaning me up, she pulls off, panting and red-faced. I pull her into my arms and lay on the furs with her.

She runs a finger over my chest, tracing lines down the planes of my abdominal muscles, then over my chest, flicking the nubs of my nipples with her fingertip. It sends a wave of pleasure through me and my softened cock gives a little twitch of interest.

Even though I want to continue this marathon lovemaking session, we need sustenance. I stand up, walking over to the table to pour us two goblets of water, taking them back and handing one to Kelly. The water is icy cold going down my throat and refreshes me.

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Kelly's throat bobs as she drinks hers and I can't help imagining this must have been how her throat looked when she was swallowing my seed. A primal sort of satisfaction blooms in my chest. She is all mine, entirely mine.

I can't wait to bury myself inside of her. All this was just the appetizer before the main course. I want to spend hours and hours inside of her, carving a space for myself. I feel so utterly possessive of her after only hours of knowing each other.

I knew that I wanted her as my mate the minute I saw her in my dragon form. Some instinctual part of me, perhaps from the Hearthkeeper herself, had pushed me to claim her, to brand her and make her mine.

Whatever is drawing me to her is giving me strange ideas, too. I'm not used to thinking beyond my immediate gratification, taking what I need and only what I need. But with Kelly, I'm finding that every minute I spend with her, more thoughts of her invade my head.

I want to take care of her. I want to make our time together good for her, to make her feel good. Above all, I desire her to like me. Why? This is strange.

I'm a creature of instinct. I use my instinct to guide me to making all my decisions and thus far it has brought me everything I could ever want and need. I have power, riches, ghostly servants...perhaps sticking with instinct is the right path.

. I let it guide me now, laying back down and taking Kelly in my arms, pressing kisses to her cheeks and lips again.

If she's surprised by the gentle way I'm treating her, she doesn't say it. She kisses me back, tangling our limbs together as we lay in the soft furs. The two of us kiss for what feels like hours, trading gentle touches and caresses, exploring each other's bodies in the warmth of the nest I made for her.

I'm thorough in my exploration, discovering how touching the backs of her knees makes her shiver, how tracing the shell of her ear seems to tickle her and how she has little dots of color across her nose that she calls freckles. I love kissing each one.

I also love kissing her mouth, invading it with my tongue and nipping at her lips with my teeth. She is so responsive to me.

Finally we break apart, after having been wrapped around each other for hours. We're both flushed and panting and Kelly's lips are red from our kissing. I stroke over her arms and stand up.

"I'm going to get us some refreshments," I murmur, heading for the table. I conjure up some light snacks, crackers and cheese, some more wine and some fruit.

When I come back with the tray of food, Kelly reaches for a strawberry but I push her hand away. "I want to feed you," I say, picking it up and pressing it to her lips. She gazes at me, eyes half-lidded as she opens her mouth, wrapping her plush lips around the piece and sucking the juices out of it.

I feel myself stirring to life again, watching as she takes every bite from my fingers, lavishing the fruit with all her attention. She licks and sucks my fingers as I feed her and I want to pick her up and impale her on my throbbing member right then and there.

We've done everything but coupling at this point and I don't know how much longer I can last. I set the tray next to us and lift the goblet of wine to my lips, taking a long

pull, savoring the delicious, deep, fruity taste.

Kelly mimics me and drinks her own goblet, fluttering her eyes closed as the taste hits her mouth. The wine I conjured is based on the stuff I drank in my former life—the best and most delicious. I indulged myself even more in my dragon life than I did as a dark elf.

Once the wine is drunk and the cheese and fruit are gone, I set the goblets aside and pull Kelly back into my arms. “You’re mine,” I whisper in her ear. “And now I’m going to show you how much you belong to me. I’m going to ruin you for anyone else.”

I lay her down on the furs, parting her legs and touching her to ensure she’s wet enough—that she’s ready for me. She swallows as she watches me and I smile widely. She’s ready.

Carefully, I position myself between her thighs and guide myself inside of her, the head of my cock plunging into her folds. Oh, gods! She feels incredible! I can feel her wet heat around me and I can’t stop myself from groaning long and loud.

“Angurus,” she murmurs my name, drawing my attention back to her. I move her so her knees are bent, positioning her so I can shove deeper inside. I press further inside, her walls soft as a petal on my cock. I can hardly hold back, I don’t want to hold back.

I want to pound into her, bury myself inside over and over again. I look down at her and notice that she’s got her eyes closed. “Are you okay?” I ask, tilting my head to examine her. Her breathing is shallow and fast.

“Yes,” she nods. “Feel so full, so good. Please, I’m ready,” she begs. How could I turn my little mate down? I immediately begin to set a fast pace, thrusting in and out

of her as I grip her hips tightly. Her own arms coming up to drag me down for more kisses.

Our lips are practically numb from kissing at this point but I don't care. She shifts so she's matching me thrust for thrust, the noisy slap of skin on skin a beautiful melody to my ears.

"Angurus!" she screams my name as I hit the spot inside of her I discovered earlier. Oh gods, I love that! I want to make her scream my name until she's hoarse.

I slam into that same spot, angling my cock to hit it with every roll of my hips. It isn't long before I feel her walls begin to tighten around me.

"Come for me," I order. "Come on my cock like a good girl!"

"Angurus! Angurust!" She calls my name over and over as she hits her peak, slick gushing between her thighs. It doesn't take me long to follow right after, spending my seed inside of her as I climax.

"Gods!" I groan, stiffening and pushing as deep inside as I can. It's my name from her lips that does it. I love hearing her call it out, calling for me and only me.

I all but collapse on top of her, utterly spent. We lay together, exhausted as we catch our breath. I don't think I've ever felt like this with any other lover before. I want her more than I have ever wanted another.

She curls up onto my chest, closing her eyes. "You are..." she shakes her head, lips curling upward.

“What?”

“You’re amazing,” she says.

A strange kind of warmth floods my chest at her words. Amazing? Me? I don’t know how to respond. The compliment is making my head spin.

Instead of saying anything, I lean down and press a kiss to her forehead.

13

Angurus

I pull in deep breaths, sweat beading down my cheek as I stare down at the creature underneath me.

She is a remarkable thing for a human. Despite her appearance being anything but similar to the female dragons I’m accustomed to, she still stirs something in me that is hard to ignore.

I shift my body above her and curl my arm under the small of her back to lift her up off the furs and settle her down properly. She winces a little at the awkward angle I’d contorted her in, but smiles quickly afterwards when I lay down next to her.

“Thank you.”

I can’t help but raise a brow. “I don’t believe a female has ever thanked me

afterwards.”

Kelly laughs, rolling over to face me. She tucks her arm under her head. “You know, you’re really comfortable to lay against.”

“Comfortable?” I echo.

“Yeah,” With her free hand, she reaches out and places it on my bare chest. “You’re warm.”

I want to laugh at that. Warm? That’s a word that no one has ever used to describe me. I’m known to be cold as ice and have a heart as black as the dark depths of the waters that surround this island. Down in the valley, the other dragons call me Angurus the Terrible.

Rumors have spread numerous times over the past few centuries of my heart being made of stone and cursed by a witch. Its pitch black darkness is foul and unkempt just like the cave in which I reside.

A chuckle bursts out of me suddenly.

“What?” Kelly blinks at me.

“It’s amusing that you think that I’m warm-hearted, when I am everything but.”

“Oh, is that what you think I meant?” She brushes her finger tips over my pecs and up to where my collarbone sits. “I meant that you’re warm physically. My last, uh... boyfriend, I guess was cold as ice. I think he had poor circulation or something.”

I squint my eyes at the term. “Boyfriend?”



“Yeah. Like a lover? A relationship?”

Heat stirs in my belly, a fire that rages into an inferno. A lover? She’s had previous ones beforehand? How many?

“Then I shall burn his ice covered hands with my flames.”

There is amusement that tickles in her eyes. I don’t like the fact that she isn’t taking me seriously. Since I have now claimed her as my mate, she belongs to me. There will be no others that walk this planet that have had her before me. I will torch them all into dust.

“You’re a little late for that, I’m afraid.”

I grab the hand that touches me, squeezing her wrist. “What does that mean?”

“He’s dead. He died in the mines a few years ago. Worked to death by the orcs who run them.”

Sadness colors her face.

It makes my chest tighten up. Though I’ve never been around humans before, I can recognize despair when I see it. This kind of reaction must mean that she had deep feelings for this other human. Even if it’s before me, I still don’t like that she thinks of him so fondly.

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I grab her face, turning it up to mine and squeeze her cheeks. “Do you still love him? I must know.”

“Love?” her brows furrow. “No, Angurus. It wasn’t like that.”

I lean close to her, spotting the small freckles that color across her cheeks. They’re faint but recognizable up close like this, sunspots left from working out in the hot sun all day.

“Then what is it? You did love him, didn’t you?”

She lets out a soft laugh that I can’t help but feel like it’s mocking me.

“No. Not at all. He was there for a time when I needed comfort. My parents were both killed in the mines and I couldn’t rely on my sister for that kind of comfort or support. So I needed someone else.”

I lean back slowly, letting go of her face.

I suppose that makes sense, her wanting to seek the pleasure in forgetting about one’s own tragedies in the arms of another. Though, it makes me feel uneasy that humans are fickle enough to have multiple lovers throughout their short lifespans.

Dark elves mate for life. I suppose dragons would, too, if we could afford to, but I’m not sure. They are too competitive down at the base of the mountain.

Commitment is a bond that is strong enough to withstand almost anything, and

tearing two elves apart after they've declared their bond is nearly impossible and always results in the death of one of them.

I look Kelly over, taking in the muscles that shape her strong body. My fingers itch to touch her in every spot that my eyes land on. I want to feel the shivers that run up her spine and the gasps that come out of her lungs.

My hand finds the curve of her hip, my thumb running over the bone that protrudes from that spot. I want her to be mine for the rest of eternity.

"Kelly," I speak finally.

"Yes?"

I look her deep in the eyes. "You are to have no other lovers for the rest of eternity."

She gives me a strange look. Her head tilts to the side while I massage the spot at her hip.

"I know. I am your mate, but you should know I don't live as long as you do. The most I'll get is probably another fifty years or so. That's only if I'm not working to death in the mines."

The thought of her collapsing in some dirty mineshaft because a couple of oafish orcs decided to get greedy irks me. My lips peel back from my teeth, a growl ripping out of my mouth before I can stop it.

"You will live as long as I do."

Surprisingly, she doesn't shrink away from me. "How? Again. I'm human, not immortal."

I don't answer her. Instead, I grip the side of her hip tightly and move my thumb over her smooth skin. She lets out a startled gasp, her body jolting when I pour magic into her skin. Tendrils of it leak from my finger, creating a glow around where I touch her.

A small design, like that of a brand, forms on her skin. It glows beneath the surface, anchoring itself while I begin to tie our two life-forces together.

This kind of magic is dangerous if used in the wrong way. It can potentially saddle one to someone that they hate for the rest of eternity. It's something I've seen very few dragons do – and on accident, like it's instinctual – and it is only meant to bond themselves once they are sure that their partner is committed to forever.

I suppose that it is slightly irresponsible of me to be doing this, especially to a human who has no concept of what 'forever' means. But even entertaining the idea of letting her loose back to the camp where she lives with suitable males all around her makes my blood boil.

I won't have her claimed by someone else while I sit back and watch it happen. I'll end up burning down the entire continent, and that wouldn't be a good look for my maker now would it.

Her hand grabs my wrist to squeeze in pain while her back arches. I hold her down against the furs and don't move. Severing the connection at this point would most likely kill us both, and that isn't what I want.

"Hold still." I tell her. She groans back at me. "It's almost done."

I can feel her life force joining mine. The thrum of her heart beat hammering in time with my own. It's an unexpectedly vulnerable feeling of interconnecting our souls together, one that I didn't consider up until now.

I breathe her in. “Kelly.”

She opens her eyes and looks at me.

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Slowly, the magic fades. It leaves me feeling more worn out than I expected. I let go of her hip, spotting the mark that has been left behind. It's beautiful, with my first initial and swirls that surround it on all sides in a filigree pattern.

I smirk at it, pride filling my chest.

I roll back onto my feet and stand. I'm not used to this form and how easy it is to get myself joints twisted up from bending them around someone else. Sure, I'm strong and very healthy, but my dark elf form is much less strong compared to my dragon form.

Kelly sits up slowly, her eyes wandering down to the mark on her hip before coming back up to look at me.

"Can we go to my sister now?"

I nod. "Yes, we'll head there now."

A smile stretches across her face, making my chest tighten again. What I won't do to keep that expression on her face. Even if it's to save her sister who will die within the blink of an eye anyway.

Her reservations about coming here have paid off, however. Not only is she getting the gift of immortality, she's potentially saving her sister's life so long as I can figure out what exactly is harming her.

Judging by her vague descriptions about the problem, it may take me some time to do

so. But at least by doing this, Kelly will be happy.

I would move mountains to keep her that way—happy and full of life. I don't wish to see her saddened like she'd been recalling her past. It makes me feel off and out of sorts.

I wave my hands, reanimating my ghost servants. They scuttle around and collect a new outfit for Kelly after I'd discarded her dress and burned her original clothes. She stands and accepts them with a small bow that I find amusing.

She's polite even to those that have come here to try and steal from me.

I watch as she dresses, pulling on her layers of clothing that keep her pale skin from burning in the sun.

When she fixes herself, she turns to me. "Alright, I'm ready to go."

I move over to her slowly. "Oh? Are you?"

She blinks at me. "Yes? I'm not missing anything."

I grab at the side of her dress and rip it up the seam to expose her entire leg. She lets out a startled yelp, grabbing onto the fabric and yanking it out of my grip.

"What did you do that for?"

I let out a soft snort. "You must have your brand visible at all times. Everyone must know that you've been claimed." Now, she wears my initial and my jewelry for all to see.

She looks down at her dress before jutting her hip out to reveal the mark on his skin.

“Seriously?”

I fix her with a pointed look. “Yes. Don’t cover it up again.”

I move past her and head to the mouth of my cave.

14

Kelly

I can’t help but gape after him, still holding the torn side of my dress.

What the hell is wrong with him?

I look down again at my marred skin and run a hand over it. It isn’t raised at all like it would be if I’d been branded with a hot iron. It feels smooth just like my normal skin, though there is a heat that collects there now. Much like the same heat that expels from Angurus.

I let my dress go, the pieces of it folding together and then splitting apart when I walk. I shake my head and try to ignore the breeze that moves across my skin. If he expects me to tailor every piece of clothing I have in order to show off my hip, he’s insane.

I find Angurus standing at the mouth of the cave, overlooking the lush greenery surrounding the ground down below. He has his hands on his hips while his white hair moves in the wind.

Heat stirs in my belly. I know that there’s something seriously wrong with me when I find this...beast attractive. He’s brutish and forceful with his opinions, and all encompassing when it comes to his desire for me.



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But for some reason, that makes me all the more attracted to him.

I'm not sure if it's because no other man at the camp pays attention to me or looks my way, and that the affection that Angurus shows me is something that I'm starved for, but it hardly makes me feel sane.

I know that coming here is helping my sister. However, I never expected to be bonding myself to a dragon in the process. What kind of sister did that make me?

I shake my head and clear my throat. "Are we ready to go? I just need to collect my hoqin."

He turns and raises a single brow at me. "For what?"

"To... ride? Back down?"

He shakes his head at me. "We will not be riding any smelly livestock, Kelly."

"It's a long walk back to my boat. It's easier traveling by hoqin."

He gives me an amused look. "Who said anything about traveling by boat? I certainly didn't."

"But—"

He steels me with another look. "Don't make me repeat myself."

I frown and follow him down the steep path leading to the bottom of the mountain. If he thinks that I'm leaving my hoqin here, he's crazy. I needed it in order to pay back that merchant who'd lent me his boat.

A deal is a deal, after all.

Traveling with us both, plus a hoqin, will be a bit of a cramped ride. But the journey isn't as far as it seems. We'll be fine for the time being as long as I can get Angurus to remain patient.

As we reach the bottom of the narrow trail, I spot my hoqin still tied to the tree. It whinnies at us when we come into view. I know hoqins aren't considered the brightest of creatures, but they still had a place in my worklife.

In fact, I don't know where I'd be without it.

Angurus sneers at the hoqin, making it jump back in fear at the sound. I push past him and grab the reins.

"Shhh, it's okay." I pat the neck of it gently, trying to soothe the poor beast.

"You aren't seriously going to take that with us, are you?"

I turn to the sound of Angurus' voice. "Well, of course I am. I can't just leave it behind."

Angurus lets out a chauff through his nose.

Suddenly, his body morphs. His bones and skin rip apart to reveal scales underneath that stretch over long thick limbs. Angurus' large body breaks through the canopy overhead. I jump back, shielding my face when the sticks and brush that rain down

onto me.

My hoqin lets out a loud squeal, causing me to part my arms to see through them.

Angurus snatches it off of the ground. The reins that I had tied it with snaps easily and dangles on either side of the hoqin's head. I watch in horror as Angurus dangles the hoqin over his slack jaw.

“Wait!” I put my hand out.

But I'm too late. He drops the hoqin into his mouth and snaps his jaw shut. Bones crunch against his teeth and the sound of the hoqin's body exploding in his mouth like a grape makes my stomach roll.

I slap a hand over my mouth and lean against the tree, nauseous.

Angurus chews slowly, almost as if he's savoring every delicious bite of my poor hoqin. When he licks his lips, his large eyes turn to focus on me.

Those slitted pupils dilate when they focus on me.

I need to remember to be careful around him. Clearly he isn't afraid of eating anything that moves, which can very quickly turn to me if I'm not careful. I don't think that it matters that he's somehow claimed me as my mate. If he wants to eat me, he most certainly will.

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I breathe out slowly and lower my hand from my mouth. I know getting frustrated with a dragon is stupid, but now I'm down a hoqin and I still need to get back to the camp once I arrive back on Kaynvu. Walking would take an entire day that I don't have the luxury of wasting.

He opens his mouth, his hot breath rains over me while his long tongue dives between his teeth to pick them clean.

"How are we supposed to get to my boat now? Or back to my sister?" my teeth grit together. "I needed that hoqin to travel, Angurus. I don't have wings like you, and I told you the orcs can't see us coming!"

He slowly shuts his mouth, clearly picking up on my tone. Rising to his full height, he towers over me like a mountain. I do my best not to look like it terrifies me, even though he can squash me with one foot.

"I told you, Kelly. We aren't traveling that way."

I let out an annoyed sigh. "Then how are we getting back to Kaynvu?"

His tail whips behind him, cutting down a few trees in the process. They land a few yards away from us in a small heap that shakes the ground.

I don't have time to argue or run away before I feel a pair of sharp claws coming around my waist and tightening around me. Angurus picks me up from the ground and lifts me high in the sky. Sitting back on his hunches, he holds me up to eye-level.

My stomach drops at how far down the ground is from here. I can tell that my heart is hammering in my chest, because I'm starting to sweat at my brow bone.

Angurus lets out a deep laugh that rumbles out of his chest.

He curls his arm back and sets me down on his back, right at the base of where his neck and shoulders meet. I'm caught between two of his spine horns, sitting between them almost like a saddle.

His large wings expand on either side of me, stretching as the wind catches under them like sails.

My heart lurches.

"A-Angurus, wait—!"

He lifts off into the air, flapping his large wings in order to take us up through the trees. I suck in a lung full of air, a scream leaving me right when my hands find the horn in front of me. My arms wrap around it while my thighs tighten over his body, gluing me down to him.

When he reaches over the tree line, he flattens his wings and glides over them. I'm too scared to look to see where we're going. I hunker down into him, the wind whipping through my hair and tangling it together.

I hope that he heads for Kaynvu, because if not, I'm screwed. I'll have no idea where I am if he decides to take me somewhere else. And by doing that, Kara might as well be dead.

Angurus steadies himself out, coasting against the winds that breeze across the water.

I peek my eyes open, seeing the bright blue ocean underneath me.

At least he's not taking me to another part of his island.

I slowly sit up, gaining a little more confidence since he doesn't seem like he's trying to buck me off. It's still scary being unguarding and hanging onto the horn of a dragon while there isn't anything underneath me to catch me if I fall off.

Well, besides the ocean. But who knows what lay in those waters.

I twist at my waist to look behind us at the island that grows smaller and smaller the farther we travel away from it. Judging by the angle of where the volcano is, I can kind of tell that it is the same view of what I'd been looking at when I arrived.

Which means that there's a high probability that Angurus is actually following through with his word.

Relief rushes through me, making me smile. I subtly stroke my hand over his horn and turn back around to admire the view of the ocean meeting the sun.

It really is gorgeous out here. I can see why dragons are fond of flying. If I had this kind of view whenever I wanted it, I'd never stop flying around.

I wonder why Angurus had holed himself up in that cave instead of being out here enjoying the freedom. I know that he'd said he was antisocial because of the other dragons living on the island, but why limit yourself to living there anyway?

If I were in his position, I'd pick up and move at the first chance I got instead of hiding in some musty cave waiting for travelers to stumble upon it, however many decades it took to discover the island.

I tilt my head back and close my eyes. The breeze is warm and inviting, something that I never thought I could feel being this high up in the sky.

I let myself take it all in. Chances are that once we reach Kaynvu, this feeling will leave me as soon as we touch down. My worry for Kara is astronomical now that I've been away from her for longer than I planned.

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I open my eyes slowly and steel my heart.

I really hope Angurus can help us.

15

Angurus

I was taking a huge chance soaring off that mountain. I had no idea if the magical seal was still in place or if the ripple I felt had anything to do with it being disrupted. But if Kelly had brought a boat and a hoqin here and it had been decades since a shipwreck washed up on our shores, I had a feeling that the seal was no longer locked around us, destroying ships and keeping us in place.

I am so glad I was right.

With the island fading steadily into the background of our journey, I marvel at the landscape as we fly.

The sea stretches endlessly in front of me. Its dark waters come to rest at the edge of the truly blue sky above us. There are hardly any clouds in the sky other than the one I trail under while heading for Kaynvu.

It's been a long time since I've seen those lands—back when the fertile grounds were home to settlements that had yet to be colonized. I've seen my fair share over the centuries of tribes come and go, and of battles between uncivilized creatures that were ultimately settled by the iron fist of dark elves.



I'm curious to see how much of it has changed during my slumber and if the descriptions from Kelly are accurate about the encampment that she's been forced into by the orcs and their domination over the resources that were plentiful there.

I've never liked dealing with those creatures, even before the Hearthkeeper had bestowed her gift onto me. Orcs were, by and large, barbaric and simply minded. Their grasp on the world around them was short-sighted and they always valued personal gain rather than the collective benefit.

Though, my own kind isn't much better. Dragons, by nature, are territorial over even the most superficial of things. Our nurturing aspect could be described as non-existent to an outsider with no prior knowledge on the subject with the accuracy of it being almost completely true.

There are very seldom instances where my kind could be viewed differently and that was only if off-spring or mates were involved.

Though, I do have to say, it is nice being off of that island now that I'm out here.

I've dedicated so much time secluding myself in my cave. Rarely ever venturing out far enough to see anything but the dense trees and brush that surrounded me, that now that I'm out gliding in the skies while Kelly leans back to let the wind flow through her hair, I've come to see that perhaps I've been missing out.

I fly us to Kaynvu on the more scenic route, letting Kelly marvel at the view from high up above the water.

I can tell through our bond that she's thrilled. Her excitement is hard to contain, and the more that she grasps at my scales while she turns to look around, the more it softens my heart.

I knew that when our bond had been forged, feeling her soul so deeply ingrained within mine would be... strange. Her intoxicating energy is hard to ignore as it rattles around in my head.

Though, I don't have the heart to scold her for it. I like that she enjoys flying with me.

When we land on Kaynvu's shores, on the outskirts of the boating docks after making sure that no one saw me coming in even with the glamour I kept in place, I shift back into my dark elf form and survey the merchants that mill about. It's strange seeing them so focused on their little lives, all of them having no idea what kind of fire-breathing terror is in their wake.

But, knowing orcs – and humans retrospectively – and their proclivity towards overreacting, it was safe to assume that traveling around with Kelly in my dragon form would draw way more attention than we needed.

“We need to find you something to wear.” Kelly says next to me.

I look over at her from where we've crowded ourselves behind one of the loading units—away from all of the busyness.

“What? Wear something? I'm not putting human clothes on to appease your delicate sensibilities.”

She grabs my arm, squeezing it.

“Please, Angurus? Even if people assume you are a dark elf, they would want to know why you're here, especially if you're not wearing clothes. We don't have time to stop and have people constantly questioning us. Plus, the orcs might try and jail you. They hate dark elves.”

I roll my eyes. If any orcs had the gall to so much as lay a hand on me, I'd laugh in their face before spouting out a reign of fire. I would even smile while doing it.

“Please, Angurus.” Kelly speaks again. “I know it’s annoying, but it’s just for the walk back to camp.”

I sigh. I truly can’t say no to her... especially with her big brown eyes.

I grab one of the merchants that pass by our shadowed hiding spot. He barely puts up a fight while I strip him of his cloak and pants and quickly discard him into the salty waters behind us.

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Kelly merely gives me a disapproving look, though I choose to ignore it while slipping on the merchant's pants. If I'm to wear stifling human clothes, she's going to need to put her human emotions aside for once.

She fixes my cloak after I clip it across my chest and pulls the hood up to cover my horns. I hold back a grunt, not wanting to waste any more time on arguing with her further on this subject.

Her hand finds mine to tug me along while we head up the docks and onto land.

It's busy here, congested with crowds that I'm not used to seeing.

The population on my island is so sparse that running into someone I don't know is almost unheard of – and it's not from my lack of trying. Here, it feels like I'm being forced to walk through a bees nest with how much noise rattles inside of my head.

Thankfully, Kelly's encampment isn't that far from the water, and we make it there in an hour once I scoop her up and unleash just my wings – which do rip holes in the robe but oh well – to fly us inconspicuously. It's much less loud there.

She leads me to a large hut that looks decrepit from the outside. Around the perimeter, strange plants bordered against the walls with large berry-looking fruit hanging off the branches. To the side of the hut was a drying rack that had a few different types of leathers hung over the dowels.

Kelly pushes the door open and ducks her head inside. I follow closely behind her and let the door slam shut behind us.

“Anyone here?” she calls.

“Is that you, Kelly?” came the voice of an old, weathered woman from deeper inside of the hut.

Kelly follows the sound of the woman, taking me around a short corner that leads into some kind of sitting area. To the left of that, the room opens up into a small kitchen. An old woman stands at the stove with a wooden spoon sunk into a large pot that steams.

“You’re back!” the old woman smiles.

She has a few light colored marks along her jawline that look suspiciously like healing bruises. I glance down at the woman’s arms where she’s pushed up her sleeves, discovering more bruising.

Strange.

“I am. How’s Kara?”

The woman’s face pinches at the mention of Kelly’s sibling. But before she can say anything about it, another voice calls from behind us.

“Kelly?”

She whips around, pushing past me to wrap her arms around a younger woman that stands just on the edge of the kitchen.

“Kara!”

I have to admit, they look eerily similar.

It's strange seeing them both together like this. Siblings aren't unheard of in dragon culture, but getting a female dragon to mate long enough for a couple to produce siblings was nearly impossible.

Though, I do recall very vaguely from my days as a dark elf that siblings existed there, too. But the memories are foggy and trying to remember faces or names is impossible.

Kelly pulls back hugging her sibling and pulls her over to the small two-person chair in the sitting room.

“Let me see your hand.”

As the younger woman sits with her on the cushions, the older one comes around me to follow them. “Her outbursts have been getting worse.”

“Outbursts?” Kelly looks back and forth between them. “What happened?”

Neither of the other two say anything for a long moment. It clicks with me instantly.

Ah, so that's what the bruises are from.

I head over to where Kelly is and kneel in front of them both.

“Let me see the blight.”

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The offending arm is offered to me. I grab Kara by the arm and pull her forward, ignoring her gasp of surprise. The scales, as black as night, crawl up from her fingers and to the middle of her forearm. I twist her arm around a few times, looking at it from all angles.

“It is quite strange...” I mumble.

Kelly leans forward. “Do you know what it means?”

“No.” I peel her fingers apart to look at the webbing between them. “You say she’s had an outburst?”

The old woman behind me clears her throat. “Yes, very violent. It seems she can’t control her reactions and lashes out randomly.”

“Hm...”

“Are you okay, Agatha?” Kelly asks. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know this would happen, or else I would’ve warned you.”

“It’s alright, dear. Nothing you could’ve done.”

I let go of her sister’s wrist and roll up to a stand again. “I’ve never seen this before but there is a possible treatment.”

I can feel the entire room perk up immediately.

“Really?” Kelly stands and grabs my hand. “You know of one?”

“Possibly.” I give her a pointed look. “I can’t guarantee anything.”

She shakes her head at me. “I’ll take anything at this point. Even if it’s temporary.”

I can’t help but admire her. Her willingness to throw herself into whatever hapless cure that someone can give her, despite the possibilities of it not working out in the end, speaks volumes of her character.

I’ve never met anyone like Kelly before.

For some reason, seeing the determination in her eyes makes my chest ache. I wonder why?

“It’s called the Paradise Lotus. It’s said to cure more blights and curses. Whatever is infecting your sister, it’s spreading quickly.”

“Where can we find a Paradise Lotus?”

“I’m not sure.”

Kelly’s shoulders sag. “What?”

I shrug. “It’s largely extinct. I’ve only seen one once before and that was long before I ended up on my island.”

“Where was it? Maybe we can go there and check?”

“It’s in dark elf territory. Deep in the caverns. At that time, the war had caused ruins to fall over them, and the area was mostly abandoned.”



“Dark elf territory is dangerous, Kelly,” the old woman cuts in.

Kelly turns to look at her. “I have to go. Kara won’t survive if we do nothing.”

“I know, dear. But going there without protection will only get you killed.”

“I have protection.” She squeezes my hand, looking back at me.

A smile works its way onto my face. I’m conscious of the old woman side-eyeing me carefully, but am much too focused on how steady Kelly is in her conviction that I’ll protect her. Because of course I will, I’m her mate after all. I will burn down cities for her if she asks.

Outside of the hut, my ears pick up voices traveling up the small pathway.

I turn my head, frowning at the door.

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“What’s wrong?” Kelly tugs on my arm.

I open my mouth, ready to warn her about the unwelcome visitors, but I’m cut off by the door being kicked off of its rusty hinge and falling to pieces on the floor.

My nose wrinkles as the stench of unwashed humans permeates the air inside of the hut.

“Kelly Brockhurst.” the one in the front says. “You have some explaining to do.”

16

Kelly

My heart rate picks up when I see Chet, Flint’s brother, standing in Old Agatha’s doorway.

“W-What are you doing here?”

He points at me. “I know you had something to do with my brother’s death. All the orcs tried to tell me that he caused some fight in the mines, but I know you and your sister were behind it.”

I breathe out slowly, feeling Angurus’ grip on my hand tighten. Though, I’m not exactly worried about Chet hurting me—he tends to be all bark and no bite—what I am worried about is Angurus’ temper.

If there is so much as a whisper of a threat that comes my way, I know he'll blow his cover and shift into a dragon to take these guys down. He could end up causing the entire camp damage in the process, and that is something that I didn't need on my conscience.

I let go of Angurus' hand and step around him. He protests with a soft grunt that only I can hear from this close, causing me to put a hand on his chest and give him a reassuring smile. Or what I least hope is one.

“Why don't we take this outside, boys.”

Surprisingly, the brigade shuffles out through the front door and into Agatha's makeshift front yard. I follow them out, wishing that there was a door I could close in order to put something between this group and Angurus' protective anger.

I hope that he stays back and lets me handle it.

Once I get outside, Chet rounds on me again.

“I know you had something to do with it, Brockhurst.”

I wipe my hands against my dress, hoping that no one notices the brand on my hip. It isn't that tattoos or markings of any kind are forbidden here, but supplies were hard to come by and it would get them to ask questions about things they didn't need to know.

“I didn't have anything to do with your brother, Chet.”

“Like hell! It was either you or that damn sister of yours!”

I wince at his volume. “Look, I—”

“Shut up!” He whips out a knife, pointing it at me with a crazed look in his eyes. “Confess to what you did and maybe I’ll go easy on you.”

I frown at him. “The orcs aren’t going to tolerate you killing me or my sister, Chet. Our workforce is already down twelve, and they’ll be pissed if that number lessens anymore. Even if you do kill me, it’ll only get you and all your friends here thrown in the pits of the mine where they’ll work you until you die. You can’t possibly want that, right?”

He grins. “You think I haven’t thought of that?”

I blink at him in surprise.

Chet steps back from me, running a hand over his face and laughing into it. “I bribed them, you dumbass! I told them that they could fuck your sister as long as I got to kill you.”

My blood runs cold. “What?”

He drops his hand to look at me again. “They’re going to use her for a fuck doll. They’ll fill every hole up she has with their come and leave her to rot when they’re done. I told them as long as they look the other way, that’s what they get for a prize. Guess how many took me up my offer. Go on, just guess.”

It feels like the ground is going to open up and swallow me whole.

No... no, they can’t take Kara and offer her up on some platter to those sick bastards. I won’t let them. Even if it means fighting all of these barbarians until my dying breath.

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I need to warn Angurus and have him fly Kara out of here. Maybe he could take her back to his island. They could live there peacefully without the threat of orcs coming for either of them.

I turn to shout for them at the doorway, when a sharp pain radiates along my arm. I gasp, and turn back to grab at it. Blood trickles through my fingers. The cut from Chet's knife is deep and hurts more than I imagined it would.

I scream and fall back when his hand arches back around to get me in the face.

Right as my hip hits the ground, I hear Angurus' roar of fury.

"What have you done!"

I can't tell if he's yelling at me or the men surrounding me, but before I can even suck in my next lungful of air, he batters through them with his strong body.

Most of them go flying, tumbling to the ground a few yards away from us. I try to tuck my knees to my chest in order to push myself up to sit but it's hard with how bad my arm hurts while also trying to keep pressure on it to slow down the bleeding.

Angurus rips through the men one by one. Blood soaks the ground around him in a maroon sea that makes me sick to my stomach. A twisted laugh leaves his lips when he grabs one of the men by the top of their head and flexes his fingers together until the man's head explodes.

He does this all so effortlessly that it makes me wonder if I'm hallucinating.

I know that he has a temper to him and he can be downright aggressive, but this all seems unusually cruel.

Is this the same dragon that I've mated myself to?

I finally get up high enough off the ground to swing myself into a sitting position. I feel woozy from both the blood loss and the gore surrounding me. There are chunks of flesh and other kinds of human matter littering the ground that make it hard to focus on anything else.

A groan leaves my mouth.

"Come here." Angurus growls out.

I look over to where he is and see that he's pinned Chet down underneath him. The man screams and squirms under him, desperately trying to find a way to claw his way out of the situation he's gotten himself into.

I watch with little emotion as Angurus fists a hand in his hair and yanks his head back. His other comes around to pry at his jaw, unhinging it wide enough that Chet groans in pain. Angurus sucks in a quick breath and breathes a densely packed fireball into the man's mouth.

I wince, looking away quickly as the screams are drowned out by gurgling.

"Ugh..." I mumble.

I try to focus on the pain in my arm instead of the image of Chet's face melting from the inside out. I can safely say that that is something that is going to haunt me for the rest of my life. I hear Angurus walk over to me and crouch next to me.

“Let me see.”

His words are surprisingly soft and much warmer than I’m expecting. It makes me look up from where I’d been focusing on the blood drenched ground.

He takes my hand off of my arm and examines the cut running up the side of it.

“I truly hate humans.” he says and leaks a yellow glowing magic into my skin.

Immediate relief follows, making me sigh in relief.

Oh, that feels good.

“You’re all a bunch of mindless animals,” he continues.

I try my best to ignore the comments. I pretend that he isn’t lumping me in with whoever it is he’s talking about, but I have a feeling that if I ask, he’ll avoid my question with some kind of long-winded anecdote.

So I don't bother to.

As my arm heals, I let myself relax. I can’t believe Chet sold out my sister to the orcs. What a bastard. I’m going to have to somehow hide her so that they don’t come around to collect their debt while I’m gone searching for the Lotus.

“Are you both alright?” I hear Old Agatha say from her doorway.

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I look over to her and wave at her with my free hand.

She eyes the macabre display in her front yard with a surprising amount of calmness. I can't tell if it's because she's used to this kind of gore because she's lived so long, or if it's because she regularly fixes up the sick and broken.

Regardless of what it is, I'm envious.

Angurus lets go of my arm and stands up once more. His cloak is soaked in blood as well as the front of his pants and bare chest. It looks like he's been offered up as some kind of sacrifice to The Warrior.

"You both must leave before the orcs come looking for you." Old Agatha speaks again.

I get up onto my feet slowly. "What about you and Kara? Chet said he bribed the orcs with the promise of her body."

The old woman shakes her head. "She'll be safe here. I'll hide her if any of them come around looking."

My heart squeezes. In a twisted turn of events, Agatha has been my greatest ally when it comes to protecting my sister.

"Thank you," I breathe out. "We'll be back as soon as we can."

I turn back to look at the bodies littering the ground. We need to clean these up before



someone passing by spots them and comes to Agatha's door asking questions.

Though, as if reading my mind, Angurus heads over and starts collecting bodies. He picks them up as easily as a basket full of freshly baked rolls. I don't spend too much time staring at him, afraid that for some reason it'll turn me on watching him.

I don't want to look too deeply into anything like that right now. I'm already on the edge of a mental breakdown, I don't need my budding attraction for Angurus picking up dead bodies like they weigh nothing to add on top of that.

I head over to Agatha's door and help her reset it onto its hinges. They're busted to all hell, but it'll do for now. When I come back, I'll help her put on a new one.

I kiss my sister goodbye and quickly head out with Angurus.

Whenever this Paradise Lotus lies, I need to find it.

Quickly, before it's too late.

17

Angurus

Even after decades of sleep, the way to N'Kezza Dorana is clear in my mind. It's an arduous journey, but a memorable one. No dragon can very well forget their first time crossing the peaks of the sinking mountains and landing across from the dying lake.

"I think we've already crossed this river before."

"Yes." Does she think I am a fool? "I am the being who is flying. I know that we've crossed this river already."

Kelly's hands tighten against my shoulders as she leans to make sure I hear her above the roar of the wind through my wings. "Are you lost?"

"I'm not lost." I'm never lost. "I could take you back to your settlement right now, if you desire."

"My sister..."

I don't want to hear another lecture about her undying love for her sister. It does something strange to my stomach, like indigestion, but warmer.

"The landscape might have changed a bit since the last time I was here," I allow. It's been ages, quite literally, since the last time I was here. "This river used to be a whisper of a stream. And those hills beneath us used to be mountains topped with snow."

"Does that mean we're close?" she asks, terse.

I would devour anyone else for that tone, but I can appreciate a desire for efficiency. I can also, somehow, tolerate in this human what I cannot forgive in others. And so I merely inhale deeply.

If I can't see my former path, perhaps I can smell it. I pick up the scent, faint but undeniable, of sickly sweet decay. It's even stronger than it had been before, which must mean the fruitless cities continually built on top of the ruins must have failed again and again. I bank hard to the right, and sail over the hills and across a barren, cracked valley.

I suppose the sinking mountains finally sank, and the dying lake finally became the salt dunes that dot the land.

Now we're getting close.

"This used to be farmland." Nothing would grow now. I can see that. We've flown to a blighted, cursed part of the peninsula. "It was dying before, no matter what the farmers tried. Their mountains began to sink, and their lakes began to dry, and their crops began to rot."

"How unlucky." Her voice is wry, but I can feel her shiver against my back. "Even orcs refuse to come this way. I've always wondered why they were so afraid. It's cursed somehow?"

"Quite." My lips twitch in amusement at how much she restrains herself from asking me the point in this history lesson. "And this is how it concerns you, my mate. The dark elves built a jewel of a city here in the dawn of time, when the Thirteen walked amongst us. But they made a grievous error."

"I've heard they often do."

"The ruler of their city claimed it was the best in the world, better than any other race could build. Better than the gods."

"That does sound like something a dark elf would claim," she says.

"It does, doesn't it? And so the Arbiter was called to judge the city, and found it wanting. As punishment for their hubris, he walked up to their finest building, their ornate courthouse wrought from magic and stone, and he slammed his staff against it so hard that the entire city sank into the ground.

“He proclaimed that nothing new could come to this land, not until the last dark elf has walked the planet.”

“I always was partial to the Arbiter.” Kelly hums thoughtfully. “So you’re taking me to a cursed, sunken city?”

“I’m taking you to treasures beyond your comprehension. Legends say the city is still here, buried intact. If that’s true, we might find the Paradise Lotus preserved beneath the sand.”

“You think it’s likely?”

“I’ve been here many times before.” I don’t know how often others have come, too, since I’ve been gone, but I find myself strangely wanting to preserve her hope. “It’s our best chance.”

And here is the mouth of the cavern, just as I remember. It’s lodged beneath an unassuming outcrop of rocks, and I have to transform out of my dragon form in order to fit. Darkness and damp surround us until I summon my magic to light our way, illuminating the cave in bright blue light.

There’s a large skeleton of an orc just inside the entrance. It holds a rusted sword and nothing else. The caverns are littered with bodies of those who tried to rob the dark elf city, and I anticipate that Kelly will need reassurance before we continue inside.

But Kelly glances at it once before stepping over him and deeper into the cave.

“You’re safe,” I say as we walk past another skeleton. “I won’t let anything happen to you here.”

Kelly looks at me, baffled. “I know.”

Her faith pleases me, and I preen a bit as we walk, pulling her close whenever we cross through a tight passage.

We make good time, but she's only human. After a few hours of traveling, I catch her smothering yawns against her shoulder and shuffling her feet as we walk. We still have a fair amount of ground to cover, and the paths only grow more treacherous. I don't want her to get hurt.

I grasp her elbow and pull her to a stop as we walk into a wide, flat part of the cave. It's tall enough that we can both stand, even if I have to hunch my shoulders a bit.

"We will set camp here."

"I'm not tired," she lies.

"I didn't ask if you were tired. I said we're setting up camp."

With a snap of my fingers, the blue light transforms into my ghostly servants, and they set about making our camp comfortable and warm. At first I expect her to continue to protest, but then I conjure wine and a feast of roast gallus, which she gratefully accepts.

"I still can't get used to this," she says around a bite.

"Caves, forbidden cities, or dragon lovers?"

"Food."

"I see." My servants play music in the corner of the cave, powered by magic. We sit at the entrance to a city struck down by a god himself. And it's food that has her impressed. "In general, or are you just a fan of the seasoning?"

“No, I mean. You can just create food whenever you want. On command.” She’s eaten her meat to the bone, so I make her another. It gives me a primal satisfaction to see her fed. “I would have given anything to be able to do this when I was younger. Hell, even a month ago would have been nice. You have no idea.”

And I don't.

It's strange to consider what it might have been like to grow up in this world without magic. I don't like imagining how vulnerable I would be without the ability to shift into a dragon or defend myself against enemies. It's almost impossible to imagine being so powerless that I might go hungry. "You were hungry often?"

She laughs, but I don't think anything about it is funny. "I was raised by orcs."

"But you had parents, surely."

"For a while." Her expression turns wistful, and something in my chest twists painfully. "But it was hard, especially in the winter. The orcs never decide our tributes are enough; it's always too little. And in the winter, when the sicknesses come, it's hard.

"My mother caught a bad cough when I was seven or so. It's damp in the mines, a lot like here, but narrower. Everyone is so close together, and if one person falls ill, everyone gets it. She'd just had Kara less than a year before, so I guess it hit her and the baby harder."

I've only ever fallen ill due to cursed magic. The mere memory of it nearly makes me want to break something. I'd been so helpless, and it had been unbearable. What must it be like to live one's entire life so vulnerable? I don't like to think about how fragile humans are, how one sneeze can cause them to fall so easily.

"Anyway, my father, he had to work double time to keep her out of the mines. Her

cough was the bad kind of wet, you know? All crackly. The healer told him she'd only survive if she could get some rest. That if she worked, she and Kara would both die. I tried to take care of them the best I could, and Kara got better, and my mom did, too. But then my dad got sick, too, and there was no one to cover for him. He died in the mines."

"And your mother?"

Kelly doesn't cry, or look upset. She takes another bite of gallus and looks at me with hard, worn eyes. "Well, she had to go back to work. Double-time, since my father couldn't. And she wasn't fully healed. She died about a week later. I think she knew she would, because she'd already started weaning my sister on capra milk. It wasn't too expensive, since we were friends with the farmer, but it wasn't free. She wouldn't have done it if she'd thought she had more time."

But she didn't have any more time, and Kelly had to learn how to raise an infant. As a child.

"I was lucky my cough healed up quick, because I had to learn how to work the mines once she went." Kelly stretches her hands out toward the cave wall and drags them along the edge. "I've always been lucky with that. Healthy lungs. Kara, too. She gets sick but heals up quickly...until this whole mess."

She blathers on, blissfully unaware that there's something terrible and strange tearing at my chest.

Grief.

Why, by the gods, am I grieving for two humans I've never known? It's a bizarre sort of mirror, as if her pain is mine. And it's so powerful it nearly cleaves me in two.



I don't want this.

I've never felt like it in my life, this strange sort of...of...I don't even know what to call it. Unpleasantness. Has she told me this story just to elicit this horrible response from me, or is this just a by-product of our bond?

Whatever it is, it's all her fault. All her talk about deep, abiding love and sacrifice is starting to melt my brain.

"Angurus?" Kelly blinks up at me, confused. "Are you well?"

"Quite." I keep my voice short and roll aside when she tries to stroke my cheek. It feels as though she's just pried open my ribs and climbed inside – I could do with a bit of distance for the moment.

The servants bring her a bed roll, and I signal them to bring me a separate one. Her eyes widen when she realizes we won't be sleeping together, but either her good sense or her pride makes her keep her tongue.

Still, I can see the hurt flash across her face, plain as a sunrise. "I guess we should get some sleep."

"Yes." Ice drips from my voice.

The pain in her eyes only makes that awful sensation in my chest worse, so I turn away from her and face the opposite walls of the cave. The servants still play music, soft and haunting. They pluck at the strings and flood the cave with beautiful, mournful chords.

I don't see them.

All I see are Kelly's young hands, bleeding as they chip away at the walls of a mine.  
Bleeding as they struggle to get a young child to eat.

I want to set something on fire.

18

Kelly

When I wake up from my restless sleep, I see Angurus already up and pacing around.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:07 pm*

Being underground, it's hard to tell what time it is or even if it's day or night at all.

I feel tired but I also had been plagued with nightmares the entire time I slept. All of them ranging from not being able to find my sister's cure and having her die in my arms as a result of her curse, or Angurus' harsh words to me before I curled up and fell asleep.

I rub my face and sigh into my hands.

I'm not sure where we go from here. I can't understand why he'd suddenly decide to ice me out, let alone completely disengage from me that way that he had before we'd fallen asleep.

Had I done something wrong? Had I said something that offended him?

I roll up onto my feet and stand slowly. My confusion about the situation makes my head spin.

My joints ache not only from the hard ground, but from walking so much too. I can't say for sure how long we've been traveling but it has to be at least a dozen or so miles. It seems like these caverns stretch on forever, making the journey through them feel treacherous.

I turn to where Angurus has climbed up onto a rocky formation. He holds a hand out with his glowing ball of magic and spreads his fingers apart. The white light travels through the cavern, lighting up a few dozen yards each way.

“See anything?” I say to him, cupping my hand over my eyes.

He doesn’t say anything to me, whether from not hearing me or ignoring me, I’m not sure. Both options make the pit in my stomach sink lower.

I wish he would talk to me. His cold words towards me last night – this morning? – had been hurtful – even if I can’t exactly accuse him of acting out-right passive aggressive towards me. To someone observing us from an outside perspective, he might have just seemed tired.

But I know better. I know him better.

Now that we are going to be up traveling again, it makes me anxious to continue this strange tension between us.

I can’t imagine he’s upset about anything other than me going on and on about my parents and my life living in the encampment. But if he is, I have no idea what from.

The light in his hands dies down enough that I am able to take my hand away from shielding my eyes. He jumps down onto the rocky floor again, turning slightly to look me over. I’m not sure what he’s looking for, but apparently he doesn’t see it because he frowns.

I sigh to myself when he turns back towards the cavern and starts walking.

I don’t bother reminding him to pick up the things he conjured last night to feed and warm us. I’m not sure how the mechanics of his magic work exactly, but if he wants to leave valuable stuff behind, then that was his prerogative.

I follow after him and keep a few paces between us.

Time passes slowly in our continued silence. It makes our journey feel almost unbearable.

Not only am I in an unfamiliar environment that has the potential to kill me, but there could be deadly beasts living down here to kill me too. And the only thing that I have that can possibly distract me from these two scary realities is currently giving me the silent treatment.

I grit my teeth and glare at his back.

His long cloak glides over the ground soundlessly. Every so often it picks up to slide over a smaller stalagmite that juts out into our pathway. I focus on it to keep my mind occupied and count the steps it takes for me to match his longer strides.

The sounds of our footing echoes within the chambers and bounces off the stalactites and stalagmites in a dizzying sort of way. I put out my hand to catch myself, stumbling off of the path and hitting my shoulder against hard, calcified rock.

It makes me grunt in pain.

Angurus stops and whips around to face me. The light above him circles back around to hover over his head. “What are you doing?”

I wince and feel blood trickle down my hand from where I’d grabbed onto the sharp rock. I grumble out a snarky response while righting myself.

A hand grabs my arm, yanking me forward. “What did you just say to me?”

I crane my neck to look up at him. “I said that I fell, but thanks for asking if I’m okay.”

He stares at me with an intense expression. His eyes peering through mine and reaching right down into my soul. There's a fire there that I can see now that we're close. It almost relieves me that it isn't ice instead.

“Do we have a problem, Kelly?”

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“I don’t know, Angurus. Do we?”

He narrows his eyes at me until they’re barely slits. He yanks me closer to him so that we’re just barely pressing out noses together. I can feel his hot breath tickling against my face.

“Do you think being smart with me is wise?”

I’m so tired of this.

“Well, if you talked to me instead of ignoring me, then maybe I wouldn’t have such an attitude.”

A small smirk crosses his face, making him look more cruel than usual. He lets out a short laugh.

“This is how being mated to a dragon is, my mate. You may want to get used to it before you continually get yourself worked up over things that are normal.”

I yank my arm away from him and push him off, separating us by a few feet. My hand stings noticeably less and it causes me to look down at it. Blood has already crusted over the cut and my skin seems to have already knitted itself back together.

I suppose I should be grateful that he’s healed me, but I can’t seem to bring myself to be. It’s the least he can do for treating me so poorly over the past few hours and from his episode before we went to sleep.

I wipe my hand against my dress.

“If that means I have to suffer with dealing with your mood swings, then fine. As long as we get the cure for my sister, I’ll deal with it.”

He flinches visibly, surprised at my words apparently. I don’t know what’s so shocking, though, considering that it’s only the truth. So far, being mated to him has been a continuous cycle of up’s and down’s that I never planned for when leaving Kaynvu to save my sister.

Getting involved with dragons had never been in my list of plans to begin with.

Now that I’m here and tangled up in this mess with him, my thoughts and feelings have been jumbled into a confusing mess that makes it hard to sort through.

I hate the uncertainty. I hate that I may never be able to save my sister if we can’t find this Lotus. I hate that the person who claims to want to protect and provide for me is being a massive dick.

Angurus finally breaks out of his stupor and rounds on me again.

“How dare you say that you’re suffering with me. Have you any idea what I’ve done for you? What I’ve sacrificed?”

“No.” I bite out. “Because you won’t tell me. You don’t let me in. I tried to be vulnerable with you and all you did was completely shut down and have barely said a word to me since. How does that make me feel better?”

“You were making me feel bad.”

“How is that my fault!” I throw my arms up in exasperation. “I was sad! You



couldn't even comfort me! You said two words to me and then rolled over and went to sleep!"

Angurus shakes his head at me. "Being upset over the dead doesn't change anything for you, Kelly. I was simply trying to not feed into it. You should move on."

I groan into my hands. "You just don't get it."

"No, you're right. I do not. Nor do I care to."

The words sting so viciously that tears prickle at my eyes. I've always struggled with my self-worth, especially since getting older and realizing how easily it was for everyone to corner me into the box of my sister's caretaker and not having any other attributes to me.

I want more than just being a sister.

I never had the chance to discover who I really was because taking care of Kara happened so early into my budding adulthood. I've always had a maternal role in her life, but after our parents died it just became worse and worse over time.

The mounting pressure of having to care for a young teenager while I, myself, was still a teenager had been overwhelming and a cold slap of reality that I may never get to live the life that I wanted to when I was younger and still full of dreams.

I put my head between my hands and fist them into my hair to pull at it.

Why can't Angurus be understanding for once? As my mate, he should, shouldn't he? Why didn't he see that the stress of this trip, of my sister's health, was actually kind of killing me? I don't want to live my life this way. I only want to be happy.

“Stop,” comes his gutted voice. “Stop that. Whatever you’re doing.’

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:07 pm*

I have no idea what he's talking about, so I ignore him. He sounds strained, but I can't make myself care enough to push my emotions onto the back burner and become his support system right now.

It's not going to happen. Not this time. Right now I need to be selfish.

Tears fall down my cheeks while I hold back a sob. It's not that I want to break down in front of him, I just have no choice. Once I become overwhelmed like this, I can't stop. I can only ride through the waves of grief and hope that I make it out on the other side.

"Kelly. Stop it."

I shake my head at him. Just leave me alone, is what I want to plead to him. If he wants, he can leave me here and come back later. I don't care.

I hiccup and slowly sink down into a crouch. My forehead comes to rest on my knees while I balance back on the balls of my feet.

I want all of this to end. The fighting, the bickering, the coldness towards me. I want things to go back to the way they were when we were in his cave and I could let myself be lost in him for a time.

I've never had that feeling before. It makes me long for things that I'm not sure I will ever be able to experience again.

A hiccup leaves my lips again, causing my entire body to tremble.

“Kelly, if you don’t get up right now, so help me, I will end you.”

There’s a bite to his voice that isn’t very genuine. Which is kind of ironic in a sense. I never thought that Angurus, of all people, would feel uncomfortable in the presence of someone crying.

My hands slide out of my hair. I wrap my arms around my knees and hold myself together that way. I hope that I don’t completely shatter because I’m not sure if Angurus will be kind enough to pick up the pieces.

“Kelly...?” His voice is softer now.

A small sob escapes me. I wish someone would hold me and tell me that everything is alright. Or tell me that the weight of the world didn’t have to rest on my shoulders.

I wish... I wish...

I don’t know what for anymore.

19

Angurus

I push my hand harder against my chest.

It’s so hard to breathe through this unbearable and agonizing pain.

Our bond throbs inside of me. Kelly’s life line cutting me and bleeding me dry until I don’t know what else to do but drop down to my knees in front of her.

I drag in haggard breaths while I listen to the sounds of her quiet sobbing echo around

the quiet chamber. I've never heard a human sound so forlorn before. It was as if she'd suffered a great loss and was now only coming to terms with it.

Had her parents made that much of an impact on her that she mourned them this deeply?

I can barely remember my past as a dark elf let alone the ones who created and sired me. Dark elves aren't particularly partial to being maternal or paternal to their offspring. As soon as we are old enough to be left on our own without dying, we are.

It is never for any insidious reasons. We are simply not the type of creatures to put value in child-rearing other than to carry on familiar bloodlines.

Not much has changed now that I'm a different species. Most of the child-rearing is left up to the mothers who are treated very well. Being that there were so few of them that could carry on our species, they were well taken care of.

But that doesn't mean that they were overly nurturing.

Dragons live in a competitive and harsh environment. The moment we are able to fly and be independent without needing to suckle from our mother's breast, we left.

Though, here Kelly sat, crying over the death of her caretakers like it was only yesterday. How deeply do human emotions run? Because I feel like I'm drowning in them—choking on the bitter taste of regret and sorrow.

I've never experienced such deeply disturbing emotions in my life.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:07 pm*

“Kelly, please.” I plead with her. “Please stop.”

She doesn’t. She only continues to cry and cry and feel and make us both miserable.

I crawl over to her and put my arms around her to pull her against my body. My cloak envelops us like a cocoon. It shields us from the cold dampness surrounding us. I squeeze her tight in my arms, feeling her body shaking from her sobbing.

“It is alright. They are in a better place now.”

I don’t know what I’m babbling about, but it’s the only thing I can think to say to her at this point. She coughs into my chest, her tears running down my skin while her cheek presses into my pec.

I run my hand down her back and rub gently up her spine. I’ve never had to comfort someone before, so I’m not sure how to do so properly. Feeling this way, at only a fraction of the agony that Kelly feels, is true torture.

I bury my face in her hair, breathing her in while I try to settle her. Humans are such complicated creatures. I’m never sure what the correct way to handle her is, but I know that I don’t like making her upset.

Yesterday was a misstep. My arguing with her was something that I should’ve let go when I saw her first getting upset. But of course, my pride is the usual piece of me that gets in the way. Especially when I feel as if I’ve been put in a vulnerable state.

What I had said before to her was true, though. This is what it means to be mated to a

dragon. We are a stubborn and prideful race that are stunted in our emotions to the point that it may potentially harm others in the crossfire.

“I’m sorry.” I whisper in her ear, nuzzling my nose against it. “I’m sorry for saying cruel things to you.”

She hiccups. “Why did you...?”

“Because I was angry and I took it out on you. I don't know how to handle myself when I feel upset like that.”

She turns her face slightly, her shoulders slowly relaxing in my hold.

“You can do this. You can hold me and tell me that it’s going to be alright.”

I frown. “But it isn’t alright. They’re dead. And you’re sad about it.”

“Sometimes it’s nice to hear anyways.”

What a truly strange creature she is.

“Oh.” I lick at her ear lobe, my teeth ache to nibble at it. “Then next time you’re sad, I shall lie to you.”

She lets out a soft laugh. She leans back from my chest and cups my face in her hands. Her eyes are red-rimmed and bloodshot, her cheeks tear-stained.

“Not lie, Angurus. I don’t need that. I just need you to tell me that at the end of the day, no matter what happens, everything is going to be okay.”

I nod, an understanding clicking somewhere in me. If all she needs is a shoulder to

cry on when times get tough for her, then I can certainly do that. If she needs me to lift her up when she falls, I would do it without a single moment's hesitation.

As her mate, I am her support through the raging storms.

I run my hand up her spine again to cup the back of her head, pulling her into a deep and heated kiss.

This woman... this beautiful livewire of a creature that I've decided to be my mate... I will protect her. I will do anything to keep her happy and safe.

Kelly moans against me when I plunge my tongue into her mouth. I explore every inch of her, every piece of her that I desire.

She's mine.

My mate. My human. Mine.

I shift us forward and lay her back down onto the cavern floor. My hips find hers instantly and roll into her at an agonizingly slow pace. I want her. I need her.

I part from her slowly.

"I must stop before I end up claiming you here. We will never find your sister that lotus if we keep going at this rate."



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She laughs at me but nods her head in agreement.

Without wanting to. I pull away from her and help us both up to stand once again. She surprises me by wrapping her arms around me and pulling me into another tight hold.

“Thank you.”

I lean down and press a kiss to her head.

“Let’s get moving.”

\* \* \*

We find the outskirts of the ruined city in only a few short hours.

As the caverns open up into a large chamber that expands miles out either way, we marvel at the city that rests at the bottom of it. To my surprise, the city doesn’t appear to be in terrible shambles like I once believed it would be.

Though from here, looks can be deceiving.

We descend into the belly of the chamber, taking a path that has been carved into the wall of the chamber in the shape of mal-formed steps. It’s too risky for me to fly us down there, even though that’s what I want to do.

There are too many pointy and sharp rock formations that have the ability to pierce

through my thick scales and send both of us tumbling to our doom below.

I keep my hand wrapped around Kelly in order to keep her from slipping and falling off the edge of the stairs and into the inky darkness.

The city isn't illuminated from within, but there is a stream of light that shines down from the giant-sized hole in the ceiling of the cavern. I can't imagine how far down underground we are, but judging from how high up that hole is at the ceiling, it's very far.

When we reach the bottom of the steps, I let go of Kelly's arm and let my illuminated light crest over us.

"Wow," she says next to me, reaching out to touch the side of one of the buildings closest to us. "This is in incredible shape."

I hum my agreement back to her and narrow my eyes as well. It is suspicious how well-preserved everything is. Almost as if someone still lives here.

I don't like the thought, so I pull Kelly close to me again and keep her tucked into my side. She doesn't seem to mind though as we walk and lets me guide us through the outskirts of the city.

I head east, hoping that by doing so, we'll end up in the middle of the city square. While I don't know what lies there before we get to it, I do know that it'll be much easier to navigate once we get there.

"How long ago was this place built?" Kelly asks me curiously.

I shrug at her, my eyes darting around to the shadowed corners we pass by. "Hard to say. Dark elf history is very long and hard to come by for exact records."

“Well, you’ve heard of this place before. So obviously the records aren’t lost.”

I snort. “This place was an urban legend for a long time. I simply told you about it because of the rumor that the Paradise Lotus was here.”

“You knew how to navigate those caverns, though.”

“I did, yes. But just because things are urban legends, Kelly, doesn’t mean that they don’t have some truth to them.”

I turn to glance down at her, surprised to see her smiling up at me. “Thank you for taking the risk in coming out here with me.”

I stop short, shocked at her words. No one has ever thanked me for doing them a favor. Sure, most have groveled because they knew that by doing so, it would get on my good side.

But I’ve never had anyone show such true appreciation for something that I’ve done for them that way that Kelly has.

She continues to intrigue me the more we spend time together and the closer we become.

Is this what it means to be mates with someone? Other than the physical attraction and the need to protect them. It feels fulfilling to make her happy. To see that smile on her face and know that I am the cause of it.

I turn slightly to cup her face. Her eyelashes flutter over her eyes before lowering as I pull her into another kiss.

## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:07 pm*

Forget what I told her earlier about wanting to wait until after we found the Lotus. I need to claim her right here and right now.

We're startled when a noise catches our attention from behind us.

I tug Kelly into my chest and cover her as best as I can with my cloak. My eyes scan the darkness surrounding us that my illumination can't quite touch.

"What is it?" she whispers at me.

I shake my head, ready to tell her that I don't know, when out of the corner of my eye I see something.

My eyes widen.

"Naga."

20

Kelly

Before I have a chance to ask Angurus what he means, I'm shoved out of the way.

My body hits the ground hard while I skid a few feet away from where I'd just been standing. A loud hissing sound comes from around the corner, scaring me into throwing my arms over my head and curling up into a ball.

Angurus lets out a fierce roar.

“No!”

The sound of hard bodies slamming into one another causes me to look up, just in time to see Angurus wrestle a large man with a tail to the ground. The long tail whips behind him violently, battering him with the barbed ends of it.

Angurus' cloak catches most of the initial damage, pieces of it fly off each time the tail thrashes around to try and get at him from different angles. He grunts with each hit, his body shaking while he wrestles with the creature underneath him.

It isn't long before Angurus is thrown off. His body smashes into a building nearby, crumpling the brick in the shape of his bulk build. Dust collects on him, coating him in a fine layer of powder.

I quickly get to my feet, catching the attention of the creature—naga, as Angurus called it.

It has the body of a human man but the head and tail of a serpent. It's a ghastly looking creature that I'm sure will give me nightmares if I ever survive this encounter. It hisses at me, its hood widening and flattening to make it—him—more intimidating.

It absolutely works because I'm terrified.

I dive to the side and roll when the naga strikes for me. It pushes towards me with the help of his tail, propelling him forward with a force that surprises me.

More noises surround us, identical to the hissing sound of the naga in front of me.

Around me, glowing eyes appear in the faded light that shines down on the city from above. I crawl back on my hands and feet, quickly coming to a dead end when my back hits the building behind me.

I hear Angurus before I see him. He lets out another mighty roar and comes crashing through the gathering crowd of Naga. He takes a few of them down with his entire body weight, slamming them into the ground and knocking a few of the others away that are close by.

I feel my head spinning as I look at our predicament.

Even though Angurus is practically unstoppable, I don't believe he's invincible. And the sheer number of Naga that surrounds him could overwhelm him at any possible moment.

I feel my heart pound inside of my chest. We are so close to our goal, of finding the Lotus and getting out of here, that this somehow seems like a divine intervention from the gods in order to slow us down or stop us completely.

Were we not meant to discover the Lotus and save my sister? And if so, why?

I try and shake the thoughts from my head but they bang around so loudly that it's hard not to focus on them.

It seems that every time Angurus and I get one step forward, we're thrown five steps back.

I get to my feet again and look around for any kind of weapon that I can help him with. I know that I have a surmountable amount of strength from working in the minds, but it's nothing compared to his. Still, I can at least create enough of a distraction for him to get the upper hand.

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While the attention is off of me, I quickly run down an alleyway that leads me away from the fight. I can still hear the loud chaos of it even as I tread deeper into the city.

Old, worn looking shops pass me by in a blur. Their windows are boarded up and their doors nailed closed, despite the outward appearances looking up-kept and clean.

If this were any other time, I'd stop to look at them and soak in the history.

I find a shop a ways away that doesn't have anything covering the doors or windows and take that as a good sign. My shoulder hits the door hard, making it creak on its hinges. I do this a few times until the door finally busts open, causing me to stumble inside.

It's an old supply store that is covered in dust head-to-toe. I cough a few times and wave my hand in front of my face to clear the air enough for me to see and breathe. My eyes flit around, looking for any kind of weapon that I can use.

Along the walls are rows and rows of hardware tools. I scan them quickly, only really spotting a hammer and a few pairs of scissors that could be used as a weapon.

I know that they're going to be way too short and small for me to be able to deal any kind of damage to those things. I need something bigger and more pointy.

I head deeper into the store. They have to have something like a ladder or even a shovel that I can quickly grab and bash one of the naga over the head with. Some kind of heavy metal would do too.

Down towards the end of the aisle I'm in, I see something that looks like a familiar shape. I grab it and hold it up close enough for my eyes to barely see it in the darkness. I feel around at the top of it, making sure that it's what I think it is.

I grin. A pickaxe. I can use one of those very well.

Running to the entrance of the shop, I carry the pickaxe over my shoulder in order to keep it from swinging around wildly while I run. It would be my luck that I would either accidentally drop it and impale myself on it or end up stabbing through some part of an important body part while running.

I can still hear the fighting going on and it makes me a little less hopeless. Angurus is still fighting, that's a good sign.

I wish he had the room to shift into his dragon form, but the calcified rock hanging down from the ceiling, as well as the ones jutting up from the uneven ground, would make it way too hard to navigate without him getting completely cut up. Or worse: impaled.

As the sounds of the fighting grows closer, I clench my hand around the hilt of the axe and brace myself. I'd hoped that we wouldn't find any trouble while we were down here, but of course, luck couldn't be on our side.

I head directly into the fray and stop to swing my axe at the closest naga in my range. It hits him directly in the side, sinking deep into the scaled flesh and causing him to screech in pain. I rip the pick out of him before he can twist around to grab it and pull it out of my hands.

I spin on my heel and nail the next one, getting him right in the chest. I don't wait for the screech and waste no time in dragging the axe down the entire length of him until I hit right where his pelvis sits.



Blood pours out of his wound, causing him to let out a guttural noise that makes me shiver.

I pull my pick axe back, watching as both naga fall to the ground at my feet.

The noise from this causes the other naga to turn and realize my possession of a weapon.

I raise it in front of me and point it towards them. Possibly a stupid thing to do what I have no other means of protection.

Angurus swipes through a few other naga near him as well. His hands pry their jaws apart, cracking their heads open like a watermelon.

I don't have time to think about how gross that is because soon, a few naga decide to be bold and lunge at me. I swipe my axe at them, fending them off long enough to dart away and get some distance between us.

My heart pounds in my chest, hammering so hard that it's hard for me to hear anything over the roar of the blood rushing through my ears. The naga who trails me eyes me with a strange look that causes me to shudder.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say they were either sizing me up to eat me or fuck me. Whichever one it is, I can't tell. And honestly, I don't really want to.

When one of them gets close enough to me, I swing my axe and nail him in the side like I had done with the first one. But this time, I don't have enough of a quick reflex to pull my axe back in time.

The naga moves his entire body away from me with the axe still embedded into his side. The handle leaves my hands before I can even tighten my grip around it. I gasp

and stumble forward, my hands grasping at the air in front of me.

The other two naga behind him converge on me. Their eyes leer at me, making me shrink away from them.

I need to go and hide somewhere. Maybe I can out run them and find some other weapons to come back and help Angurus fight with.

I'm only able to take two steps back before Angurus comes crashing down on the naga in front of me. He takes them both down with his claws sunk into the backs of their heads. He pierces into the thick scales there, blood pouring over his hands while he crushes their faces into the dirt.

Their skulls crunch in his hands, but it's something that I find not grotesque but satisfying.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:07 pm*

I grin at him. “Angurus!”

He looks up to make eye contact with me, a smile spreading across his handsome features. “Kelly, I—”

His voice cuts off suddenly, his entire body seizing forward. I gasp and jump back, startled while his body wavers. As he falls, I see the pickaxe I’d used on the naga now embedded into his back.

The tip of it pokes out through his chest, just barely visible. He hits the ground with a dull thud that completely knocks the wind out of me.

“No!” I scream, my hands reaching out to Angurus’ fallen form.

No, no, no, no. He can’t be. He can’t be slain. Not like this!

I feel the ground quake under me and suddenly, everything is engulfed in red.

21

Angurus

I hear Kelly scream for me.

It’s a terrible sound—the despair in her voice. It makes me wonder if I’ve truly earned that kind of sorrow from her.

Will she miss me after I'm gone? Will she mourn me? How many tears will she shed over me?

As I lay dying on the ground, my mind starts to wander. I worry that Kelly won't be able to find her way out of this complicated system of caves and caverns by herself, or without the help of my illumination magic. She could stumble down a wrong tunnel and be forever lost.

That is, if the naga don't get to her first.

Will we die here together? I wish we could at least hold hands while we both bleed out. The naga will more than likely skin us down to our bodies and consume our flesh until there is nothing left of us but skeletons.

Then they'll use our bones as toothpicks and be off on their way once more.

Had I known there were naga here, I would've left Kelly back inside of the caverns and ventured down here alone. I'm sure my fate would've ended up one in the same as now, but at least Kelly would have a chance.

My body grows cold as more blood leaks out to puddle under me.

I wish we could've had more time to really understand each other. Falling for Kelly hasn't been a graceful process, but I don't regret any of it at all. Perhaps in another life, we can meet again.

I hear a rumbling that comes from beneath me. It rattles the rock of the chambers, causing the naga around us to grunt in confusion. I lift my head slightly to see where Kelly is, finding her a few feet away from me with a handful of naga surrounding her still.

The ground shakes and cracks apart where hot magma boils right underneath the surface. The heat is harsh against my face but doesn't burn me, seeing as I'm immune to it. The naga scatter, trying to avoid the bursts of flames that rip through the city streets.

It traps them in the small alcove that we've been fighting in between buildings.

I grunt and slowly force an arm under my chest to wedge my body up from the ground.

"Kelly..." I call to her, barely able to keep myself from toppling over again.

She stands slowly, a rage that seems terrifyingly out of place plasters over her face. I watch her in awe, her hands coming out in front of her to summon the magma up from the depths of the caverns.

The tidal waves of it all come crashing through the cracks that have been formed. Large arches curl and consume the naga that try to flee from it, but they're trapped within Kelly's circle of Glacies.

I squeeze my eyes shut when the magma hits me, too. While it doesn't burn me, it certainly isn't comfortable. The axe buried through me heats us from the molten rock, making my wound ten times more painful.

I grit my teeth together and hunker down while magma coats me completely. I'm surprised that our bond has given Kelly such strong abilities. Maybe she really will make it out of this bleak and forsake situation.

It isn't long until I feel a pair of hands pushing through the thick layers coating me to get at me. It's hard to lift my head with how heavy it is, though I try. A pair of arms hook under my armpits and lift me up until I break through the surface with a gasp.

“Oh, no, no, no.” Kelly mutters over me, pulling me over to a spot that hasn’t been coated yet. “Angurus! Angurus, please tell me you’re still with me!”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:07 pm*

I want to chuckle but it comes out more as a cough.

When she sets me down, she does so gently. What she does next is anything but.

Kelly puts a foot on the small of my back – now bare from my clothes being melted off of me – and yanks the axe straight out of my body.

A choked groan leaves my lips while my body flops back down onto the ground. I feel my skin start to knit itself back together almost instantly.

“Angurus?”

I groan at her. Why would she do it like that?

“You’re still with me!” she drops to her knees next to me.

I lift my head just enough to turn it towards her, my eyes blinking open in order to show that yes, indeed, I am still alive.

She lets out a surprised laugh with tears shimmering in her eyes. Her fingers come up to caress over my cheek and the fringe of my hair near my horns.

“When he put that axe through you, I—” her words are cut off as she swallows hard.

“Shhh,” I tell her. “I’m alright.”

“But you weren’t.”

I smile slowly. “You saved me.”

This seems to startle her. “I don’t know how I did that. It just happened.”

Neither do I, but I’m not going to question the logistics of our bond so near to us both almost dying. For now, the subject can be put on the back burner until we are in the state of mind to be able to sort it all out.

When it gets easier to breathe, I slowly push myself to sit up. There is a large scar on my chest from where the axe had punctured through, which I can imagine is also mirrored on my back.

I roll my shoulders, my body feeling almost as good as new.

Kelly leans forward to place a hand on my chest, covering up my scar.

I grab it and instead, lift it up to my lips to kiss it.

“I’m alright.”

“I was so scared when I saw you fall. I never thought you could be taken down.”

Her words are so sweet that I kiss each and every individual finger. My pride as a dragon has been hurt because I was taken down by filthy naga, but her wanting me to pull through so badly warms my stone cold heart.

I turn my head to look at the havoc that she’d wreaked and find that the molten rock has since started to cool down and harden. While I can’t see the naga that are now trapped and buried under all of that fresh magma, I know that they’re there for all of eternity now.



It makes me smile. She really did all of this for me?

Perhaps my heart isn't so stone cold anymore.

Turning back to Kelly, I cup her face and pull her into a deep kiss. She moans against my lips and leans her body weight into me. I shift back on my heels and hold her in a tight grip. I never want to let her go. Not now, not ever.

She drags her fingers through my hair, causing me to groan.

How twisted would it be if I laid her down right here and had my way with her? Would she let me?

Her body against mine tells me all I need to know.

Kelly tightens her grip in my hair and physically forces our mouths apart. I pant and laugh at her, knowing that my thoughts aren't far off from where hers are also going. Too bad we have other obligations to attend to.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:07 pm*

“We need to find,” she pants in sync with me. “My sister’s Lotus.”

I grab her wrist and tug her hand out of my hair.

“Yes, we do.”

Her lips crash against mine one more time. Our tongues dance with each other while we eagerly exude all of the pent up energy we sustained while we were fighting off the naga. I’m glad that she’s glad I’m alive. It reassures me that she won’t be leaving once we cure her sister.

“I love you,” she mumbles against my lips.

It makes my heart jolt in my chest.

I growl and run my hand down her spine, parting the side of her dress where I ripped it apart and grip her bare ass.

“You say that to me right now when we have things to do, Kelly...”

I feel her lips smile against mine. “Say it back.”

“I should take you right here and now,” I grumble.

Her hands find the sides of my face. “After the Lotus.”

I squeeze her ass cheek again.

It's a promise of things to come. I'm hard against her thigh and her body wiggling against me as she laughs is only making it worse. I itch to bury myself inside of her and plunge into that soft heat between her thighs to lose us both in the feeling of being one.

"After the Lotus," I solemnly agree.

"Good." I take my hand out from under her dress and grip her chin with it, locking eyes with her in a steady gaze. "I will have you."

A sly smile crosses her fair features. "I don't doubt that."

My thumb runs over her bottom lip, bruised from my kisses. I sigh softly to myself. I really am done for with her. There is no stopping me from becoming completely vulnerable to this human who I've claimed as my own.

She holds my whole heart delicately in her hands. She has the power to shatter it at any moment, and all I would be able to do is watch as the pieces of it fall to the ground beneath her feet.

Though I'll give myself to her willingly, as much as I hate to admit it. I'm not sure when all of this had begun to change in me, but it has and I can't stop it now.

"I love you, Kelly Brockhurst."

Her eyes widen. Had she not been expecting me to admit it so willingly? "You do?"

I smile and squeeze her cheeks. "Of course, I do."

She lets out an incredulous laugh and throws her arms around me, hugging me tight.

“I love you, Angurus. I really, really do.”

I can't help but bury my face into her neck, breathing her in and soaking in her warmth. This human woman has changed me in more ways than I can count. She'd come crashing into my life and had made herself a permanent resident inside of my heart.

I kiss up from her neck to her jaw, peppering her skin along the way. I don't want to let go of her, but I know we have a job to do. Saving Kara outweighs more than our newfound feelings for each other.

If only for just a little while longer.

When I pull back from her, I help her to her feet and brush off the dust that has collected on her dress from the rocks bursting apart when she'd called upon the magma. She smiles at me gratefully and squares her shoulders.

“Ready?”

I nod to her. “Let's go find your sister's Lotus.”

22

Kelly

Before we leave N'Kezza Dorana, I take Angurus through the streets to find another open shop.

Despite his protesting about not needing clothing, I didn't want him to have to walk around in the cold and dark caves without some kind of protection from it. My knowledge on dragon biology isn't the best, but when I'd pulled him out of the magma, he'd been shaking.

Though, now that I think about it, maybe that had something to do with him having a pickaxe practically skewing him and not because he'd been cold.

He lets me dress him in another set of clothing, however—this time a pair of drawstring pants and a shirt that he leaves the collar of unbuttoned. I spot the scar on his chest that has now dulled to a very faint pink.

I still can't believe he survived that axe through his body like that. Or the lava burying him like it had.

I feel guilty that I almost completely lost him when I was taking out all of those naga, but thankfully I'd been able to control the magic at that last moment before I'd let it all come rumbling up from the ground.

When the lava had begun to explode from the crust of the city, I was shocked. I've

never been able to conjure up magic before, let alone in a dangerous situation like we were in.

But I could feel that pulse of otherness running through my body, ordering me to take out as many of the enemies as I could in order to save my mate. He had needed me and I was the only one that had the power to save us.

Even if at the time, it felt like a fruitless effort.

But I'm so glad that it hadn't been in the end.

Angurus and I take to the streets once more when we are properly clothed. I keep to his side like glue and hold his hand while we walk down deserted streets.

"Do you think the naga were here long? And that they were the only ones?"

Angurus lifts his head, his eyes scanning the buildings that we pass by carefully.

"It's hard to say, really. Typically naga only like to inhabit one pocket of space that they'll defend to the death. So I'm not surprised that they took over this city."

I wish I could feel bad for completely wiping them out, but I don't. They were perfectly capable of telling us to leave and never return and instead they chose to fight us with no warning.

I've never been around naga before, so their temperament had been a mystery, but judging from what we'd encountered, they seemed heavily aggressive.

"I'm glad that we took them out."

Angurus turns to me and squeezes my hand. "You took them out. I merely slowed

them down.”

I smile up at him. “Not you letting me take all the credit.”

He raises both of his eyebrows. “I didn’t go that far.”

It makes me laugh.

We travel until we reach the other side of the city where the chamber narrows into a long tunnel.

Angurus thrusts his ball of illumination forward to let it lead us through to the other side. I’m surprised by how long it stretches, and notice that as we pass by, there are markings carved into the walls from hands that have long since abandoned these caverns.

I point at some of them.

“What do you think they mean?”

Angurus glances over at them, mostly keeping his eyes ahead to make sure that nothing could jump out and surprise us.

“The inhabitants of N’Kezza Dorana had a brilliant barter system that I’m sure they continued down here after their city was sunk.”

“Hm,” I look back to the walls.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:07 pm*

I wonder what happened to those inhabitants in order for them to up and abandon their city after preserving it so well down here.

Up ahead, there is a noise that sounds distinctly like the sound of running water. My curiosity peaks.

When we reach the end of the tunnel, another chamber opens up before us. Angurus' light cascades up to the top of the ceiling and hovers a few feet away from it. It casts light around the entire area, illuminating the waterfall that seems to come in from an unseen source.

I stop to marvel at it.

“Wow...”

Closer to us, thick green vines wrap around the sides of the walls and coat it in lush leaves and small white wildflowers. On the ground leading over to the waterfall are more flowers, each of them beautiful and vibrantly colored.

I take it all in with wonder. Never would I have thought that something this magical could be down here.

Angurus slips his hand out of mine and treads through the flowers. His head is bent over, looking for something.

“You think it's here?” I follow after him.



He wanders for a few minutes silently, bending over to look at over a dozen flowers. He carefully inspects each one with a gentleness that I've never seen in him before. It makes me wonder what else, besides me, would he be that kind with.

It's humid inside of the chamber, much more so the closer we get to the waterfall. I look up when I reach the base of it and see that it seems to be coming from a fissure in the wall. I wonder if the Dark Elves that used to live here irrigated it that way.

The water falls into an endless pit down below, the ledge of which I look over to see where it goes. The flowers seem to sit on top of some kind of ledge that has formed due to the erosion from the waterfall, though it's a mystery as to how the flowers got here and have survived.

It must be some kind of magic.

"I'm afraid there is some bad news, Kelly."

I turn away from the water to head back over to him. "Is it not here?"

I hope that he doesn't say yes—in fact, I'm terrified. This was our only lead and if it doesn't pan out, then I'm back to square one.

"It is, but it's been crossbred."

I blink. "Crossbred?"

His eyes shimmer in the light from above as he turns toward me. "The flower is not pure as it once was."

My head swivels around to the flowers that surround us. There aren't any pollinators in here, so how in the world would it have been able to interbreed with the other

flowers around it? You think the dark elves did that?"

He shrugs a shoulder, twisting the flower by the stem to inspect it.

"Hard to say. The only problem is that I have no idea whether this will have the full effects of the actual Paradise Lotus or if it will be some kind of watered down version."

I sigh and take the flower away from him. "We don't have any other options, do we?"

He shakes his head at me. A rare forlornness crosses his features.

I know he doesn't particularly care about Kara, but I appreciate that he cares that I care. "If it doesn't work, we shall find something else."

I nod and hold back another sigh.

The only problem is that I don't think Kara has any more time left. I'd only been gone for a few days when I'd gone to Angurus' island and found him, and Kara's violent episodes had only increased.

There really is no telling how long I had before I lost her to her curse completely. There is no telling what exactly she'll even turn into.

Angurus bends and picks a few more flowers, all of them with similar looking petals to the Lotus but had different color variations.

"We'll take a few of the crossbreds and see if any of them work for her. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky and by combining them all together, it will negate the effects just like a regular Lotus."

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:08 pm*

I smile a little at him, even through my sadness.

I really do love this dragon. Even though he can drive me crazy, he still is trying to help me and my sister.

“Okay. We’ll do that, then.”

\* \* \*

We pack the flowers carefully and fly out through the hole in the top of the chamber over the city center.

It’s much easier heading out that way versus trying to navigate our way back through the caverns and figuring out how not to get lost again while backtracking. I make sure to navigate Angurus carefully through the stalactites that hang down, ready to skewer him again.

When we clear the caverns and fly off into the morning light, I’m finally able to breathe again. Even though we’d taken out the naga settlement, I still had been waiting for something to come and jump out to attack us to finish off the job that had been started.

I hold onto Angurus’ horns tight while we fly back to the encampment, my mind wandering back to my sister once again. I hope that Old Agatha has kept her relaxed and she hasn’t had any more outbursts. That woman deserves more than what I can provide her with.

Maybe after this is all over, I can have Angurus take me back to his cave where I can snatch a few of his treasures and bring them back for Old Agatha to have.

I'm sure she could find plenty of things to do with a pile of coins – a small mound of ipias no less! – at her disposal. Maybe it would help her fix up that hut of hers just like she's been wanting to do.

We reach the familiar terrain of Northern Kaynvu in just under a few hours.

With the flowers clutched in my hands and his clothing draped over my arm, I have Angurus touch down behind one of the buildings near the outskirts. He shifts and takes his clothes back from me, his fingers deftly buttoning and tying himself into his garments.

Since I hadn't been able to find him a cloak or a hood of some kind, we'll need to stay as far away from people as possible. The only upside to that is that it's around noontime, so everyone should be hard at work in the mines besides Agatha.

As our village healer, she is entrusted with certain privileges that the rest of us don't have.

We quickly hurry through the streets, keeping our heads down and diving behind things at the occasional crossroads. When we get to Agatha's hut, I quickly push the door open and drag Angurus inside.

"Agatha?" I call for her.

I round the corner, expecting to see her standing in the kitchen but it's surprisingly void of her.

That's strange. There's a pot of something boiling on her stove.

“Where is she?” Angurus asks me.

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

Just as I’m about to tell him that we should head outside and look around the back where her garden is, I hear someone crash through the front door.

Angurus’ arm comes around to shield me behind his large frame.

I peak over his shoulder, bracing myself as whoever it is comes around the corner.

I blink when I see a haggard-looking Agatha.

“Kelly?” her voice sounds rough, like she is hoarse from screaming.

“What happened?”

She shakes her head at me. “They have her. The orcs came and took Kara away.”

23

Angurus

Ifly us to the mines as fast as my wing can beat.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:08 pm*

Kelly holds onto the back of my neck, her head tucked down against my scales while the wind whips by us.

Never did I imagine seeing such horror on my mate's face when that old woman had been describing what the orcs had done after they'd discovered her sister. Apparently, their plan was to hold Kara in the mines, far away from everyone, and lock her inside of a cage.

They planned on leaving her in it in order to observe what exactly the curse's effects were and how long it would take to manifest and completely take over Kara's entire body until she was no longer recognizable.

I'm sure there is more to the story than simply being cruel to a human. While orcs aren't exactly calculating creatures, they are intelligent enough to know a potential weapon when they see one.

Considering the fact that Kara's outbursts have been getting more frequent and more violent, I'm sure once the orcs caught wind of it, they decided that they were going to keep Kara as some kind of beastly pet to unleash on whatever they felt like.

Kelly didn't need to even look at me or plead with me before I had already dragged her outside and shifted.

At this point, hiding myself is useless. We aren't going to get anywhere by sneaking around and trying to find her sister now that the orcs had her captive.

We were going to need to go in there blazing like the pits of Glacies.

Kelly guides me to where the mines are, her hands tug on my horn like a lead, shifting my position ever so slightly until I can spot the entrance to the mines myself.

I can see from here that there are humans coming in and out of the mineshaft. Their faces are tired and haggard—no doubt from spending so much time underground in the cold, damp darkness.

When they spot me flying above them, most of them scatter with screams of terror. I would find it amusing if I wasn't so focused on finding Kara.

I land at the entrance to the mines, lowering myself just enough so that Kelly can slide off of my shoulder and onto the ground. I beat my wings a few times, kicking up enough wind to blow dust and dirt down the mineshaft.

A few of the orcs—ones who are manning the equipment by the entrance—come running over. They have their weapons drawn, big hunks of metal attached to thick sticks, while beating their chest with their fists.

I snort at the display.

“I'm going to go inside and find my sister!” Kelly yells, already jogging towards the entrance.

I turn my head, wanting to follow her. I need to take care of these mindless idiots first.

I suck in a deep breath and release flames from my mouth. A few humans nearby scream again and abandon their equipment in order to get out of the way.

I take off into the sky, keeping my fire blazing while I rain it down onto the Orcs.

Their skin sizzles and melts down to the bones. My fire is hot enough to burn through metal if I concentrate it long enough into one spot. I tilt my body back and hover in the air to beat my wings hard enough to fan the flames that engulf the orcs.

I'm glad to hear their agonized screams. It really is music to my ears.

These terrible creatures have done more harm to my mate and her family than anything else on this forsaken island. I want to watch them reap what they sow and destroy every last piece of them in honor of her. As her protector, they must pay.

Once the final one drops dead to the ground in a heap of burning flesh, I head into the mines. It's cramped enough in the tunnel that I have to resort to running on all fours—not something that I'm particularly used to.

I see up ahead that there are lights that illuminate the end of the tunnel, casting a wide glow into a bigger cavern inside. When I reach it, I realize that the mind doesn't extend outward, but down.

Floors have been carved on each level down into the deep hole that looks to reach at least a mile down into the crust of Kaynvu. I'm a bit struck by it, mostly because this kind of work is something that I would expect from a dark elves' civilization. Not an orc encampment.

Since there is much more room to fly here, I lift off from the sheer drop in front of me and glide down. I don't have any idea where Kelly could've gone, but I can still recognize her scent well enough to follow it.

It leads me down to one of the back sectors of the mines, following the line of the elevator that is stationed in the middle of the long drop to whatever ground they've hit so far.



I can hear loud shouting from one of the tunnels up ahead, causing me to follow the sounds and land on the ledge leading down one of the more narrow tunnels.

“Let her go!” I hear Kelly yell.

A growl leaves my throat.

A see two silhouettes running towards me. Their lithe figures are familiar even if they're hard to see in the shadows. I tuck my wings into my back, giving them both enough room when they clear the tunnel and hit the landing.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:08 pm*

“Angurus!” Kelly’s relief is palpable. “Take Kara and get out of here!”

I shake my head at her in disagreement. Is she insane? I’m not going to leave her here. She has no weapons on her and no means to defend herself. And even if she did, I still wouldn’t let her.

I scoop both sisters up in my clawed hands and launch us all into the air. Kara screeches in surprise, much like her sister did when I did this same thing to her only a short while ago. I carry us up to the main tunnel, ignoring the Orcs who appear at the mouth of the tunnel.

Once I get these two to safety, I’m coming back to scorch the rest of them into oblivion.

However, just as I reach the landing to the main entrance, a spear pierces my wing. I collide with the ground immediately on my side, cut off from properly landing on my feet rather than my chest.

Both girls scream.

My body comes to a grinding halt a few feet into the tunnel leading out while sharp pain shoots through my damaged wing. I lift my head and survey the hole that has punctured straight through my wing.

Those absolute barbarians.

I let go of both of the girls, dropping them unceremoniously to the ground.

“Go,” I growl.

“No!” Kelly tries to grab at my arm. “I’m not leaving you!”

I stand slowly and shake her off. “Go. Now. Let me take care of this.”

“Come on, Kelly.” Kara grabs her sister and drags her down the tunnel.

I’m glad at least one of them has the sense to know that they are heavily out-matched. Arching my back, I grab a hold of the end of the spear with my teeth and yank it straight out of my wing with a hard snap.

It stings coming back out, but at least now my wing will be able to heal properly.

I see the ropes of the elevator moving as the orcs twist it to get back to my level. Even if I need to set this entire mine on fire, I’m not going to let them come out of this mineshaft alive and intact.

Coming over to the ledge again, I spot a group of them inside of the elevator box. All of them, besides the one cranking the wheel, have their weapons raised.

A spear shoots at me again.

I catch it between my teeth easily and crunch it in half like a twig.

Easy.

I expand my lungs with a deep breath, hard enough to make my chest hurt from the pressure. I explode flames from my mouth, dousing them all in a fiery inferno. All of them cry in agony as I hit them, melting them beyond recognition.

Their elevator catches on the rope holding it up, a safety measure that I'm sure had been put in place in case anyone accidentally took their hands off the crank wheel. But I burn the ropes too, sending their box crashing down into the dark depths below.

The remaining orcs that had been watching on the ledge from their vantage point, scatter to run back into the mine that Kara had been held captive in. I smirk to myself and flex my wings in order to test out how much I've healed.

It twinges only a little bit. Good enough.

I take off for them, blowing fire the entire way down. I incinerate every last one of them as I chase them through every single mine on that floor. It's a fun game of prey versus predator that fuels my ancient brain.

Those that I'm not able to douse in fire, I catch with my teeth and rip them apart.

I don't care that I'm making a mess in the process. None of these orcs deserve a painless death, let alone a dignified one.

When I finally finish with the last one, I take off into the air again and fly to the entrance's landing. All around me are small fires where corpses have been scattered around haphazardly. They remind me of the lanterns that were said to light the way to N'Kezza Dorana.

I head out through the tunnel, the sunny skies of Kaynvu greeting me along with a crowd of humans. I stop short, surprised at how many of them clog up the entrance leading outside.

I let out a growl, making them all scatter away from me.

Where is my mate?

I crane my head to look around, spotting her running over to me.

She immediately throws her arms around me when I lower my head for her. I can feel her heart pounding in her chest as well as smell the bitter worry that rolls off of her.

“I was so scared. You took so long down there.”

I nuzzle into her body. “They’re all dead.”

She pulls back from me in surprise. “Allof them?”

I nod at her. “Every last one.”

She stares at me for a long moment, completely taken aback that I’d killed every last one of the orcs that were inhabiting the mines. I’m sure there are more on this island that need to be taken care of, but for now, her vermin problem has been taken care of.

She grins at me and turns to the crowd of humans that have yet to actually leave us alone.

“The orcs are dead!”

I’m startled when they all begin to cheer.

What... is going on?

“You did it,” Kelly tells me, throwing her arms back around me again. “You did it.”

“Did what?” I ask, incredulously.

She lifts her head and looks at me with tears in her eyes. “You freed us.”

24

Kelly

After the fall of the orcs, our lives begin to change drastically.

As once oppressed beings, it felt like one big trick that we were finally rid of the orcs who had controlled us for so long. No longer were we going to be forced to work in the mines until we died from exhaustion. No longer were we going to be forced to breed and create more livestock for them to abuse.

It all felt like an incredible dream that no one wanted to wake up from.

Angurus had been praised to the high heavens for his actions. His heroism has earned him the kind of notoriety that only a king possessed. Unanimously, it'd been decided that the encampment was to be named after his actions: Angurus' Mercy, in order to honor him.

Of course, he'd soaked up the attention like the vain dragon he is. But he'd charmed enough people into letting him stay among us without fear that they needed to chase him off of Kaynvu.

Which had been a relief to me. I didn't want to leave my sister, but I also didn't want my mate being forced to leave either. Now, I get to live a happy life with both of them.

I move us back to my and Kara's hut after things have started to settle down. I know that eventually, Angurus and I will need a bigger place to stay, but for the meantime this works.

As for my sister, Old Agatha and I had tried a few different combinations in order to find the purest form of the Lotus that we possibly could. For now, Kara's curse has been put into remission, though the cure still eludes us.

It's a disappointment for sure, but at least she won't be getting worse any time soon.

“What are you thinking about?”

I look over, seeing Angurus coming out of the hut—dressed for once—and stride over to me.

I smile at him and turn back to the encampment. I've been people-watching all morning because it's been hard to sleep lately. I think it's the restlessness left over from our long journey that I've finally started to come down from.

Angurus wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me back into his chest and fitting us together perfectly. He buries his nose in my neck, breathing me in.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:08 pm*

“I was just thinking about Kara.”

“Mmm,” he kisses his way up to my jaw. “Are you worried?”

I sigh. “Yes. I don’t want her to get worse.”

“She won’t. That Lotus will keep her curse contained for now.”

It makes me frown. I hate that my sister still has to suffer, even if she technically isn’t getting any worse.

As if sensing this, Angurus kisses my cheek.

“There is another dragon that I know of that may have a better understanding of curses like your sister’s.”

I turn my head to look at him. “Really?”

He nods. “He’s more well-versed in the apothecary. Much more than me, anyway. I will seek him out for you in hopes that it will help find your sister’s cure.”

I turn fully in his arms in order to cup my hands around his cheeks. I pull him down into a kiss.

“Thank you,” I say softly.

He claims my mouth again hungrily. His tongue pierces through my lips to explore



every inch of my mouth. I moan into his kiss, letting him suck on my tongue and grab at the loose shirt he's wearing.

His hand slides down to cup my ass and squeeze it between his fingers.

He pulls back from me roughly.

“Come inside.”

My eyes flutter open. “But, Kara...”

“She went down to the market. We have plenty of time.”

I don't argue with him. Instead, I let him grab me and throw me over his shoulder in order to carry me inside. I duck my head under the doorway, grabbing the side of it to push it closed behind us.

Angurus wastes no time and strides over to the bed, dropping me down onto it. I slide backwards and spread my legs, my dress parting at the side where he'd cut the slit up in order to show off my brand. He'd done that with all of my dresses the second we'd settled in.

In fact, it was the first task he'd given himself.

I can see his impressive length pressing up against the seam of his pants. It makes me bite my lip in anticipation and rub my thighs together at the wetness that collects there.

“I can smell your arousal,” he growls, crawling over me.

His hand finds the side of my dress, pulling it apart to expose me to him. I've gotten

accustomed to being naked underneath my dress. There is no point in wearing undergarments because more than once has Angurus gotten impatient and simply ripped them off of me.

So now, I don't bother.

He lets out a satisfied noise when he sees me bare already and fists his hand in the material at my bust. His fingers tug on the laces that hold my dress together, deftly untying them and freeing my breasts from their constraints.

It makes me moan and lean my head back.

I know he wants to taste me. His eyes tell me that he wants to lick every inch of me and mark me with love bites as he goes on his way. My body shakes from anticipation from it, I want to feel those perfect lips of his on every part of my skin.

He pushes me down onto the bed and grabs my thighs to turn me longways on the mattress. He holds them back against my chest, giving him a nice view of me and how wet I am for him. He licks his lips while staring down at me.

“Do you want to taste me?” I ask in a husky voice.

His only answer is another growl before he's leaning down and running his tongue flat against my wetness.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:08 pm*

I have to grip the sheets by my head in order to keep myself from rolling my hips against his mouth. In situations like these, he likes to take all of the control and leave me at his mercy until I beg for release.

He flicks his tongue playfully around my clit, making my body practically jump off of the bed.

“Angurus!”

I can feel him smirking against my skin. He’s clearly pleased by my reactions to what he’s doing. But of course I am, he’s practically a god when it comes to lighting my body on fire like this.

I let out a strangled moan when his tongue plunges inside of me. It tastes every inch of me, scooping in and out to mimic what he’ll do to me once he has me begging for it. I cry for him again and twist my hands tighter in the sheets.

I know that I’m going to have to remake this bed before my sister gets back, because at this rate, it’ll be completely obvious what exactly transpired in order to mess it up so badly.

My hips long to roll against that incredible mouth of his. I want more friction—Ineedit. But I know he will only give me as much as he wants me to and demanding anything else will result in a longer tease.

Angurus presses his nose into my clit, rubbing it while he continues to move his tongue in and out of me. I drip onto his tongue and down onto the bed underneath us,

my body soaked and ready for him to take me hard and fast.

I want to feel his body pounding against mine while he stretches me wide with his incredible cock. I want him to fill me with every inch of him until it feels like he's splitting me in two.

I want him so desperately.

He pulls back from me, making me whine in frustration. He causes him to chuckle and squeeze my thighs before letting them go. He slides off of the bed and tosses his clothes into a heap on the floor at the foot of the bed.

With one knee pressing into the mattress again, he grabs at the front of my dress to pull me over.

"Come here."

Eagerly, I roll onto my side. My lips part when he presses the head of his cock against them and I easily swallow him into my mouth.

Both of us moan in unison.

Angurus threads his fingers through my hair and curls them at the back of my neck. He holds my head up with both hands and slowly thrusts into my mouth. I love watching his hips roll like this. It's erotic and causes me to squeeze my legs together again.

He tilts his head back, breathing out heavily while I take him deep into my throat. He fills every part of me perfectly, letting me know that we really are perfect for each other.

I open my mouth a little wider, allowing him to pick up the pace and thrust a little faster. His fingers tighten in my hair, causing me to let out another moan while he fills me so deep he practically hits the back of my throat.

I gasp when he pulls me back by my hair, popping himself out of my mouth suddenly. He pants softly, his skin glistening over with a thin sheen of sweat. I look up at him and lick my lips at the taste of him, wanting more.

“You are the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen.” He takes his hands out of my hair to cup my face.

I smile at him, my chest warming from the praise.

He lifts himself back up off the bed and pulls me with him. Putting a hand at the small of my back, he fits our bodies together again and kisses me deeply. His tongue runs over mine again, taking me in just as hungrily as ever.

Angurus’ hands find the fasteners of my dress and slowly undoes them down my entire back. He lets my dress fall to the floor at my feet and lifts me out of it once I’m free. I wrap my legs around his waist, feeling his cock rub up against me and create unbelievable friction.

I shiver at our contact.

“I need you.”

“I know,” he tells me.

He sets me back down onto the bed, his hand curved under my ass to prop my hips up properly. I bite my lip and hold back another whine when he untangles my legs from around him and separates us again.

“Angurus...”

“Shhh,” he pushes my legs apart, rolling his hips into mine.

I close my eyes and moan at the contact. “Please...”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:08 pm*

“Please what, my mate?”

I arch my back, presenting myself to him. “Please take me. I need you.”

“Mmm, that’s what I like to hear.”

I let out a startled cry when he finally plunges all the way into me.

25

Angurus

I rock our hips together.

Kelly cries under me. Her sweet sounds are like music to my ears. I love the desperation in her voice as she calls out my name. Repeating it over and over again like an oath of devotion to me.

I’ve already gotten her entire encampment’s devotion, and hers is just the cherry on top for me.

Since defeating the orcs, I’ve decided to stay here and take over the mines myself. I’m not foolish enough to work them all to death like the orcs had been fond of doing, completely eradicating their workforce in droves.

No, I am going to make sure that their working conditions are comfortable. Because happy workers means profitable means. I’m not exactly starving for money, but I

want to provide wages for the camp, and in order to do that, we need a profit coming from the mines.

No human has protested my take-over anyway. They know that it's a much better deal than working under the orcs anyday.

Now my days are spent overseeing that pet project before finally being able to come back here and make love to my sweet mate until she can barely remember her name. Hopefully soon we will have our own place and won't be constantly interrupted by her sister.

But until then, I make due with what I have.

Holding Kelly's legs fully apart, I snap my hips and thrust into her at a punishing pace. It makes the entire bed move against the floor, the frame of it squeaks in protest while I pound into her.

Kelly's breasts bounce against her chest in an erotic way, causing me to let go of her legs in favor of leaning over to wrap my mouth around one of them. I suck on her skin and play with her nipple between my teeth.

Her groans of pleasure fill up the entire hut, which I'm sure can be heard from outside of it too. But I don't care. If the humans in this village wanted to peep in on what a real fucking was like, than that was there prerogative.

Kelly's fingers dive into my hair and wrap around my horns in order to hold my mouth against her chest. It makes me grin at how much she can let loose when I have her this aroused. I love seeing her come completely undone under me.

"Angurus!" she screams as her first orgasm hits her hard.



Her entire body arches off of the bed, forcing me to press my weight down over her to keep her from rolling off of the mattress. I continue to pound into her, our hips slapping together while the bed shakes hard enough to threaten breaking.

Honestly, once I do break this bed, it will be a crowning achievement for me.

Her hands loosen on my horns, giving me enough time to pull my mouth away from her chest and lean back from her. I stop moving inside of her and pull myself out, causing her to whine in frustration at the sudden absence.

“Roll over, my mate.” I tell her. “I want to see you on your hands and knees.”

As obedient as ever, Kelly quickly rolls over onto her side before propping herself up onto her hands and knees. Her back arches again, positioning her hips up in order to offer herself to me.

I groan at the display, my cock wanting desperately to be inside of her again.

I move her closer to me and sit up on my knees in order to line our hips up again. My hands grip her waist, pulling her back until her body swallows me up again. Her warm heat feels like the golden lands of Helias, paradise and absolutely everything I’ve ever wanted.

With a hard thrust, I plunge deep inside of her.

She gasps at the force, her hips jolting because of it.

“My mate, you fit me so perfectly. You know what?”

She nods quickly, her hair bouncing over her shoulders from the motion.

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I reach out and grab it with one of my hands, holding it in a tight grip while I continue to slam into her over and over again. Our skin makes a clapping sound, loud and dirty and filthy enough to make anyone overhearing us blush.

It makes me grin in satisfaction. Mine. She is all mine.

The hand still gripping her hip slides around to the front of where her pelvis is. My fingers brush over her brand, knowing exactly where it is without even having to look. The spot heats up against my fingertips.

“Mine.” I growl at her. “You are mine. My mate.”

Kelly lets out a shuttering gasp, her body starting to shake again from another impending orgasm.

“Do you hear me?” I tug on her hair and pull her back against my chest.

My free arm wraps around her as I sit back on my feet, trapping her against my body. Her heart beats erratically against his chest and another moan escapes her lips as she leans back to rest her head on my shoulder, exposing her pretty neck for me.

“I’m yours,” she tells me. “All yours.”

I tighten my grip in her hair, pulling her head back more so that I can sink my teeth into the soft skin at the base of her neck. I mark her there too, just like I have at her hip.

I feel her body clenching around my cock, desperately wanting to orgasm once again. I don't move as I suck at her skin, leaving red marks all the way up until I hit her jawline.

She groans at me.

“Angurus...”

I flatten my tongue and lick up the length of her neck over my bites. Perfect. Now everyone in the encampment will know she belongs to someone even if they don't happen to look down at her bare hip.

I let her hair go and sneak my hand down between her legs. My hips start moving again, pumping up into her wet heat. Kelly lets out another shameless moan and lets her head loll against my shoulder.

I flick my fingers over her clit, causing her hips to jolt and another orgasm to hit her hard.

She screams, grabbing onto the arm that is still wrapped around her body and holding her up. She clings to me as her body convulses, her eyes screwed shut as tears brim at the lashes.

I kiss her cheek, licking up the salty tears that happen to fall when she squeezes her eyes.

“More!” she screams at me.

My greedy mate. She wants me to fuck her name right out of her skull.

I throw her back onto the bed again and grab her by the hips once more. Using both

of my hands I hold her steady and pound deep inside of her, making the bed shake again.

“Yes!” Kelly’s hands grip the sheets.

Although her face is pressed down into the mattress, she has her lower body propped up so perfectly for me.

The image of it is so erotic that it makes me lean my head back and close my own eyes. I love how she wraps around me like a glove. She squeezes me so perfectly that it’s hard to keep myself from falling right over the edge the second that I’m inside of her.

I’m glad that when she came to me, she wasn’t entangled with anybody else back here in Kaynvu. Because if that had been the case, I would’ve unleashed war onto this place and turned it into the same kind of fiery pits as I did with the orcs in the mines.

I would’ve loved to string up her lovers and roast them alive.

“A-Angurus!”

I open my eyes and turn back to my beautiful mate. I know that we’re both close again, and I want us both to come together in unison. I want us to feel each other’s release at the same time, our pleasure combining into an amalgamation of the both of us.

I take my hands off of her hips and lean forward to curl my hands under her. I cup my hands over her breasts and press my chest into her back. My hips hammer into hers, causing us both to gasp as our orgasms sneak right out of us both.

I pour into her, my body ready to give her everything that I have. She greedily takes it

all, clenching around me and pulsating until I'm completely spent.

I thrust into her one final time before slowly coming to a rest against her.

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“Ohhh...” she moans, relaxing into the mattress.

I pant heavily against her shoulder, my entire body going limp as well. No matter that I’ve fucked her hard enough to cause her memory loss, I’ve in turn done much the same to myself.

I nuzzle my face into her shoulder and kiss her soft skin a few times. My arms curl around her entire body and squeeze her back against my chest. I hold her as both of our hammering heart beats slowly come down from the exertion.

Kelly lets out a small laugh, surprising me.

“What?” I ask her.

She surprises me by saying, “I love you.”

I blink. “Oh?”

“Mmm...”

I smirk and nip at her shoulder. “I love you, too.”

26

Kelly

Things are so much better with Angurus in charge, as I knew they would be. I trust

my mate to be as fair, kind and generous with my people as he is with me, so I know he is the perfect choice to lead our people.

He professed when we first met to be a hard-headed, stubborn, careless man but I saw the real him and I knew my people would feel the same—that Angurus was a benevolent ruler who we could look towards for guidance and help.

Even though they work hard in the mines, Angurus insists that the villagers work no more than six hours a day, four days a week. He's very stubborn about this schedule and allows everyone plenty of time off to spend with their families.

If they're sick, he makes sure that they don't go to work and that they're taken care of. Agatha is promoted to Head Healer and has two apprentices now, who she's teaching to heal the villagers as well.

No one is starving anymore, either. Everyone gets equal shares of grain rations and we now have a few villagers who tend to the taura and the capra, which we're allowed to use for milk and meat now.

Angurus gets help from the villagers to build us a manor. We build sturdy, solid walls around the village to protect them and he even hires some of the villagers as his servants.

We settle in and begin leading the town towards a brighter future.

“Mistress,” my handmaiden, Amanda, speaks up. I look up from where I'm leaning out the window of my room. I'm not used to having my own servants but as Lady of Angurus' Mercy, I have my own household staff.

“Yes?”

“Lord Angurus is requesting your presence,” she says, curtsying.

“Thank you, Amanda,” I bow my head and wave, dismissing her. Angurus taught me how to manage the household, according to his own dark elven customs. I had to get used to being a Lady but I confess, deep down, I don’t mind it as much as I protest.

It’s certainly not what I expected when I set foot in that cave all those months ago. I was merely looking for a cure for my sister, not to fall in love with a dragon. Still, living a life as a Lady, ruling over my village with my mate is quite a step up from tirelessly working the mines watching my sick sister suffer under the orcs.

I smooth out my skirts, checking myself over in the tall looking-glass next to the mirror before departing.

Angurus is in his study, pouring over land surveys, mine operation reports, and building requests.

“Did you know that none of the village children attend school?” he asks, looking up at me. I tilt my head, staring at him. Of course I know that.

“This needs to be remedied at once.” He holds up a sheet of parchment. “I would like to arrange for one of the more educated villagers to tutor the children every day. No more working in the mines. We will pay their parents a stipend, enough to keep them from worrying about any lost wages.”

“You are so kind,” I praise him. “Far more kind than you let yourself believe. I think that is an exceptional idea. I have the right person in mind as well—April McMahon is one of the smartest girls in the entire village and would be the perfect schoolteacher.”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll have the schoolhouse built at once and Mistress April will be in



charge of the children if she is amenable.”

I smile a wide grin, throwing my arms around his neck and give him a quick kiss.

“Thank you! I love you very much, Angurus the Terrible,” I tease.

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“And I love you, silly human girl,” he nuzzles into me, breathing in my scent. He says it’s a dragon thing, though I think he just likes any excuse to be close.

Without another word, he scoops me up in his arms and carries me off to his bedroom, the largest room in the manor with plenty of warm furs to wrap ourselves in during the cold winter, or just when we feel like giving into our most primal selves.

“Shall I show you just how I polish my treasure?” he asks as he deposits me onto the furs, arching an eyebrow. He knows exactly what he’s doing, recreating our first time together, back in his cave.

“Yes, you must take good care of your treasure,” I insist, spreading my thighs. “It’s been simply ages since I’ve had a good cleaning. Maybe two whole days!”

“We must remedy this one at once,” Angurus’ eyes darken and he looks over me, lips curling into that predatory smirk that sends a coil of desire through my belly.

He ducks down under my skirts and gives me a very,verythorough polishing.

Afterwards, he helps me sit up and straighten my clothing just as a servant starts knocking on the door with loud, quick knocks.

“Come in,” I order, slipping off the bed like we hadn’t just had an afternoon romp. The servant enters, eyes wide.

“Lady Kelly, it’s your sister.”

I know as soon as the servant says it's Kara what's happening and I fly past them, hurrying towards the entrance of the manor.

Kara has been getting sicker again. The cure we administered was temporary – we knew this at the time but we hoped it would last longer than a few months. Unfortunately, she's been having her episodes.

And it seems like she's having one now, I observe as I rush to the hut she's been sharing with Agatha's apprentice, Amelia.

Things are tense when I arrive. Amelia is clutching her nose, which is bleeding profusely. Kara is hissing and scratching at Agatha's other apprentice, who is trying to hold her back. It's worse than I've ever seen Kara.

"Hold her down!" Agatha screeches from the corner. "I'm going to administer this potion but you have to hold her down!"

"I'm trying!" Desdemona shouts back. "She's scratched my face up!"

"She broke my nose!" Amelia holds a handkerchief to her face.

"I can help!" I jump into action, pulling Kara away from Desdemona and holding her arms behind her back. "I've got her!"

Agatha approaches but Kara is still snarling and hissing, snapping her jaw at the healer. Agatha nods to Desdemona who holds Kara's jaw open and Agatha quickly shoves a spoonful of herbal medicine into Kara's mouth.

My stomach rolls at the sight, watching my sister forcefully administered medication that will sedate her for a few hours.

“What happened?” I ask, hugging Kara to me as she begins to slump down.

Angurus was hot on my heels and appears inside the hut as well, pulling Kara away from me as she goes limp so he can lay her body on the cot. “Is everything alright?” he asks.

“She was fine! She was working in the mines when she started to seize,” Desdemona says, wringing her hands. “One of the workers brought her here and we were going to check her over when she came to and started attacking Amelia.”

“I’m sorry,” I wince, looking at poor, beat-up Amelia. “I was hoping that the cure was going to last longer than this.”

“It seems not,” Agatha shakes her head. “I fear that the disease is progressing more rapidly now than ever.”

“I don’t know what we’re going to do,” I move towards Kara’s unconscious body and brush her hair out of her face. “Can’t we administer more of the Paradise Lotus?”

“I don’t think it will help,” Angurus looks over Kara’s form, brow knit together. “I was worried about this. After all that cross pollination, it’s not as effective as it might have once been.”

I sigh and rub a hand over my face. “Keep an eye on her,” I ask Agatha. “I’ll come by later to check and make sure she’s okay. We’re just going to have to keep her unconscious for now.”

It isn’t a solution I like—it isn’t a solution at all, really, but what can we do? There’s no other option. It’s best for her safety and for the safety of our villagers. As the Lord and Lady of the land, our duty was to protect all our people now.

I can't put Kara's life ahead of the other villagers. The orcs were concerned only with themselves and that made them selfish, greedy monsters. I am determined to be nothing like them.

Following Angurus back to the manor, I grab him before we head inside. "Are you certain we can't get more of the Paradise Lotus?"

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“It’s not really a long-term solution,” Angurus says, pulling me to his chest. I’m not as short as Kara but I do like how much taller he is, so I can rest my head against his chest. I can hear his heart beating and I feel my own slow down.

“I know, but we have to do something,” I say, looking up at him. His eyes find mine and his furrowed brow goes slack.

“I promised to find a cure, and even if I have to go to the ends of Protheke to find it, I will help your sister,” he vows. It’s moments like this that remind me exactly why I fell in love with him.

“Thank you,” I say, my voice cracking. “Thank you Angurus.”

“I would do anything for you, my love, my mate,” he cups my cheek and gives me a kiss, settling the whirring in my stomach.

We eat an early dinner and I head back out for the village to check up on Kara and see if she’s feeling any better.

As I arrive in the village, though, I catch a hooded figure sneaking around amongst the huts. “Halt!” I order, reaching for the dagger that Angurus gifted me for protection. “Who goes there?”

The figure slips between the huts and I give chase, determined to catch up and reveal the culprit skulking around the camp.

“Stop!” I grab their hood, pulling it back to reveal...

“Kara?”

“I’m sorry, Kelly!” she says, pulling her cloak back from my fingers.

“Were you leaving?” My voice breaks.

“I can’t stay. You know that and I know that. It’s no longer safe!” Kara protests, twisting her fingers into the material of her cloak. “I’m a danger to the others and to myself. I broke Amelia’s nose, Kelly! What if I break someone’s limbs next, or worse! I slaughtered those mine workers. If they were to ever find out the truth, they would banish me.”

I know she’s right. It still doesn’t make it hurt any less to see her leaving. “What are you going to do?” I ask, tears blurring my vision.

“I’m going to seek the dragon Mordis,” she says, clenching her fists. “I have to find a cure. I won’t live like this but I’m not going to give into my fate either.”

I’ve always assumed that Kara was the weak one of the two of us. That she was the one who needed looking after, needed protection. That she needed me more than I needed her.

But now, as I watch her standing in front of me, for the first time I realize I need her more right now.

“I don’t want you to go!” I start sobbing, pulling her towards me so I can wrap my arms around her.

“I don’t want to go either,” Kara is weeping now as well. I feel her tears dampening my blouse. “But I’ll return, I promise,” she says, pulling away to look me in the eyes.

“Yes,” I agree. “We will reunite once the cure is found.”

We hug each other, reluctant to part but eventually Kara has to go as the sky is getting darker. I watch her leave, cloak pulled up over her head, and I'm rooted to the spot.

Someday the two of us will find each other once more.

The End