



Dragon Blood (Dragon Island #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: The royal heir must choose between duty to her people and a destined lover.

Astred Arakkil resolves to accompany her mother to the wedding of a dragon shifter's lifetime. With recent attacks and a traitor on the loose, even Astred questions her mother's tenacity, defying the Council's wishes to attend the political union in person. The princess' determination to play the part of a flawless Aelefttherian representative crumbles when unexpectedly confronted by the man that once anchored her wayward spirit.

Kai Sun reluctantly agrees to a weekend trip with his estranged mother for a chance of reuniting with his little sister. A tropical island wedding should be the perfect time for an impromptu vacation. Until the moment he comes face to face with the woman that broke his heart. When Kai suddenly becomes the prime suspect of the queen's fall, and faced with the prospects of an Aelefttherian prison, he knew he should never have left his quiet life, free of dragon politics and intrigue.

Fate draws the unlikely pair together to save the queen from dangerous enemies lurking in the shadows, both from within and beyond their borders.

Total Pages (Source): 40

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Kai Sun paced the wall of windows overlooking Victoria Harbor. Tearing his gaze from the spectacular Pacific sunset, he read the invitation again.

His sister, Kymri Steelscale of Aeleftheria, was to marry the new king of the mountain dragons, Jori Mountainside, at some private island—location to be given on acceptance.

Cryptic, but understandable, since until recently the two nations were at war with one another.

Kai was damned sure not every Aeleftherian was on board with one of their own marrying a centuries' old enemy, let alone their king.

Repercussions from that conflict had rippled out into the rest of the paranormal community, including his father's tiger clan, here in Asia. Everything the dragon shifter tribes did affected everyone else around the world.

But there you have it, perfectly calligraphed in gold ink on expensive card stock.

He sighed, tapping the embossed card against his other hand as his gaze drifted over the ships ambling in and out of the harbor below his penthouse.

Kymri. A sister he hadn't seen since she was an infant, a considerably long time ago.

Their mother was responsible for this setup.

Kolina. A total stranger since he was fourteen, she had suddenly walked back into his

life a few months ago, turning him upside down and inside out.

He glanced at his laptop, snoozing on the glass coffee table.

Too much work to do.

His sister... and forced time with a mother who had abandoned both him and his father. For what? Duty?

Fucking Aelefttherians.

He snorted, tossing the card on the table beside the laptop.

But... that perfect, chubby little face with the trusting bright eyes glued to his. Kymri's grasping little hands clinging to his fingers. A promise of family. Until Kolina left them, taking his sister with her.

The clan aunties had filled the gap that she left behind. Never perfectly, but they'd done their best by him, keeping his father in line and focused on clan needs.

Long buried memories sliced his heart as they shot to the surface.

He drew a breath, rubbing his eyes and turning back to the fiery panorama.

The sun rode the distant mountain range, sinking behind it.

Boat sails captured the sun's flaming golds and reds along the glittering ocean surface, reminding him of yet another female from his past, also best forgotten.

The one that he'd given what was left of his heart to, only for her to drop it at his feet and sail away.

I shouldn't have come back here.

Should have stayed inland, as far from the sea as possible.

But he'd been unable to resist the coast for long.

A sucker for punishment. A masochist.

He snorted.

Would she come back, in that glorious, red-sailed galleon of hers?

Turning away from the final moments, the most beautiful of the sunset, he retrieved his laptop to finish his work.

He had partnership contracts to review. Whether or not he was prepared to set himself up for a fresh round of torturous heartbreak, there were still swathes of designated conservation lands that needed more stringent protections.

This portfolio had taken months of painstaking work to fill out. He had to see it through. The conservationists depended on him to ensure that there were no gaps that tycoons could use to worm their way onto their lands for development or resource mining, no matter how hard they leaned on the government to change the laws in their favor.

Someone had to fight for them.

Whether or not Kai went to this wedding full of strangers, he had to ensure this vulnerable organization had everything they needed to protect themselves.

There was no way he was going to allow exploitation of a precious band of

wilderness that was home to too many species endangered and at risk.

Removing his shirt, he dropped it onto the back of the sofa before stepping into the first position of his martial routine.

Hands together, he closed his eyes, standing motionless for several minutes as he centered himself.

The room darkened around him, buffering him from the world, lending comfort to his aching heart.

Hands flowing outward and around, foot sweeping, smooth and controlled.

Kai imagined running through lush jungle like the one that he worked to protect. Remembering the wilderness surrounding his father's territory.

His powerful, silent paws grasping root-covered rocks to climb gullies and gorges, muscles bunching, striated white and black fur glimmering under the brilliant moonlight.

Soon, he lost himself in the darkness and the motion, calming the memories, shadows growing around him.

With the last motions, he swept the shadows away with fluid hands and opened his eyes, releasing the last vestiges of strain from his body.

There was work to do.

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A stred Arakkil banked on an air current, keen eyes scanning the glittering azure seas far below her for their destination—a small island belonging to a long-time friend and ally of her people.

Weddings make my scales itch.

Not being an Aelefttherian practice, she'd never understood the need for that level of commitment.

It wasn't so much that she hated weddings, per se, it was the restrictions that propriety demanded at official social functions—especially political ones. The expectation that she be on her best behavior, when she'd rather be on her ship, sailing at the whim of her heart and her crew.

This wedding doubled as a gathering on neutral ground for the union between her close friend, former Aelefttherian Guardian Commander Kymri Steelscale and Jori Mountainside, the new king of the dragon mountain of Katoa Koro.

A puff of cloud floated across her path, and brought relief from the sun's intensity. Angling up into it, she closed her eyes, revelling in the sensation of the cool moisture coating the baked scales that covered her dragon body. Properly misting her wings with a swift roll, she slid below the cloud to resume her search.

There!

A speck appeared, breaking the wavering haze of the distant horizon. Mikrí Oasis, GPSA Agent Carson Perenga's home island.

Astred drew a deep breath, scrubbing away her anxiety as she dipped her nose for a closer look. After a few minutes, she spotted other approaching dark specks in the sky, and white spots on the ocean's surface.

Looks like everyone's arriving right on time.

With a huff, she banked, circling back toward the red sails of her beloved eighteenth century pirate ship, carrying her mother Regina, the dragon Queen of Aeleftheria Nisi.

This is such a bad idea.

Despite everything, she couldn't ignore the pleasure of knowing her mother had finally set foot aboard her precious ship.

After all this time. For a political wedding far outside the protective boundaries of Aeleftherian territory and her fleet of guardians, no less.

It would have been nice if she'd come aboard, just once, just for me.

Astred shunted away the thought as soon as it presented itself.

It was still a very bad idea.

Once the Crimson Claw's sails came into view, Astred descended, gliding along the ocean's surface.

There had been a few recent attacks, and an infiltrator that had revealed a traitor was still at large worried her.

Queen Regina hadn't left her citadel in centuries. Not since the early days after she

ascended to the throne, but this time, the enemy had made it all the way to the tip of their archipelago, where Regina had subdued the invaders herself.

The world was changing— their world was changing—and the queen was adjusting likewise.

The Council was deeply unhappy about it and staunchly opposed to Regina's decision to embark on this little trip.

Red laughed to herself. The Council was near apoplectic when Regina had asserted her sovereign rights. After all, she wouldn't be completely alone.

Princess Astred would accompany her, along with her seasoned crew of talented warrior sailors from all walks of life. Guardians Marli Fleetwing and Zayli Steelscale were also on board. The queen's lifelong friends, Kolina Steelscale and Elora Mountainside, would be present on the island. Adding to that, the island belonged to long time Global Paranormal Security Agent, and ancient sea dragon, Carson Perenga, whose team, and mate, among so many other allies—old and new—would be on hand should trouble meet them.

Regina insisted they had nothing to worry about.

Still, an invisible claw clenched at Red's gut. Instinct tightened her nape.

I hope Mamma's right.

The queen's investigators still hadn't been able to determine who was involved with the last attempt to threaten the island.

The Traitor.

Part of the underlying reason everyone was gathering now.

Recent events had escalated between Aeleftheria and the male dragons, finally breaking with the discovery that agents of an ancient shadow organization were involved in both sides of the conflict, amplifying tensions to suit their goals.

Guardian Marli Fleetwing had pursued one of their spies right to the shores of Aeleftheria, where they'd met with one of their own, but she had escaped before her identity could be ascertained.

The investigation continued with only a handful of guardians delicately working to uncover the identity of the Aeleftherian traitor.

They had to be careful. They had to be sure.

Finally, Red closed her eyes and dropped below the water's surface, slowing her approach to the ship. Once she was close enough, she shifted into her human form and swam for the hull.

Astred climbed the rope ladder waiting for her, and First Mate Tundi Okonedo was at the rail with her robe.

"Adjust bearing by half a degree to the south, otherwise we'll overshoot the tiny thing." She shrugged into the robe, belting it as Tundi nodded and left to attend to the correction.

"A beautiful day for a wedding." Regina's voice drew Red's attention to her approach.

"If you're into that sort of thing. I'm surprised you are, considering Aeleftherians don't engage in such rituals."

Regina closed her eyes, face upturned to the sun and ocean air. “At one time we did.”

“You’re kidding?”

Regina shook her head. “Before the divide.” She opened her eyes, turning to Astred. “This is the first official Aelefttherian wedding since then, Astred. With our allies as witnesses, we’re finally seeing the new beginning that I’ve hoped for all this time.”

Red grasped her mother’s hand and smiled. “I’ve never seen you so emotional, Mamma.”

“Though I’m still deeply cautious, I’ve never had so much hope for a better set of circumstances for your inheritance as I do now. It will take a lot of work to bring the Council around.”

Red dropped Regina’s hand. “I have no interest in the throne.”

Regina smiled. “That’s obvious, Astred, but irrelevant.”

Red scowled at her mother.

“Your love affair with the seas is coming to an end—not for some time yet, but soon.” Regina searched Astred’s face. “I know your passion for freedom will transfer to that of your people. Acceptance of your duty will come. And a little more time at home with the history and political tutors would be wise.”

Astred snorted. “You should have had another heir, mother.”

Regina quirked a brow. “I only need one, and she’s perfect for the job.”

“You should prepare for our arrival.”

Regina caught Red's hand as she moved to leave. "You will be a formidable queen, my love. And your rule will be marked by the Ascension. I've just held the course. You will guide our people into the new era."

Red held her mother's gaze as her words rippled through her with snaps and fizzles, triggering truths long buried within her.

Astred drew a breath, breaking eye contact. She gave Regina's hand a pat before turning away to call up to a crew woman in the crow's nest to alert them when an hour from port.

"Astred."

Red halted at her mother's voice.

"Everything will change after this event. You need to prepare yourself. It's time."

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Taking in the vaulted ceiling of the airy mansion, Kai Sun rolled his shoulders. He still questioned his fragile reasoning for agreeing to fly across the world to a tiny island in the middle of the ocean when he had a stack of contracts that waited on his desk to be reviewed.

Even though he'd completed the most pressing portfolio before leaving, there was always more waiting for his attention.

Kolina had insisted. She'd called him to see about his acceptance. His sister was getting married, and it was the marriage of a dragon's lifetime. An Aelefttherian dragon's lifetime. Which he was not. By blood, yes, but as a male, wholly irrelevant.

His jaw tightened as his gaze landed on Kolina at her approach. He nodded respectfully. "Mother."

He stiffened as she reached out, giving his arm a light squeeze, eyes roaming his face as though he would disappear at any moment.

She's much softer than I remembered.

Gut tight, he buried the rising emotions he had yet to examine since her sudden reappearance, seeking to reconnect with him after all these years. Many years. He still reeled over the whole unexpected reunion. If it weren't for his family's encouragement—his father's family—he'd have shut the door in Kolina's face and got on with his life.

Her smile faltered, but still held it as she dropped her hand. "I'm glad you decided to

join us. Kymri is so excited to meet you.”

Something he never thought would happen. Not with the Aelefttherian attitude toward male children.

He nodded, not letting her off the hook. “Shame it took so long for it to happen. And to be honest, I wasn’t going to come. Not with the current workload I have.” He cleared his throat, turning his attention to the other guests arriving.

“Well, consider it an impromptu vacation.” She turned as an older man approached, broad shouldered, trim, salt and pepper hair. “Odson. This is my son, Kai.”

The way Odson’s gaze swept over Kolina, lingering on her face, left Kai with no doubt about his affection for her.

Odson Blackridge. Kai had heard of him over the years. He held out his hand to the older man.

Odson accepted it with a firm shake. “Kai.”

“Is Kymri ready? She was looking for Jori when she asked me to find Kai,” Kolina said.

Odson nodded, turning to lead them toward another wing of the vast house. “We’d better do this while everyone is settling in before dinner. Carson is just waiting for Queen Regina to arrive.”

Kai followed behind, thoughts whirling through his mind, stomach and chest so tight he had to force himself to breathe as he struggled to make sense of what was happening. As he had so many times before, he questioned the reality of the circumstances and his sanity for agreeing to come to this weekend wedding for a

sister that didn't even know him.

She was so tiny and perfect with those big glistening eyes...

Despite being a fourteen-year-old boy, his heart had melted at that first—and last—sight of his baby sister all those years ago. Kolina's return to present the child to their father had also been the last time he'd seen his sister—and his mother.

Kai never forgot Kolina's stern expression when he'd asked her to stay with them and she'd refused. Her duty was to her people. Not her family.

Kolina turned, stopping Kai before they entered the room after Odson. She visibly swallowed before speaking. "Kai, whatever your feelings toward me and my choices, just remember that Kymri is innocent." Her eyes searched his face. "She didn't know of your existence until I finally decided to look for you. You are here for her. Not for me, though I wish it were otherwise."

Having no words, Kai straightened with a nod, his gut churning.

He drew a deep breath, determined not to let his emotions cloud the experience. Just like when he approached the boardroom.

Calm. Thoughts in order. Clear assessment.

Kolina led him into the commodious, light-filled room, cream and white like every other space he'd seen so far.

While his own, usually dormant, inner dragon rose within him, scenting the other dragons in proximity, his tiger growled beneath the surface at so many apex predators in his vicinity.

His gaze immediately landed on the bright, wide eyes of the woman staring back at him.

One hand rested on her rounded belly, while the delicate fingers of the other remained laced with those of the man next to her.

Kymri.

His heart melted all over again, easing his inner beasts.

Kai smiled. “Hello, little sister.”

The man—Jori, he presumed—released her hand with a light squeeze. She seemed to float toward him, eyes bright. She stopped within two paces, studying him as he studied her. The resemblance between her and their mother was undeniable, but he saw flecks of their father in her too.

“Brother.” Finally, she reached out a tentative hand, eyes flicking toward Kolina. “I’m glad you’re here. Mother didn’t think you’d come.”

He grasped her small hand in return. “Father insisted. But I’m glad to be here to meet you, and see your big day through.”

“Father? He’s well?” Her breath hitched on that first word.

“He is. And when you’re ready, he awaits your visit.”

Her shoulders lifted as she drew a deep breath, turning away to hide the tears forming in her eyes. “I will do that. Now, this is Jori Mountainside, king of Katoa Koro. You’ve met Odson Blackridge, his uncle...” she went on naming names of those in the room he’d ignored until that moment.

Jori stepped forward, hand extended. “So glad you’re here, man.”

Kai noted his neatly pulled-back man bun and the tattoos lining his arms below the rolled-up shirtsleeves. He hesitated at the unexpected gesture from a dragon shifter king. “Aeleftheria is pretty awesome, once you get past the whole no-man thing. You’re going to like it—if you decide to check it out, that is.”

“I’ll... think about it.” Kai nodded, shaking his hand.

He whirled through a few more names and faces... Elora, Jonathan, Stenlen, and Frederick—sometimes called Goliath.

They fell into awkward idle chatter until their host, Carson Perenga, appeared at the door. “Queen Regina is here.”

He stepped aside as two women entered the room, dressed in formal engraved leather armor covering flowing cotton tunics and pants, ceremonial spears in hand, silver hilted daggers tucked into the armor at various accessible positions.

“Marli Fleetwing and your cousin, Zayli Steelscale.” Kolina whispered to Kai. “They’re both Aeleftherian guardians and until recently, were under your sister’s command.” Kolina nodded toward the uniformed women. “If Kymri hadn’t met Jori, she’d still be on her way to eventually replacing me among the queen’s personal guard.”

“You’re a member of the Queen’s Guard?” Kai looked down into Kolina’s face.

“I am. But today I’m here as mother of the bride. I just wish your grandmother had come too, though I never expected she would have.”

Mother, sister, cousin, grandmother...

“She disapproves of the groom?”

“You could say that, though it’s not personal to him. As part of the Queen’s Council, Kymri’s choices have upset my mother’s plans for Aeleftheria’s traditions and the Steelscale legacy.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“Not any more complicated than the social structure of your father’s clan—ah, Queen Regina.”

Kai turned at Kolina’s nod to the entrance, curious to see the revered ruler.

A charge rippled through the room, making the hairs on his arms and nape stand on end. The sensation of power caught the attention of his inner dragon, while it set his tiger on edge.

He finally pulled his gaze from the captivating woman’s face to the one standing directly behind her.

His breath stopped, thoughts frozen, words jammed in his throat as he stared at the equally stunned expression staring back at him.

Red.

Kolina leaned in again. “Princess Astred Arakkil, heir to the Aeleftherian throne.”

Princess? Heir? Fuck.

Red’s expression registered shock, a flicker of delight, then dropped into a narrow-eyed scowl before she found her mask.

Kai's heart pounded with each change, tightening on the final one.

He drew a deep breath and adjusted likewise.

I knew I shouldn't have come.

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Astred followed her mother, bringing up the rear of the small procession for the private meeting before the slightly more public dinner.

She'd exchanged her usual ship's clothing for the regal flowing dresses that Aelefttherian royalty were expected to wear, with their complicated wraps and knotting.

She'd struggled with it for a quarter hour before her mother appeared, flipped her hands around her for about five seconds and it was done, making her feel like a child again.

On entering the meeting room, she'd nearly tripped on the hem when her gaze landed on the tall man standing next to Kolina Steelscale.

She'd nearly blurted his name, heart racing, threatening to gallop right out of her chest.

Kai.

She drank in his familiar, handsome features, as her brain ticked in the background.

Her inner dragon rose to the surface, inhaling, seeking.

Not now!

Astred shoved her dragon down, ordering her back to sleep.

What in all the hells is he doing here?

Her gaze caressed his face once more.

He looks just as surprised to see me... I—I can't think about him—this—right now.

Not now.

She broke eye contact with him, forcing her attention to the room at large, getting her heart rate under control, suppressing the need to turn around and get back on her ship.

Greetings registered as murmurs while her mind latched on to the man standing between the Steelscale women, both good friends to herself and her mother, who'd stepped away to talk with Kolina and Elora.

Astred struggled to focus on the small talk, her dragon seeking Kai's unique scent, dragging her thoughts toward him over and over again.

His scent, his smile, the feel of his lips and hands on her. The texture of his skin under her fingers, the aura of peace and contentment as they lay with their naked bodies entwined.

She drew a deep breath, shoving the precious memories away.

Kymri grasped Astred's hand, whispering. "Red, are you unwell? You look a little flushed."

"What? Yeah, fine. Just... weddings make my scales itch, you know?" She offered a wan smile.

Kymri's gaze turned sympathetic. "I know you'd rather be at sea, but I'm so happy

you're here with us.”

Astred squeezed Kymri's hand back, her focus settling on her friend. “I am too. Truly. Besides, thanks to you, my mother finally left the island. On my ship.” She grinned at her old friend.

“This is my brother, Kai. Mother finally found him and convinced him to come. Apparently, we met once when I was a baby.” Kymri released Astred's hand, turning so that her gaze lingered on Kai's face as though he were a long-lost gift.

A true treasure...

Astred's heart flipped as she finally met his eyes again, his expression guarded, jaw tight.

...that holds my heart. Still.

He bowed before her, as he'd done for her mother. “Princess.”

“You don't need to do that,” the words rushed out.

He straightened, brow quirked.

From the corner of her eye, Astred noted a petite, dark-haired woman approach Carson Perenga. His mate, Lirikai.

Everyone else noticed her presence, quiet conversations falling silent, as the ancient, legendary Barra'kidai waited for their attention.

Thankful for the distraction, relief swept Astred as Lirikai and Carson led the gathered guests out on to the terrace overlooking the ocean. The arrangement of the

dining area felt both modern and old world, beautifully decorated with flowing snowy fabrics and fresh creamy blooms.

The arrangement allowed for small, intimate conversations. A trinity of circular tables draped in more embroidered linen, gleaming porcelain and sparkling flatware. Crisp name cards indicated the seating plan.

Astred's chest tightened.

Three tables of ten seats each and Red's card was next to Kai's, with Regina's on her other side.

No one's looking. I can swap with my mother.

...Who had Joey Kane, head of The Organization, seated to her left.

Damnit, she'll want to talk to her.

Astred resisted the urge to rub her nape.

Politics.

Dragged into discussions with Mother and Ms. Kane, or awkward small talk with Kai.

I can ignore him...?

Fuck, no, that would be noticed and raise questions I don't want to answer.

She glanced across the terrace toward Marli, with Stenlen and Carson with Lirikai at the other tables.

Oh, Heidi Brandt and her family are here! They would be so much more fun to sit with.

Noticing Astred's attention on her, Heidi smiled in return.

The tension eased out of Astred immediately.

I really need to spend more time at Black River.

The family of bear shifters always made her feel at ease.

Dragging her attention away from the other tables, Astred turned to find that Kai stood behind her chair, waiting for her to sit.

"I don't need—" The chair slid under her as she lowered herself. "Thank you."

Kai moved to her left as Regina prepared to sit.

Startled, she smiled up at him. "Thank you, Kai." She immediately turned her attention to Jolena Kane, head of the Global Paranormal Security Agency and its umbrella shadow Organization.

Heat fizzled along Astred's right as Kai settled down next to her.

I'd rather be scrubbing barnacles off my ship's hull right now.

"So, princess, huh?" Kai's low voice rolled up her nape, with a deep, sensual familiarity that she immediately dropped the hatch on.

She grit her teeth. "Uh huh."

“And here I thought it was me. Turns out, it was.”

Her gaze snapped to his face, meeting his dark eyes, growled. “I told you it wasn’t. That I had obligations.”

He lifted a brow. “Clearly avoided by being at sea all the time. No, I figured it was more to do with my... heritage.”

Astred straightened on her seat, eyes darting to the others seated at their table. “Here is neither the time nor the place for this conversation. What happened between us has nothing to do with you, and everything to do with me.”

Kai chuckled, nodding, as he suddenly occupied himself with the crisp napkin. “That’s rich. Very altruistic of you, Red.” He looked up as a server brought champagne to fill their glasses. “This weekend is going to be fucking priceless.”

Astred stared at her glass with longing. Anywhere else, any other time, she’d have drank it down and demanded a refill.

You’re not aboard your ship, Red, nor in port on leave.

Here, she was hyperaware of etiquette in the presence of these important friends and allies. She folded her hands on her lap, ignoring Kai, despite the tension rolling off him.

She’d seen him on edge before, during particularly challenging contract negotiations, but nothing like this.

The low murmurs between her mother and Jolena Kane ceased as Joey leaned forward, looking at Astred.

“Good to see you again, Astred. If you’ve some time later, can we discuss a few things?”

Astred smiled. “Good to see you too, Joey, especially under lighter circumstances such as this. Business discussion? Yes, I can make time for that.”

“Perfect, I just wanted to provide you with a satellite phone for the Crimson Claw.” Joey nodded and settled back as Jori and Kymri rose from their seats, glasses in hand.

Everyone followed suit.

“I’m not a speech guy, so I will keep this short. First and foremost, Kymri and I are thankful that Carson and Lirikai agreed to host our gathering this weekend.” Jori said.

Kymri continued. “And we thank you all for agreeing to witness our union and give us your time to discuss important matters that affect not just our respective communities, but the global one.”

Everyone raised their glasses and sipped their champagne.

As the food was served, friendly conversations hummed around all three tables of old friends and new allies.

Astred and Kai ignored one another and eventually he was pulled into discussions with his mother and sister, and other guests on that half of the table. Across from her, Odson and Jonathan, Elora’s human husband, were also quietly engaged.

Astred picked at her food and drank another glass of champagne as her thoughts inevitably returned to Kai.

Her keen senses picked up every nuance of his voice, the deep familiarity of his

scent, and brought up the bittersweet memories of their time together. Her dragon kept urging her to lean closer, to whisper his name and draw his attention in her direction so that he would see only her.

Every time the heartache rose, she swallowed it down with another sip.

I thought I'd never see him again. In all the world, of all the people, he has to show up here. Now.

Resentment soured her stomach.

He's supposed to be on the other side of the world in his stuffy office, pushing papers.

This is my world.

Her gaze flicked to his hand, curled on the table next to his plate as he laughed at something Jori said.

Astred gripped her fingers together, resisting the overwhelming desire to slide her hand over his, to feel the strength of it once again.

To revel in the sensation of both of his hands roaming her body as hers explored his—as they had done over the years when they met up in various coastal ports.

She suppressed a smile, recalling the charity event they'd met at. A tall ships event which she and her crew had agreed to participate in, to raise ocean ecology awareness.

He was living in Shanghai then.

She glanced around as the plates were cleared away.

Thank fucking Goddess.

The last time she saw Kai was in Hong Kong, when she broke things off with him.

Does he still live there? Doesn't matter, Red. It's done.

She finished another glass.

Forever.

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Kai peeled himself away from the myriad guests, overwhelmed by the variety of scents; not just of the other dragons, but shifters of all types. Having lived in cities for the last few decades, senses dulled, he'd grown accustomed to human life, the familiarity of other shifters faded.

Queen Regina honored the guests with bottles of her signature sapphire wine toward the end of the meal. Rich, made of flavorful Aelefttherian fruit, and more potent than anything he'd ever imbibed in his life.

His head swam as he considered the constant flow of conversations with unfamiliar faces and names.

He was quite intrigued with their host, Carson Perenga, and his team of agents, which included his mate—the legendary Lirikai of the Barra'kidai, all under the overarching command of Jolena Kane. Now she was one that he couldn't decipher, with an unfamiliar scent and a power signature as strong as Queen Regina's.

He recalled the few stories his cousin Aaron had told him about working for Kane and the impression she left on those that worked for her.

Kai needed some fresh air, despite the event being held on the terrace.

His thoughts kept slipping back to Red, his gaze finding her at any point in the vicinity.

Not good, Kai.

So, he decided to retreat before he made matters worse for himself. He'd managed to maintain control over his emotions during the entirety of the long, long dinner. He needed to keep it that way. Calm and neutral. And far, far away from Red.

Princess Astred, heir to the Aelefttherian throne. Explains a lot.

His tattooed, bar brawling, red-headed pirate captain with the biggest heart of anyone he knew.

Except where he was concerned.

Their last amazing weekend together had been so perfect, he'd asked her to bond with him.

Kai immediately shut down the rest of the memory, stepping away from the murmur of the party, heart heavy.

At least now he understood her rejection.

Royal heirs didn't commit themselves to hybrids.

A male figure stood looking out at the ocean.

Slipping beyond the torch-lit terrace to the shadowy perimeter, Kai descended the stone steps toward the beach. Waves frothed toward him on a glittering onyx ocean, back-lit by webs of stars and scattered rainbow dust.

"It's been an age, Uncle."

Bayn Long turned at the sound of Kai's voice, a wide smile stretched his lips. "That it has. You're not a youngling anymore."

Kai laughed. “Not for a while. Aaron tells me you’re living in Toronto now?”

Bayn nodded. “Your cousin gets himself into some binds now and then, especially with that lot.” He turned, jerking his head toward Carson and Joey, deep in conversation.

“You’re with the GPSA now, too? Aaron didn’t mention it.”

Bayn laughed. “Not officially, no, but fuck, who isn’t these days? Though for good reason.”

“That serious, huh?”

“Yeah, there was a tangle with the Aelefttherians not long ago that’s still unresolved. Regina’s got her hands full.”

“You were there?”

“I was. Not as a tribal rep. Just on my own, as a favor to some old friends.” He nodded his head toward the house.

“See, that’s why I stay the fuck away from dragon affairs.”

Bayn snorted. “Like tiger clans aren’t as complex.”

“I didn’t say that. But when we pull grudges, they’re not likely to wipe out whole cities ‘cause we’re so motherfucking big.”

“Kid, you’re just as big as the rest of us, no matter you identify as a tiger. You can pick and choose what suits you, until you can’t. I was there, remember? I know exactly who and what you are.”

Kai scratched his temple. “Yeah, well, I haven’t been back to the clan territories as much lately. I keep my head down and my business to myself.”

“Generally a good policy, but with the winds stirring as they are, none of us will have that luxury. This affects all of us.”

“Care to enlighten?”

“Bayn, you got a minute? Joey wants to discuss some things about that case she mentioned.” Carson called from the edge of the dining area.

“Up to them. I’ll catch up with you later.” Bayn clapped Kai’s shoulder before turning away. “It really is good to see you again.”

Kai watched Bayn go, his gaze sliding across the clusters of guests. All of them were important in their clans and societies in some way. Bayn was no exception. A Sh? uwàng Zh? prince of the eastern air dragon clan, the Watchmen, which had initiated Kai as a dragon youngling when no others would take on the responsibility. Certainly not a male Aelefttherian reject. But Kai’s paternal grandmother was Bayn’s sister, and due to this family connection, an exception had been made.

He watched Queen Regina talking animatedly with Heidi Brandt and Lirikai.

And then there’s me. An eternal outsider on all accounts.

Dragon shifter, but not pure enough for the tribes, or even the right gender for his mother’s clan. Tiger shifter, but not devoted enough to a tribe that didn’t fully accept him, either.

Both abided within him. Each a part of him, but also separate from each other.

The tiger and the dragon eternally circling within him.

At the threshold of the beach, primal musk, sounds of laughter, and dishes clanking fell away, buffered by the winds pushing them back toward the house.

Drawing a deep breath, Kai's shoulders eased, allowing the overwhelming desire to feel the sand under his feet to take over.

I haven't been on a beach since the last time Red and I were together.

In fact, he'd stayed firmly inland and as far from the sea as possible, until recently.

He swallowed the sudden rise of loss, shrugging out of his dinner jacket, laying it on the stone banister at the foot of the steps. His tie, shoes, and socks quickly followed. He then rolled up his pant legs and shirtsleeves as he stepped forward, unbuttoning the collar so that he could breathe better.

With a final glance toward the house, Kai strode along the beach, cool sand sprinkling the tops of his feet.

The house and terrace full of guests disappeared as he followed the beach around a bend of leaning trees, where the manicured green ended at the edge of island wilderness.

Within moments, surrounded by the darker shadows of the trees, Kai's senses and body relaxed, his tiger more at ease with the primal surroundings, urging him to strip down, shift, and go for a long run.

Now probably isn't the appropriate time for that, with an island full of political guests.

If he were to shift at all, they would be expecting another dragon, as the son of an Aelefttherian. Not an unfamiliar tiger. Though his mother wouldn't be surprised.

Does Kymri also have the tiger?

Probably not.

Not in the ways that mattered, given the strict rules of Aelefttherian society, he doubted she'd have been so

accepted—and set to marry a dragon king, if she bore hybrid blood like Kai.

“Fuck it.”

Kai stripped down, leaving the rest of his clothing on an overhanging branch, and shifted.

Hands and feet elongated into powerful white paws. Muscle and bone bunched and slid into new positions as white fur with distinct striations sprouted from his pores. Tail swishing back and forth, Kai lifted his head, ears perked, nose scenting, as the wind tickled his whiskers. The ocean air carried with it as many stories as the stars did.

He stretched, extending his claws, feeling the sand between the pads of his toes as he released the tension from his back.

Ready, he sprang into a run.

Moonlight flashed off his pale forelegs, bright in the darkness. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, bringing with it a sense of inherent freedom from social expectation. He ran, observing the subtle changes in the winds and constellation

positions as he made his way around the circumference of the island until the small harbor came into view and scents alerted him he was no longer alone.

Slowing to a trot, he analyzed the information. Pairs of guests broke away from the dinner, enjoying the night along the beach, as he was. Some disappeared into the dense inland greenery.

Distracted, and with the wind at his back, he was too late to notice Red sitting on a boulder nearby, watching him with a distinct blue bottle in hand. Her dress draped and pooled around her, looking like a goddess from ancient times.

Fuck.

“Didn’t expect to see you here.” Astred drew a long swallow from the bottle, turning her gaze back toward her ship at anchor in the distance. She waved a hand at him. “But here you are.”

Like any of this is my fault.

The wind changed direction, dragging Red’s scent across Kai’s sensitive nose, bombarding him with his most intimate and cherished memories of her.

She reminded him of the tropical wildflowers that grew around the beaches where they’d met and made love, and spent the happiest days of his life.

He turned to go.

“Want a drink?”

He paused, tail swishing, her scent swirling around him in an eddy, urged him closer.

Tread carefully, Kai.

But he couldn't force himself to take that step away from her.

Run.

He swung his head around, body following, prowling toward her.

His gaze slid to the bottle and back to her face.

“Hell yeah, I’m drunk and I’m going to get drunker.” She took a swig for emphasis.

“This stuff doesn’t leave the wine cellar often, so I’d take advantage if I were you.”

Kai eyed the rich sapphire blue bottle with its yellow-gold detailing.

Red stared up at him, challenge glittering in her eyes, body taut despite the relaxed position on the boulder.

Taut in the way that only ended in fighting or fucking. She never, ever, fell apart. There were no bars around here for her to brawl in, so that left her one option.

Faces of the other single guests filtered through his memory.

He huffed, shifting back into his human form.

Kai stood before Red, gaze locked on hers, accepted the bottle and drank.

The wine was spicy and sweet as it slid down his throat, pooling around his heart before settling in his stomach.

The corner of her mouth curled as her eyes slid down his naked body, which

responded to her attention as though time and her abject rejection were nothing.

“Tiger or man, you’ll always be magnificent, Kai. I never deserved you.”

Kai’s heart jerked at the unexpected words. He handed the bottle back. “It was never about deserving. It was about taking what you wanted. We had some fun. You made it clear you didn’t want more than that.”

Closer now, Astred’s scent combined with the sound of her voice and the fierce look in her beautiful face blocked everything else out, snapping him right back to their shared past and his overwhelming desire to touch her. To claim her again. To remind her of what they were and could have been.

She was on her feet, blinking. Regret and anger warred in her eyes. “I can’t—,”

Within reach, heart pounding, Kai’s hand instinctively stretched out, cradled her nape, dragging her against him.

His lips closed over hers to shut her up.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Regret sat heavily in Astred's throat as she stared at Kai's naked body, bathed in moonlight.

Desire curled through her at the sight of his response to her attention. Electricity shot through her and she was instantly ready to take him.

Kai always did that to her.

Her fingers tightened around the bottle in her fist.

You can't have him, and he deserves more than just a casual fuck for the rest of his life.

As much as she loved Kymri and was wildly happy for her, she equally hated every second on this fucking beautiful island that pounded her with all the bittersweet memories of her past with Kai. She'd been staring at her ship, telling herself she could just sail away. Leave all the political shit to the others.

Leave Kai to his life.

Just me and my sea crew and our beautiful ship.

And then the winds changed, delivering Kai's scent to her little boulder sanctuary before a very large, magnificent white tiger prowled out of the shadows, disrupting all of that, and she could think of nothing but him.

She'd never seen him in his animal form before. There'd never been an opportunity.

Breathtaking.

On all fours, he stood taller than her human form, silky coat gleaming under the cool titanium moon. Despite that magnificence, all Astred wanted to see was Kai. Just Kai.

Once more?

Could he forgive me for just a few hours and pretend nothing had changed? That he hadn't asked her to give herself to him and she hadn't left things the way she had. Falling in love with him was never supposed to happen.

It couldn't. It can't.

But it did, and she'd locked it away and threw it overboard until she laid her eyes on him again. And just like that, she was right back in that moment she never wanted to relive. Her castaway heart had somehow got a tenterhook into some unseen crevice, dragging along behind her.

She'd expected him to walk away, not accept her offering.

Resisting the urge to chug the rest of the bottle, she shared it with him, while her eyes devoured the sight of him just a little longer.

Goddess, she wanted the feel of him inside her again. Their bodies gripping and slamming.

All she could think about was the memory of his arms around her. He'd never whispered words of adoration, but she felt it in the way he touched her. The way he claimed her. She was his and always would be—from that very first moment. They met and her soul wanted for no one else.

At least in her heart.

Though she'd never tell him.

I can't.

There'd always been others. Bodies, male and female, good times. Never anything more.

Not like with Kai, which had begun to scare her in a way that nothing else ever did.

As much as Astred lived her life with the freedom of a centuries old pirate, sailing and brawling and partying as she did, her heart was another matter.

It wasn't hers to give. It belonged to Aeleftheria, whether she wanted it to or not.

He threatened that. Confused her.

She was on her feet, talking—words having no business escaping her mouth. His response felt like claws sinking into her heart, and then his lips were on hers and there were no more words or thoughts.

Just one more time.

Bottle gripped in one hand, the other found his erection, working the hard length.

Kai's hand slid between the folds of Astred's dress, smoothing along her thigh and hip.

She deepened the kiss, opening, her body bending to his, arched over her.

As his fingers slid into her moist heat, his cock jerked in her hand.

His mouth left hers, trailing down her chin and jaw to her throat, teeth and tongue grazing the delicate skin as he worked her with his hand, thumb over her nub.

With his free hand, he pushed aside the fabric, giving his roaming mouth access to her nipple.

The building haze took Astred over, she released him and dropped the bottle to the sand, giving her hands the chance to grip his shoulders.

“Kai...” she whispered, wanting his hard length inside of her but also not wanting his magical fingers to stop what they were doing as she ascended.

He alternately sucked and grazed her nipple with his teeth while his fingers drove in and out of her.

Rising, she panted, nails digging into his shoulders, heart twisting.

Goddess, how she missed him. She wanted him to sink into her, filling her depths, their arms around each other, as they used to do. So easy. So right. Some distant part of her knew that wasn't going to happen. Not here, not now. But it didn't stop her from wanting it.

She inhaled deeply, recalling his unique scent and slipped, forgetting, just a little, and her dragon rose to the surface as she reached her climax.

No!

But it was too late. It was too much. The pressure to claim her responsibilities to her beloved home, warring with the heartache of missing Kai so very deeply.

Astred lost the tight control as her dragon struggled for dominance, desperate to sink her teeth into Kai's shoulder as she peaked with a long moan.

‘Claim him!’

Tears sprang to her eyes with the force of it, her arms wrapped around his shoulders, forehead against his collarbone.

Her body shook with the power of the climax and the strength it took to override her dragon's assertion.

Eyes closed, her hands slid down his muscular arms as she swayed on her feet.

He eased back, his body still taut with need between them. Lifting her chin with a forefinger, he kissed her lips in his gentle way, and whispered, “Goodbye, Red.”

Without another word, he turned and disappeared back into the darkness of the dense tropical forest.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Kai dragged himself out of the frothy bed covers, scowling at the morning sun streaming in through the filmy curtains.

His sister's wedding day.

Fuck.

A day trapped near Astred.

Last night was a huge fucking mistake.

He rubbed the fatigue from his eyes, rolled his neck and shoulders in a bid to release the ever-present tension.

I should have walked away.

He glanced down at his dick, upright and proud and in full disagreement. Kai strode toward the shower to take care of business. All night, memories of Red had pounded him.

Weak.

I shouldn't have kissed her—never should have slipped my fingers into her moist...

She'd so readily accepted his touch. It wouldn't have taken much more to lean her back...

He groaned, fist pumping under the hot water.

His tiger had told him to walk away. His dragon had urged him on. Instead, he'd mistakenly thought he'd have more control as a man, but he'd been unable to resist the allure of her scent once the wind changed directions. The sight of her on that rock overlooking the bay.

The way the moon illuminated her smooth skin, highlighting the delicate curve of her lips and the bold arch of her brow.

It was always like that between them. From the start.

All he'd been able to think about was easing her back and tasting her. All of her.

He'd thought he would control the situation. Kiss her, be done with her. Leave her on his terms. Not hers. But then his fingers had found the sanctuary of her core. Let her know what she walked away from. And each step of the way, his tiger growled warnings in his brain.

His dragon rumbled with delight.

Kai pumped harder, soap frothing under the intense heat of the water.

He'd nearly shoved her back onto that boulder and buried himself deep inside her.

Where I belong.

And then her breath had caught, she'd moaned, her channel clenching his drenched fingers, and it was all he could do to walk away. Kai's breath hitched as he spilled over his fist, his seed spurting into the shower drain, panting.

As his heart rate slowed, he washed and prepared for the torturous day looming before him. At least he wouldn't have a gods damned hard-on all day.

Once dressed, he slipped on his shoes and focused on his tie, using the time to solidify his resolve.

Self-control and dignity, Kai. One more day and then it's back to work.

Home.

Back in Hong Kong, this last year.

Before that, he'd been inland so that he wouldn't have the constant scent of the ocean breeze or sounds of rolling surf to constantly drag his memory back to Red.

He'd thought he was finally safe. Kai laughed at his reflection as his hands released the knot, twisted, then reworked the silk fabric.

His mother had suddenly walked back into his life, gutting him. And now, his ex-lover ripped his heart out all over again.

Fucking dragons. Fucking Aelefttherian dragons.

Antarctica was looking pretty appealing right now.

Maybe Bayn and his cousin Aaron had the right idea. Toronto, right in the heart of North America, as far from the coast as you could get.

Nah, I'd just get dragged into whatever shit he mentioned last night. All this political drama everyone was whispering about throughout dinner. Don't need that shit—had enough of it within my own clan.

He grunted, reworking the tie.

His watch buzzed, drawing his attention to dismiss the notification. It was time. Turning from the mirror, he pulled on his tuxedo jacket as he left the airy room, shoulders and chest heavy. Today was his little sister's wedding.

Nothing else mattered.

"Everything is going to change for dragonkind after today." Queen Regina's gaze swept Astred's hair, searched her face, then her attire.

Astred allowed her mother to adjust her dress rather than waste time fussing over the draped layers herself.

She observed her mother's bent head as she worked, humming a tune Astred hadn't heard since she was a child.

The melody tickled a buried memory, filmy and too fragile to grasp.

She shook her head.

So long ago.

Red swallowed.

How long has it been since I saw her look so relaxed? Free of political weights and Aelefttherian responsibilities?

This was the first time Astred knew of Regina's absence from the island. She'd dedicated her entire life to it.

Something Astred had resisted most of her adult life.

It is so good to see her look so free and peaceful.

Finished, Regina straightened, smiling into Astred's eyes, searching their depths. She reached out, caressing Astred's cheek. "You love him."

Startled, Astred gaped.

Regina smiled. "His scent is distinct. And I know you, Astred. Better than you think." She tapped Astred's chest with a gentle finger. "As queen, I'm often privy to the emotions of those around me. I feel the subtle changes in their energy. And yours turned chaotic the second you saw each other yesterday."

Astred turned away from her mother's knowing gaze, throat tight, heart pounding.

"Kolina's son. He's different." Regina picked up her Aelefttherian jewels, pinning and tucking them into place. "Dragon initiated, but not wholly dragon. And tiger? Unusual." She added a pin at each shoulder. One for their House of Arakkil, the other for Aelefttheria. Regina held up a twin of the second one for Astred.

Astred shook her head.

Regina replaced it in the box. "Standing between the two of you felt like standing between two bluffs, with a tsunami rolling between them."

Retrieving a second box set on a side table, the queen strode toward the door and paused, hand on the handle. "I remember that feeling." She opened the door and stepped between the Aelefttherian warriors guarding it.

Astred straightened her shoulders, staring at the back of her mother's head as she

followed her to join the other guests. Aeleftheria's sacred indigo flower decorated Regina's flowing locks, woven with a silver chain bearing diamonds and a third crest, of dragon and fire.

She shivered, eyes glued to the facsimile bearing one of the three seals representing dragonkind's connection to its magical heart. Embedded into the architectural design and decor of Aeleftheria, it was a symbol higher than any house or dragon nation. One of the other two seals, binding dragon and human, was protected by Jori's tribe of at Katoa Koro mountain dragons.

And the seals were the reason they met on this island to talk weddings and politics now.

Three seals depicting the trinity of dragon heritage, keys to dragonkind's greatest treasure and laterally spell-bound, to ensure cooperation when the time arose to open the ancient vault.

So Astred recalled from the old tales that colored recent conflicts and intrigue.

She sighed.

The location of the third seal was still a mystery. Kane believed the Consortium held it, still seeking confirmation from the prisoner, apprehended bearing the stolen mountain seal, subsequently returned to Jori's protection.

Ahead of her, Regina paused.

Arriving at the threshold, Astred's gaze swept the lovely venue.

The terrace had been arranged for a single, blended audience with rows of chairs lined in arcs, rippling back from an intricately carved and decorated arbor set atop

risers with the sparkling deep teal sea and intense aqua sky as its backdrop.

Eyes closed, Astred inhaled the fresh ocean air, allowing it to fill her lungs, turning away thoughts of her beloved ship and the freedom she represented. Opening her eyes, she focused on her duty to represent her people amid this small delegation of varied nations and organizations, strengthening their partnership to protect against threats crowding their sovereignty. It wasn't a global meeting, just those intimately affected by recent events, surrounding the discovery of this shadow group's interference seeking to control all three seals.

The Consortium.

This wedding was a union of two individuals who'd found love, deciding to stay the course on their mission to reunite dragonkind, culturally severed centuries ago.

Astred's gaze swept the terrace, landing on Kai as he approached from the other side of the mansion, striding toward his mother, Kolina Steelscale.

Her mouth went dry as her pulse accelerated at the gorgeous sight of him wearing a tuxedo. She quickly shoved away the tiniest peep of memory of their encounter in the wee hours that had left her sleepless.

He was a perfect example of why her mother had decided to resist the Aelefttherian Council and work with the Katoa Koro dragons rather than turn their backs on them. It wasn't just Kai, but the newly crowned King Jori Mountainside himself, along with all his tribe. And Odson, Elora's brother and Aelefttheria's honored friend since long before Astred's birth.

Sons of Aelefttherian dragonesses.

Dragonkind, divided for far too long, and under the rule of someone like Jori, the

males could be guided to understand the power of true partnership and forgo their instinct to dominate—which had led to the divide in the first place.

Following her mother, Astred took a seat at the end of the front row, close to the dais.

Regina sat, back straight, hands resting over the crystal box on her lap.

Astred could only imagine the weight of the Council's iron resistance to Regina not only supporting Kymri and Jori, but appearing in person to represent Aeleftheria.

From what Zayli and Marli had told her, when she'd stolen a couple of hours after dinner with her Aeleftherian sisters, the situation back home was tense. Divided. The hopeful rallied around the queen. While those that clung to the strife the male dragons had caused stiffened their resolve, fed by centuries of fear, resentment and anger.

It wasn't unwarranted, but if things were to change, both sides needed to work together.

The last thing the Council wanted was change.

Little more had been said on the matter; all those present were determined to celebrate Kymri's union and the coming of her child.

The seats filled, guests murmuring to one another.

Elora and Kolina took seats in the center of the first row, Jonathan and Kai on either side of them.

Once everyone was seated, Jolena Kane stepped up onto the dais, draped in a mercurial platinum dress, reminiscent of days so long ago, they fell into realms of myth. For a split second, the surrounding air shimmered, slipped, allowing Astred a

glimpse—a sense—of something ancient. Far more ancient than the eldest of dragons, stealing Astred's breath away. Blinking, it was gone, leaving Astred to wonder if she'd truly witnessed anything at all.

Too much wine last night and not enough sleep.

Joey Kane's gaze slid over the audience with a spark in her eye and a smile on her lips.

Astred's heart accelerated as power mingled and flowed around those gathered under the open sky.

Stepping up from either side of the terrace, Jori and Kymri appeared, smiles tugging at their lips, eyes shining as they joined hands on the riser below Joey. Kymri wore a dress that flowed around her body like liquid gold, embroidered with the symbols of her heritage and station among the Aelefttherian people. The sun reflected off the swell of her belly, denoting the cherished status of motherhood. Jori wore a modern tuxedo similar to Kai's, also embroidered likewise along the hem, cuffs and lapels.

They turned, eyes landing on Regina, who stood, crystal box in hand.

She approached the couple, extracting two indigo buds of the same flowers adorning her hair. At their coronation, she had gifted them seeds. They waited as she attached the buds to the fabric at their shoulders.

Regina's previous statement, along with this gesture, was unshakable.

Both children of Aelefttherian mothers, they equally had the right to bear the sacred flower.

In her long life, Astred had never seen the flower gifted to a male. Only the highest-

ranking servants of her people, which were all female.

Handing the box to Jori's mother, Elora, who served as ambassador between their two nations, Regina grasped Kymri and Jori's hands.

The air thickened around the trio.

"Everything will forever change after this union." The vibration of Regina's voice rippled along the ocean breeze.

When she turned, she met the eyes of every individual present to bear witness, including her guards lingering at the rear of the terrace.

Unbidden, tears sprung to Astred's eyes, breath caught in her throat as the words resonated through her entire body, enveloping her heart.

This truly is the beginning of a new era.

Regina resumed her place next to Astred, reaching for her hand, giving it the gentlest of squeezes.

Kymri and Jori faced one another.

Jolena began. "I am honored to preside over the first ceremony of its like in centuries, heralding the new direction of dragonkind into the next era." She smiled, placing her palms atop their heads.. "You have already attained the deepest bond of dragons as lovers, and the sanctity of sovereigns by right of declaration and witnessed ascendance. Here, I bestow the blessing of something greater. Destiny."

Jori's thumbs stroked Kymri's hands as he smiled into her solemn face.

Astred imagined Kymri still struggled to kindle her hope, with her experience as a lifelong guardian and warrior for her people. No matter how much she loved Jori, and hoped and strove toward a brighter future, the light of vigilance would always reside deep within her.

It would, within all Aelefttherians, until proved irrevocably obsolete.

And it was exactly why this ceremony was crucial.

Astred straightened her spine.

Perhaps it's time I take my place among them.

She'd always answered the call to defend and protect against threats, returning home to fight off attacking males seeking to control their island, rebuilding in the wake of their destruction. And then reunite with her community, nurturing the bonds of sisterhood.

Joey Kane's hands slid away from the couple's heads as they turned to face the crowd, hand in hand, eliciting a cheer.

Despite the solemnity of the ceremony, they were still surrounded by friends and family concerned for their happiness.

Glancing at Regina's profile, Astred gently squeezed her mother's hand.

I've left you alone in this for long enough.

The Watcher stood apart from the guests gathered in clusters across the terrace, mingling, sipping the bluest and best aged of Aelefttherian wines.

Queen Regina's wedding gift.

Unsure if the administration of the tincture was sufficient, the tiny bottle in the hidden pocket of their formal attire seemed to bear the weight of a boulder, dragging at their guilt.

It's for the best.

The queen had declared change coming for dragonkind. And it was, just not in the way everyone thought it was.

The watcher's gaze slid around the room, monitoring the delegates, memorizing and listening for snippets of coveted information. Despite the celebrations, some wouldn't be able to resist discussions of politics, and it was to those that the watcher paid the most attention.

"You've barely touched your wine. Relax, enjoy yourself. There will be much to do in the coming days." Regina's voice pulled the watcher's gaze to the right as she approached with a smile.

Pulse ticking, the watcher nodded with an instinctive dip. "Yes, of course, Your Highness."

"Join the others," the queen winked over the rim of her glass, sipping as she slid away to speak with another guest.

The watcher's gaze lingered on the glass at Regina's lips.

Was it enough?

They couldn't be sure. Opportunity had been scarce, and they'd had to resort to

adding it to the bottles rather than the queen's specific vessel, despite instructions to proceed with diligence. Time was sliding away and choices nil.

Should be well enough. She assured me it wouldn't affect anyone else.

Their gaze slid around the gathered again, swallowing when Princess Astred stepped into view, praying there would be no effects there.

The dragonscale spell was meant to target the individual to whom the scales belonged, and the curation of Regina's had been painstakingly overseen for years. The queen rarely took her dragon form.

The watcher could not know whether it would adversely affect the heir, which would be inherently counterproductive. Sweat prickled the watcher's scalp. Lifting the glass of precious wine, they hesitated, staring into the blue wine, the scents of Aeleftheria's aromatic berries luring them to taste.

"You look a little unwell." Odson Blackridge's deep voice drew the watcher's attention from the glass.

I'm drawing too much attention standing here alone.

"Just thoughtful. Everyone is in good spirits."

Odson nodded, eyes twinkling. "You should spend some time with Kymri before she returns to Katoa Koro with Jori. It won't be long before the baby presents itself and there is no room for anyone else."

The watcher laughed. "I have no doubt that child will be born as independent and fierce as her mother."

“And as much of a handful.” Odson tapped the edge of his glass to the watcher’s, lifted it in salute, then sipped as he made his way around the room. “Have some fun before things get too scaly later.”

The watcher had no choice but to join Odson, sipping from the exquisite glass to honor the celebrated couple.

As the aromatic flavor slid over the watcher’s tongue, it elicited complex emotions they preferred not to analyze.

A surge of guilt soured the experience.

Lowering the glass, the watcher’s gaze found the queen, then the heir, and drew a deep breath.

It’s for the best. My duty is to the safety and well-being of my people. No one else’s. These alliances are worthless and a waste of time.

Resolved, the watcher clasped the glass between their palms to suppress their rising tension and plastered a smile on their lips as the next guest approached to exchange small talk.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Kai studied the blood-red sails of the Crimson Claw fluttering overhead, jaw tight, molars grinding.

The crew, dressed in loose cotton tunics and pants, climbed the masts with ease, tended the rigging, adjusted the angles to ensure the bow was pointed toward Aeleftheria.

He drew ocean air deep into his lungs, scrubbing away the tension and inner resistance of going to visit his mother's ancestral home for the first time.

At the queen's own invitation.

Who could deny that?

After the ceremony, he'd just packed his bag to head home when one of the Aeleftherian guards knocked on his door, summoning him to Regina's suite.

Apparently, his mother had formally requested permission for him to enter Aeleftherian territory and visit the island.

He swallowed the competing emotions gurgling in his gut.

Kai could not resist the power and magnetism of the queen as she studied his face with a knowing smile, which made him sweat like a teenager meeting their date's parents for the first time.

He'd meant to politely decline the invitation. Instead, he was agreeing before his

brain noticed what was happening.

Now he was committed to this prolonged torture.

More time with his estranged mother, who'd abandoned him and then suddenly reappeared.

He'd come on this journey to see his little sister married. Reunion gladly established, he should have been on a plane home to face his mountainous workload.

His gaze found Astred up on the quarterdeck, deep in conversation with First Mate Okonedo.

And now, more time with the woman of his heart who'd run out on him after he'd ripped himself wide open and asked her for forever.

The desire to be close to her warred with the need to put distance between them. An impossibility within the limitations of her beloved antiquated pirate ship. The thing she loved most in the world, living and breathing the life of a sea captain since she had relieved the Spanish privateers of their property, several centuries back.

This ship had sailed her into his life, and right back out of it again.

His jaw tightened again as he returned his attention to the glittering horizon, allowing the crew's calls to one another to float around him.

Kai observed and admired the crew's skill and precision in handling their ship. Their home, to dragon shifters, humans, and some other paranormal drifters alike.

Typical of Red.

Rebellious, self-imposed outsider, gathering a crew that shared her heart for the ultimate freedom, collecting women from around the globe, from all walks of life and communities. Those that desired and answered the call of the seas. And those that desperately needed a place to belong.

That was Red.

Or so he'd thought.

Now, it seems, she wasn't an outsider at all, but a runaway. A poor little princess who rejected her family's wealth and status to avoid responsibility.

Commitment.

The ultimate free spirit. Fuck everyone else.

He couldn't imagine her giving it all up for the stagnation of rulership, like her mother.

But, if and when she ever did, he knew she would devote herself to the role as fiercely as she did the captaincy of this ship and her crew.

Regina and his mother Kolina drifted along the deck behind him.

"You should rest," Kolina said. "Perhaps being away from Aeleftheria is draining you too much."

"Perhaps. We'll be back soon enough. But I will go and rest for now." Regina moved on, leaving Kolina to join Kai at the rail.

"Did you know that Astred commandeered this ship in order to protect Aeleftheria's

borders from human trespassers, without exposing our true identity to the world?"

Kai shook his head.

After a long silence, Kolina drew a deep breath. "It concerns me to see the queen looking anything but the height of health."

"She's unwell?"

Kolina nodded, eyes searching the horizon. "More and more so, since leaving Aeleftheria, she mentioned."

"Hopefully it's, as you say, something to do with her absence from her home."

"Mmm. Yes. It has been a long while since she left."

How would that kind of land bond affect Red, if that were the case?

Is that why she stayed at sea for so long?

Because the tether to the island was permanent, and short?

Such a thing didn't exist among the tiger clan's monarchy. Other dragon colonies didn't seem to suffer the same. The king of the air dragon clan was gone from his realm all the time. Jori Mountainside didn't seem to have problems leaving his mountain.

So why Queen Regina?

"Why?" he hadn't meant to ask, but his curiosity got the better of him. And he was bored as hell and looking for safer topics in present company.

“Why... she doesn’t leave?” Kolina blew out her breath, turning her back to the rail, allowing her gaze to travel up the masts to the billowing sails before dropping it to Kai. “For the same reason our culture exists as it does.”

He lifted a brow, waiting for her to continue.

She seemed to consider her words carefully before she answered. “A lot happened during the dragon schism. This isn’t the first location of Aeleftheria over the centuries, but it is the most important and may very well be our last. We became a warrior culture to protect ourselves from the domination of the males that would control everything—even the air we breathed.”

“So they created some magical bond to protect it?”

Kolina shrugged. “I imagine so. And we will defend it, and our queen, with that very last free breath.”

“Except it seems that the queen herself is not free.”

Nor will Astred be when she ascends.

“No. We are a culture deeply rooted in sacrifice.” Her hand hovered over his shoulder a moment before making contact.

She still hesitated to touch him.

Kai was one of those sacrifices. Males could not live in Aeleftheria. They were left with their sires. Their fathers, if they were lucky. As he had been. Many were not so lucky.

Most never knew Aeleftheria, or had the privilege of seeing her.

Both lingered in their silence, listening to the crew and the ship's sounds as she slid over the ocean. The wind rattled the rigging as distant storm clouds drew closer. Storm and ozone drifted past Kai's sensitive nose.

"I hope you go to Katoa Koro soon. Kymri was so pleased to see you, and I know she'd want you to visit. It would be good for you to see more dragonkind and understand what they're trying to achieve in that mountain. Our partnership is crucial to—"

"Kolina." One of the queen's guardians approached, her expression taut. The one called Marli.

"What is it?" She spun at the sharp tone, immediately striding forward to meet her. "Is it the queen?"

Kolina brushed past the guardian, heading for the queen's quarters.

Kai followed.

Astred was already at her mother's bedside, hand grasping hers, head on her chest, listening. She straightened, face pale, eyes large in her face as her gaze slid from Marli to Kolina to Kai and back. "She's unconscious. Zayli came to tell me that mother was unwell. When I came in, she didn't respond, and still hasn't."

Seeing the distress in Astred's eyes constricted Kai's chest, pressing him to do something to help ease her fear.

"We need to get her home. She's been away too long." Kolina moved to the bed, gently touching the queen's pulse points and forehead. "She needs the shamans."

"There's a storm coming which may slow the ship. I'll take her there myself." Astred

stood.

“You’re not going alone,” Kolina growled.

“As a member of the queen’s personal guard, you should have been more vigilant.” Zayli’s tight voice drew their attention to the open door. “Instead, you’ve been distracted with personal affairs, ignoring your duty to our queen.”

Kolina didn’t object to the accusation. She nodded to Marli. “Prepare her for the journey. It won’t be easy to launch from the ocean. We must be careful.”

“I will do that.” Astred’s gaze locked on her mother.

Kai hovered, his heart clenching with every beat as he watched her bury her fear. “I can help. If you lay her in the rowboat, I can carry her.”

“No male will put his filthy claws on our sovereign.” Zayli snarled, advancing on him. “For all we know, this is your doing. You had a private audience with her.”

Kai stood his ground, facing his cousin’s flinty stare.

Astred was suddenly between them. “Kai is a guest by royal invitation. You will treat him with the respect reserved for any individual personally invited by our sovereign.”

Zayli stepped back, eyes darting toward Kai, before lowering her gaze. “Yes, your Grace.”

Astred’s gaze swept the room. “Kai Sun is present by royal request and as such is now under my protection while the queen is... the queen is indisposed.” She glanced at Kai, then turned to Kolina. “As a member of the queen’s personal guard, if you are in agreement, we will accept Mr. Sun’s offer—as a dragon much larger than

ourselves—to transport the queen in one of the Crimson Claw’s small craft, with the rest of the guard as escort.”

Kolina nodded. “Yes, your Grace.”

Kai studied Astred’s worried face as she stroked her mother’s cheek.

The ship’s captain had suddenly given way, seamlessly stepping into her role as heir apparent.

Regina closed the door, knees sagging as she grasped the nearby table for support on her way to the bunk. She stood a moment, nails digging into the edge of the wood, concentrating on the small flower buds clustered together.

Head swimming, heart racing, she closed her eyes, seeking relief on the pillow. She hadn’t experienced this kind of dizziness since she had trained in aerial combat with her Aeleftherian sisters, long before she ascended the throne.

The undertone of her absence from her beloved archipelago had been constant since she left the protected boundaries of her realm, deepening further the longer she separated herself from her nation home.

She’d been warned. Warned not to leave her precious ward unprotected. It needed her as she needed it, their symbiotic relationship strained with this personal mission.

No, not personal. This is important. Our future depends on it.

She’d seen it.

The vision demanded attention and action.

A vision could never be ignored.

Her inner dragon had urged her forward, making it impossible to dismiss the need to fulfil this duty.

But something else had hovered at her nape. A warning, the source unknown.

She drew a deep breath, seeking stillness against the spinning in her skull while the rest of her body continued to rock with the motion of Astred's beloved ship.

Despite the discomfort, Regina smiled.

How glorious it was to take this time with her daughter and experience a sliver of her world.

She swallowed against the sudden thickening in her throat.

A world she will have to give up, as I had to.

"Oh, Astred," Regina sighed. Mouth unnaturally dry, her throat tightened further.

Regina struggled against gravity in search of a drink of water, her limbs uncooperative.

Something is wrong.

She fell back onto the pillow, a tornado encased in her skull, a sheen of sweat coated her skin.

Illness?

She hadn't been ill since Draconis fever had ravaged the island in her childhood. But that had been suppressed and cured by the shamans. No one had been ill with it in centuries.

Her heart rate stuttered, suddenly slow, dragging her further down into the mattress and pillow.

Need shamans...

Lethargy smothered her thoughts as her body slackened. Her legs remained over the edge of the bed, unable to lift them. She didn't care.

I hope... I hope Astred doesn't catch this. Not Astred.

Regina's dragon dimly alerted her of another presence in the room. But whatever was happening added a thick layer over all of her senses, including the energetic feelers that allowed her to read everyone around her.

Mute, immobile, blind.

Something else?

Hands lifted her legs onto the bunk, allowing her body to straighten out, placed her arms in a more natural position, then gently eased errant strands of hair from her face. Unable to resist being handled, she struggled to crack her eyes open.

A blurry visage loomed before her, a soothing voice. "Sleep, your highness. Don't fight the tincture. Just rest."

I know that face—that voice....

Thoughts tumbled as her body sank deeper into the bunk, dragging her into oblivion.

She blinked, trying to focus as something wet and cool slid past her lips, coating her tongue. Reflexively, she swallowed, allowing the liquid to soothe the gritty feel of her throat.

No...

Slowly, understanding wriggled through the thick barrier against her mind.

Oh, no, no...

Betrayal...

Not you...

Voiceless, no limb would obey, even her breath eased into a steady rhythm, mimicking sleep.

Astred... must protect....

Regina's consciousness fell into the void, her dragon extending a weak tether, holding her true.

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Heart racing, Astred observed as each of her chosen Aelefttherian escorts dove off the side of the ship into the rough ocean waters, emerging moments later in full dragon form with enough force to launch them into the sky.

Her mother had been bundled into the bottom of the small boat with care, and rowed away from the ship with Kai's travel bag tucked at her feet. Astred's crew held fast until the escort was ready to take her.

Kai dove next, disappearing deep into the water.

When he emerged, Astred noted the differences marking his scales. She'd never seen his dragon before. She'd almost forgotten that he held more than his tiger beast within him.

A metal dragon like his mother, bearing the subtle striations of his tiger markings, flagging him as 'other'.

Magnificent.

He circled around, massive wings flapping to hold his position as he reached for the small boat, carefully lifting it from the water. Once secure in his grasp, the crew members jumped overboard, swimming to a second nearby rowboat that would take them back to the ship.

Last, Astred dove into the water, shifting into her dragon as she continued away from the ship, swimming fast to build up enough power to launch herself into the sky with a hard snap of her powerful wings. Flapping hard, she caught the bluster of the

coming storm, aiding her ascent to join the others.

She flew alongside Kai, the small boat bearing her unconscious mother cradled in his claws. Kolina headed the convoy, while Marli and Zayli circled around to guard their backs.

Despite the great measures to secure peace with the combative males, not all followed Jori, or were interested in alliances such as the GPSA. There were still enemies out there.

Tension bunched Astred's muscles as she concentrated on the flight, keeping her senses alert for trouble.

She also couldn't be sure that Regina's symptoms were actually due to her distance from home. Again, not with the recent attacks on their domain.

If that were the case, who would dare? Who could get close enough to affect her like this?

An infiltrator to Carson's Island? An Aelefttherian traitor? The same that conspired with the Consortium? Another?

Astred kept her gaze straight ahead on Kolina's lead. At her side, Kai carried her mother, his claws steady, his wingbeats smooth, despite the strengthening winds bearing down on them.

There were only Zayli and Marli behind her. Everyone else aboard the Crimson Claw were crew members that Astred trusted implicitly.

Her thoughts tumbled back to the island, desperately rolling through the faces of all present. She couldn't picture a single one of them as responsible for this.

She dared another glance at her mother's inert form, small amid bundled blankets, face pale.

Side effect or infliction?

Perhaps the Council had been right to try to force Regina to remain in Aeleftheria? They had forbidden her departure and warned of the dangers.

She'd never seen her mother sick, and the sight of Regina's unconscious form sent tremors through Astred.

Her mother, her queen, was the solid foundation of their nation. She could not be seen as weak or fallible.

A measure of relief eased Astred's mind as they passed through the magic barrier, shielding the boundary from the human world into Aeleftherian territory, deep in the Bermuda Triangle.

Aeleftherian guardian patrols approached the newcomers, swooping in fast and close, quickly banking and falling into formation, broadening their escort to the citadel.

After hours in the sky, her muscles burned, and her mind ached with the constant reel of suspicious possibilities. She pushed on as everyone else did. No one flagged or faltered.

The queen was ill, and it was imperative to see her immediately placed in the care of the draconic shamans.

Soon, the tail end of the Aeleftherian archipelago came into view amid white-capped waters. The land itself resembled a dragon in flight, as did the constellations when the sky darkened.

Home.

Kolina roared the tonal signal, alerting the shamans, drawing them to the infirmary platform. The guardians broke off, resuming their patrol.

The five dragons circled the tower platform in formation before Kolina led Kai downward, followed by Astred. Shamans assembled on the platform, surging forward to collect the incoming patient from the boat the moment Kai laid it on the stone surface.

Marli and Zayli were the last to land.

Shifting into human form, Kolina followed, accepting a proffered robe, turning to Kai as he collected his bag from the boat, pointing to a chamber to the left of the infirmary entrance. “There is a change room through there.”

“Escort Mr. Sun to the guest wing.” Astred ordered the attendants as she pulled a robe on, heart pounding, pausing to speak to Kai. “Someone will come for you later. And... thank you.”

He nodded, features drawn as his gaze swept her face. “Anything I can do, just say the word.”

The tension in her chest eased a fraction as she held his gaze, wanting to find comfort in his arms for just five seconds before facing the enormity of the situation.

She nodded, turning away to follow the contingent of shamans into the infirmary. The queen’s own council-appointed team were summoned from the citadel. The infirmary shamans continued their work to secure the queen’s comfort and establish what they could through preliminary triage.

Astred crossed her arms over her chest, observing the shamans murmuring to one another, touching their sovereign with the greatest care, yet with thorough efficiency. The lead shaman questioned Astred as she worked, while a clerk shadowed, recording everything.

Kolina stood next to her, reporting time and observations of when she parted with Regina. Astred filled in the rest. The queen's guards had each checked in to see her asleep, as she was when Astred went to see her at Zayli's summons. "She didn't respond, no matter how I tried to wake her, and her breathing is so shallow, though steady."

"Her Majesty appears to be in stasis—a subtle difference from unconsciousness." She pulled several rune-inscribed crystals from her pocket. Astred recognized the stones as common energy monitors, similar to the ones she kept with her ship's medical equipment.

These particular ones gauged a dragon's energy, separate from the human form's physiology.

Regina's dragon energy was dim.

"I suspect that whatever the cause of the unconscious state, her Majesty's dragon is creating a barrier of her own." The head infirmary shaman straightened from her bent position. She used her personal senses to detect anomalies emanating from the queen before she reached for several swabs. "May I?"

Astred nodded, standing aside as the medic gently swabbed Regina's inner lips, nostrils and various other points of her body, tucking the cotton-tipped tools into special containers. The clerk continued recording data from the team, imparting instructions regarding the samples.

“Is this a result of her absence from the island?” Astred leaned closer, voice low, while the clerk was too distracted to record their exchange.

The head shaman’s gaze darted to Astred’s concerned face, thoughts ticking before she glanced at the clerk, then the door.

Even though the queen’s personal shamans were coming, Astred wasn’t waiting to ask them.

“To my limited knowledge of the historic annals,” the head shaman jerked her head in the negative, her lips briefly tightened. “The strain on her bond with Aelefttheria would be significant and she would certainly feel it. Though causing her to lose consciousness after so short a time is highly questionable. Perhaps her personal shamans could impart a more thorough explanation.”

Astred turned her gaze to her mother’s prostrate form, atop the gurney, awaiting the arrival of her politically appointed medical team.

‘I don’t think so,’ Astred’s dragon responded from within. ‘ They are covetous of what they have and will not risk their political positions for anything.’

She drew a deep breath in defiance of her mother’s shallow draws.

If this isn’t the result of her absence, then what—or who caused this? Someone from the wedding party?

A shiver rippled through Astred.

Kymri and Marli had accepted the former enemy male dragons readily enough; her two oldest and closest friends, outside of the Crimson Claw’s crew.

Astred's gaze slid to Kolina, watching the proceedings from the opposite side of Regina's sick bed, arms crossed, expression grim.

Kolina and Elora were her mother's closest friends. As close as one could have, when a sovereign.

Otherwise, Regina was surrounded by council appointed servants.

Astred rubbed at the tension in her throat, suddenly longing for the freedom of her ship.

Thoughts of ascension to the throne, ruling at the hands of the aged council, always brought sensations of suffocation that usually had her headed to the port earlier than expected.

She couldn't do that now, not with her mother in danger.

If Regina was in danger, so was Aelefttheria.

I can't run away.

Not anymore.

K ai paced his new guest room, his travel bag resting atop the foot of the high four-poster bed. The room was large and comfortable, but his inner tiger prowled within its walls.

Danger.

Entrapment.

Travel bag in hand, he'd followed the attendant down a spiral staircase that reminded him of the servants' steps in medieval castles, along a covered footbridge, to another section of the complex. Different from the sweeping architecture he'd known as a youth in the Eastern Air Dragon court. Onward, through a variety of torch lit, rough stone corridors, which opened to a grand central hall bearing many family crests, and up a sweeping staircase with the Aelefttherian seal etched into a marble slab set into the wall. He recognized it as the duplicate of the pendant adorning Regina's hair at the wedding.

A dragon entwined with a flame.

The image poked at the ancient dragon soul within him, making his skin prickle.

I don't belong here.

'Yes, you do,' his dragon growled.

The attendant led him to a thick wooden door, intricately carved with Aelefttherian flora, set into the thick stone walls. Pushing it open, she gestured for him to enter and silently pulled the door closed behind him.

As much as he wanted to leave this place that he'd given up wanting to see at the age of fourteen, here he was, fighting his deep-seated curiosity. His need to know something of his heritage—his mother's heritage.

A culture that rejected his like.

Not just a male, but an anomaly. A hybrid male.

Most children of mixed shifter heritage were born as one or the other of their parents' genetics.

Rarely both.

Did they know? Had Kolina told them what he was? Had she ever spoken of him to them ?

He'd never known what Astred had thought of his duality. They'd never spoken of it, but her rejection of his proposal had been enough.

Kai huffed.

Of course, she would never have accepted him as he was. As heir to the Aelefttherian throne, no queen could have a live-in consort, let alone one such as himself.

Kai rubbed the back of his neck.

When Kolina had returned, a year after her last visit, with the baby in her arms to present to his father, Kai had shared his self-discovery with his mother.

She hadn't said a word, but her expression hadn't required her to.

Kai had swallowed, his heart sliding into his stomach.

He'd thought she'd be pleased to see how special he was. How strong he would become as both tiger and dragon.

Instead, her gaze had locked on his father's, standing behind him. The feel of his father's reassuring hand on his shoulder made his lip quiver.

Even at fourteen, he didn't cry, though his heart had cracked apart as he faced his mother, cradling his baby sister. The one that would go back to Aelefttheria with her.

To his father, she'd said, "You have connections."

"The Sh?uwàng Zh? are willing to foster him."

She'd nodded, silent for so long, Kai had wondered if she'd simply frozen.

In a sense, she had.

Though he didn't know it, not then.

Finally, Kolina had reached for the gold locket that his baby sister grasped, tiny fingers stroking its etched surface, and tucked it under her tunic.

Kai hadn't known, until Kolina's return some months ago, that bits of his hair were in that locket. Nor that she had worn it against her heart all this time. Even now, as far as he knew.

The Kolina Steelscale that he was coming to know these last few months was vastly different from that last memory of her, though she hadn't been so harsh during her previous visits, which had been several times a year, prior to his sister's birth.

Everything had changed after that.

A knock pulled his inward thoughts to the door, pausing his return stride across the guest room.

He opened the door to his mother's grim face.

"Will the queen be alright?"

Will Astred be alright?

“Her personal shamans have removed her to the citadel through discreet tunnels.” She sighed, rubbing her hands over her face. “I’ve been ordered to ensure you speak to no one about this.”

“They’re keeping her illness secret?”

Kolina nodded.

“Wouldn’t the entire island have heard the alert and seen our arrival at the hospital?”

“They would. Though the Council will weave some story as to the reason. No one would necessarily know that it was the queen in the boat. They want you to remain here.”

“I’d rather go home.”

She shook her head. “You’re a witness to the queen’s activities and decline. They won’t let you go until they interview you for information.”

“Like fuck they won’t,” he growled, resuming his pacing.

She reached for his shoulder. “Please.”

He glared down at her raised hand.

She dropped it. “You were meant to be a guest—are a guest. As you can appreciate, circumstances have changed.”

“No shit,” he spat.

Shame wriggled its way into Kai’s chest. His instinctive need to escape any cage

stirred his temper. Halting his stride, he rubbed the back of his neck, drawing a deep breath. As he blew it out, he turned his gaze to his patiently waiting mother.

This stranger.

He flexed his dragon magic, summoning scales to his wrist, testing.

“I wouldn’t try that. The entire compound is warded to disallow anyone to shift within the palace walls. If you try any harder, the wards will trigger, summoning the guards.”

Of course it was, as was the case at the Eastern dragon palace and the tiger clan’s stronghold.

Those wards would undoubtedly extend to any prison cells the Aelefttherian guards would inevitably throw him into, because by his very gender, he was a potentially dangerous enemy. A dangerous enemy that had touched their sacred queen.

They could decide that he had caused her downfall.

“What is required of me?”

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

A stred stood by the window overlooking Aeleftheria. The sea was onyx and indigo, with a platinum overlay. The moon, a suspended orb. After that of being in the sky, this view from her mother's personal chambers in the royal tower of the citadel was the best.

As much as she loved her ship and the sea, this little cluster of rocky islands always pulled her back.

Home.

The Crimson Claw was nowhere on the horizon.

Good.

Directly below, the string of villages wound along the coast, their cottage windows blots of glowing gold as, one by one, they slid into the darkness of the citadel's tower as the sun completed its descent.

Overhead, the stars in their frothy rainbow web called to her, inviting her to stretch her wings for a few hours

With a sigh, she turned from the temptation, rubbing her eyes as she surveyed her mother's room, decorated with furnishings and trappings from queens long past.

Heirlooms of a time when this place was founded, and remained frozen as such.

Inside, lanterns and candles cast the room with a warm glow that didn't provide the

comfort it normally did.

Some burned fire-based, others use magical illumination.

Due to the magnetic fields surrounding Aelefttherian territory, electricity and modern technology could not be implemented without great effort, such that none of the residents had deemed it worthwhile.

Astred sometimes questioned that, though she hadn't expressed concern one way or the other, since she spent far more time aboard her ship than here, anyway.

From her position by the open window, Astred's gaze fixed on her mother's pale face, small amid the over-sized pillows of the grand bed.

I should have come home long ago, and not left her alone so much.

A royal shaman remained stationed in the corner, where an inset cabinet rested with its doors and drawers open as they worked through their tests and assessments.

They'd tried to stop Astred from following them, given her a litany of reasons she should not be present. She couldn't do anything, she ought to rest, she would be a distraction to the shamans, if the queen had a contagion, then Astred might also be at risk...

Ignoring their concerns, she watched for hours as they worked, murmuring to one another when incantations failed to provide results, shaking their heads, mixing new tinctures and exchanging crystals for more crystals until someone finally disappeared into the archive vault and returned with a massive tome.

An ancient book they kept shielded from Astred's view.

One that Astred had never seen before, and despite her resistance as a child, she'd been expected to review the entire Aelefttherian archival treasury. This book was not among them.

She'd had to swallow her growls of frustration, her pulse escalating with their lack of transparency as her mother lay inert in their care.

Aboard the Crimson Claw, no one ever hid anything from her. It was her realm.

This was not.

Not yet.

And with the Goddess' blessing, not for a long, long while.

She rolled her shoulders against the effort required to remain mute, observe and wait them out. Eventually, they would forget she was there or let down their guard when they saw that she wasn't interfering.

On silent feet, she crossed the room and settled into a well-worn, over-stuffed reading chair surrounded by her mother's personal reading nook. Next to the armrest, a book lay on a small table with a marker embedded a third of the way from the top. A couple locked in a passionate embrace adorned the cover.

Astred smiled.

It was from the last box of books she'd imported from the continent.

The Council frowned on such things, so she smuggled them in and let the island's black market take care of the rest. And somehow this human fiction book managed to end up in the queen's bedchamber.

Yes, things needed to change. They couldn't stop the world outside Aeleftheria from revolving, nor could they stop Astred from bringing some of it to them. After all, their survival depended on Aeleftherians leaving the island now and then to find mates to produce young. Otherwise, they'd die out.

Every Aeleftherian capable of childbearing was expected to do so at some point.

Astred had so far avoided that duty.

Kymri had resisted for as long as she could, until her unique physiology that of a Steelscale metal dragon, could not resist the heat that ignited, deciding it was time to mate.

Astred had great sympathy for her friend, even though that one trigger had changed everything for Aeleftheria, causing break-neck ripple effects throughout the rest of the realm.

Thoughts of Kymri inevitably brought Kai back to Astred's mind.

Blistering memories of their precious time together rolled through her. Closing her eyes, she inhaled, long and slow.

She opened her eyes to the romance book still clutched in her hands.

If only things had been different...

Astred set the book aside with a sigh.

In the corner, the shaman stifled a yawn, settling on a stool to observe the queen while she remained in stasis.

Not the lead royal shaman. A subordinate, whose eyes drooped and whose chin inched closer to her chest.

Astred waited until the shaman's light snores drifted across the room before rising to peek at the ancient tome. It appeared to be an anatomy manual, specific to the royal line, complete with illustrations, diagrams and fact charts for each individual.

She thumbed through until she landed on a page of notes relating to herself.

There were few entries from her adult years forward. She scowled at one particular line 'Shows little evidence of visionary connection.'

Stifling a snort, she closed the book, careful not to wake the attendant.

On tiptoe, she approached her mother's bed.

The superiors had insisted she keep her distance and reiterated their previous reasons, adding a few more.

Now, nearly alone with her mother, hours after their last failed test, she gently lifted Regina's fingers, sliding her palm against hers as she sat on the edge of her mattress.

I wish you could tell me what's happened.

She didn't dare speak aloud, disturbing the napping shaman, as she stroked her mother's cool hand, searching her face.

Regina's fingers twitched against hers, though her features remained unchanged.

Astred held their hands close to her heart, waiting for some further movement.

When none came, she bent, resting her head on the thick coverlet draped over Regina's torso, and closed her eyes.

Sometimes, when she was a child, Regina would play dream games with her while she slept. Subtle things, wherein she would visit Astred in her sleep state and leave her clues to some small treasure that she would find the next morning.

That had stopped once Astred reached an age where she'd decided she no longer wished her mother to have access to her unconscious mind.

'Shows little evidence of visionary connection.'

Astred huffed.

Now, she relaxed, seeking that sliver of connection that she'd closed off so long ago.

Perhaps it's been too long, with too much between us now?

Astred hovered on the brink, slipping into the lighter realm that lifted her into the dream world. Dimly, she was aware that Regina's fingers tightened on hers again.

Astred...

Her heart flipped.

Mamma?

Astred's dragon rose to the surface, reaching.

Regina's dragon appeared through a clouded barrier, exchanging thoughts with Astred's. Her human self was on the cusp of comprehension, as the fog slowly

receded.

A shooting star streaked across the sky, over a tree bent with age, its trunk so vast it seemed to devour the clump of earth it clung to. Surrounded by rings of rippling water, it drew her forward until a black, smokeless flame appeared to engulf it. It neither burned nor withered as it disappeared into the heart of the flame.

The blaze brightened until painfully blinding, when a pair of blue eyes appeared. The eyes then formed into the body of a white tiger, emerging from the searing fiery light as the falling star sped toward them.

In the distance, oily smoke and writhing clouds grew as they tumbled toward her like an avalanche of blackened debris.

“Your highness, you must not disturb the queen.”

The stern voice snapped Astred’s connection, waking her instantly.

She straightened, turning her irate gaze on the elder shaman, glaring down at her with disapproval. The younger shaman stood by the door, eyes downcast, cheeks red.

Regina’s face remained at rest, her mind locked away.

Astred released her hand, clasping her fingers together to still their trembling.

What did that vision mean?

“Your highness. You should find comfort in your own chambers to rest. We will update you on any changes to her majesty.”

Astred’s gaze slid from the lead royal shaman to the collection of queen’s councillors

lingering by the door, expressions stern, though a few regarded her with compassion.

She stood, studying the stern ones; the surviving elders, overseeing the direction of Aeleftheria since the divide.

Astred could not forget that there'd been an incident involving an infiltrator that Marli had witnessed. No one had updated Astred with the details of the ongoing investigation to discover the identity of the traitor, though Marli had not been assigned to the investigative team.

Could one of these elders be the traitor?

As she stared at their faces, the possibility seemed unfathomable. Astred had known all of them for her entire life.

Regina had quietly worked to strengthen alliances with other paranormal communities and Joey Kane's organizations.

The Consortium had indeed arrived on Aeleftherian shores and were as much of a threat as the male dragons ever had been.

Perhaps more so, since their long-term manipulations had been revealed.

How long?

And how long had they had their dirty hands in Aeleftherian politics?

Her gaze flicked to each of the councillor's faces.

Her insides twisted, souring her palate as she considered the possibility that one—or more—of these lifelong councillors, dedicated to Aeleftheria and the protection of her

queen, could be a traitor.

And responsible for my mother's illness.

She doubted it would be any of the village elders. Though respected, their hands weren't the ones at Aelefttheria's helm.

These dragoness matrons were.

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The council matrons stood in a semicircle of the interrogation room, as Zayli Steelscale verbally repeated her written report at their center.

The guardian stood erect, head high, eyes forward, feet at hip width, hands resting behind her back, thoughts concealed behind the impassive set of her face.

The matrons grilled her, seeking deviation from her report. They found none.

One matron studied the guardian closer than the others, impressed that she didn't bow under the pressure of her elders.

The righteous don't.

Zayli Steelscale, though sometimes wayward, believed in the Council's position.

Aeleftheria can never allow males to occupy this island. Never.

They held no value here.

Females mated beyond the borders, then returned home. Those that didn't return were forgotten and struck from the annals and lineages.

A daughter was welcome.

A male offspring was not, and was to be cast off, as was her right and in any way she chose.

Nothing more required. The sperm need not even come from another dragon shifter, since Aelefttherian dragonesses determined the fates of their young.

No male had the right to dictate, or even influence, that dragoness' choice. Not since they started the war.

A war that this matron remembered well. Too well.

So well that she would ensure this council never, ever wavered.

Even when the queen did.

The queen was young, her memory not so long, or infused with firsthand battles.

She did not see her sisters fall, torn and wrecked by enemy male dragons asserting their imaginary rights.

Regina may have trained with the guardians in her youth, but she was always sheltered from the front lines, only allowed to preside over funerals of the fallen, when their bodies could be retrieved from the ocean, or dragged back from the far-off lands where they'd been dumped.

That should have been enough to harden her resolve.

But she'd always had a soft heart, even when her own mother had been lost when she'd flown out to battle and fallen. It was then that the Council had decreed the queen should never leave her beloved island vulnerable. She must be the stalwart symbol of her dwindling people.

Regina.

Too soft. Too forgiving. Too hopeful.

Na?ve.

There was no hope outside the Aelefttherian boundary.

True hope was bound to Regina's ability to stay the course. Hold true to her agreement.

I've given up too much, I'll sacrifice no more.

I was the shining star of Aelefttheria, her greatest protector.

If I can't be the warrior that I once was, I shall be the hand that guides their resolve.

This nation will remain sovereign. She will bow to no male. Ever again.

The matron's steely gaze remained on the young guardian's face.

The younger woman's eyes flicked ever so briefly to the matron, enough to shore up her strength under the Council's scrutiny.

The other matrons' knowledge was limited. Though elders in their own right, none counted the years that this dragoness did.

None of them could claim birth in the previous cycle, surviving millennia, despite all that the world threw at her. Despite what the males had taken from her.

This matron was the singular constant in Aelefttheria, except for the Dragon Mother herself, asleep in the sanctuary deep below the bowels of the citadel.

I failed to gain control of the seals, for now. But I will be successful before it is time for her awakening.

With or without the crown's cooperation.

With Regina forced into stasis, the Council was stronger for it. They would guide the young Astred in the queen's place as regent.

It was perfect.

Uninitiated, Astred wouldn't have the full link to the Mother that the queen held as the goddess' oracle. The heir would be vulnerable and in need of the Council's sage guidance.

Perfect.

There was plenty of time still to regain possession of the seals.

The matron would find another way to outsmart the Consortium's dirty, grasping, thieving fingers.

They wanted control of the Great Mother, so that they could control everything .

As for the mountain dragons?

Well, that new development could be played to Aelefttherian advantage.

If they wished to open their doors, so be it. Another infiltrator—an Aelefttherian—could be housed among them, and when their guard slipped, she would act.

Otherwise, she would ensure that Aeleftheria was still on her guard for their next attack, now that so many of those males knew where the archipelago lay. They would come again. It was only a matter of time.

Patience.

I've been at this for centuries. What is a few more decades?

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A sharp knock drew Kai's attention away from the book he read. Jaw tight, he set it aside and strode to open the door, hoping it wasn't another interview, but braced himself with the likelihood that it was.

Astred hadn't come, nor had anyone other than the council guards, since they'd dumped him here.

Perhaps today was the day to transfer him to a prison cell. He'd had plenty of time to consider his escape options, which were slim, but not impossible.

Pulling the door open, Kolina faced him, expression tense.

Gut tight, he moved aside, closing the door as soon as she slipped past him.

"Any changes with the queen?"

She held his gaze, her entire body taut as she faced him. "You need to go home."

Kai jerked his head, then lifted a brow. "This royal guest has finally worn out his welcome with the Council?"

Kolina's lips compressed. "The queen hasn't awakened yet. She welcomed you as her personal guest. That's no small thing, Kai." She drew a breath, steeling herself. "I'm not sorry I brought you here to see this part of who you are. I'm just sorry that this part can't seem to loosen its grasp, and that has endangered you. And the timing... it isn't safe for you to stay here."

“Will the queen be alright?”

Will Astred?

In light of his recent discovery of her role on this island, his concern for her was well above his worry for himself.

He couldn't shake the feeling that she might be in danger too, that some dark threat loomed over her.

I can't leave her.

There was nothing he could do to help her.

The Astred he knew was both titanium strong, and exquisitely fragile when you looked beyond the rough veneer.

He'd felt it in the small silences between them.

Kai also knew she'd never accept his help if he offered it.

It didn't matter what they'd felt for each other in the past. She'd rejected him, then disappeared from his life.

The night on the beach had been Kai's goodbye to Astred.

There were never supposed to see each other again after the wedding. Not to mention this absurd situation where he was being held prisoner by her mother's elders.

“The queen is strong. Her shamans are determined to bring her back to us, and I have faith in their ability. It may take some time.”

“Time that I don’t have.”

Kolina shook her head. “You’re the obvious scapegoat, given current circumstances.”

“That I knew nothing about until a week ago.” He growled, arms crossing his chest.

Her lips compressed.

Every time he thought about leaving, be it escape or merely flying away on his own, the image of Astred’s fear filled face loomed before him. She was just distraught over her mother, who was now in the right hands. He’d helped with that, what more could he realistically do?

Kai ignored the feeling that she needed him, chalking it up to male pride and protectionism.

Why would she need him? She was the fucking heir of this place with a fleet of guardians at her command.

“Alright, I assume now is as good a time as any.” He gathered the few items he’d removed from his travel bag, zipping it closed.

Kolina reached up to her nape, unfastened a thin chain and extracted the locket hidden beneath her shirt. Hesitating, her thumb caressed the winged shield etched into its surface. The Aelefttherian symbol of strength. “I’d really hoped things could finally be different.” She looked up, eyes glassy, as she grasped Kai’s hand. “I’m sorry.”

The locket was warm and light against his palm as it settled with the chain pooled around it.

Without a thought, Kai reached for his mother, pulling her into his embrace. Something he hadn't done since before he was fourteen years old.

She gripped him, hard and fierce, whispering. "You've always been my precious little boy, Kai."

His heart pounded, hearing words he never allowed himself to dream of hearing, knowing deep down that this might be the last time he had the chance to fix things between them.

I can't leave...

Again, and do what?

"Come with me."

She extracted herself from his arms. "I wish I could."

He drew a deep breath.

Here it is.

"For reasons different from before."

"Aeleftheria comes first." His resentment spiked from the pits of his past, unable to stop the words.

But he also understood. Her queen's life was at risk, and Kolina Steelscale was a member of her personal guard. His thoughts slid back to Astred, then away again.

She wants nothing to do with me.

Did she suspect him, too? Did Astred believe that he would harm her mother for some political plot, in the works long before their unexpected reunion? Maybe that was why she severed contact with him after their arrival.

Kolina was right.

I have to leave.

His fist tightened on the handle of his bag.

“This way,” she gestured toward the back corner of the room, beside the grand fireplace. Sliding her fingers along the intricate carvings surrounding the rich mantle piece, a soft click released a panel from the wall.

“Astred had you assigned to this room... just in case.” She resealed the passage behind them, casting them into darkness.

Tension licked through his body at Kolina’s admission that Astred had accounted for the possibility that Kai might need a covert way out.

With a few scuffing sounds, followed by the strike of flint and whoosh of flame, Kolina lit a lamp suspended from an iron hook on the wall, then led the way through the stone corridors deep within the citadel, ever downward.

As they descended, eerie ripples coated his body, causing goosebumps to rise as the scents of earth and stone and damp filled his nose.

“There’s magic down here.”

Kolina glanced back at him, her features softening as she searched his face. “Perhaps,” she said, pausing. “But what you’re feeling—a ripple? That’s your dragon

reacting to the earth's ores. The air dragons are sensitive to changes in the atmosphere. You are a metal dragon, and we're connected to the ores in the earth's core." She resumed her lead. "In a different way from earth dragons. Similar but different."

They turned yet another corner, descending more stone steps. At the bottom, Kai lost his breath, stumbling as an inner force dragged at him to turn right.

The tugging extended to his tiger magic.

Like a harpist's plucking fingers traveling up and down the scale.

A melody of magic and shadow, intertwined and overlapping.

An intersection. A liminal space.

"This way," Kolina said, jerking her head to the left.

Kai stood immobile for a full moment, catching his breath. Everything in him directed him to the right.

Her keen gaze observed every twitch, curious, though she said nothing, waiting for him to step toward her.

Gauging her expression, he knew she wouldn't tell him what was in that direction. His escape home lay in the opposite pathway. With a shake of his head, they continued on until they reached a heavy door. There was no handle or keyhole to open it.

Instead, Kolina created a triangle with three fingers pointed at the wood. Her magic rippled as her claws extended from those fingers, then she inserted them into

corresponding darkened marks on the thick wood.

From somewhere within the wood or stone, Kai couldn't tell which, a latch released the door.

Dragging it open, sea air rushed into the corridor, scrubbing the stale underground passages. Kai dragged in a welcome deep breath. The door closed behind them without Kolina's touch, as they continued toward the coast and Kai's freedom from the chaos about to erupt within Aeleftheria.

The stone corridor opened into a cavern containing a wide pool fed by an underground river. Fissures in the stone allowed air and vegetation into the space, though there was no visible exit.

A lone figure waited by the flowing water.

The Aeleftherian guardian, Marli Fleetwing.

"Marli will guide you the rest of the way, Kai." Her fingers twitched, as though she stopped herself from reaching for him. "Thank you for coming to Kymri's wedding. It meant a lot to her."

As he looked into his mother's face, he sensed how much it had meant to her too, despite her stoic stance and controlled expression. It was in her eyes, though there were no words.

She was still the hardened Aeleftherian guardian he'd known from his youth, but the faint lines denoting her age and the softness in her gaze took the edge away from the memories.

His short time among the Aeleftherians gave him a sense of understanding their

world—her world. And why she'd made the choices she had. He'd been shielded from most of the political dealings surrounding the wedding, but Kai was a tiger. He watched and listened.

"We'll see each other again?" His voice had taken on an unexpected gruffness.

Her mask faltered as she nodded. "I hope so." Her gaze slid over his face, memorizing the sight of him. "I hope so," she whispered, then turned away, striding back toward the door to the underground warren.

"This way," the Aelefttherian guardian's voice pulled him back to the task once the door was secured. "Most of Aelefttheria's guards have been assigned so that this particular exit point will be unguarded. I'm just leading you to a contact who will guide you the rest of the way out of Aelefttherian territory. Understood?"

Kai nodded.

Marli quickly shed her clothing, scales covering her human body as she stepped into the water.

Averting his gaze, Kai did likewise, stuffing his belongings into the bag as she sank below the water's surface and disappeared.

Kai summoned his scales, as Marli had done, to enable greater speed while moving through the water. He slipped his arms through the straps so that he could swim unhindered. The water was unexpectedly warm after the chill of the cavern. Drawing a deep breath, he dipped below the surface, following Marli along the narrow stone channel, just wide enough for a humanoid form.

Little light filtered in, throwing them into darkness and forcing him to rely on his other senses beneath the water, hands skimming the stone as his feet propelled him

forward. The eddies from Marli's movement ahead of him sent ripples over his body, creating a guiding path in the darkness.

Just as he thought his lungs would implode, the sea lightened into an underwater world of brilliant corals and flickering fish. He followed Marli to the surface, dragging oxygen into his lungs.

They floated some distance offshore of several smaller islands. The main island with its citadel and string of coastal villages lay in the distance.

Treading water, Marli nodded toward the thick shadows among the island's greenery. "She's in there. Good luck, Kai." She disappeared below the surface before he could respond.

He swam toward the island to meet his guide, not expecting Astred's familiar form to be the one to greet him, expression grim.

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He and over her racing heart, Astred watched from the cool shade amid the palm trees and tropical flora as Kai emerged from the ocean, gaze seeking.

So much more could go wrong—was already going wrong.

Is this the right move?

He would never know how relieved she was to see him, or how many times she'd forced herself to stay away from his room these last few days.

How many times, she nearly gave into the need to seek comfort in his arms, as she used to do.

She succeeded only because she reminded herself that she no longer had the right. He'd made that clear on the beach when he'd said goodbye. Something she hadn't even afforded him.

Astred knew, deep down, that he'd never close the door in her face. It wasn't his way.

All she'd have to do is ask.

I can't.

Waiting for his approach, her fingers slid over the scales protecting the most vulnerable point of her torso.

She couldn't know anything more than what the vision had shown her.

That Kai was linked to whatever she needed to do to save her mother and her people.

The vision made that clear.

They barely spoke as she led him to the Crimson Claw, awaiting them in a narrow inlet, sails furled.

Aboard, she wasted no time issuing orders to her crew, as she strode toward the quarters her mother had occupied during the journey from Perenga's island to Aeleftheria.

At the threshold, hands on hips, she scanned the small but comfortable bunk where Regina had fallen ill.

Is Kai the problem or the solution?

That part of the vision wasn't so clear.

He hadn't been the last to see her mother before her illness struck, but Astred couldn't shake the accusations council matrons had hurled, calling for his imprisonment and execution.

Their answer to every problem that involved males appearing on the island.

It was all she could do to stall them, until she finally asserted her regency status, right before arranging for Kai to be moved along the underwater smuggling caverns.

They won't be happy I've disappeared.

She rubbed a hand over the back of her neck.

They'll be frothy, and no doubt assume that Kai has somehow managed to kidnap me and be out for blood.

At least my absence hinders their power, somewhat.

I hope.

Her hand slid over her chest as her eyes flicked over every inch of the room, doubts slamming into her conscience.

I should be by Mamma's side, representing her in her absence. I've left Aelefttheria without a captain—a queen.

Astred glanced to her right where her first mate, Tundi, stood ready.

And soon the Crimson Claw would equally be without her captain.

She didn't need to glance to her left, where Kai waited. Her body was hyper aware of him. A piece of her tugged her toward him as it always had, since their first moments together.

I'm not running away, she sent me that vision.

Astred jerked her head against the internal argument.

She'd said everything would change after Kymri's wedding.

She blew out a breath, shoving the sudden replay of the unnerving images that Regina shared with her.

Astred drew a deep breath, stepping into the room that had already been searched for

evidence. The prickling at Astred's nape told her there was something more. It would be small. Subtle.

Simple.

Her gaze landed on the indigo flowers occupying a small corner of the built-in bureau. The flower buds that her mother had worn for the wedding rested in a small bundle atop the time-worn wood, their edges just starting to curl.

Approaching, she lifted the curled petals, cool satin slid along her fingertips.

Beneath the flowers, the aged wood had several fresh scratches. A few jagged lines with random divots, just enough to mar the patina. Astred followed the line with her fingertip, still cradling the undeveloped blooms, reminding her of a section of familiar coastline. And that divot, set some distance from the line, looked suspiciously like it could be the rough location of a town she also knew very well.

That nagging feeling at her nape returned, bringing with it the image of the ancient bent tree from the vision.

Black River.

Connected in some way to the white tigers?

Studying the second set of lines and divots, she glanced up at Kai. "Do these marks make any sense to you?"

Kai stepped toward the bureau, his scent infusing Astred's senses in the small space as he leaned in to see where her fingertip rested.

He frowned, glancing up at Astred and back down to the mark, grunting. "Maybe."

She turned, studying his impassive expression, lips set.

They did.

Turning to Tundi, she leaned a hip against the aged wood, replacing the blooms as they were. “You’ll sail the Crimson Claw back toward Perenga’s island. Use the gray sails to give yourself more time.”

“You want us camouflaged from the patrols?” Tundi lifted a brow.

Astred nodded. “For now. They’ll find an excuse to stop you, but if you can get to Carson, have him call Kane. Don’t show this desk to anyone but her. Not even my mother’s council if they board you. As far as anyone else is concerned, I’ve sent you to investigate on my behalf as to what could have happened to my mother.”

“And you?”

“As far as you know, I’m still in Aelefttherian territory—which we are.” Astred winked, then strode toward the door.

“Understood.” Tundi followed her out then veered off to issue orders to the crew while Astred kept going to her quarters.

Kai followed her out, but waited with his back to the wall, arms crossed as he looked out at the ocean, his bag at his feet.

Astred retrieved her waterproof travel bag, similar to Kai’s. “Let’s go.”

Kolina stood on the guardian’s tower, watching as patrols came and went, relieved each time they returned empty-clawed and with no sightings.

Astred knew how to be invisible, even from their highly trained guardians.

Footsteps sounded on the worn stone behind her. The breeze shifted, dragging familiar scents across her face.

“Kolina,” Launia, her long-time friend and commanding superior of the patrol fleet, spoke.

It was time.

She knew it by her old friend’s tone. Soft for their centuries of friendship and affection, firm in her deep sense of duty.

Kolina wouldn’t make it difficult for her. She turned, holding her gaze, looking neither left nor right to the guardians flanking her. Zayli and Marli, by rank.

Protocol.

They would escort her to the Council. By force, if Kolina insisted. She wouldn’t. If she was seen to cooperate, it would earn Astred and Kai more time. She hoped they were long, long gone by now, to wherever Astred needed to go to find the answers to save them from whatever was brewing.

Zayli stepped forward, shackles in hand, stopping short when Launia held up a hand. Kolina lifted a brow, finally turning to meet her niece’s eyes. The spark in them told Kolina all she needed to know. Marli stared straight ahead, gaze locked on the horizon.

She wouldn’t have much more time.

Zayli believed that Kolina was complicit in a plot to injure the queen.

The scapegoating was in full swing.

Kolina's heart beat faster.

Kai was gone. Kolina was not.

She straightened her shoulders.

It is time.

She nodded to Launia, who turned, leading her toward the passages winding down to ground level.

They would walk through the public spaces, visible to all, allowing the town and citadel citizens to see her being guided by the guardians to the council hall.

Theatrics.

Politics.

She wondered who would lead the inquisition against her as the locals gathered in whispers, following behind as they went.

As a member of the Queen's Honor Guard, Kolina was known. Her mother and clan matron had been easing the way for her to take her place on the council. Grooming her.

Had been. Until everything had begun to change with the impact of a little plane on the tail end of their archipelago.

Her daughter Kymri's destiny had crash landed, setting their little world ablaze, like

toppling dominoes, until there was no room to replace the fallen tiles as they had been.

Not when the queen welcomed the stranger, albeit with caution. Nor when she left her sanctum to battle the invading enemy. And especially when she left her lands and people to make peace with that arch enemy.

The enemy that had for centuries threatened the autonomy of their sovereignty.

And Kolina had played her part in all of it.

She'd even done the forbidden and brought her male child to the heart of their protected culture.

The whispers grew to murmurs. Murmurs to grumbling, escalating to audible accusations.

"Traitor!" Someone shouted as they ascended the steps to the council hall.

She paused, turning to sweep the gathered crowd for the one with the bold voice at her back.

Many faces she knew, few she didn't.

But there, on the edge of the crowd, she spotted one woman, a dragon shifter, like herself, next to her human companion.

One that worked in the citadel. Kolina recalled seeing her often carrying arm loads of linens between guest rooms.

A woman who'd born two sons and no daughters. Sons she'd had no choice but to

give away in order to guard her place of freedom here.

Kolina suspected the woman's true seat of anger lie in festering loss. Her jealousy challenged Kolina for daring to bring her son back to the very place they'd all been banished from.

Yes. How dare I?

She drew a deep breath, turning her back on the woman.

How dare I not?

It was time.

The queen was amenable.

Division was no longer the answer.

Perhaps if all went well, then this woman would also dare, as Kolina had.

Then she would know the terror of rejection that Kolina had faced and conquered. Not unscathed. But conquered, none the less.

And now she would pay the price so that it would not be in vain.

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Few words were exchanged between Kai and Astred the entire journey.

Even now, as Astred drove their rental along winding roads through the mountains leading north and west from the coastline, crossing rivers, streams and borders. His gaze lingered on her profile, the desire to touch her pressed on his restraint. So many times, he wanted to say something , but there were no words that were right. Kai knew she'd loved him once, otherwise he'd have never uttered words of commitment.

Acid flared through his chest, eating away any words of what might have been.

It wasn't meant to be.

He was wrong to have thought that fate had brought them together. More than once, as Kai followed Astred out of Aelefttherian territory, he considered simply leaving and heading home, but each time, he'd been compelled to stay with Astred, following wherever she was leading him.

I should get back to work. Kolina meant for me to return home.

None of this is my business.

Bayn's words floated back to him from the night before the wedding. 'This affects all of us.'

The need to protect her hadn't dimmed the further from Aelefttheria they went, it had only grown more persistent. He wouldn't abandon her in whatever it was she needed to do. She was alone now. No crew, no royal guardians.

Especially not since she had him smuggled out of her mother's citadel, and out of their people's territory, sending her crew off on a diversion mission.

Then she'd pointed out the odd scratch marks on the bureau that hit him right in the pit of his stomach. Yes, the marks had meant something. They looked far too much like the eastern clan's shared territory boundary, the dots resembling key locations. But he wouldn't tell her that until she was ready to tell him what she was up to. Until then, he had her back, while shit was hitting the fan back in Aeleftheria.

He had to know why those scratches pointed to both the Dùn Zh?o - Shield Claw location, his father's tiger clan, and the Sh?uwàng Zh?-Watchmen's palace, Bayn's clan. The fostering clan that had seen him through his own dragon growing pains and beyond when no one else would. He knew the rumblings of power dynamics when he saw them, and he had no doubt Astred did, too. But in dragon society, there was nothing higher than the position of the monarch.

She couldn't be displaced, no matter that her mother was removed from the board at the moment. And there'd been no indication there was another heir.

No, those grasping to hold on to the power they had, or wanted, would jockey to curry Astred's favor.

To guide Astred.

To control her.

And if there was anything that he knew about Astred, was that she would never be controlled.

They drove through the tidy little town of Black River without stopping, though she pointed out the Brandt-owned club that Odson Blackridge worked at, with a "you

should go some time. It has a great vibe.”

He lifted a brow. “I’m surprised you know the vibe of any place this far inland from the sea.”

She rolled her eyes. “I do leave my ship now and then.” A smile tugged at her lips as she cast him a sideways glance. “Besides, the waterways into the great lakes make a perfect interior ocean for her to stretch her sails.”

His gaze swept her profile, eased with talk of her ship. The silence returned with the gentle breezes through the open windows, carrying her uniquely embedded scent of wildflowers and hot sandy beaches swirling around him. The recollection of how perfectly she fit in his arms slammed him.

Perfect.

He’d foolishly thought so at one time. Until she’d made it clear how wrong he was. So why hadn’t she left him at the coast or dumped him at the nearest airport?

The cool way she looked at him, and the distance she constantly placed between them, made it glaringly obvious she held her reservations about him.

Keep the enemy close—or some such thing?

Why else drag him along?

The scratch marks?

She’d mumbled something about her mother and changed the subject as though that was all there was to say on the matter. Clearly it must have been enough, because here he was, having made zero effort to wash his hands of her and the Aelefttherian

bullshit.

Clearly all Astred.

And the damned little locket Kolina had given him that weighed against his chest beneath his shirt.

Didn't curiosity kill the cat, Kai?

The face was etched with the Aeleftherian crest. The back with the images of a tiger and a dragon prowling around one another. His father and his mother.

And the tiny clipping of his hair and claw.

Finally, he broke the silence with something less mundane than assisted travel navigation or snack choices.

“What will happen to Kolina?”

Astred's hands tightened on the steering wheel.

There would be repercussions following his disappearance. And Astred's.

“They're going to think she helped me escape, and that I kidnapped you, or something stupid like that, aren't they?”

“Probably.” She glanced at him, then back to the road. “If they arrest her, she'll be detained while Council hashes out what to do with her. Then a trial. But as a member of my mother's Honor Guard, she will be afforded respect for her position and a stay on any final actions until a royal judgment has been made.”

“Which your mother can’t do while unconscious.”

“And I’m not there to be pressured into one as her regent.”

Kai nodded, the grip on his chest easing. “Continental road trip it is, then.”

Astred eased off the gas, turning into the entrance to a narrow dirt road marked by a pristine hand-painted mailbox labeled ‘Brandt’.

They’d barely rolled to a stop outside of the vast farmhouse with its surrounding porch when Heidi emerged through the screened front door, scrubbing her hands with a dish towel. The scent of bear surrounded the property.

“Astred? Kai?” Concern chased away her delighted surprise, as she watched them approach the steps, studying their faces. “Coffee? I’m working on muffins if you’re hungry.”

They followed her past an entire floor-to-ceiling wall of framed photographs, into the oven-warmed kitchen. The aroma of bliss filled his nostrils and lungs as he breathed deeply of Heidi’s baking efforts. Kai had never seen anything so... domestic—both expansive and comforting all at once.

“Thank you, Heidi. We won’t be staying long.”

Heidi glanced up from the coffeepot with a nod, gaze darting between Astred and Kai. She hit the button on the grinder, the sound filling the kitchen for several breaths. “More dragon politics?”

Astred’s laugh was short as she slid onto a stool at the island counter, brushing her wind-tousled hair from her forehead. She linked her fingers, resting her hands on the counter as she leaned forward. “I need to visit the nexus.”

The scoop carrying fresh coffee grinds clattered against the top of the machine as Heidi's eyes widened. Catching herself, she finished her task and set the machine to brew. "I can arrange that. You'll tell me what's going on?"

"Mother's fallen ill, and I was hit with a vision." Astred's gaze flicked to Kai. "No one knows we're here."

Heidi's face paled as she gripped the countertop, gaze flicking between Astred and Kai. "Go on."

Vision?

Kai turned, studying Red's drawn features again.

His thoughts bounced right back to Regina's scratched map hidden beneath Aelefttherian buds.

Astred recounted the main events since the wedding with clipped efficiency.

"Kymri & Jori?"

"I'm keeping them out of this for as long as I can. This is internal."

"Not the Consortium?" Heidi poured the coffee, handing them each a mug.

"Maybe? But we haven't caught the traitor that's been conspiring with them yet, to know for sure." Red brought the mug to her lips. "I need to see Odson, too."

"And the vision?"

"I can't make sense of it, other than that the Nexus was very clear." Her gaze slid

toward Kai, but she didn't meet his eyes. "And that Kai's clan—or Kai himself—is somehow connected."

What the fuck did that mean?

Kai stiffened as his pulse upticked, "I assure you, we have nothing to do with the queen's current state."

Though the reality was that he couldn't be one hundred percent sure why Bayn was at the wedding. Maybe the air dragons were moving on something.

They wouldn't, would they? The Watchmen were neutral—and why would they?

Astred nodded, slid her warm fingers over his hand, whispering. "I know."

The unexpected contact sent conflicting emotions tumbling through him after so much time. They hadn't touched since that encounter on the beach the night before the wedding.

Kai slammed that memory back into the vault of his mind and spun the lock.

Removing his hand from her reach, he grasped the coffee mug and brought it to his lips.

Heidi blew out a breath. "Okay. I'll reach out to Charmaine, and she'll gather the Wardens." She pulled a cell phone from her pocket and slid it across the counter toward Astred. "Leave me your number. It may take some time. And Odson is out at the camp, helping clean up after a recent storm. Cell service is a luxury out there, so you'll have to go in person."

"The refugee camp Marli & Kolina mentioned?"

Heidi nodded, turning to collect a blank recipe card and pen, scribbling directions before handing it to Astred.

Taking the card, Astred slumped on her stool, suddenly looking tired as she rubbed her face, murmuring. “A place like that should never need to exist.”

“It’s not ideal, but they do alright. Especially with the locals helping out when they can. Speaking of, would you mind dropping off some supplies? I have extras that wouldn’t fit in Odson’s car when he came by.”

“Of course.” Astred said absently, fingering the card. She glanced up, straightening. “Of course. Whatever I can do to help. This is Aelefttheria’s responsibility, though I suspect they may not see it that way.”

“You’re not wrong,” Heidi sipped her coffee.

“How so?” Kai asked.

“The camp was formed from Aelefttherians that didn’t want to be subjected to Aelefttherian laws and chose to leave. Others have since joined them. Dragon shifter wanderers, looking for something different from what their tribe offers. A different way of life.” Astred slid from her stool.

Kai stood, preparing to leave.

“Not just dragon shifters. You lot aren’t the only ones with problems,” Heidi added, rounding the counter to face Astred. She placed her hands on Red’s shoulders, meeting her eyes. “Whatever happens... your mother... we’re here. No matter what. I hope your shamans can figure out how to bring her back to us.”

Seeing the emotion in Heidi’s eyes, Astred nodded, allowing the bear shifter

matriarch to pull her into her arms. She swallowed, voice tight. “Me, too.”

When they parted, Heidi turned to Kai, placing a gentle hand on his cheek. “I’m so, so glad Kolina found you. You’ve always been a significant part of her that was missing.”

Kai nodded, at a loss for words as he drew a deep breath to alleviate the flare of heartache.

“You’ll bring Odson back from the camp afterward? My husband and the boys are up north helping his grandmother move to a new apartment, so I’m alone here with plenty of room. Whatever the Wardens’ answer, nothing will happen today.”

They loaded Heidi’s boxes into the trunk of the rental and headed for the refugee camp while Heidi reached out to the Black River Wardens on Astred’s behalf.

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Even with Heidi's explicit directions, the camp was a challenge to reach. Down a narrow, overgrown dirt road, past a gate with surly guards, eying their cargo with deep suspicion. Astred showed them the recipe card with Heidi's handwritten instruction paired with Odson's name, which seemed to act like an admission ticket.

Kai's gaze swept the bustle as Astred parked the car next to the community building that the last guard had pointed them to. Getting out, they scanned the scene before them, searching for Odson.

The camp was actually a village in various stages of evolution, crawling out from the weight of a heavy storm thrown at it. While overgrown, the road had been cleared of any debris. Alive with activity, the denizens hauled felled trees and debris from cabin rooftops to be cleared and cut.

Both his tiger and dragon selves perked up with curiosity as the scents of fresh split wood and sap, mingled with a mixture of dragon, human, bear, and various other shifters, drifted around them on the breeze.

Hands in her back pockets, Astred blew out a breath when her eyes landed on a nearby wooden structure crushed under an uprooted tree. "Goddess, I hope no one was in there."

"Red?" The older male dragon that Kai had met before his sister's wedding approached, surprise clear on his face, gaze darting between her and Kai. "What's wrong? Why are you here of all places? And with Kolina's son?"

"Long story. Heidi sent more supplies." She jerked her head toward the car.

“No doubt that it isn’t a good tale, either.” He accepted one of the boxes that Kai had extracted from the car. They followed him into the community hall, where several others were gathered going over plans. Odson called out to them, “Heidi sent more stuff.”

Relief filled their expressions as they approached to alleviate their loads; all of them smelled of dragon.

“Thanks so much.” One woman smiled at Kai as she accepted it. “I’m Brandi, this is Fiona, and Allison. Please tell Heidi she’s a gem.”

“Brandi is the head of the Camp Council and oversees all the business.”

“One of many,” she nodded to Fiona and Allison. “The others are all working to clean the place up at the moment.”

“Dragon-goddess, you look so much like Astred Arakkil. You can’t be, but damn, the resemblance is crazy.” The other woman called Fiona said, eyes wide as she stared at Astred, who exchanged looks with Odson.

Astred handed her the box. “I am. And this is Kai Sun, son of Kolina Steelscale.”

Fiona fumbled the box, Astred helped her right it when Odson swooped in to rescue the load, which sounded like sliding dishes.

Brandi’s voice lost its friendly tone. “Why are you here? We already helped the last time your people came recruiting, when we should have stayed out of it.”

“And we deeply appreciate that you did. But no, I’m not here to ask for anything. I came to see Odson and Heidi sent these boxes. But now that I’m here, I’d like to help out if you’ll let me.”

The women seemed to have a conversation with their eyes until eventually Allison shrugged. “Kolina helped Odson bring my Ben home to us when those male dragons could have got him seriously hurt or killed.”

“No Aelefttherian politics?” Fiona demanded, eyes narrowed on Astred.

Astred searched her face. “I remember seeing you in the market below the Citadel.”

“Yeah, I came down to the market every time your ship came in with black market goods from the continent.”

“Black market?” Allison’s brows went up.

“Cosmetics, books and magazines, and clothing.” Astred shrugged.

“That the Council disapproved of. Red the Pirate Princess is adored among the younger Aelefttherians that haven’t made it off the island yet.” Fiona laughed.

Kai couldn’t help but smile at that.

Brandi crossed her arms. “So why is the pirate princess here? In our camp? Are you looking for an importing deal?”

Astred held her gaze, voice firm. “No. I said I was here to see Odson. That’s all. If you don’t want the help, that’s fine, I respect that. But I do need five minutes of his time.”

“What’s happened, Astred?”

Astred switched her attention to Odson, pausing before answering. “We have trouble, and I need information. I’ve asked Heidi to reach out to the wardens.”

Odson blanched. “The queen?”

Astred nodded.

“The Consortium?”

“Undetermined.”

“What’s wrong with the queen?” Brandi demanded.

“She’s ill.”

The silence that struck the room rippled over Kai’s skin and senses.

“Is Katoa Koro aware?” Odson’s voice dipped.

“No. That’s why I need you to reach out to them. I don’t want anyone else involved until I figure this out. But I do want them to know what’s going on and be prepared as best they can.”

“Of course,” Odson nodded, expression solemn.

“What do you need?” Brandi finally asked Astred.

Astred shook her head. “Just information from Odson before I go back to Black River. I’m not asking the camp for anything, but you all may need to brace yourselves for the fallout that comes with this.”

Brandi nodded. “We’re aware of the Consortium and their reach, after the last time an Aelefttherian visited us, and that no matter how independent we try to be, they will drag us all together into some serious messes.”

“Let me guess. The Council thought Kai was the reason for your mother’s illness.”
Odson looked at Kai.

“Yes. Kolina had me smuggled off the island,” Kai said.

“Shit, you’re not kidding. The Queen’s Honor Guard, aiding and abetting? This isn’t going to go well for her.” Fiona gaped.

“I’ll ensure she’s pardoned once Mother wakes up. I needed Kai.”

Needed.

The vision and Regina’s etched map.

The admission still didn’t send warm fuzzies through his acidic gut. Not until he understood what that meant.

“This ought to be interesting. Why?” Odson prompted.

Astred spread her hands. “I’m hoping the Nexus will tell me.”

Tension strung through Kai.

She didn’t drag him along because she needed him. He was there because Aelefttheria needed something from him.

He’d had a sense that she would need him before they ever left the citadel. Now the reason was slowly developing before him. Painfully slowly.

He hadn’t been in the refugee camp very long, but this mission was clearly important to more than just Aelefttheria. He had to know what the connection was to his clan,

too.

What threat was Astred bringing to them if that little map was indeed directing her to go to the Watchmen?

Kai shoved aside the personal sting of her words, focusing on the fact that he could help them in some way. Help Kolina, and Kymri and Jori. Help Astred, though he wasn't sure how.

Not knowing Astred to be psychically sensitive, Kai was mystified and intrigued by the notion that she'd had a vision, that also potentially included him.

'Potentially' included him.

'Kai's clan—or Kai himself—is somehow connected.'

She most likely needed him to get to someone else in his clan. Aaron? His father?

"The Nexus," Brandi breathed, drawing Kai's attention back to the present. She swallowed, studying Astred with new eyes. "Well, the wardens don't move fast, so you may wait a while. We will accept your help to clean up the storm debris while you're here."

"Let's get started. It'll be good to feel like I can do something productive during all of this mess. Was anyone hurt?"

"Some injuries, but they'll mend; the humans are all being treated at the local hospital."

"If you're willing, I'd like to hear more about your village." Astred followed Brandi out of the community hall.

They worked long past nightfall, with floodlights set up around the camp to enable the clearing effort to continue. Large machinery was unnecessary, as dragon shifters would take turns easing into their dragon forms in locations that needed the raw strength to precisely lift and move entire trees as needed, setting them down where chainsaws could do the rest.

Others lifted replacement material to repair damaged rooftops. Pickup trucks carted away things that couldn't be salvaged.

Kai observed how the refugees worked together, learning a great deal about various dragon societies from all over the continent. The dragonkind web was just as complex here as it was in the east.

His thoughts and gaze constantly drifted back to Astred as she worked alongside the locals, listening and chatting, and eventually laughing alongside them as they relaxed in her presence.

She was just like any of them.

He grudgingly admitted to himself that he couldn't regret his time with her, as the resentment of her rejection melted away.

The days since their unexpected reunion were giving him enough time to absorb and adjust, though it changed nothing between them, other than that he was letting go of the bitterness.

He'd seen enough of Aelefttherian machinations to understand the position she was in.

She belonged to her nation.

He'd never had any right to her—even had she wanted him, hybrid or not.

Astred was easy to love.

Her natural leadership ability had always been clear in the way that she interacted with her crew aboard the Crimson Claw. They loved her. They were her sisters even as she commanded them.

That same energy exchange was evident here too, even though she claimed no sovereignty over them. She treated them with the same respect that she did everyone else, and those around her subconsciously reacted to her natural power.

A born leader.

Her dynamic undercurrent made her irresistible.

He'd felt that same unmistakable power in her queen mother. The power that commanded attention and drove one willingly to their knees in acknowledgment of her connection to something otherworldly. And since her mother's decline, that same power ascended within Astred, making her shine all the brighter. A constellation among the cosmos, suspended by a rainbow of stardust over Aeleftheria.

She inspired him to stand a little straighter, work that little bit harder, give more than he thought possible.

He swallowed the tightening in his throat as his heart swelled, watching her laugh at something Brandi said.

I still love her.

He'd just have to bury it even deeper now.

And when they discovered what she'd needed him for?

He'd be there.

Whatever had drawn them together all those years ago seemed to have a purpose. A story. Even then, that was being played out now. His work contracts would wait. There were others that could head the firm while he was away.

It wasn't just about Astred, that he would willingly join her on this journey.

'Someone needs to witness things as they unfold here on behalf of the rest of dragonkind,' his dragon whispered from his nap. Because as much as Kai had buried that part of himself, he was still a dragon.

And maybe a witness for all shifters?

The ripple effect this Consortium group had on the tightly-knit Aelefttherian and mountain clans was powerful and dangerous.

His hand drifted over his shirt where he'd tucked his mother's locket.

He withdrew it now, thumb caressing the Aelefttherian shield etched into the front before flipping it over.

Kai stared, yet again, at the entwined bodies of the dragon and the tiger.

A story from his childhood quietly drifted back to him now.

A tale of the fearless tiger becoming the protector of the powerful dragon.

A stred and Kai had accepted Heidi's gracious offer to billet them at her farm while they spent their days helping to set the refugee camp aright.

Though Astred didn't think it could rightfully still be called that anymore.

It was a village. A community in its own right.

And though it had its own internal issues, it was well run by those chosen to lead.

Chosen.

A unique concept in the dragon world.

If and when Aelefttherian rulers had been 'chosen', Astred had no idea of their origins, as it was so long in the hazy past no one thought about it anymore. Those histories would all be in the stuffy, enclosed archives, which Astred had always avoided.

Thankfully, Odson had elected to stay at Heidi's with them, driving them back and forth to the camp to finish the cleanup, and providing as much knowledge of dragon history as he could remember, constantly insisting that Elora was a much better resource.

They rose with the sun, stuffed themselves with Heidi's delicious breakfast, fuelled up with her signature coffee and set off to work until long after sundown.

Heidi had thoughtfully left them plates for their late-night dinner before turning in for the night.

Astred, Kai and Odson ate in near silence, exhausted after a long day of work, expecting another early rise the next morning.

No word from the wardens yet.

Astred perused Heidi's small sitting room library as she waited for the shower. An entire shelf was dedicated to coffee bean development. Apparently, her new hobby involved working with South American coffee growers to create her own blends.

Astred smiled, fingers skipping along the spines.

She squatted, inspecting the titles along the lower shelves of children's books. Her gaze flicked to the nearby wall of family photos showcasing Heidi's sons and their own new families.

Pulling a brightly illustrated atlas from the bottom, she strode toward a reading lamp to better see it. Having a deep love of maps and all things nautical, it was impossible to resist flipping through the pages. She paused on the two-page world view spread, eyes dropping to the empty expanse of Atlantic Ocean where Aeleftheria hid. Her fingertip drifted to the coastline of North America adjacent to Black River's location, tracing the lines as her mother had etched them into the wood. Closing her eyes, she recalled the other set of marks.

Returning her gaze to the map, she searched for the matching lines, not finding anything similar on this page.

Not until she looked at the eastern hemisphere, did she spot a section of coastline that resembled the marks. Asian coastline, suspiciously close to the region that Kai lived when she met him.

But not knowing the meaning of the corresponding dots made it impossible to confirm her suspicions. He hadn't affirmed or denied recognition, just said 'Maybe' .

There was a white tiger in the vision, so that's likely what it was pointing to. The tiger clan? But why?

She snapped the book closed with a growl, replacing it on the shelf.

Switching off the reading lamp, she climbed the stairs to see if the shower was free yet.

Light spilled from the bathroom door, slightly ajar. The spaces beneath the other doors in the hallway were dark. On silent feet, so as not to disturb anyone else, Astred slipped through the block of light splashing the runner, glancing up to see Kai brushing his teeth.

Pausing, her mouth went dry as her gaze took in the damp, tousled hair. His muscular arms and torso gleamed with clinging moisture from the hot shower, a towel draped so low on his trim hips, it threatened to tumble to his feet.

Pulse accelerating, she stood transfixed as powerful memories urged her closer, daring her to reach out and touch him like she used to.

That night on the beach taunted her, making it clear they still desired one another.

But he'd pleased her and left her there.

Her gaze dropped to his strong hands, one on the countertop, the other working the toothbrush.

Hands that knew how to make her feel . Her favorite sensation was that of Kai's warm hands on her body.

Heart pounding now as she struggled against the unwanted feelings, she realized he was staring at her reflection in the mirror as she lurked like a peeper in the hallway.

She cleared her throat. "Almost done?" she whispered a little too cheerily.

The corner of his mouth curled around the toothbrush before he leaned to spit the toothpaste out and rinse his mouth.

Astred's eyes dropped to the towel that slipped dangerously lower. Her tongue slid across her lower lip as she met his gaze when he straightened with a nod.

He pulled the door open wider, stepping up to the threshold.

Rooted, Astred struggled to breathe as she fought against the familiarity of the moment. A moment when she would have just slid her palms over the taut muscles of his chest and arms, inciting him to drag her against him. When she'd flick the towel out of her way to take what she wanted, with his beautiful mouth taking hers and traveling down the column of her throat to—.

“Astred?” His silky voice tugged her to the present, brow raised.

Practically naked, his skin hot and moist, she drew a deep breath of his soapy scent, tasting the clean musk of his tiger and his dragon.

Heart ticking in her ears and pulsing between her thighs, she distantly realized that she was blocking the way.

Her nipples pebbled as he leaned close, aura brushing hers, whispering next to her ear as his hand slipped over her hip, “Hot is left. The lever is stiff and requires a little play to get it where you want it.” He gently eased her back a step and slipped past her to his room. “Good night, Red,” he nodded, pushing the door open.

Eyes locked on the graceful curve of his back and wide shoulders, she met his eyes and nodded dumbly.

Astred snapped her mouth shut as Kai disappeared from view, and stepped into the

steamy bathroom, clouded with his scent, shutting herself inside. Leaning against the slick wood, she closed her eyes and breathed deep.

Desire thrummed through her, dragging the heart ache with it.

I miss him. I miss him so much.

She shed her clothing, adjusted the water, and stepped in, her mind crowded with images of Kai.

Her soapy hands roamed over her body. How easily she could have tugged that towel to—no. She'd broken things off with him. That night on the beach was the last time.

Anything more, meant everything more.

But it didn't stop her from remembering, imagining the sensation of his lips on hers, his hands caressing her back, palming her breasts.

Had he thought of her during his shower? She slid a soapy hand between her thighs as the other cupped a breast.

Her breath hitched, and she sighed, alleviating the sudden tension. But it wasn't enough.

She wanted him. Needed him, if she was honest.

It wasn't just the desire.

When she recalled their time together, it wasn't the times of passion that dominated her memories. It was the quiet, lingering moments afterward, wrapped in each other's bodies, comforted in the sanctuary of one another's souls.

Astred bowed her head under the shower spray, both arms now crossing her chest trying to contain her heart ache. She wouldn't allow any tears to fall for what she'd thrown away.

I did this. To myself. To him.

She'd sailed so far away from his love, she'd managed to land right back in front of him, unable to escape this time.

Except now everything was far more fucked up than when she'd left him.

There was no point in trying to fix things. She still couldn't have him, even if by some slim chance he might still want her.

It doesn't matter anymore.

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It took three days for the Wardens to agree to Astred's requested pilgrimage to the Nexus.

Three days, with no relayed information from Marli or the Crimson Claw. Whether this was good or bad, she couldn't know, so she decided to stay the course, only adjusting her sails when necessary.

That morning, Odson was recounting the dragonling story of the legendary hero Dragon Star, which Astred had fixated on, when Heidi's phone pinged.

Something about the star in her vision.

Heidi set aside her coffee to pick up the phone, her expression grim.

Everyone had fallen silent.

"It's time."

They rode in Odson's Mustang Shelby, Heidi in the front seat, Astred and Kai in the back.

Working to help rebuild the refugee village had helped pass the days, but it had still been too many hours to think. Too much time for her worries to circle around and around in her head.

The situation with Kai was ever-present. He was constantly in her periphery, lingering at the edge of her consciousness.

Then there was the fear for her mother's wellbeing and the status of the investigation into the traitor. The threat of an Aelefttherian working with the Consortium, jeopardising their people, their home, the queen, and their most treasured Mother.

Betrayal burned through her like acid.

And now, because of all of this, she was forced to go to the Nexus.

As much as the otherworld had mystified Astred, it also gave her the heebie jeebies. A girl—and her dragon—were creatures of the earth, not the astral. She lived the adventure-filled life of the seas, preferring to keep her soul firmly planted earth side—or seaside— where she was much less likely to wander off after shiny light beings or be trapped by the murky ones. Or so Astred had imagined.

Stomach tight, Astred became hyper aware of Kai next to her as her anxiety escalated, needing something—someone else to focus on.

It was time.

She was about to journey into mystical territory that terrified her, driven by the vision that led her from her mother's side.

Maybe it wasn't a vision, with a capital 'v'. Maybe it was just a psychosis, and she'd hallucinated a way out. An excuse to run away from the turmoil of the island before the council matrons jammed her mother's crown down onto her head.

She wasn't ready for that. She wasn't ready for this .

Chest tight, her lungs struggled for air, like when she stayed underwater too long. Straining, begging for freedom.

Her hand shot out to grasp Kai's on the seat between them. With a glance of concern, his fingers immediately closed over hers.

Warm. Secure. Calm.

Kai.

Eyes closed, she drew a deep, steadying breath. Astred was accustomed to barrelling headlong through things to avoid thinking about fear.

She couldn't do that here.

Not with the three days wait. Like the Wardens had done it on purpose—to build up her fear of the unknown. Just like the Aelefttherian Matrons liked to do.

Assholes.

Another breath, easing the tension across her chest and releasing the impatience that had bound it up in the first place.

They drove through town along the river road, leading them out to the tiny clump of land that supported the sacred tree.

Odson turned the Shelby onto the winding Moon Road that descended with a sharp curve to the right. He parked at the end of the narrow peninsula, overlooking the small inlet.

Exiting the car, Heidi led them between the trunks that arced out into a grove of mature individual trees. Not a single type, as would be expected of a space such as this.

Oak, Golden Spruce, Scots Pine, Maple, and several more that Astred couldn't name, rose to ring a flat clearing sprinkled with sweet grass and meadow flowers, whose scents filled her nose and lungs, chasing away the tension. Butterflies, tiny birds, moths, and other insects fluttered around the clearing, carrying on as though there was nothing sacred about the grove at all.

Or perhaps that's exactly what made the grove sacred.

The peace and nourishment it offered, both to the tiniest of bodies and largest of souls.

Glancing at Kai to her right, her gaze dropped to their linked fingers, realizing that she'd grasped his hand again on exiting the car.

Clinging to him.

He lifted their joined hands, placing a soft kiss on the back of her fingers, holding her gaze.

I'm here.

The message was clear and the last of her tension fluttered away with the most delicate of moths vacating the clearing, looking for a safe place to rest.

The look in his eyes brought a smile to her lips for the first time in what seemed forever.

Turning her attention back to the meadow, she allowed another moment to admire the beauty of it before continuing on.

She wasn't here for the grove. She was here for the Nexus.

Releasing Kai's warm fingers, she strode through the meadow toward the river, glittering beyond the trees.

At the bank, the wind swirled around her from across the water; the sun kissed her face in welcome.

At this junction, the Black River flowed out to meet the great St. Lawrence River, its opposing banks curved in and around a mound of earth, supporting a solitary twisted tree.

The Nexus.

She'd sailed past it, her ship too far out to pay much attention, though she was aware of its existence. Her mother had at least ensured she knew about it, before Astred set her sights on horizons as far from Aeleftheria as possible.

It was exactly the type of tree she loved to climb as a child. Crooked and twisty, with deep undulating roots and a high arching canopy to lose yourself in.

Astred closed her eyes. Beneath the sensation of the wind brushing her skin and hair was the rippling power, teasing her dragon to the surface.

Similar to what she'd felt the few times she'd accompanied her mother down into the bowels of the Citadel where the sacred chamber protecting dragonkind's most precious treasure was concealed.

Regina had never told her what slept behind that door. She waited for Astred to ask.

Astred never did. She feared she hadn't needed to.

She saw it once—and only once because it had been too much for her young mind to

grasp what she'd glimpsed.

Deep within, she knew . And that terrified her, shying away from any sort of confirmation.

Oracle of the Mother.

As she stared at the tree, serene on its lonely clump of rock, that fear crept toward her with seeking fingers.

The Nexus was going to rip away her childish veil, a thin sheet against night terrors, and show her what she already knew.

Her mother's crown, Astred's unwanted inheritance, was much more than a symbol of rule.

It was the deepest connection to dragon divinity.

And that was what scared Astred the most.

Sacrifice.

All her life, Astred held tight to her identity, molding it from the depths of the seas and wildest of storm fronts. What she feared most was having it ripped from her so that she was nothing but a vessel for something other.

'Which is silly. The queen isn't an empty vessel.' Her dragon whispered.

Astred rolled her shoulders, displacing the icy fear creeping through them.

'We will stop running from them,' her dragon asserted, lifting Astred's head, sniffing

the air. ‘This Nexus will tell us why.’

Odson’s retellings rolled through her mind as her heart pounded, eyes locked on the tree nestled in the gentle flowing waters of the Black River.

I don’t like this.

‘We don’t have to. But we will do it, anyway.’

Astred’s gaze found Kai watching her, expression grim.

‘We should claim him.’

I can’t. They won’t let us. Besides, it’s too late for that, nor is it the time.

Astred’s dragon snorted, giving her a shake.

‘We can. They can’t stop us, Astred. They never could, unless we let them.’

Charmaine Shea, Heidi’s friend and lead warden, approached Astred.

“Princess Astred Arakkil, heir of the Aelefttherian throne and Oracle of the Mother, do you consent to this journey into the Nexus?”

Breath stalled in Astred’s throat.

Oracle of the Mother.

Raw fear spread throughout her body in icy blooms.

I can’t. She... I am not worthy.

‘Worthy or not, we must and will protect her.’

Her dragon pushed the words through her constricted windpipe. “I consent.”

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The power of the area pulsed through Kai's body, forcing him to focus on his breath. A group of women approached; the one in the lead carried a carved wooden box.

He had expected the wardens to come dressed in flowing robes and cloaks.

They weren't. They were all dressed as though they'd just come straight from their day jobs—farmer, librarian, shopkeeper, banker, tattooist, teacher, homemaker carrying an infant, and one he guessed was... a socialite?

Back home, in the tiger domain, a temple enclosed a place such as this, and the keepers dressed in full regalia for a journey ceremony. Especially for one of royalty.

This group embraced the sacred in the mundane. A different way of protecting.

The shortest woman, with a cloud of graying auburn hair, who held the intricate box spoke to Astred. "Princess Astred Arakkil, heir of the Aelefttherian throne and Oracle of the Mother, do you consent to this journey into the Nexus?"

Astred's wide-eyed gaze flicked to Kai, her lips parted, pulse ticking in her throat.

Her dragon glinted in her eye as she held his gaze, growling, "I consent."

Kai's own dragon rumbled in his chest, rising to her bait.

He closed his eyes, controlling the inner beast to settle.

He'd witnessed two other ceremonies such as this and Astred didn't need his dragon

interfering. Since their encounter outside the bathroom the previous night, his dragon had kept Kai awake, urging him to knock on Astred's door during the wee hours.

"Who will act as her guardian?" The warden's straightforward gaze slid from Astred to each witness in the clearing.

"I will." Kai stepped forward without a second thought.

She'd need the patient protection of his tiger. Silent and watchful, guarding her back. Just in case.

The older woman nodded her head, accepting this, then strode toward the center of the clearing. She set the box on the ground between clumps of long, wild grass. From it, she withdrew two etched silver cups, handing one to Astred, the other to Kai, murmuring instructions as she reached for a matching ornate decanter. "This potion is the reason for the three-day delay." She poured it equally into the two cups. "It will soften the barrier between your body and your spirit, enabling the Nexus to absorb your essence for the duration of your journey. This potion will bring you into the right frequency, and your blood offering will allow it to know you."

"Blood offering?" Astred grimaced at the bitter contents in her cup.

"It won't require much. The tools you'll need are already in place." She nodded toward the river. Cups emptied, she returned them to the box, then took one of each of Astred's and Kai's hands. The rest of the wardens formed a circle. The two on either side of Charmaine laid a palm on her shoulder, closing the formation.

The potion churned in Kai's gut as his head slowly lightened and his vision wavered.

Color surrounded every living being in the clearing and intensified, drifting with the breeze. A ring of gold light flowed back and forth between the wardens, who stood

connected, eyes closed, while Astred blazed indigo.

Astred grasped his hand.

Oracle of the Mother.

He'd only ever seen fear in her eyes twice. The day that he'd asked for her heart and then at Regina's sickbed.

Kai linked his fingers with Astred's, holding firm.

His pulse ticked a little faster, even while his thoughts slowed as Charmaine's voice intoned a prayer, then recited several more lines in one of the old languages before gently releasing their hands.

Kai's dragon growled in protest against the herbal interference, while his tiger hunkered down, waiting, watchful.

Odson stood by Heidi, monitoring the ceremony.

The Wardens protected the Grove and the Nexus.

The Brandts were guardians of the entire region.

Just as Kai's clan, Dùn Zh?o—Shield Claw—were, in his home territory.

Charmaine led the way to the riverbank where a traditional birch-bark canoe floated in wait, folded robes draped over the benches.

“We'll need to undress?” Astred turned to Charmaine.

“Your clothes may be damaged in the process.”

“The tree is going to eat us?”

Charmaine’s eyes crinkled in the corners. “Just for a little while. “

“Charming.” She turned to Kai, the corner of her lips lifting. “Swim?”

He lifted a brow when her gaze flicked up and down his body. His head felt like it was going to totter off his shoulders. “Sure.”

At the water’s edge, they stripped, leaving their clothing in two heaps.

Astred pulled her shirt up over her head, stepped out of her jeans and into the water.

She never bothered with underclothes.

Kai focused on his task, shed his clothes, following her into the chilled water where she waited, waist high.

With a final glance back at the witnesses on the bank behind them, Astred led the way across the outlet to the island, just large enough to support the solitary tree, which now, to his altered eye, glowed pure white.

Memories flickered through Kai’s mind as they swam, recalling his previous times alone with Astred, always where the water met the earth. The boundaries of two worlds.

Only this time, it wouldn’t result in the union of their bodies in passionate lovemaking.

This meeting of boundaries would unite their souls for a while in the astral sphere of a nexus.

The potion continued to hum through his body, though temporarily dulled by the chill of the river. The closer to the tree they swam, the more intense the roll of power surged through his limbs and drummed around his heart.

Focus became more difficult as the barriers of control—human control—slid away, giving way to instinct and pure intention.

Despite the mission, Kai's buried thoughts and emotions homed in on Astred.

He'd never wanted anyone else the way he wanted her. Still. Even now, after the rejection.

Drawing a deep breath, shoving all of that aside, he pushed the last few feet through the river to the bank supporting the ancient tree, reminding himself that the potion and the nexus were going to brutally rip him wide open right along with Astred.

But he was too slow to shunt away the raw truth that even now, he'd never wanted her more.

Not because he saw her bathed in glittering sunlight with an ethereal indigo shine. But because it reminded him of their time together and how she'd made him feel, with everything stripped away, free and easy in their own little world.

Just the two of them and their truest selves. No councils, no community expectations, no cultural divides. Just Astred, and just Kai. Naked bodies and hearts at play.

When her guard was down, and he felt her love.

Their attraction had been instant. Love had followed, swift and intense. Neither had said so, not until the day he'd asked her—he shoved it aside again before the ache returned.

Standing on the bank next to Astred, Kai drew another breath as his thoughts slid again.

It was the potion and the power, pulling him in directions he didn't want to go. Shoving his pain in his face as he stared at the craggy girth of the trunk, struggling against the next wave.

He was here, with Astred again, because Kolina had walked back into his life, dragging him through long buried memories and feelings.

This time, images of his mother steamrolled him, loosening the resentment from the depth of his gully of pain.

There hadn't been time to process her return. He hadn't wanted to.

He'd embarked on this journey for his sister Kymri, to correlate the bright-eyed infant he'd met in his youth with the fierce dragon shifter woman struggling to unite two divided societies that desperately needed unity and healing.

Just as he did.

The child in her belly gave her the strength to grasp both sides, straining against her efforts to draw them together.

She had the support of her mate, her closest friends, and their mother.

She needed more.

Kai's gaze returned to Astred.

Kymri's struggled mirrored Astred's.

He realized then that although he had no idea what his role was in all of this, he could no longer deny that fate had selected him for a purpose.

Kai took Astred's hand, guiding her toward the impressive, exposed roots, spotting the freshly knapped flint that Charmaine mentioned. He stepped into the alcove of the two largest roots, lowered himself so that he sat with his back to the trunk and invited to Astred to join him, settling between his knees.

"You've done this before?"

"I've witnessed similar journeys but not done it myself." He reached for the flint, dragging the sharp edge along the base of his left thumb, turning his hand so that the beading blood dripped onto a section of root already stained from prior journeys.

He handed the flint to Astred, who did the same.

Within moments, their dragon magic accelerated the healing process, closing the superficial wound.

Astred drew a deep breath. Words Kai never thought he'd hear from her hissed through her teeth. "Kai, I haven't been this scared since I was a child."

He met her eyes, holding out his hand, palm up. "Me too, Red."

She hesitated for just a moment, moving closer to nestle into the protection of his arms as they waited for the Nexus to accept their offering.

The potion had just about finished its circulation through his body as the tingling in his flesh, muscle and bone slowly merged with the surging power of the nexus.

When he was aligned, the sound of crackling signaled their acceptance. Bark, wood, sap, and energy slid across his back in gentle waves, drawing him into the trunk. Astred's fingers tightened on him, and he locked his arms around her as they were slowly consumed by the silky fibers of the nexus.

The sunlight glittering off the river's surface disappeared as the bark closed them off from the outside world and dropped them into the astral.

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A stred focused on her breathing, fingers digging into Kai's forearm as the tree ate them. Heart pounding, she gripped him hard, pressing ever deeper into his chest, suppressing the overwhelming urge to resist.

The swaths of color and intense clarity of her senses had distracted her from the knowledge that she would be consumed.

That word terrified her.

She wasn't sure she could let go long enough to allow it.

Even for just a little while.

Memories of the terrifying eyes filling her childhood vision, the power, the imposing voice in her head, shaking her bones as her body drew taught against the overwhelming connection that she was not ready for.

I can't breathe .

The Mother.

That first experience of connection collided with the experience happening now as she and Kai sank into the heart of the tree, engulfing them whole.

I can't breathe!

She began to struggle.

Kai's arms tightened around her.

'Astred.'

The sound of her name in his voice, though she didn't think he'd spoken.

The need to fight ceased rising and slowly eased.

As the potion worked to bring her into alignment with the tree, the tincture surged through her pounding heart. It wasn't until she accepted Kai's protective embrace, trusting that he would ensure all was right, that she came into sync with the tree's life force.

Without his touch, his reassurance, she knew that she would have used her dragon strength to rend and tear the Nexus apart to free herself.

She would have allowed her fear to destroy it.

Which she never would have wanted and for that reason, she would be forever grateful for his presence.

Kai brought comfort to her spirit, her soul.

He eased her raging need to combat the world and stake her claim to it.

He always had.

In his arms, together, they could simply exist, like the gentle fluff that floated past her blurring eyes right before the tree swallowed them whole, clinging to one another.

They floated in a cocoon of darkness, drifting like the fluff.

These terrifying moments abruptly threw Astred into her most cherished memories—all the time she'd spent, just like this, in the sanctuary of his embrace.

These rich memories dominated every other part of her life and relationships.

She still didn't trust that the tree wouldn't just eat and keep them for eternity.

Would their bones be found millennia from now, preserving their need for one another long after death, too late for life?

The macabre thoughts left her mind as their bodies gave way, tumbling through nothingness into the satiny shadows of the Astral.

Kai's arms tightened around her, staying the panic of unrestrained free-fall.

Her instinct was to fling her wings out, claw for purchase on anything that would stop the horrible sensation of being completely out of control.

She burrowed deeper into Kai's embrace, linking her fingers through his, eyes squeezed shut.

The sensation of being protectively enveloped in warmth eased the icy fear lodged in her throat.

Safe.

While there was no distinct impact, the turmoil within her suddenly stopped.

Drawing a shuddering breath, she listened.

"Astred." Kai's voice caressed her temple.

She didn't want to open her eyes just yet. Instead, she clung to the wisps of knowledge that she wanted nothing more than to remain in the safety of his arms, his world.

I can't.

And yet, she had to let go.

She opened her eyes, blinking against the change of scene, realizing they weren't huddled on the ground, but stood facing the narrow entrance of a glittering crystal cave.

Silky shadows lightened, receding from the perimeter, seeming to gather behind Kai before disappearing.

Her gaze dropped to their hands, fingers still entwined, then up to Kai's face.

He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze as his eyes trailed above her head with a smile and a respectful nod.

Astred turned with a gasp.

That's me! Us!

Her dragon loomed behind her, sniffing at Kai and the two figures that flanked him.

His dragon and his tiger.

Astred swallowed the lump in her throat.

She wasn't alone.

She wasn't just one soul making this journey.

They were five.

Where Astred's dragon scales shimmered in earthy tones, Kai's held the metallic glint of his mother's celestial line. His tiger's ethereal white fur was brought into balance by the sooty striations of his coat. Blue eyes pinned on her.

Luminescent threads of ever-changing color connected Astred and Kai to their beasts. Another thread disappeared up into the darkness of the overhanging root system.

The sudden sharp sounds of crackling from within the glittering crystal maw drew Astred's attention back to their task.

There was only one way to go.

In.

She stepped forward, fingers still linked to Kai's. Narrow and jagged, the entrance was just wide enough for a human-sized being, and maybe a prehistoric-sized tiger. She glanced back. Her dragon continued to sniff at Kai's much larger, shinier embodiment.

"I'm not sure we should leave them alone."

Kai chuckled, brow lifted. "They won't fit. Lead on, Captain." He jerked his head toward the opening.

Astred growled, eyes narrowed on her dragon.

Behave.

Her dragon snorted, otherwise ignoring her.

Don't do anything I'm going to regret later.

The dragon cracked an eye in her direction, then pointedly rolled it away.

With a deep breath, Astred stepped toward the crystal cavern. They walked, time meaningless, along a downward winding stone path illuminated by the crystals, reflecting light from an unseen source, until they reached a hub with a curved wall containing darkened passages.

The deeper they went, the stronger the power flowing through and around them. Astred lost her sense of embodiment, though she could see the illusion of her limbs and body. Her sense of vulnerability poked at her awareness, checking her wonder and anchoring her to her mission.

To understand the vision that brought her here, in order to save her mother and ensure the safety of Aeleftheria. As she stepped more fully into the hub, the tenor of the energy surrounding them shifted, causing her nape to tingle, despite the fact she realized that her corporeal body remained at the surface. Beneath the thin layer of flesh-toned scales protecting her chest, her breast bone ached and vibrated in time with the Nexus' energy.

Her gaze dropped to her feet, where scorch marks marred the stone beneath them.

Three blackened circular imprints.

She crouched, fingertips dusting the gritty surface, exposing the familiar image of Aeleftheria's emblem. A dragon entwined with a flame, backed by three connected spirals. Clearing the other blackened spots revealed the imprint of the seal that King Jori Mountainside's tribe protected, bearing the image of a dragon and a man. The

third displayed a man and a flame.

“The three seals,” Astred murmured. “Were they enchanted here?”

“Three seals?” Kai asked, studying the images.

“Together they unlock the treasure that Aeleftheria protects. Centuries ago, they were spelled to enforce a peaceful partnership.” Her fingers drifted over the incinerated stone. “It looks as though the spell was crafted right here.”

“By who?”

Astred shrugged. “Some immortal being determined to keep the dragons from destroying themselves. For the greater good of the earth, as I understand it from Odson’s stories.”

“The Divide?”

Astred nodded.

A sudden wave of disorientation sent her reeling.

Familiar images bloomed up around them, as though they were being immersed into a hologram. It was the exact vision that Regina had shared with Astred.

A shooting star streaked the sky over a tree bent with age, its trunk so vast it seemed to devour the clump of earth it clung to. Surrounded by rings of rippling water, it drew her forward until a black, smokeless flame appeared to engulf it. It neither burned nor withered as it disappeared into the heart of the flame.

The blaze brightened until painfully blinding, when a pair of blue eyes appeared. The

eyes then formed into the body of a white tiger, emerging from the searing fiery light as the falling star sped toward them.

In the distance, oily smoke and writhing clouds grew as they tumbled toward her like an avalanche of blackened debris.

The tree disappeared, leaving only the smokeless flame, as its tendrils reached skyward toward the streaking light overhead. It rushed louder than a dragon barreling through the air, its scream denser than a freight train across a winter landscape.

In the distance, Aeleftheria's walls stood tall. The image flickered as another Aeleftheria, its towers crumbled, villages streaming with blackened smoke, fought to superimpose itself over the original. They were in the midst of it as the chaos erupted around them. Screams, smoke, wind and flame buffeted their non-corporeal selves.

Dark figures writhed through the air, alight with fire, smeared with soot, while more clamored across the ground, clashing violently. Other structures rose behind the citadel, surrounded by protective shadows that emerged to blanket the sky, turning everything dark and obscuring the aerial battles.

Kai gasped. "The eastern temple."

Shadows expanded, thickening, surrounding Astred and Kai.

"The eastern temple?" Astred repeated Kai's words.

"That structure is a temple at the Air Dragon palace." He glanced at her then, face pale. "The scratch marks your mother left in the wood grain aboard the Crimson Claw."

"You said you didn't know what they were," she growled, gaze following the

writhing darkness around them.

“I wasn’t sure,” he retorted, pivoting as something slithered through the mass, oily and dank, changing the tenor of the surrounding energy. “The first part you recognized brought you here, to the Nexus. The other looks like the location of the temple, the building in the vision.”

The air seemed to coil around them.

“Astred, stay close.”

Kai’s firm warning sent her into a defensive crouch, claws extending, eyes scanning the darkness for the implied threat. “What is it? What’s happening?”

“A remnant.”

“A what?”

“A liminal dweller.”

Astred growled. “Not any clearer, Kai.”

The scene continued around them as the pressure in Astred’s chest grew.

He spun, eyes following the inky thing through the darkness, hands elevated before him. Kai’s tiger mirrored his stalking. “Remnants are liminal dwellers. Former living beings sent to the death plane, but due to magical connection or some other power, are able to cling to the in-between places, such as shadows, and gateways between realms.”

“There!” The tiger pounced, snarling, snapping teeth and swiping claws as Kai’s

hands flowed back and forth before him as though he gathered air.

Not air.

Shadows.

Astred moved, claws extended to attack the thing that dragged scents of death and rot with it.

“No!” Kai shouted, shouldering her away as the thing suddenly turned in her direction.

The shadows slipped from Kai’s grasp as he moved to protect Astred. The tiger screamed, launching itself as the remnant hissed, trying to strike Astred’s chest. The tiger sank its teeth into the back of the thing’s neck, yanking it away from Astred, the strike hitting her exposed shoulder instead.

Instinctively, her body instantly coated itself in dragon scale, though consciously she had no idea if that would protect her from this kind of creature.

It ignored Kai and the tiger, intent on Astred.

Overhead, the streak in the sky grew brighter, despite the thick shadows swirling around them.

Kai continued whatever he was doing to collect them, moving them about like a buffering shield to block the remnant from accessing Astred, all the while seeking its entry point. Together, man and tiger fought to contain the remnant within a roiling mass of thick blackness as he finally gained enough control to force it backward into the fissure it had emerged from; the inky stain at the point of the spell which had made the seals.

Astred lost track of Kai's battle as she stood transfixed on the brightening sky.

The star that rocketed toward them—her—was blinding as much as it illuminated the conflict on the horizon, but Astred couldn't tell if this blinding light was going to obliterate them or save them.

All she knew was that she had to reach for it, though she could never grasp it. This blinding light, this falling star, was not hers to control, but held some link to Aeleftheria's destiny. Heart pounding beneath the protective layers of the scales coating her chest, she finally knew.

It was the Star Stone.

As her consciousness made the connection, the light surged, turning the entire scene titanium bright until the scream of the falling star extinguished into silence.

By the time Astred and Kai made their way back to the Nexus entrance, the magnitude of what they'd just witnessed had ingrained itself into Astred's being.

The deep fear hadn't gone away with the knowledge—the mission—it just shifted focus.

The Ascension, though many years away, meant the thinning of the veils as the worlds moved closer together and the gateways solidified; places where remnants could dwell, and potentially escape, adding even more to their problems.

Was this something else that the Consortium sought to control?

Astred had no idea.

Perhaps it was time to have a long, long chat with her mother and Kane, when all of

this was settled.

She needed to know what the fuck was coming for them. Defending Aeleftheria wasn't just an abstract value. The fate of dragonkind, and the world, depended on it. They would need their allies now more than ever.

Uniting the dragons was crucial, for good, this time.

They moved through the crystal path and stepped into the entrance, lost in deep thoughts of their recent journey.

Looking up, Astred chuckled. Kai emerged beside her, a grin spread across his face. Before them, their dragons lay curled around one another, napping, rainbow threads tangled.

Kai's tiger slid his body along Astred's shoulder, drawing her attention to his silky fur. She hesitated, then reached her hand up to stroke between his ears. Calm rooted out the deep sense of fear as she slid her fingers through the tiger's warm fur.

Astred wouldn't meet Kai's gaze, instead considering the entwined dragons.

So many factors.

So much work to be done.

So much at stake.

But there was no longer any doubt. Regina's words drifted back to Astred: 'Everything will change after this event. You need to prepare yourself. It's time.'

Regina had known it was coming. The Mother had told her.

Yes, it was time.

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Discussions with Heidi Brandt, Odson Blackridge and the Wardens lasted late into the night.

Black River needed to be aware of the increased threat that the Consortium posed to the paranormal community. War was coming, and there was little doubt that the Consortium would be involved. The shifters and the wardens would be ready, should the dragons need to call on them.

The following morning, Kai set up a meeting with Bayn Long in Toronto, while Astred left a message for Joey Kane to call her back.

If Kai was right, they needed to talk to Bayn about the temple in the vision and what it meant.

Astred's first inclination was to assert that Aeleftheria could resolve her own problems, but she quickly stayed the urge.

She had to wait and see how things played out in the coming days. It was still too early to decide if this could be handled internally.

The visions told her it wouldn't be.

Though the battle loomed over Aeleftheria in the vision, the combatants were undefined.

Astred needed time to sort through everything she and Kai had witnessed.

And the remnant? Shivering, her gaze sought Kai with fresh eyes.

Where did he learn to do that? To control shadows like that?

If he hadn't been there to protect her from that thing while she struggled to understand the vision...

She forced her thoughts back to the surface mission rather than the underground journey.

Regina had gone to great effort to show her political stance regarding alliances and unity outside of their own borders.

Astred couldn't shut that down now. She needed to nurture those relationships, whether she called on them for this immediate crisis or not.

Relationships that Elora, Regina's closest friend and ambassador, had begun to foster decades ago. They'd set things in motion, and with Regina's absence, Astred had little choice but to take up the mantle.

And after that vision, she was determined more than ever to do things her way. Not the Council's way. Regina had put in her time to keep them happy.

No longer.

While nothing had changed regarding the vital need to protect the Mother and their borders, Astred would ensure the dragons would work together.

Everything, indeed, was about to change.

Princess Astred Arakkil was at the helm in her mother's absence, and she had no

intention of letting her ass get chapped on the queen's throne.

No.

Resolved in her earlier decision, they would meet with Bayn Long, one of the Eastern tribe princes, while Odson headed for Jori Mountainside Tiger drama. Constantly letting me know how you've neglected them. You should call them now and then. They won't be happy if you don't stop over to see them since you're in the country." Aaron sniffed the air as he withdrew a bottle of wine, handing it to Kai as he swapped out his shoes for slides. "Sea bass?"

Kai set the bottle on the counter.

"The corkscrew is in the top left drawer." Bayn waved a hand in the right direction, then pursed his lips as he looked at Aaron. "Just in time to not do any work."

"I brought wine. My work is done." He grinned at Astred and swept into a low bow, reaching out to kiss the back of her hand. "Your Grace."

Kai's tiger stirred from his nap.

Where Kai expected Astred to bristle at the forward gesture, she laughed as though they were old friends. "Agent Connor."

"You two know each other?" Bayn's brows lifted, looking between the two, then shot a glance at Kai, who shrugged.

Wine bottle in hand, he also closely monitored the interaction between Aaron and Astred.

"Nope, never laid eyes on such an exquisite dragoness," Aaron released her hand

with a flourish.

“So, Toronto transit, huh?”

Aaron leaned too close as they dove into light chatter about the city’s public transportation.

Astred looked at him too often, her smile too interested.

Kai’s tiger growled.

“Everything okay over there?” Bayn asked, brows raised.

Kai glanced up to see everyone looking at him.

“Can’t find the corkscrew,” he muttered, thumb swiping at the label.

“Top left drawer.” Bayn tilted his head in the indicated direction, a knowing smile tugging at his lips as he dropped his gaze to the sizzling pan.

Kai retrieved the corkscrew, opened the bottle without issue and carried it to the table where Astred studied him with renewed interest.

Aaron’s eyes twinkled without any effort to hide a smirk.

Kai poured wine into the glasses as Bayn finished up his work at the stove and began plating the food.

“So, Princess, tell me more about this little adventure that has the two of you gallivanting across the continent.” Aaron grinned, leaning toward Astred with his most winsome smile and flirtatious tone.

Kai rolled his eyes at his ridiculous cousin, turning to Astred. “Remember that Bond phase I warned you of? Well, he hasn’t grown out of it yet.”

Astred laughed as Aaron gave Kai a pained look.

“You don’t have to make me look bad in front of royalty, Kai.”

“No, I don’t. You do that all by yourself, cousin,” Kai gave Aaron’s shoulder a bump as he passed him to collect Bayn’s work of art on gleaming china. “This smells amazing.”

“Of course it does. I’ve had centuries to perfect the recipe and adjust to heat methods and changes in seasoning.” Bayn arched a brow as he set the first plate in front of Astred. “Captain.”

“Oh, Captain, is it?” Aaron turned with even more interest.

Astred dipped her head. “Preferably, if you insist on titling me at all.” She leaned over the plate, eyes closed, inhaling. “I’m drooling already.”

“Pirate Princess, I believe someone said.” Kai relaxed as the banter continued to slide to other topics, but his watchful tiger maintained his vigilance with the competition. Picking up his chopsticks, he wrangled his errant thoughts.

Don’t be stupid, Kai.

‘She’s ours,’ his dragon stated, cracking that eye open again. The tiger agreed.

She belongs to no one.

‘She just needs time to realize we all belong together.’

Kai drew a long, slow breath before he reached for his glass as Bayn finally settled in after seeing to the last few details. “Shall we?”

“To?”

“To the success of Princess Captain Astred’s secret mission,” Aaron’s teeth gleamed as his grin widened impossibly more.

“Sounds good to me,” Astred shrugged. “And to Bayn’s culinary talents.”

They touched glasses and sipped.

Unable to keep his eyes from Astred for long, Kai continually reminded himself that he loved his cousin.

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Astred stared at the golden liquid in her glass, the fingers of her free hand absently rubbing at the thin layer of scales still protecting her chest beneath the fabric of her shirt.

Everything about her mother's rule was the exact opposite of how Astred lived her seafaring life, though that had changed a great deal in the last century.

Astred couldn't just pick a fight, brawl, and be done with it.

She set the glass aside and picked at Bayn's succulent steamed sea bass with her chopsticks.

Monarchs required diplomacy and tact.

I need Elora.

I need my mother.

Besides, who could she pick a fight with?

Freeing the moist meat from the delicate bones, she lifted the morsel to her lips.

The males weren't the cause—this time.

The Consortium? Out of reach—for now.

The traitor.

Dragging her attention back to the present moment, she popped the food into her mouth.

Flavor enraptured her tongue as she savored the melting fish.

She swallowed and sighed, meeting Bayn's intent expression.

"Perfection," she smiled.

The tension in his shoulders eased as he lifted the first bites to his own mouth.

They all tucked in, talking as they enjoyed Bayn's efforts and one another's company.

Astred glanced around the table, realizing, not for the first time, how surreal this moment was. Over dinner, she'd learned a little more about each of her companions and their connections to one another. Two clans linked by family.

Bayn Long, a prince of the Sh?uwàng Zh?. The Watchmen of dragonkind. Antiques dealer and talented chef.

Aaron Connor, a nobleman of the Dùn Zh?o tiger clan. The Shield Claw of the paranormals in the east. And a member of Joey Kane's GPSA Shadow Corp.

Kai Sun. Dragon. Tiger. Shadow master?

Kai.

She suppressed a smile, recalling his curious behavior when she and Aaron had been chatting.

Jealousy? So unlike him.

How to sum him up? She wasn't sure she could.

She swallowed as her thoughts bounced to the memory of their dragons nestled together. The safety of his arms around her, providing security and balance during their journey into the nexus.

Those qualities were a deep part of who Kai was, gently drawing out that softer side of her trapped well below the ballast level of her consciousness.

During these last days, she was learning more and more about the man who'd stolen her heart.

Protector.

Former lover. No, that label was too small for what she'd felt for Kai. She swallowed the sentiment.

Love of her life, if she were completely honest with herself.

The tender fish nearly caught in her throat as sudden unwanted emotions wedged themselves there. She'd never allowed herself to feel that way about anyone else. Hadn't needed it. She'd never told him about her past, nor he of his.

Seems they'd both led double or triple lives.

Kai Sun was also a member of the Dùn Zh?o, fostered by the Sh?uwàng Zh?, and a son of Aeleftheria.

Aeleftheria.

Loss crashed over her, stealing her breath. Astred had walked away from Kai—the hardest thing she’d ever done in her life. Love was a luxury that Astred could not entertain.

He’d asked her for forever and she’d ended their relationship.

For Aeleftheria.

A thief of happiness. A life of duty.

These events had pushed Astred and Kai together while ripping away the surface to reveal the underlying growing chasm between them. When would the edges crumble, swallowing them both whole?

Until yesterday, she hadn’t truly allowed herself to accept the depth of the honor of this duty. Not to Aeleftheria herself, but to the protection of the Dragon Mother that her ancestral line had dedicated themselves to as the Oracles.

A duty Astred had run from her entire life. She still didn’t want it, but who else was there? How many others before her had done the same? Resisted the shackles of destiny? Had her own mother?

Somehow, she couldn’t imagine her mother shirking her obligations to the throne. She lived and breathed for it.

Or had she too, discovered resignation?

Astred dragged her thoughts back to her mission. Untangle the vision in order to get her mother back on her throne.

Ignoring the wine, Astred picked up her teacup, glancing over the steaming rim at her

companions again.

Too many moving parts.

Have the guardians caught up with the Crimson Claw yet? Did the ship make it back to Mikrí Oasis, Carson's island? She hoped so, she wanted Kane's insights on the crudely scratched map.

Her crew were highly skilled on the seas, but the guardians were unmatched in the skies.

So long as they sailed beyond Aelefttherian territory, they didn't have the right to detain her or subject the crew to questioning—though that might not stop them, given the circumstances.

As Astred's ship, they could request permission to board her, but not rightfully force their way aboard.

Discussion among her companions floated past her as she clung to her worries.

Aaron reached for the wine bottle while Bayn and Kai cleared away the dinner debris. As he topped up Astred's glass, his watch buzzed.

"Ah, Joey's ready for us." He grabbed his bag, extracting his tablet to set up on the counter island where they gathered around.

Bayn leaned in to inspect the crystal dongle Aaron plugged into the side of the device. "Witch tech?"

Aaron shot him a glance. "I know your place is well warded, but we can never be too careful."

Bayn nodded. “I’d like to get me a couple of those.”

“Joey’s department—she has great sources that she won’t share with the rest of us, but I suspect this one is dwarf tech,” Aaron grinned as he finished setting up the station to receive the encrypted call.

“Dwarf tech? Well now, I am impressed.”

A moment later, Jolena Kane’s face filled the screen.

“Boss.” Aaron adjusted the equipment to accommodate all of their faces for Joey’s view, then the audio.

“Aaron. Bayn, Your Highness, Kai,” she acknowledged each, expression tense. “Good to see you all again, though I wish the news was of a lighter matter.” To Astred she said, “I’m sorry I couldn’t respond to your message sooner, we’ve been swamped here trying to pull all the pieces together. Your First Mate, Tundi Okonedo, caught me up on what happened since we parted from Carson’s island.”

“You saw the marks my mother left in her room?”

Joey nodded. “While you were at Black River, Carson’s team resumed pursuit of the escaped males after the last attack on the island, and we’ve finally gained Sam Egan’s cooperation. Aaron, your flight is booked to join your team for the raid on the Consortium’s menagerie.”

“Holy fuck, you’re kidding! You got Egan to talk?” Aaron’s hand slid through his hair as he stepped back from the counter.

“It was a group effort. Lirikai and Raya wore her down to see sense, but in the end, it was Marli Fleetwing’s offer to help her sister escape from the menagerie that did the

trick. We leaned into that.”

“You trust her information?” Bayn pinched his lip between forefinger and thumb, his arms across his torso.

“Egan’s ambitions crashed the second we picked her up. There’s no way the Consortium will accept her back or integrate her into their commanding elite.” Joey shrugged. “She wants her sister’s freedom and security.”

“You think you can get more out of her?” Aaron paced.

Joey nodded. “I think so. But not until we secure her sister.”

Astred leaned in, heart pounding with this critical news. But there was still more she needed. “Were you able to get the identity of Egan’s contact on Aelefttheria?”

“It was the second part of the deal. The location of the menagerie and the identity of her Aelefttherian contact in exchange for her sister and protection from the Consortium’s reach now that she’s vulnerable.”

Heat flared through Astred as her dragon pushed at her skin, wanting to be unleashed. This knowledge would allow them to act.

“And?”

“You’re not going to like this.” Joey’s voice softened as she turned toward another screen beside her, the sounds of keys being tapped. A file overlay Joey’s feed, the details extensive, followed by a photograph.

Astred’s breath stalled.

Impossible.

Impossible because digital technology didn't work in Aelefttherian territory. To have a picture of that face...and wearing a modern t-shirt.

"When the contact clawed Egan's torso, she not only caused nearly fatal damage, but the ferocity of the fighting left some of her genetic matter embedded in Egan's. She topically absorbed enough of it that she could use it to morph."

"Morph?" Kai's voice broke through Astred's haze.

"Egan has the ability to shapeshift into anyone, so long as she has some of their genetic material to consume or absorb in some way. That's how she was able to live undetected among the mountain males for so long." Astred explained, gaze still glued to the screen, though the distraction of Kai's presence reduced her instinct to fly off with teeth and claws ready to tear the traitor apart.

"I thought this kind of shapeshifter was a myth."

"Everyone did." Aaron stopped pacing, peering at the photograph on the screen.

"If I hadn't met one centuries ago, I'd have thought so too," Bayn said. He nodded toward the image. "You're sure about that one?"

Joey's brows drew together. "As far as I know, the only way Egan can take another's form is to have some physical contact with the genetic material. I suppose if it was supplied to her in some other way, she could fake it. But she was searched and given new clothes, so it would have had to be in her system already."

Astred's pulse resumed ticking in her temple. "A similar possibility of a targeted attack on the queen? Through some confiscation of her biology for a spell or poison?"

“Yes, it’s possible. The previous King of the Mountain used spell magic linked to his own biology, which transferred to Jori Mountainside at his death. He mentioned sourcing the spells from an unidentified wizard we believe to be a member of the Consortium.”

A growl erupted from Astred’s gut as she stared at the aged face of the council matron staring back at her from the screen. “And the Consortium has access to the Queen of Aeleftheria’s person? I will rip her apart for this.”

Kai’s warm hand slid across Astred’s taut spine, ebbing the rising rage. “Who is she?”

Astred jerked to her feet, fighting the haze impairing her reason as her dragon continued to strain against her confinement.

Now she had a target to brawl with.

And she would be formidable.

Astred snarled, “Council Matron Zadora Steelscale. Your grandmother, Kai.”

He dropped his hand as his gaze met hers, expression stony as her accusation washed over him.

“How is it that the Steelscales are at the epicenter of all Aeleftheria’s turmoil?” Her fingers curled into fists, mind racing.

Was it all a plot? All along?

Jori Mountainside’s ‘accidental’ crash in their territory? His mother, Elora, had been ‘missing’ for decades and found to be in King Kargassa’s mountain. A bid to turn

Kymri against her people?

And Marli? Now bonded with Jori's right-hand man?

Kolina Steelscale?

Astred stared at Kai.

Kai? Is he part of this too? All this time?

She locked eyes with him as the fury continued to crowd her mind, resisting the urge to lunge at him. She didn't. As much as the raging woman within her wanted to lash out.

Her head spun. She uncurled her fist, resting her palm over her chest to calm herself. Her dragon's attention was focused on the image of Zadora Steelscale, not on Kai.

She looked at the others then, all silent, watching her facing Kai.

Would they stop her?

She was the only female among these males.

Maybe they're in on it too?

Astred spiraled, free hand gripping the edge of the countertop.

Finally, her dragon huffed, soothing the raw rage surging through Astred's body.

'The conspiracy is not so great. We know there is no deceit here.' Her dragon, her soul, brought up the memory from the Nexus. 'The Nexus strips away all duplicity. If

there were any in Kai, it would have been exposed then.'

Astred drew a deep, stabilizing breath.

No. Not Kai.

The memory of his protecting her from the terrifying remnant rose in her mind, shaking the final dregs of her sudden, raging paranoia.

Not anyone else.

The strain of too many days, worried sick for her mother's life and the safety of Aeleftheria, had worn on her. She closed her eyes, regaining her equilibrium, drawing on her mother's influence. What would Regina do?

'Tread carefully.'

The exact opposite of Astred's habit of punching first and asking questions later.

"She'll be after the seal. That's what Egan stole from the mountain," Bayn said.

Joey added, "And as a council matron, she'll have access to the vault."

"The vault, yes, but not the seal," Astred said, rubbing her chest again.

Matron Zadora's image blinked off the screen, Joey's taking its place.

Connections began to snap in Astred's subconscious.

"Joey, you saw the etchings aboard the Crimson Claw?"

“I did. I guessed you figured out that the markings represent locations, since you made it to the nexus and to Bayn’s place.”

Astred nodded. “I recognized Black River right away, but not the other location. Kai said the scratches resembled the eastern territories. Why would my mother send me there?”

Kane was silent for so long, Astred thought the screen had frozen or they lost connection.

“That’s where the Star Stone is hidden.”

The Star Stone, from the legends.

The image of the streaking meteor shot through Astred’s mind.

“It’s with the Sh?uwàng Zh?,” Bayn hesitated. “Has been since Kolina brought it to us.” He glanced from Astred to Kai. “The reason she met Kai’s father.”

Astred dropped onto the stool next to the counter, weary.

Kai turned away, rubbing at the back of his head. “That explains why we saw the royal compound in the vision.”

“Why would this matron want to do this?” Aaron asked, “and how does Uncle Keone fit into this? This is all dragon politics.”

“Kolina would have needed permission to enter Shield Claw territory in order to reach The Watchers. Especially in those days.” Bayn said. “Things have relaxed since then.”

“Okay, but why? Why would Kolina take the Star Stone to the Watchers? And what is the connection to Zadora Steelscale?” Astred demanded.

“Because I advised Regina to order it,” Joey said. “She had a vision, much like you did, and she sent for me.”

“Why?” Astred persisted.

“Because with the stone, Zadora was too powerful, and it was infecting her. The meteorite made her who she was and acted as a charge when in her proximity. When she threatened to take control of the throne, we agreed that moving it to the care of the Watchers was the best option.” Joey sighed, eyes closed, pinching the bridge of her nose, finally showing some sign of weariness. “I just never suspected Zadora would make another play for control after she’d been stripped of the stone’s power. Hoped against it.”

“But you knew something.”

“Regina’s vision warned of it. But as you know, these things aren’t precise to our understanding of things.”

Astred huffed. “Yeah, I do know.” She rubbed her face. “And really wished I didn’t. But it is what it is. Now I just need to figure out how to get my mother back in the game so she can fix this, and we can all get on with life.”

“Wouldn’t the stone be safer hidden away where it is?” Bayn’s voice drew Astred’s gaze from the tablet.

“Maybe, but that star in the vision... It was overwhelming. It has some role in what’s happening now. Maybe Kolina can use it, or Kymri, after the baby is born. I just don’t know how much time we have before things really go sideways.”

“Could it just be a symbolic representation?”

“I wish I knew for certain, Bayn,” Astred said, throat tight.

Joey drew their attention back to the tablet screen. “If Zadora figures out how to open the vault without the seal, your mother’s life will be even further at risk. The seals are a sort of fail-safe to ensure proper rituals are in place for the transfer during the awakening.”

“More than just to keep the peace between the dragon clans?” Bayn leaned in.

“So much more. They represent the creation of dragonkind. The merging of dragon, human and djinn.”

“Djinn? You’re shitting me!” It was Aaron’s turn to gape at Jolena Kane.

“Afraid not. During a previous cycle, a very long time ago. At the height of the Ascension, dragonkind were created to protect the earth against invasions from the other world.”

Astred’s thoughts flicked back to the remnants.

They’d be just the beginning.

Aaron picked up his forgotten glass of wine and gulped it down.

“The legends are true. Odson’s stories?” Kai whispered.

Joey’s expression softened. “I’m afraid so. Listen. Aaron, I need you on that flight tonight to meet with the rest of the team. The planning for the raid is almost complete and you’re an essential part of it. We have to get the timing right. Astred, I can

arrange a flight for you to meet with Bayn's clan to collect the stone. But just get in and get back to Aeleftheria. You need to claim ownership of the vault before Zadora does. If you don't, the Mother's essence will consume Regina in her weakened state if the proper rituals are not in place."

"Consume? I don't understand any of this—,"

"You don't need to right now, but it's important you trust me, as your mother did. My only motivation is to protect this earth. Regina and the Dragon Mother's security is imperative to that mission."

"Protect the earth from what?" Kai accepted another glass of wine from Aaron, who was determined to empty the bottle he'd brought...

"I told you. From the other world. With each Ascension, we never know what and who will come through the veil. The dragons are our greatest protection."

"And the Consortium's role in all of this?" Kai's usually tanned face paled.

"Do what they always do, find ways to exploit everyone and everything. The thinning of the veil and the opening between worlds is always a power boon for them. Access to more resources."

"So, if they control the dragon mother, they control everything?"

"Essentially, yes."

"But, this is Zadora. What will she do with the Dragon Mother?"

"That's the biggest question, Astred. I don't know." Joey's expression turned pained.

“How can she possibly access the vault if it’s supposed to be aligned to the royal bloodline?” Bayn leaned down to peer at the screen.

“Zadora is descended from the royal line.” Joey’s voice was tight. “She was removed from succession after the accident.”

“Accident?” Kai asked, incredulous. “This all sounds unbelievable.”

“She was too close to a meteor strike that altered her genetics, which created the Steelscale line.”

“Insane.” Kai breathed. “Insane.”

Joey shrugged.

“Is that what this is about, then? Zadora wants the throne? Why now? She’s had millennia to challenge my mother—my grandmother, for dragonsake!” Astred was on her feet again.

“I wish I knew.” Joey’s voice softened. “But for now, we have enough to act on the menagerie while you retrieve the stone. It will have to go to Kolina. Zadora may have no intention of awakening the Mother. But if she does, then, well, there will be consequences we can’t reverse.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

The matron scowled at the first barrier to her prize and drew yet another deep breath before shaking the frustration out of her hands. The first set of heavily warded doors, made of the strongest wood.

Patience. We've waited too long for this opportunity, and there is far too much at stake.

Opportunity not by chance, but by painstaking design that would not be understood—not for a long while. Not until after this crisis that Regina was leading them into was long behind them.

Only then would Aeleftheria thank her for her great effort to preserve the freedom they fought so hard for all those centuries ago.

The matron remembered what it was like, and she would never forget, having lost a daughter in the war, and now the other was becoming a disappointment.

She didn't understand. How could she? None of the younger generations truly did. Oh, they'd had their skirmishes and many, many close calls since the divide and the emigration. But there were few left who'd lived under the rule of dominance.

Never again.

And although the matron's blood was as royal as Regina's, the accident during the previous era had seen to it that she could no longer serve as an heir to her mother's throne. And thus the crown had passed to her younger sister, Rayna. Regina's mother.

As a youngling at the tail end of the previous cycle, a shining meteor had fallen from the heavens, impacting too near the original Aelefttherian territory, and Zadora had been too close. Too close even for a powerful dragon royal. When she'd awakened, her deep bond to the earth had been shattered, her essence altered, and her connection to the Mother nearly broken.

The day the meteor struck their earth, she ceased to be Zadora Arakkil. She was reborn as Zadora Steelscale, first of her name.

Her mother had mourned for her heir, but renamed and reshaped her anew during the tumultuous centuries that followed as the males exerted their will more and more.

Zadora could no longer be considered for rule, but she could be the throne's greatest protector, when she beheld the celestial rock that altered her destiny and made her other .

The Dragon Star.

Over the last few centuries, Aelefttheria slowly forgot what Zadora sacrificed. The story was buried in the annals, her lineage broken from the royal chart and started anew.

So be it. But she wouldn't let that sacrifice be in vain.

No.

There from the beginning of the Descent, through the Divide at the lowest point of the decline, and now that they were facing the Ascension, she would see it through, as she had everything else.

These greedy males had taken nearly everything from her. Nearly.

Zadora didn't know how much longer she had before the earth reclaimed her bones. She guessed that she still lived out of sheer will and duty.

Protect the throne, even from itself.

And if that meant removing her niece from her position as ruler in order to protect Aeleftheria and reinforce her most sacred duty to the Mother, so be it.

Zadora would do what she had to, as she'd always done.

Working with one enemy against another was just a tactic that every side employed. A gamble.

She wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty so that the queen could remain pristine—as she should.

There were a few others among the councillors who secretly shared Zadora's dedication, though none would ever conspire.

That, she did alone.

Manipulating, whispering, pressuring.

But she knew their leanings. Saw it in the glint in their eyes, the tightening around their mouths despite their greatest efforts to maintain the mask of neutrality that every councillor was expected to bear.

Behind those masks, burned a fierce resolution to maintain Aeleftheria's sovereignty.

No matter the cost.

For Zadora, no cost was too high.

She'd groomed Kolina her entire life to follow in her wake, and she'd proudly watched her granddaughter Kymri slide right in line behind her.

Until her defiance to breed had brought the world crashing down around them.

Kymri had rebelled against the one duty that all dragonesses had to fulfill, that metal dragons could not deny. Providing a youngling to solidify Aelefttherian society. Produce offspring to secure their survival and relieve that biological necessity.

Her resistance had thrown her into an acute heat, endangering their nation when she refused to execute the heir of their greatest enemy, and instead took him to her bed, leading the enemy into the heart of their nation.

And somehow, in a matter of months, managed to turn Aelefttheria's staunch stance against male dragons into one that now seemed to accept nearly all of them.

The change had been blistering, and Zadora struggled to regain control over the Aelefttherian narrative, holding the course.

Regina had seemed to succumb to the poison of the outside world and let her guard down. She'd grown soft. Weak.

So Zadora had done what was necessary before she gave everything up. She had to fix what her daughters had broken.

She had another granddaughter, as dedicated as herself.

She needn't know the depths of Zadora's machinations, but she'd always been useful. Unwavering.

Zayli would understand. In time.

For now, all she had to do was follow orders. Zadora's orders, by way of the Council, Zayli believed. And so far, she'd done nicely.

Now. Zadora just had to gently work her way to the inner chamber that housed the blessed seal that recognized only royal blood.

She had to get it to distinguish that she had royal blood, too. Her mother had been queen.

But she was also running out of time.

If Zadora could no longer claim the title of queen, she could at least guide the errant princess Astred on the right path. The righteous path, to protect their little nation from exploitive, destructive males.

At least until it was time for the Mother to reawaken.

Zadora could and would do that.

She just needed more time, and she'd nearly lost her advantage during her confrontation with the Consortium agent's arrival and refusal to cooperate.

Guardian Marli Fleetwing had almost uncovered her identity.

Almost.

By some luck of the goddess, she was sure, Fleetwing had not been able to capture or identify her, and it had taken much careful maneuvering to have the investigation placed in the hands of less skilled guardians without too much suspicion.

Zadora had to be careful.

She'd grown impatient and nearly lost everything she'd worked so hard for.

Now, as she stared at the locked and warded door, she sought the connection she'd nearly lost centuries ago.

Nearly.

There was still a whisper.

The thinnest of strings tethering her to the Mother. Her destiny.

She'd given herself to the greatest of earthly treasures protected by the astral sanctuary deep beneath Aelefttheria.

The sleeping Mother. Their Goddess, who would rise in time to bring fire back to the dragons to burn the infiltrators of the other world when they came.

Zadora had been meant to lead all of dragonkind, not just Aelefttheria.

But the fall of the meteor had severed that destiny and almost severed that thread—that most fragile link to their deity.

Her own mother had seen that star fall from the heavens, transform the heir anew, and saw it as a sign that Zadora's destiny led elsewhere.

She would give anything to feel that connection again, as she had during her youth.

Pure and powerful. A connection so deep, to a being so divine, it was indescribable. She'd longed for it. That sense of wholeness. That knowing her destiny was defined.

Zadora swallowed the resentment of the stars' interference. She'd never wanted to be the protector of the oracle.

Her life, her duty, was to be the oracle.

To bathe in the knowledge of the Mother's light and love.

To be her voice and her will.

To wield her power and steer dragonkind's destiny.

Her sister hadn't been able to withstand the strain of such a soul bond. Her niece hadn't been able to resist the illusion of peace.

Too easy . Peace was a compromise that Zadora would never give in to. She couldn't repair the exposure, but she could ensure their solidity. The Great Mother deserved nothing less.

The wards gave way under the drop of Zadora's blood, deep inside the lock's finger holes.

Breath held, she turned, then turned again, heart racing.

Perhaps the celestial stone is hidden here too?

Zadora shivered at the thought of the power of the artifact, combined with her access to the Great Mother.

A faint click as the door released and hushed open, revealing the antechamber.

"Finally," she whispered on an exhale, loud in the silence of the chamber deep below

the citadel.

She just wanted to see it. The seal, secreted away for so very long.

Body quivering, the ancient dragoness stepped forward.

Spelled lamps flickered to life, illuminating the narrow room housing nothing but the next thick door bearing... nothing.

Zadora's heart threatened to pound out of her chest and up her throat as her stomach dropped.

No.

She surged forward, palms flat on the door as she struck it.

“No!” she wailed.

Her hands slid over the vacant casement that normally cradled the Aelefttherian seal to the Mother's chamber.

“Astred.” She seethed. “Fool!”

No one else could have taken it.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Kai's head reeled with everything that he'd learned during that video call and the implications attached to that information overload.

After the call, all four drove to the airport in Kai and Astred's rental, where they returned it to the company.

Aaron boarded his flight to Europe where Kane was headquartered, while Kai, Astred and Bayn flew to Asia. Bayn had decided his presence would facilitate the retrieval of the stone, since Astred had no previous experience dealing with his family.

The flight touched down before dawn, allowing them to take advantage of the darkness to travel the rest of the distance in dragon form.

It had been decades since Kai had last seen Sh'uwàng Zh' territory.

Bayn had been like an older brother, though he and his older brother Dai Zen were actually his grandmother's brothers, and he understood why they'd never told him about the circumstances around Kolina's presence in the east. Granted, he'd never asked him, either. Those questions had been relegated to his father, who'd refused to entertain Kai's curiosity. Hence why he'd known little of his own history and heritage.

Now, it seemed, his existence, due to Aelefttherian politics, had taken on a new facet.

He glanced at Astred as they followed Bayn through the royal compound.

He'd met her purely by chance.

Hadn't he?

Her red-sailed ship had floated into the harbor down the hill from his penthouse.

Now that he thought about it—really thought about it—he wasn't so sure.

He'd been strong-armed by an old friend of Bayn's into attending a charity party that he'd had no interest in, where he was specifically introduced to the fiery red-haired beauty with the swagger of a sailor and the magnetism of a starlet.

She'd instantly captured his heart, sailing away with it at the end of the enraptured weekend.

Six months later, she returned with it, freshly scrubbed with sea air and adventure for a night on the town.

And a hell of a night it had been. He hadn't been able to believe she'd picked a fight at every bar she'd hopped them to, paranormal and human alike, then invited him to make love to her in the aftermath.

How could he not, after the way she made his blood burn?

Wild and fearless.

It had taken many more returns to port before she'd started to let him see her softer side. He'd had to coax it out of her, but found it he did.

He'd known at first sight he wanted her.

As she'd wanted him.

Once he finally met the deepest part of her, he'd known it was forever.

His heart felt that desire in hers, in the way she looked at him, the way she relaxed into the security of his arms.

Or so he'd thought.

He'd been foolish to believe that someone so untameable would settle into a commitment of any sort.

Curious how those memories reeled him back to that past, now, when they were about to face a far deeper past that included both of them, long before either had been born, rippling through time with beckoning fingers.

Like they'd been destined for this moment, though Kai couldn't see his involvement in it.

Yet.

He glanced at Bayn's set face as he opened the door to his brother's study. The head of the Sh'uwàng Zh'.

King Dai Zen Long.

But that sense of destiny slithering up through him persisted.

He did have a part. Somehow.

The king of the Watchmen looked up from his laptop set on a heavily carved centuries old teak desk.

“Joey told you we were coming?” Bayn said to his brother.

“She did. It’s been a long time, Kai,” He turned to Astred. “Princess Astred Arakkil.”

She stood, shoulders level, taking in his measure, though she dipped her head. “Your Majesty.”

“I’m not so formal in here. Out there is another matter.” He jerked his chin toward the door.

She smiled. “I prefer captain to princess, but here we are.”

The king’s brow lifted. “Ah, a kindred soul. Well met. I had to trade in my beloved airship for this post.”

“My condolences, your highness. I hope to be spared that particular grief for many years yet. With your help, of course?”

“Clipper?”

“Galleon. Seventeenth century.”

Dai Zen whistled. “Classic.”

“She is my pride and joy. Her crew is incomparable.”

“Of course.” His eyes twinkled. “I do believe I recall some rumors of a pirate princess sailing the seas. Red sails?”

“Guilty.”

“The stone,” Bayn reminded them.

The king turned his assessing gaze from Astred to Kai and back again, thoughtful. “You want me to give you the stone?” His attention narrowed on her, asked the obvious but seeking something more in her answer.

“Want it? Hell no. Need it? Maybe. Hopefully not, but Ms. Kane insisted that I may need it to stop a traitor from annihilating my mother, if she decides to try to break into the vault.” She drew a breath. “As far as I’m concerned, no one ever knew where it was, therefore it’s safest here. But if my mother’s life is at risk, I have to do what I can to stop this threat.”

“Even if it means putting everything else at risk.”

“Preferably not.”

“They’ve been to the Nexus.”

The king’s gaze shot to Bayn. “You witnessed this?”

“No, Odson called me. Heidi Brandt oversaw it while the Wardens conducted the ritual.”

The king nodded. “And you?” His gaze pierced Kai.

“I made the journey with her.”

The king exchanged looks with his brother, studying Kai for an eternal moment before he seemed to make some decision. “You’ll make the next with her, too.” To Bayn, he said. “Summon Wu Keone Sun. He has work to do. They’ll need to prepare.”

Startled, shock straightened Kai's spine.

Bayn nodded, looking between Kai and Astred, "I'll be back with your father and his retinue as soon as possible. In the meantime, you two should settle in and rest up. You remember the way to your room, Kai?"

"Yes."

"Good, Princess Astred will be given the stateroom at the end of that wing. You'll see her to it?"

Kai bowed his head. "Of course."

"I'll need a minute to write the official summons." The king said to Bayn, nodding his dismissal to Kai. "It was good to meet you, princess Astred Arakkil. Your mother has been a long-time friend and ally. You may understand that this relationship between our nations has been kept quiet for the safety of the greater good."

Astred nodded. "I do. Obviously, the Consortium never considered your court would have any connection to ours, given their attempts to secure the mountain seal, as well as access to our vault. No doubt, they'd have sought the stone to find some way to use it."

"We are very conservative when it comes to outsiders." The corner of his mouth lifted. "Joey is dedicated to extracting the third seal from the Consortium. She's spent eons of time trying to pinpoint where they keep it."

"You know her well?" Astred lifted a brow.

Bayn said, "Joey is my brother's consort."

The king laughed. “More like I am hers. Though it takes nearly every ounce of my will to stay out of her projects. My duty is to maintain neutrality.”

“The Watchers.” Astred nodded.

“Indeed. But now and then a storm rages, and when it does, we hit hard. Never doubt that. A balance must be maintained. This is why we partner so closely with the Shield Claw. They are our connection to earthly affairs in this sector of the world. What affects dragons has an impact on all the paranormal world. As you will see for yourself.”

Bayn glanced at the window behind his brother, then to his watch. “The sky lightens.”

The king turned to his desk, eyes lifting to Astred. “We will have dinner this evening. You’ve had a long flight. Go and rest.”

Kai opened the door of the king’s private study, allowing Astred to pass through before him.

An attendant awaited them in the corridor, as protocol demanded.

Kai nodded respectfully to the steward, whose gaze softened as he assessed Kai. “It is good to see you, Master Chan.”

“And you, Kai, welcome back. You will reside in your old apartment?”

“The king wishes it.”

The old man nodded and bowed to Astred. “Princess Arakkil, a pleasure.”

They followed him through the winding corridors to the guest wings. Kai's eyes lingered on the ancient woodwork as they made their way through, reminded of the Aelefttherian decor. So different, yet the similarities were unmistakable.

One society. Dragonkind.

His people, though he'd never really thought so, favoring his Tiger ancestry his entire life. Until now: Yes, he was a dragon, too, though still an outsider.

Always was, always will be.

But he'd come to terms with that long, long ago. He'd had to. And now it was his strength; not too mired in the ways of just one society but well acquainted with many, which had so many commonalities among their differences.

He appreciated the acceptance that the Long family had shown him, despite his status as a hybrid. Perhaps it had made the exposure to his Aelefttherian heritage a little easier to swallow?

They'd understood the Aelefttherians in ways that the tiger clan couldn't.

Kolina had sought him out to reconcile in her way. She hadn't made it about her trying to save a relationship with him, but for him to have a relationship with his sister. She'd done that. Reunited the siblings and taken a step back, though she'd made her regrets clear. Now it was up to Kai to decide if he wanted Kolina in his life.

Without a doubt, he'd wanted to see his sister again, despite his misgivings that she might have turned into a carbon copy of their mother.

The similarities were there, but she was her own woman and dragon.

That was evident in her choice to commit to her relationship with the mountain dragon, Jori. An odd king, if Kai had ever met one, so different from any before in his life. Jori's upbringing as a human was glaringly obvious. He lacked the ingrained apex qualities that signaled his dragon side, let alone his royal one.

But then, Astred was different too, in her own way.

Kai followed behind Astred as Master Chan led the way to the royal guest wing.

Never the prim and proper princess she was expected to be. A rebel and a sailor. A pirate for a time, sailing the high seas, stealing hearts, mending others.

An outsider by choice. Her crew was composed of women of all kinds. A mix of human and paranormals. Their common thread was their need. The Crimson Claw was a sanctuary, the crew a chosen family.

Kai had his tiger clan, and by fostering, the Longs. He'd never really fit into either, but wherever Astred went, she was the missing part of every gathering that made it whole. Perhaps that was another facet of the gemstone that she was, which drew him to her. She fit. Everywhere. No matter who was involved.

Astred was a shining light in the world.

Kai remained in the shadows, where he was comfortable. Both a watcher and a protector, as needed.

He'd be there, guarding Astred's back against whatever was coming her way.

Work would wait. His corporate team could handle the contracts in his absence.

There was nothing and no one else that needed his attention for anything as important

as this.

Master Chan finally stopped at a gilded door at the end of the guest hall.

“Thank you, Master Chan, I’ll find my way in a moment.”

“If you need anything, please use the call button,” the old man said to Astred. With a short bow to Kai, he left them alone in the dim corridor outside her room.

Aside from the strained hours traveling from the Crimson Claw to Black River and then driving from Black River to Toronto, they hadn’t been alone.

Not since those moments on the beach.

Astred’s expression when she’d found him in the bathroom slammed back into him. The raw desire and longing in her eyes that he could not give into.

Words flowed to the tip of Kai’s tongue, but he swallowed them back.

The sense that things needed to be said, after the Nexus, when there hadn’t been time and he’d been unable to pick out the right words.

Astred’s eyes met his with the same intensity, hand on the shining door handle.

She had words too, though she’d never hesitated to speak her mind before.

Now she did.

The tip of her tongue slid over her lips, uncertain. “Do you want to come in?” Her gaze flicked to the empty hall behind him.

He didn't turn. He couldn't deny the flicker of vulnerability in her eyes. "Yes."

The journey into the Nexus had been harrowing for both of them, and they'd have to face another journey of some kind.

She needed him.

Those weren't her words. They never would be, but her eyes spoke it when her breath hitched over her parted lips.

She couldn't say it, but she could let him feel it.

The door swung open with the softest click, admitting them to a room lit with a glowing hearth. They stepped inside, and Kai closed the door behind him.

An uncorked bottle of fine wine sat on a narrow table between two high-back armchairs. Two etched wine glasses glimmered in the golden firelight.

Two.

How would Master Chan know that Astred would have a companion?

Bayn.

Yes, Bayn, who knew him better than anyone else, had also been the one to instigate that first meeting. Of course. The older air dragon, an eternal bachelor, who had a heart with a golden lining. Thoughts of his old friend, uncle and foster brother, fled his mind as he met Astred's intense gaze.

His heart melted at the expression of doubt warring with need. She blinked away unshed tears looming at the edge of her lashes, clearing away the lapse of her dragon

armor.

“What’s this about?” His voice was soft as he reached up to wipe away the moisture.

Straightening, head up, she met his gaze, clear and direct. “Kai, I’m sorry.”

Kai’s heart stopped beating. The only sound in the room was the crackling flame consuming heated logs. A particularly loud snap brought him out of his momentary shock. His heart resumed beating at breakneck speed. He drew a breath. “You have no reason to be sorry, Red.”

She stepped toward him, chin tilting up a fraction, her voice challenging. “You deny my apology? Kai Sun of the Shield Claw, fosterling of The Watchers?”

A shiver raced up his spine at her simple acknowledgment of who he was—who part of him was.

I’m just Kai.

She was now seeing this aspect of him, just as he’d met more facets of who she was; princess and defender of the Aelefttherian people, heiress of the Oracle to the Dragon Mother. The world’s greatest treasure.

What an honor it was to witness her emergence as she slowly embraced her destiny, though reluctantly.

She swallowed, licking her lips. “I hurt you, and I left you. Without any explanation.”

“Astred, I always woke up alone at the end of the weekend. There never were any explanations.”

She stepped closer, searching his face. “That last time was... different.”

He nodded, allowing that. “It was. But you weren’t.”

“I am now.”

He leaned back from her. “Are you?”

She nodded, eyes on his lips. Kai’s body turned to molten steel.

She wasn’t drunk this time, like she had been on Perenga’s island. There were no other males to challenge. There were just the two of them.

Just Astred.

Just Kai.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

A stred inched toward Kai. The hearth light flickered over his handsome face, deepening the bronze of his skin.

She'd been watching every nuance of his expression when she spoke the words that had haunted her since she'd left him that night.

To avoid giving the answer she couldn't give; that she'd wanted him. Always had, always would. She couldn't tell him how much his proposal had made her heart soar, only to break an instant later when reality crashed in, with jagged shards piercing her soul.

She hadn't answered him.

Instead, she'd made love to him, and left in the cooling hours of the night, as she'd always done.

Never a goodbye.

Only, she'd never returned to his port, either.

This? Now?

Everything was different. She still couldn't have him, not even with all the truths finally stripped away, thanks to their unexpected reunion on a tiny island that led to their journey into the Nexus. But now he knew why.

Can you forgive me?

Drawn by the intense heat of his body, she leaned ever closer, until his back bumped the closed door.

“Yes, Kai, I am different now. I realize I can’t run away anymore. I can’t run from my duty. And I can’t run away from facing what lies within.”

She stared at him, willing him to understand her meaning. To understand what she couldn’t say.

I love you. I always have.

He’d already said it, so long ago, that night he’d asked her to commit.

Did he still?

There was no doubt that he desired her, no matter how aloof he tried to be. The memory of their recent encounter on the beach before the wedding blazed through her. His magical hands on her, the taste of his tongue entwined with hers.

There’d been no tenderness in their heated exchange. What his body wanted might not be what his heart wanted, now.

Maybe. Her thoughts flicked back to their last night in Black River, and their brief encounter in the hallway.

She hesitated, leaning back.

Cool air invaded the space between them.

She straightened her shoulders, finally turning to give him space. “Wine? We’ll have to discuss what happened and what’s coming next. I—”

His hand, firm and warm, spun her back to him. His fingers gently cradled her face as his dark eyes stared directly into hers. “Red, we will always have what lies within. Don’t ever doubt that. Ever.”

The ferocity of his growl melted her against him, heart pounding as desire pooled at her core.

His mouth descended to hers as he finally claimed her as she needed him to.

“Do you still want me, Kai?” she breathed against his mouth when they parted for air, linking her fingers into his.

“Always, Red. You know this.” He dragged their linked hands over his pounding heart. “And this.” He brought their hands lower down to his belt and lower still, grasping his hardened anatomy with their clasped hands. “Always.”

A flash of molten heat blazed through her.

She unfastened his belt, button and zipper, needing to feel him hot and hard in her hand.

Leaning her forehead against his chin, she worked him, caressing, pressing, squeezing as he claimed her lips again.

He released her mouth, pulling her shirt up over her head, exposing her naked breasts to the warm glow of the firelight.

He paused, eyes fixing on the thin sheen of scales covering her chest, then flicked up to her face.

She offered no explanation to the question in his eyes.

His hungry mouth descended to her gold-tipped nipples.

She moaned his name as he suckled, nipping and nibbling at their taut peaks.

She worked him harder until pre-cum moistened his tip.

Kai's hand slipped into her pants, fingers moving with his special magic.

Releasing him, she shoved at his jeans, then her own, so that they stood naked.

He spun her so that her back was to his chest as his hands explored her lean body, periodically sliding into her core as he nuzzled her nape, nipping her throat until she crackled hotter than the hearth fire.

Astred pressed her bottom against Kai, moving her hips until his hard length slipped between her thighs, where she gripped him tight, sliding back and forth as he continued to work her over with his hands.

Her self-control grew hazy under the rising ardor. Her dragon pushed at her surface.

'Take him. He is ours.'

"No!" she growled, fighting her need to give in.

Kai stopped immediately. His chest rose and fell against her back, he pulsed between her thighs. "Red?" His velvety voice caressed the shell of her ear.

She gripped his hands, pressing them against her chest and belly, pulling his powerful arms tight around her.

He nuzzled the crook of her shoulder, pressing a heart-breaking kiss below her ear.

“I’ll leave.”

Astred tightened her grasp, seeking strength to control the erratic pounding of her heart as her body continued to smolder. She didn’t wait for her mind to clear. Pressing his palm to her heart, she whispered, “I don’t know what’s left of me to strip away during the next ritual, Kai. We both know I want you as much as I can’t have you. Even as consorts, like King Long and Jolena Kane. Committing to you will only make our time apart all the harder.”

He nodded against her hair. “They seem to make it work. But I understand how it’s different for you. I see that now.”

“Maybe they aren’t bonded at all. Just... an understanding?”

He shrugged around her, tightening his hold. “I couldn’t even begin to guess what their arrangement is, my love.”

My love.

Astred squeezed her eyes shut as her heart wrenched on those words.

I opened the door. I invited him in. This is my doing.

‘We want this.’ Her dragon’s voice drowned out her human thoughts. ‘We have the right to our heart.’

What of my mother? The Dragon Mother?

‘They were not the ones that created the divide and forbade males from cohabitating with us. As you’ve seen, others have made it work.’

The refugee camp. Kymri and Jori—though that was still so new. The Eastern Dragons. Other paranormal communities.

But could we?

Can Aeleftheria risk her safety, and that of the Dragon Mother? Their existence is bound to her protection. They didn't have the luxury of love and domestic happiness.

“Aeleftheria can never have a king, Kai.”

His body tensed, then slowly eased from around Astred, releasing her. “Do you think that's what this is about?”

“No, I—,” She spun around to protest. To deny the rest of the words.

“I don't want your fucking crown, Astred. Why would I? If you think that's who I am, then what the fuck am I doing here with you?” The intensity of his dark, glittering eyes boring into her made her drop her gaze for the first time in her life.

Her pulse rushed in her ears as they stood face to face, barely inside the threshold of her stateroom, naked.

She met his eyes again, bearing the anguish and flare of anger in them. The hurt.

She may as well have slapped him in the face.

Shame filled her.

I've hurt him again.

“As a hybrid, I don't belong in any one place or to any one people. Not like you.” His

voice was so soft it fractured the last vestige of her resolve to hold him at bay.

She searched his face, waiting for what came next.

‘But I belong to you,’ his eyes seem to say, where his lips didn’t.

Completely naked, body, heart, soul. Woman to man. Dragon to dragon to tiger.

“I accept who I am. Man, tiger and dragon. Yours.” He swallowed hard, “But I won’t be played, Astred. I’m not a toy, or a whim, or just a weekend fuck. Not anymore. There’s too much at stake now.”

‘My Love.’

His words echoed back to her again.

He leaned down, forcing her to step back without touching her. Collecting his clothing in a swipe, he met her eyes as he straightened. “But you have to decide.”

He slipped out of her room into the darkness of the corridor on silent feet, clothing balled in his tight fist.

Astred gently pressed the door closed, resting her forehead on the frame to release a shaky breath.

‘Fool.’

Astred slid to her knees, still leaning on the door as the rest of her heart fell to pieces on the floor around her.

“Yes, fool,” she whispered back to her dragon.

Kai pulled his shirt and jeans back on, ignoring the path to his old room. Instead, he made his way to the servants' corridors and out through the courtyard to the gardener's access gate.

He needed to run.

There, he stripped again, laying his clothing on the branch of the same mulberry bush he'd always used as a hook, and turned his face up to the dim sky.

Dawn lightened the horizon, surfacing from her night's rest.

He drew a deep breath and shifted on the exhale.

Glossy fur sprouted from pores, bones crackled and merged, muscle stretched and reformed until he was whole.

He was Kai Sun. Shield Claw son.

With an effortless pounce of his powerful haunches, he ran.

Away from Astred.

Away from the political turmoil of the shifter world.

Toward the dense tropical forest that surrounded The Watchers' royal compound. Aware of his presence and habits, the guards wouldn't stop him. They never did.

His paws flashed under the moonlight as he bounded over rock, root, and turf, up through tree-strangled hills, down the deep maws of nearby gullies. Home. The jungle was cool, dark, peaceful.

Aside from the local dragons and other tiger shifters, he was the apex predator in this wild place and feared nothing in it.

Kai ran until his muscles burned, sides heaving.

Padding to a stop, he panted, scenting the cool night air before stepping out onto the ledge. The delicate pre-dawn air swirled as his gaze took in the pristine natural spring pooling at the bottom of the ravine.

Here, he was roughly mid-way between the dragon compound and the edge of his tiger clan's boundary.

The distinct sound of air rushing over wings drew his attention to the sky above.

Dawn crested, sunlight illuminating the glorious scaly body of the dragon hovering over his sanctuary.

Astred.

Gliding in a gentle, circular downward spiral, she landed with the delicate light-footedness of an uncertain deer, her keen eyes trained on his location on the ridge above her.

The breeze pressed her scents against the far wall of the gully, robbing him of the chance to know the chemistry of her emotions before he descended.

Kai wouldn't turn away from her.

Though he would meet her, he took his time, picking his way down the steep ridge to the glittering pool's edge.

As he reached the bottom, stepping from the thick trees and tall grass into the clearing, she shifted into her human form, waiting, still watching him approach. The glittering cloud of magic surrounding her scales now clung to her skin with a glossy sheen, giving her an ethereal glow for a moment, until that too dissipated under the dawn light.

He passed her, drank the cool, clean water from the spring, then scented the air again now that he was closer.

Remorse clung to her as the remnants of her desire faded.

The sound of her elevated pulse tickled his sensitive ears.

Larger than most Siberian tigers, Kai stood on all fours, eye to eye with Astred, to remind her of who he was.

To remind himself of who he was.

In these last weeks, he'd started to forget himself, surrounded by dragons, calling to that shut-away part of his identity. That rejected aspect.

The part that The Watchers had welcomed, initiated and fostered.

And for that honor, he'd always be grateful.

Kai decided which of the voices was his. And coming home reminded him that the tiger was his primary identity. Reflective of who he was. Dragon was just an additional aspect that he could tap into when he chose—which was rare.

Important, but not defining.

The morning light crested the ridge, gilding Astred's beautiful human form. She would always be that brilliant gold in his life, dazzling when illuminated by the purest light.

The heiress to the dragon mother's oracle and throne of Aeleftheria stood naked, as hesitant as a fresh maiden.

The fear in her eyes wasn't for the tiger facing her. It was for the heart of the man waiting for hers.

Her eyes shone as she looked at him, crystal clear and vulnerable, as she lifted her fingers toward the fur protecting his throat.

He remained still, allowing her to reach for him. Waiting.

A watery smile as she looked into his eyes. "You're so beautiful. Magnificent."

He didn't preen under her praise.

"And deserve an equal, that I don't think I am," She rushed on, "You're too good. Steady. Noble. Strong in your silence. Wise in your restraint. All the things that I am not."

She stepped closer, sliding her arms up around his neck.

Without meaning to, he leaned into her, inhaling her scent deep into his being.

"Maybe that's what I need. Dragongoddess knows I've always wanted you, since that first moment. I don't know how to make this work, with them, out there. But I'm willing to do it, Kai. Just you and me. If—if you'll have me."

The thick emotion in her voice twisted his heart, making it thump harder.

Kai let go of the tiger magic, allowing her to feel the intimate changes in his body as he reduced to his human form, her arms still around him. He pulled her closer. “I told you, Red, we’ll always have what lies within. Always. No one else has a right to that.”

She went up on tiptoe, pressing her sweet lips to his. “This place... it’s your special place you told me about?”

He nodded, his mouth a breath from hers.

“Is this okay? Here?”

The deep uncertainty in her voice, the vulnerability in her eyes, melted the remains of his anger, allowing his own heart to pound in his chest for new reasons that had nothing to do with the recent strain of his run.

She meant it.

Now.

“Here is perfect. You are perfect,” he whispered against her exhale, pulling her closer still.

She gasped, drawing his essence into herself as her hands kneaded his shoulders and nape.

He’d never, in all their time together, seen her so deeply exposed and raw. The final facet.

The moment branded on his memory.

Finally, he allowed his fingers to drift over her flesh, tracing the tattoos adorning her body, some centuries old, others fresh and bright. Astred was her own artfully crafted treasure map. Body art had never been of interest to Kai, except for the curiosity it invoked in Astred's designs.

His gaze fell to the tropical flowers gracing her shoulder and biceps and he noticed the addition of tiger eyes peeking out from the shadows of the foliage.

"When did that happen?" He slid his thumb over the image.

"After you asked me for forever," she swallowed, leaving the explanation there.

He nodded. She didn't need to say more.

"You're sure about this?"

She turned her face so that her eyes were level with his. "I'm sure about us."

"There's no failsafe, Astred."

"I know, damnit." The vestiges of her uncertainty fell away, decision made.

He smiled as he dipped his head to claim her lips, whispering as he hardened against her belly, "There's my dragoness."

She sighed, rubbing against him, igniting them both.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Astred met Kai's dark eyes, illuminated by the morning sun rising over the ridge, giving them depths she'd never fathomed before.

In that moment, she saw all three facets of his soul: the rich dark chocolate she loved, the steely stare of his dragon and the sky blue of this tiger, layered behind the iris, shifting and swirling as their magics reached for one another.

Astred shivered in Kai's embrace.

She'd done it, made the biggest decision of her life.

The throne wasn't a decision. It was a duty—a destiny.

Now they just had to complete the ritual where they bound themselves in eternal promise.

'Just us. All five of us...' her dragon purred. 'I like my soft kitty as well as my steely dragon.'

Astred chuckled low in her throat.

"What is it?" Kai smiled back at her, brushing tendrils of her hair from her face.

"This is going to be one hell of an adventure," she grinned up at him, nibbling his lips, then lifted a brow, "Shall we?"

There would be hell to pay when she got home. Brimstone and sulfur would erupt

from the council matrons.

Her thoughts brought up the image of Kai's grandmother, Matron Zadora Steelscale.

What would she think about this?

The conflict would turn her inside out.

So be it. I'm so fucking done with her—they, all of them.

But this wasn't about them.

No.

This really was about just Astred and Kai. Completing something she had wanted to do the instant he'd asked her. She'd re-examined her charts, aligned the compass and re-calibrated her course.

Kai was her guiding star.

The one that gave her assurance and calmed her in a world of storms. It was why she'd returned to his port again and again.

Her crew had teased her mercilessly about the convenience of this same port, no matter her excuses that it held the best bars, beer, and brawls in the world. It did. But only because Kai added the right flavor to the night. They all knew it.

Now, she wished she did too. Truly.

Astred wasn't going to waste any more time, now that she knew they'd weather the counter-wave together.

Whatever it smashed against them.

She'd always been strong, especially with her crew surrounding her. With Kai? The way he looked at her—into her?

They'd be invincible.

Linking her fingers with his, she stepped toward the glittering pool, fed by a freshwater spring tumbling from the rocks above.

The peace of Kai's sanctuary reminded her of the magic and natural silence of the Nexus' companion grove. Birds and glimmering insects flitted by, ignoring them as they began their day.

As Astred and Kai would begin this new era of their lives.

After so many years of fast weekends and slow returns, and a too-long break, she was ready.

Once the edge of the water slid silky cool around her waist, she turned to face him, heart threatening to gallop out of her chest.

Her dragon rose to the surface with a huff, calming her racing pulse.

Kai smiled down at her, though there was a hint of weariness in his eyes.

In case she left him again.

No more.

Astred wove her hands around his waist and up his muscled back, drawing them

together.

His fingers traced her spine downward, causing her to shiver when he reached the cleft of her bottom, caressing her haunch before pulling her thigh up onto his hip.

He dropped below the water, taking her with him toward the deeper center.

She clung to him, linking her ankles behind his hips, her belly pressed to his, her breasts pebbled against his solid chest.

Floating, supported by Kai, she reached down between them, grasping his length, working him till he filled her fist, hot and hard.

This wasn't happening because of a haze of passion. Instead, this union was going to be in the full clarity of intentionality, eyes and hearts wide open.

Kai nuzzled Astred's throat, lips and teeth trailing a blaze from the spot below her ear, igniting fires down at the apex of her thighs. His hands worked her muscles from her hips, up her back to her ribs, where his callused thumbs rotated over her peaked nipples.

Oh, but there would be passion.

There never wasn't, between Astred and Kai.

"I've missed you," he whispered against the shell of her ear as his fingers sought her entrance, testing, massaging her nub.

Throat tight, she nodded, grasping his hair in her hands, pulling his mouth to hers, "And I, you."

He drove her higher. She deepened her claim on his mouth until she could stand it no more and tore her lips from his with a gasp. “Now, Kai, now.”

Hands firm on her hips, he held her solid as he aligned his tip to her entrance and slid home, burying himself so deep he sent her over the edge with a cry.

She opened her eyes into his, heavy lidded, face taut with concentration and restraint. Her chest heaved, panting and breathless.

He was still rock solid, filling her, taking the shock waves of her fading orgasm.

Before she could sag against him, he gently withdrew as far as he could without leaving her completely. With slow deliberation, he filled her swollen channel, drawing a moan from her depths.

Again and again, rebuilding her shattered pieces, until she clutched him tight and fierce, ready to bite and scratch all over again.

Watching her, he listened to the melody of her gasps and cries, timing.

This time, as she climbed, he ascended a heartbeat behind.

“Astred,” he breathed her name, strained, urgent.

“Yes, Kai,” she gasped, closing her eyes as she searched for her magic, inviting her dragon to the surface in a glittering cloud that rose from her flesh, coating both of them.

A breath later, Kai’s rose, a swirl of white, grey and black mist.

His eyes flashed silver, then blue, and back as his incisors descended.

The sight ignited Astred's instinct, rocketing at the erotic sight of his primal form meeting hers.

Eye to eye, she took control of the pace of their lovemaking, riding him hard and fast as a silver thread formed in the mist, looping around them in a magical spiral.

"I'm yours, Red." His whisper filled her head with the tones of his soul.

"And I, yours, Kai," she growled in return, her dragon joining in the consent.

Need and instinct took over as the magic thickened, heat blazed through Astred as her gaze landed on Kai's thick, muscled throat. Her tongue slid along its column before she opened her mouth, allowing the predator to grasp him, deliberate and merciless.

He grunted, tensing against her an instant before he bit down on her shoulder, penetrating flesh and muscle down to the bone.

She rode against the pain, the magic a raging storm around them as they fought for mastery over each other and themselves, binding their souls together. Forever.

Kai's deep, deep, dual toned growl, both dragon and tiger, reverberated through her. Astred's dragon opened their heart, submitting, yet taking Kai's with her as she spiraled inward.

Magic exploded in the peaceful gully.

Kai's hands clutched Astred's hips as he drove deep, striking her sweet spot.

In a flash, lightning struck, blinding Astred, her body rigid. She gripped Kai so tight within her, he had no choice but to release his restraint and give in to her.

Astred's spasming body drew Kai ever deeper. He surged, filling her, hot and true as their magic descended in a mingled, glittering mist, coating them and everything around them.

Astred opened her eyes, absorbing every inch of Kai's features in that moment before he opened his. Traces of gold dust flared before receding into the depths of the dark brown.

He smiled, his gaze sweeping hers.

"What is it?"

"Your eyes flared blue for a second," he grinned.

"Did they?" She laughed. "Well shit, yours were gold for a bit, too."

He grinned back at her.

"What chaos have we stirred up?"

"Who the fuck cares?" He kissed her, deeply, with all the tenderness in his heart, so that it brought tears to her eyes.

"I love you, Kai." Her fingers fluttered over his damp hair.

"I know you do, Red. As fiercely as I love you."

She closed her eyes before the droplets could fall, shaking her head. "I don't know how—"

"It doesn't matter how, yet, but we will make it work, Red. Trust us."

Astred drew a deep breath.

Inside, her dragon purred.

She smiled. “I do.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Kai and Astred stood in the Eastern Air Dragon's palace, positioned at the foot of the ceremonial throne and dais where the king sat in gold and silver threaded robes. At the far end of the grand hall, the massive wooden doors eased open to admit Kai's father and his retinue.

Astred stood erect, eyes forward.

The traditional curved headdress with its intricate carvings balanced on Keone Sun's head as he glided forward. As the tiger clan's head spiritual shaman, he bore the weight of his people's traditions on his body for every age-old ceremony, since he'd accepted the title passed down from his ancestors before him.

Kai marveled at how the helmet never dared tip.

A talent he was sure never to develop, despite his father's urgings and great disappointment.

No, the beautifully decorated attire would one day pass to one of Kai's cousins, who made up part of the retinue. One of his aunties' daughters, he hoped.

He studied their impassive faces as the group approached, though their eyes glittered with intense curiosity when they looked at him, next to Astred and the dragon king.

At the bottom of the dais, Keone flowed to a stop as though he'd never moved a muscle, dipped into a low bow, eyes always respectfully on King Dai Zen Long. "Your Majesty." His smooth voice rolled forward, barely above a whisper, yet unmistakable.

“Wu Sun,” the king replied with a slight nod using his respected title.

Keone Sun’s gaze slid to Astred. “Princess.”

She curtsied respectfully, low and deep. “Your Eminence.”

Keone acknowledged Bayn before finally settling his gaze on Kai, his expression curiously resolute. “Shall we begin?”

Suddenly rigid, Astred lifted a brow, sucking in a breath, but nodded. Bayn had already explained some of the protocol to her before the mystical attendants arrived.

Keone turned on his heel, moving several paces toward the temple entrance, allowing Astred and Kai to fall in line behind him as the petitioners. King Long, followed by Bayn, then the remainder of Keone’s entourage and the imperial guards completed the parade.

They were going into the world of the spirit; Keone Sun’s domain, where kings, emperors and princesses were trifling titles.

Kai’s gaze swept the temple room. This room he’d never before entered, though he’d participated in many rituals over the years, they were usually at his tribe’s temple. Never this one.

This was the personal temple meant only for the king and his closest family, resplendent with the regalia and carvings appropriate for the royal air dragons.

An altar dominated the center of the room, and power vibrated through the space, forcing the hair on Kai’s body to rise. Stone, so finely carved that it appeared as though a mist lifted from the face of it, encircled the room. Dragons appeared to writhe in and out of fluffy cloud banks, while along the base of the wall rose a

jeweled jungle, and mountains sparkling under the firelight.

The dragons remained unadorned. Colorless.

The Watchers.

His eye skimmed the bottom, opulent, portion of the decor where jeweled tigers prowled among the shadowy foliage. Kai swallowed the rise of emotion, having never expected the dragons to honor the tiger clan in this way.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Astred's head turn as she too appreciated the beauty of the room, sweeping the areas where the tigers lurked. A smile tugged at her lips as she cast Kai a glance.

Both parts of his heritage were represented in this private royal dragon temple. Kai's grandmother, Keone's mother, and sister to Bayn and King Long, was an air dragon. She was the reason that the king's family had been so welcoming to him, as a hybrid.

"Are you ready, Princess?" Keone's dark eyes bored into Astred.

Astred turned to King Long. "Before we retrieve the star stone, I humbly request that the Watchmen safeguard something else of immeasurable value in its place."

Astred pulled down the collar of her shirt, bearing the expanse of her chest above her breasts, covered in dragon scales, which then dissolved, revealing a disk.

Kai met Astred's unapologetic gaze, then slid to King Long's startled expression. The queen's seal.

A dragon entwined with a smokeless flame, one of the three keys to dragonkind's greatest treasure: The Mother Goddess's sanctuary.

Kai's gaze shot to Bayn and the king, who'd exchanged surprised glances, but maintained their silence as Dai Zen considered her request.

Accepting the seal could bring trouble to the neutral clan, should the secret be revealed.

"We would be honored to protect the sacred seal of the divine Mother." The king nodded to Wu Sun.

Keone's hand swept through the air with a breath. His voice intoned the first notes of the shadow work spell, drawing on the essence of the netherworld. An added layer in which to hide the Aelefttherian seal from detection.

Magic flowed from his body, filling the temple.

The song, combined with the shadow flow, created a protective barrier against remnants as Keone opened the sacred space to the liminal.

Keone led them around the altar, where on one side, a singular piece of jade, bearing the lines of a tiger and a dragon encircling each other, slowly appeared under the magic's call.

It was the same etching as was on the back of Kolina's locket.

Kai's breath stalled. His pulse beat in his ears as his gaze shot to his father's steady eyes.

Keone turned his attention to Astred before the questions could pass Kai's lips.

Kai returned his focus to the seal, the importance of this artifact, and the power it represented.

His gaze returned to Astred's taut face, intent on the ceremony.

She didn't tell me she had it all this time.

Removing it from the protection of her people, to this nearly forgotten sanctuary. Kai's pulse increased as Keone's notes rose to an abrupt stop, now that the room was filled with shadow magic. King Long approached the dais, placing his palm over the solidified dragon and tiger emblem. The internal locks clicked. He stepped aside, turning to Kai with a nod. Keone gestured for him to do as the king had done.

Unsure as to why he was part of the ritual, Kai obeyed, startled when a pin pricked his palm on contact, triggering the next set of locks. Keone turned the seal, releasing the final layer of tumblers inside the mechanism.

Next, Keone encased his hand in the thick layer of shadow magic before removing the barrier to the hidden cavity in the dais. He glanced at Kai from the corner of his eye as his hand slid over the dragon and tiger carving.

Something about that glance sent a tingle of foreboding up Kai's nape. When he looked at the others in the room, their eyes were glued to him.

Shadows continued to swirl over the cavity, buffering the space as Keone reached inside.

Dark, glittering shadows writhed around his father's hand as he withdrew it from the dais.

Everyone seemed to hold their breath,

The instant Keone released the shadows, revealing a shining object nestled within his palm, power, pure and fierce, trilled through Kai, making his body go as rigid as a

drawn bowstring.

His muscles strained against the vibration charging the particles in his blood, usually dormant, infusing and waking his sleeping dragon deep within. Breathless, he fought for control as his body sought to expand in the restricted space of the temple. Power, like nothing he'd ever experienced before, surged, enticing his scales to erupt from his skin, sending his dragon senses into overload, coiling him with the need to allow his dragon instincts free rein.

Free rein to dominate this place, these other beings, to rise and crush, tear with deadly tooth and claw.

Keone's rising song filled the temple, his shadows growing, reminding some small part of Kai of his training. His control.

But both aspects wanted control, and a dragon was so much stronger than a tiger when awakened, tasting freedom from its suppression, released by the song of the star stone revealed to him.

It sang to him, louder and clearer than his father's shadow song.

Kai's gaze locked on the stone in Keone's hand and the Aelefttherian seal in Astred's.

His heart jack hammered against his chest as the roaring rush of blood through his system filled his ears.

I can take both. Right now. And no one could stop me. I would be king of all dragons, with direct control of the Dragon Mother.

He was acutely aware of the intensity of the others beside him. Watchful, ready to spring into action. His senses told him everything they felt.

No one else seemed affected by the amulet in his father's hand.

Just Kai.

Astred's scent, her unique fragrance, broke through everything else, overloading his senses.

As his body shook with strain, his eyes met hers.

Astred stood so still, she barely breathed. Unshed tears gleamed in her beautiful eyes as she waited for him to find the thread that linked their hearts buried under the overwhelming power urging him to claim everything around him.

Holding her gaze, that gold thread hummed through the shadows and through the blinding power, incrementally granting him relief.

Kai gasped, gaze swinging to Dai Zen, then to Bayn. His king, his family.

He met his father's worried eyes; despite his controlled expression, his shamanic shadow magic swirled through the room, providing a layer of protection.

He's protecting them from me. From what I might do.

His magic would draw their corporeal forms into the shadow realm should Kai lose control and attack them physically.

Holding Astred's gaze, Kai fought through the stone's power for his own shadow essence. Once he had enough control over the dragon, he extended his hand as he formed his own swirling cloud of glittering shadow.

This was his test.

Placing his palm over his father's, he muted the stone's power, shaking and gasping.

Keone turned their palms so that the cold star stone fell into Kai's palm.

He gripped it tight, clinging to the shadow magic flowing from his tiger soul to his fist.

With his other hand, he grasped Astred's. Trembling, he transferred the amulet from his fist to her open palm so that she held both powerful artifacts.

Surrounded by the mix of Keone's powerful shadow magic, bolstered by Kai's, Astred pressed the amulet against her chest bone. Scales immediately flowed over the shadow-wrapped artifact, trapping it within her body.

With the stone's song muted, Kai drew a deep, shaking breath, then growled, stepping away from her. "What the fuck was that?"

"That, my son, is the source of the Steelscale power." Keone accepted the Aeleftherian seal from Astred, bundling it in protective shadow magic before placing it in the cavity where the stone had been, locking it in place.

King Long slid his palm over the lock. Then Astred did likewise.

Kai struggled against the anger, replacing the fading power, which continued to whisper to him.

With both artifacts safely stowed away, Dai Zen clapped his palms together. "Tea?"

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

In the new council chambers embedded in Katoa Koro's peak, Odson Blackridge stared out of the vast windows overlooking the rolling emerald slopes below

His nephew, King Jori Mountainside, stood next to him, rubbing the back of his neck.

Several paces away, Stenlen Flintail straightened, waiting.

Jori finally turned away from the vista. "This is bad."

Odson nodded.

"Marli?" Stenlen's voice was very low.

"Doing her job. Quietly."

The tall, black oak council room doors bounced against the wall with reverberating thumps.

"What do you mean the queen is ill?" Kymri Steelscale's voice whipped across the length of the council room. Despite the rounded belly dominating her slight frame, she stalked forward, eyes pinned on Odson, swinging to Jori and back.

Odson's gaze flicked to his sister, Elora, who trailed several steps behind Kymri. He stiffened to his full height as Kymri lifted a finger.

"Just because I'm pregnant does not mean I cannot handle the truth of what happens in my home realm, Odson. I never pegged you for the type of male to hide things

from me.” She scowled up at him, her long, brightly painted fingernail dangerously close to the tip of his nose.

It took everything the old dragon had not to chuckle at the highly irate diminutive dragon woman, who was now a queen in her own right.

No, the former Commander of the Aelefttherian Guard would not be too pleased about being left out of the conversation.

“Five minutes, Elora,” he growled at his sister. “I asked for just five minutes.”

Elora shrugged her delicate shoulders, brow raised.

He turned back to Kymri. “Your Majesty—,”

“Cut the shit, Odson. You know we don’t do that here. You’ve never placated me before. Don’t start now.”

He couldn’t stop his gaze from dropping to her belly. “No, ma’am.”

The bigger her belly grew, the crankier she got.

She growled through her teeth, then inhaled deeply through her nose as she lowered her hands to her sides and straightened her spine. Calm returned, she opened her eyes. “The queen is ill, and my mother is in the traitor’s dungeon for helping my brother escape. Astred is on a secret mission—with Kai, of all people, and my grandmother is in charge? Is that right?”

“That’s what I’m told.”

She was silent for a long moment. “Who else knows?”

“Heidi and Charmaine.”

“Char—? Okay, this is serious.” She blew out her breath, pacing toward the windows, turning her gaze up to Jori, then back to Odson. “Why go to Charmaine?”

“Astred went to the Nexus because she had a vision.”

Kymri blanched. “You were there?”

Odson nodded. “I was a witness to the ritual. Afterwards, she and Kai went to Bayn’s place.”

Kymri pinched the bridge of her nose with one hand while she rubbed the top of her extended belly with the other. “Why go to Bayn?”

“So that Aaron Connor could meet them there to set up a secured meeting with Kane. They both live in Toronto.”

“That still doesn’t explain why they would pull Bayn into this? Aside from recent events, as an air dragon, their mandate is neutrality. This just pulls him deeper into the mess.”

Jori remained silent beside her, Stenlen, ever his shadow, maintained his post nearby.

Elora’s soft voice hung in the vast room. “For the star stone.”

Fear streaked down Odson’s back. He flexed his suddenly clammy hands as he studied Elora’s face. “That...” his gaze darted back to Kymri, dropped to her belly before bouncing back up to her face. “Holy shit.” He raked a hand through his greying hair.

“What? What is the star stone?” Jori demanded, turning to Elora.

“Do you remember the story about the Dragon Star, Jori?”

He shook his head, “Not clearly, I was very young when you told it to me.”

“It’s just a myth.” Kymri said. “That story is just a myth.”

Odson’s head shook. “It’s not.”

“The Dragon Star was our greatest hero in the wars following the divide. She was the strongest of us, aside from the queen,” Elora said. “She saved so many of our guardians when the males overran us outside our boundaries.”

“What happened?”

“She couldn’t be everywhere all the time. Despite her efforts, we still lost many dragonesses.” Elora’s gaze landed on Stenlen. “Your previous king was relentless in those days, as was his father before him. First, Queen Rayna fell. It was unthinkable, but she did, and the Dragon Star bore the responsibility like a lead weight. Regina ascended in Rayna’s place.” Elora fell silent.

Odson took it from there. “But then Zalina fell too, after a raid, and the Dragon Star lost her way. Her endless raiding and assassination attempts on the mountain males brought them out again and again, making matters worse for Aeleftheria. She nearly died in a narrow escape. I found her in really bad shape and brought her back to Regina.”

“She wasn’t the same after that.” the sadness in Elora’s tone mirrored the memory of Odson’s experiences during those days so long ago.

“Zalina?” Kymri said, eyes wide. “My aunt Zalina? Zayli’s mother? She died shortly before I was born.”

“Regina forced the Dragon Star to give up her power.”

“The star stone?” Jori said.

“It’s the Steelscale legacy,” Elora said to Kymri. “Your grandmother was the Dragon Star until she grew too power hungry. She didn’t like the direction things were going, so she decided she’d press her own will on the queen.”

“Wait, back up. What?” Kymri rubbed her temples, looking at Jori, who was at just as much of a loss as she was. “Why does no one know this? Why don’t I know this?”

“Regina compromised. Zadora handed over the star stone and formed the Council, which would ‘guide’ Regina’s rein. The Dragon Star was left to the legends after that.” Odson shot Elora a glance. “Regina told me what happened when I saw her next.”

Elora nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. “I remember. You came to pay homage to the new princess. Astred.”

Odson averted his gaze and changed the subject. “The Star Stone. If Astred is retrieving it, something is very wrong.”

“But she can’t use it. She isn’t a Steelscale. She doesn’t have the starmetal in her blood.” Elora frowned.

“I do, my mother—who’s in prison—does, and Zayli,” Kymri said, “and my grandmother.”

“And Kai,” Odson added as his phone vibrated in his pocket.

Kymri looked up at him. “Yes, Kai too. But she wouldn’t—he’s male. My grandmother? But still, why?”

“I gotta take this. It’s Kane.” He punched the button to accept the incoming call.

“Odson? Where are you?”

“Katoa’s council room.”

“Good, you’ve caught them up?”

“Yes, I—,”

“Put me on Speaker.”

“Done.”

“You need to prepare. We hit the menagerie, but the Consortium had already cleared out. We rescued a few survivors that are all in really bad shape from their failed experiments.”

“Prepare for what?” Jori demanded.

“The Consortium. The spy that Marli apprehended and we took custody of was tagged with a spelled tracking crystal. Her sister was nearly dead, but she’s regained consciousness.”

“And?”

“She says the Consortium recruited the male dragons that left the mountain.”

“Fuck,” Jori spat, raking a hand through his hair. “Fuck!”

“What else, Joey?” Elora approached Odson’s phone.

“Zadora Steelscale.”

Odson never heard such regret in Jolena Kane’s voice.

Elora reached for the phone. “Has something happened to the matron?”

Joey was quiet for so long, Odson wasn’t sure she was still on the line.

“No, Elora. It looks as though Matron Steelscale is the traitor that evaded Marli that day.”

“Impossible,” Kymri surged forward. “There is no way that she’s a traitor.”

“Sam Egan identified her.”

Odson gaped. Elora’s expression mirrored his own disbelief as they listened.

“She’s lying. There’s no way my grandmother would betray Aelefttheria like that. She would never work with the Consortium.”

“That may be, but Egan’s ability allowed her to shape shift into Matron Steelscale’s likeness. Unfortunately, I witnessed it myself—a thing I never want to see again if it can be helped. Egan needs direct DNA access to do that. And according to Marli’s report, they fought, injuring one another. It’s plausible.”

“She could have gotten that DNA some other way. From someone else, to frame her.”

“It’s possible.” Joey allowed. “But you all still need to prepare for what the Consortium may do next. Egan’s sister said they left with the stolen seal, intending to finish what Egan failed to do.”

“Do they have someone that’s blood bound to it?” Jori’s complexion had paled by several shades.

“From what the survivors relayed, part of the experimentation was geared toward creating some sort of blood fusion that would allow any of them to act in that capacity. But it’s impossible to know if it worked.”

“Goddess,” Kymri whispered, fingertips to her lips, turning wide eyes to Jori as her other hand fell again to her belly. “If they really have a seal and they’re headed for Aeleftheria, then the islanders need to evacuate.”

“I’ve already sent word to the Crimson Claw to get the message through. I just hope they get there in time to save as many as they can.”

“We don’t know if Regina has gained consciousness yet to defend the island and subdue the invaders, like she did the last time.” Odson said.

“I can’t stay on the line. I’m still trying to get through to Astred and the Eastern Dragons. Prepare,” Joey urged. “The mountain seal has to be safeguarded.”

Odson’s screen went black. He rubbed a hand over his face, heart pounding.

Safeguard the mountain.

Fly to Aeleftheria’s aid. Protect the queen, the island, and the Dragon Mother. Odson

remembered the day he learned about the Dragon Mother. Regina had told him, with tears in her eyes. The reason she could never abandon the island. Not even for him.

The need to act tore through him.

Regina and her people were more than capable of defending themselves. Every Aeelftherian spent their lives preparing for what was coming—shifter and human alike. As much as they might resent his interference, Odson couldn't stand by and not do anything.

Stalwart, Regina would rely on the wisdom of her council and the talent of her guardians.

His chest constricted at the thought of those that were stopped from taking their posts, for one reason or another. Kymri, guardian commander, heavily pregnant, couldn't even shift into her dragon form due to the pregnancy.

Kolina was locked up.

And Astred. Wayward Astred, spitfire princess and fearless explorer. Odson couldn't leave her to handle this chaos on her own. I hope she leans into the network of allies her mother wove for her through Elora and Kolina's efforts.

No, she wasn't alone, but she might not know that right now. And Odson would do everything he could to ensure that she had as much support in this dire time as he had the power to muster.

He caught Elora's eye.

It was time.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

S eated in the high-backed chairs of King Dai Zen Long's private sitting room, Astred glanced at Kai over her steaming gilded teacup.

The hard set of his jaw, fists on thighs, with his tea left untouched on the table, the way he refused to look at her, told her how angry he was.

Her body still trembled from the experience. The fear hovered at her nape at just how close she'd been to losing Kai to the stone's power. It had been a risk. She could have lost everything right there.

She'd heeded her instinct to offer it up to him, Though, not because she was testing him, but because he'd needed to test himself. In that moment, he'd proven himself to these men who'd guided him his whole life.

Dai Zen and Bai Yun both ignored Kai as they exchanged concerns over the next steps. Ultimately, the stone's fate was Astred's decision, but neither was so sure that Astred's retrieval and return of the stone was the right step, especially now that they knew that its original owner was still vying to usurp power on the island.

Beside Kai, Keone maintained his silence. The rest of his retinue awaited him in the courtyard, which she had learned consisted of Kai's cousins, aunties and some other clan novices training in the art of shadow magic.

A talent he'd never mentioned to her. But why would he? He'd told her as little about himself as she'd told him of her life, beyond the harbor they'd met near. The only reason she'd known he was even a shifter, tiger and dragon, was because of his unique scents.

She flicked her gaze back to his aged father. Kymri's father. Kolina's lover. Tiger shifters aged slower than humans, much quicker than dragons.

Does Kolina love him still?

Kai looked so much like him. The way he held his body, the set of his mouth, the flash of intelligence in his dark eyes. Even the tenor of his voice, a little rougher, a little softer with age, but still undeniably powerful when used to control magic. A magic strong enough to hide the stone from Kai's awareness until the shadows faded from it.

Astred's throat tightened as the memory of his incredible resistance to the stone's powerful call, as it challenged every fiber of his essence.

Until he looked into Astred's eyes.

Her whole body had frozen, breath bated, heart racing, to see if he'd act against her.

She recalled the stories of the Dragon Star.

'Trust him,' her dragon had whispered, mustering the image of Astred and Kai's dragons curled around one another in the Nexus. Of their binding, in the sparkling glade not so far from here. The bond alone would not prevent him from acting if he chose to, but it called him back to her, reminding him of their love and their promises.

Whatever he found in her eyes eased the conflict, his fight for resistance no longer necessary. He'd slipped the key to incredible power into the palm of her hand.

He could have embraced it, denied her, broken the trust of those around him. The Aelefttherian seal was within reach. With each artifact in hand, he could have taken

the island and control of the Great Mother's sanctuary.

He hadn't.

Kai had placed all power in Astred's hands.

Her gaze caressed the lines of his taut face.

The stone vibrated, soft yet insistent against her chest bone from within the protective layers of shadow and scales.

I'm not sure I could have done the same...

She put her cup down. "My mother, Oracle of the Great Mother, sent me the dream vision, putting me on the path to your door. I do not have the training to interpret the images inflicted on me, but my instinct tells me that this is what I must do."

She met Keone's gaze across from her. After a long moment, he simply nodded.

"I didn't know of the Star Stone's existence—not really. Nor was I aware that my mother sent Kolina here. This story was relegated to just that. Stories. Legends."

Her entire generation had grown up ignorant of the threat from within their own people.

Her fingers grazed over the fabric covering the scales hiding the stone beneath. "I must trust that you will safeguard the seal as you protected the stone, while I sort out what lies ahead. Because I don't know what that is."

Master Chan appeared at the door, wordlessly drawing Dai Zen's attention.

At the king's nod, the older man approached, whispering his message for the king's ear alone.

King Dai Zen Long paled, dark eyes snapping to Astred.

Aeleftheria? Her mother?

Trepidation streaked down her spine at his expression, worry gripping her throat as her fingers ghosted her empty pocket for her phone.

They'd been waiting for word from Kane, but had left their phones outside the sacred temple in Master Chan's care during the shadow ceremony to retrieve the stone and give the seal into safe keeping.

She stood, the sound of her own blood chugging through her body was deafening.

Everyone else followed suit as he spoke. "The Consortium are headed en masse for Aeleftheria.

"Do they have a seal?" Bayn growled.

"Undetermined if they have it on hand, but we suspect that may be the case."

"How long before they arrive? We're a full day's travel away," Kai paced, "I have a local business colleague with a private long-range jet that owes me a few favors. That should at least get us to the right side of the Atlantic coast." He left to retrieve his phone.

"We will increase the warding on the temple chamber, rendering the seal undetectable, should the enemy turn their gaze to us," Keone said.

“Few know that Kai and I are here, let alone why.”

“That may be true, but we must not be undercautious at times like these,” he replied.

He’s right, of course.

Kai returned, tucking his phone into his pocket, handing Astred and Bayn their devices. “We’re set. He’s calling in his aircrew.”

“That must be some favor he owed you,” Astred gaped.

Kai nodded without elaborating. “Yes, and we’re still not square yet.” The corner of his lips curled as his eyes twinkled.

“Take my car.” The king had removed his ceremonial robes, unbuttoning the top of the collar of his shirt as he led the way back through the compound to his office. From there, a door tucked into a far corner proved to be a private passage to a large garage.

Astred gaped at the beautifully preserved antiquated airship displayed at one end. The rest of the space held two lines of highly polished cars, old and new. From a nearby cupboard, he selected a set of keys, tossing them to Bayn. “Don’t scratch her.”

Bayn glanced at the fob in his hand, pressing the button. Headlights flashed a third of the way down the left side, drawing their attention to a sleek dark teal sports car. “A Gemera.” He grinned at his brother.

“Not even a nick. She just came in last week.”

“You should have told me you ordered one. I’d have come to visit sooner.” Bayn opened the driver’s door and settled in. The engine roared to life. “Nice,” he purred.

“Shotgun,” Astred rushed forward. “Kai, you can navigate from the back seat.”

Kai rolled his eyes as he slid into the car, shutting the door.

Bayn immediately hit the gas, and they were on their way to a private airstrip less than an hour’s drive away.

They might be able to knock an hour or two off their journey, but they were still out of reach of immediate action.

Astred closed her eyes, losing herself in the sensation of the growling engine and smooth sweeps along the winding roads.

Warm fingers caressed her shoulder. She grasped Kai’s hand.

Whatever was coming, she wouldn’t face it alone.

She just prayed they weren’t too late.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Crimson Claw First Mate Tundi Okonedo squinted into the horizon from the quarterdeck, gaze flicking to the sun as she assessed the drift of the wind, her keen senses reading the atmosphere.

They'd been just outside of Aelefttherian territory when Joey Kane had contacted the ship via satellite phone to warn them of the Consortium threat headed their way.

Almost there.

Eyes closed, she waited as the vessel drifted, bearings true.

She sighed as her skin tingled from scalp to toenails from the magnetic field in the vast Bermuda Triangle, an invisible field that Aelefttheria drew on to protect her territory. Here, no radars, sonars, satellites or other such technology could spy and track them.

She turned, and with a flick of her chin, signaled several of the crew to drop over the Crimson Claw's starboard side.

Moments later, the ship rocked as the women shifted into their dragon forms, displacing the surrounding ocean. Tundi's sharp feline gaze followed their dark forms under the surface until they were far enough out to emerge with the significant force required to propel them into the air, wings snapping out to catch available currents.

Soon enough, they were dark spots in the sky as they raced home to alert the archipelago to prepare.

The remaining crew members scrambled to adjust the rigging to capture the too light drifts, drawing them at a leisurely pace.

All they could do was adjust and hope the airborne dragons brought the alert in time.

Sakunthala joined Tundi at the helm. “Hopefully our arrival will be timely enough to get the non-aerial away before...” She swallowed the last words, unwilling to say them aloud.

Tundi nodded. “It’s up to the sea to decide.”

They all knew it. It was the sailor’s life.

She glanced at the strained set of Sakunthala’s lips. “Don’t. Captain wouldn’t want you to drain your magic to conjure a wind. You may need your power later—sea goddess willing that we don’t see battle—so, just in case. That’s an order.”

Sakunthala’s lips thinned further, but her head jerked an affirmative.

Act now or prepare for later. Press upon nature or go with her flow.

Decisions, the weight of which dragged on Tundi’s shoulders. Lives were at stake and their duty was to ensure the safe passage of the vulnerable. Those that can’t fight or defend. Those that need to preserve the past for the future will go down into the earth.

But with what Tundi had learned over the last five decades with Astred, and recent events concerning the seals, she wasn’t so sure that was enough.

This is what concerned her most, as she turned her face skyward, studying the wisps of cloud and the subtle changes of the ocean’s surface.

Her pulse ticked through her chest as she turned to study the tones. Wind would come, but when?

The urge to shift pressed on her flesh and hummed through her bones, despite the uselessness of it. Tundi wasn't a dragon shifter. She couldn't fly, nor was she large enough to stave off any enemies of that size. Not as a lion shifter. But should they bring smaller allies, her claws and teeth would sink deep. The need to act, to protect her crew, to perform her duty to her captain. Her captain, whose duty was to protect the archipelago.

For several centuries, the Crimson Claw was Aeleftheria's eyes and ears outside of the boundary.

Pirates, privateers, sailors, traders, and in more recent decades, ocean eco-preservationists.

She chuffed at that.

A piercing whistle ripped Tundi's attention from the horizon up to the crow's nest. The look out pointed in the distance at something large displacing the sea water far beyond their stern, as their departing dragonesses had, only moments before disappearing ahead.

It was larger than the Crimson Claw.

Fear gripped Tundi's chest tight, on realizing it moved straight for them. The wind was barely enough to propel them forward, there was little chance to evade this threat. Still, she gave the signal for the crew to try. Even a few feet could mean survival over instant destruction.

"Perhaps you may use your magic, after all, Sakunthala."

With a nod, Sakunthala braced herself on the uppermost deck, hands outstretched, eyes closed. Lips moving, forehead creased, she strained to summon the needed breeze to move the ship out of the way.

Calls and the rushing of feet over ancient wood and up through thick rigging filled the air as Tundi watched, calling adjustment orders as needed.

The water distorted its true size. Possibly a whale, though not likely in this region at this time of year. It could be an enemy dragon, whom they were on alert for, though it appeared to be singular.

A scout?

The First Mate spun the wheel as sails billowed, dragging the ship in a new direction.

Tundi forced her breath to fill her chest in a controlled manner, feeding oxygen to her brain, keeping her mind sharp, one eye on her crewmate as she struggled to coax the unpredictable forces to do her bidding.

Steady.

All the crew members not working on the sails prepared the iron cannons. They were old, but they bloody well still worked. The Captain made sure of it. Year after year, they attended tall-ship gatherings and demonstrations, usually firing blanks, but it still ensured the irons beasts were in top working order, despite their age. And the crew were skilled in their use.

Eyes glued to the submerged mass, orders flew from Tundi's lips.

Readied, the Crimson Claw's cannons could damage a dragon; at the very least shred his wings, preventing airborne assaults.

The mass continued toward the ship.

Not a whale.

“Prepare!”

Gun ports snapped open, muzzles ready, flares alight.

Her fingers gripped the helms’ polished wood, fear warring with caution, uncertainty slithering up her nape.

“Warning shot!” She shouted.

A single cannon roared with a billow of smoke, it’s shot crashed into the ocean, crossing the advancing mass’s path, forcing it to slow.

“I wouldn’t fire another.”

Tundi’s head whipped toward the port side. A woman climbed over the rail, naked and dripping with sea water. “Lirikai? Are you all right? Who is out there?” She signaled a crew woman to grab her a towel or robe, concerned that she was being pursued.

“It’s Carson.” Lirikai nodded her thanks as she wrapped herself in the offered covering. “Kane sent us ahead to help Aeleftheria, but the Sea Goddess diverted us to your ship. He’s going to pull you along so you can get the refugees out before the Consortium arrives.”

“Sakunthala!” Tundi shouted for her crewmate to release her magic. Sakunthala relinquished her hold, sagging against the rail.

Relieved, Tundi wasted no time ordering the cannons put away, and the rigging and sails bundled before ropes dropped into the sea.

Astred had told Tundi on the journey to Carson's island before the wedding, that while he was a dragon, he wasn't like the others. He was created by the Sea Goddess, as Lirikai of the Barra'kidai, a barracuda shifter, had been, centuries before him.

So, she—the Sea —had decided to help. Just not with the desired winds to fill their sails. Instead, Carson Perenga would tow them, like an oversized tugboat.

“Where are they?”

“We're not sure which direction they'll attack from or what their numbers are, but we're sure they're coming.”

“If they haven't struck already,” Sakunthala said, looking forward as the Crimson Claw groaned, lurching forward as if it suddenly had jet propulsion in the form of an ageless water dragon.

Crew members still in the rigging secured themselves.

Tundi's heart caught in her throat as one of the younger human crew women misstepped and lost her footing on the deck, rolling toward the rail, until Lirikai caught her with supernatural strength and speed, pulling her to safety.

With a final glare, Tundi ensured everyone else was secure as they sped toward Aeleftheria to evacuate the vulnerable.

We just might have a chance to get them to safety.

Despite her realist nature, Tundi allowed herself that slim glimmer of hope.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Kolina paced the cramped, dark cell to keep her limbs busy as her mind worked. She didn't focus on the feeling of entrapment; instead, she focused on the reasons for her imprisonment.

She'd helped Kai escape.

The Council blamed him for Regina's illness.

The guards had been ordered not to talk to her as they brought food and an empty bucket while clearing away the empty bowl and used bucket.

Launia, Supreme Commander of the Guardians and Kolina's long-time friend, was the only one allowed access to her.

Every time she appeared for a friendly visit, the topic was the same. Kolina never deviated from her story. Her report.

She'd recounted every detail of the events at Perenga's island where Kymri and Jori had united in marriage. She relayed every detail of the political discussions with their allies and where their focus lay.

There was minimal discussion about the traitor who'd met with the Consortium agent who was still at large. The GPSA were focused on the rogue male dragons and locating the Consortium menagerie that Sam Egan had been attached to. Kane was determined to find and apprehend the agent's master, determined to cut off the head of another branch of the ever-evolving Consortium organization.

Aeleftherian politics was Aeleftheria's own business within her border. Their only concern was when it ignited problems outside her territory.

What the queen had to say on such matters while Kolina wasn't around, was up to the queen to recount to the council at her discretion.

Footsteps echoing along the narrow pass heralded her daily visitor.

Kolina was surprised when Launia arrived with a new list of questions.

What are Kymri's intentions once her child is born?

How large is the Katoa Koro army?

How long have you been working to usurp the queen so that Kymri may take her place?

At what point did you know that Elora planned to install her son as King of the Mountain?

How many other clans will follow Kymri and Kai's lead to take control of Aeleftheria Nisi?

Kolina gaped at Launia's impassive face.

The other dragoness gave no hint whether she believed in what this line of questioning said of the council's opinion of Kolina's integrity. Each point a slap in her face. Her heart screamed at the implied accusations.

She swallowed it all down, allowing it to foment in resentment buried deep in her gut. "They finally have what they need." Kolina said, referring to the Council.

Launia lifted a brow as she held Kolina's gaze.

"To turn Aelefttherians against a chance at peace with the mountain males, blinding them to who the real enemy is. Have your guardians rooted out the traitor?"

Launia's lips tightened as her gaze flicked over Kolina's face.

They hadn't.

"They believe you are the traitor."

Kolina snorted. "Impossible. I was on the other side of the world when those events happened."

"Supposedly."

"Surely Marli would have known me and given me up."

"Perhaps she did, and out of loyalty to Kymri, she keeps your secret."

"Do you really believe that of her? I don't think you do. She may love my daughter like a sister, but we both know that her work for our queen and for us has brought her into so many missions which hammered home the need for our sovereignty."

Launia remained silent in the face of Kolina's words.

"Marli Fleetwing would never betray the queen and rightful ruler of our people. Nor would I. No matter how much we might desire peace and unity with the males after so long sundered from one another. We're all tired of this particular war. There is another, deeper, older war, so buried we've forgotten about it biding its time in the permafrost of our convictions, Launia. The Consortium."

Launia crossed her arms.

“How stupid we’ve been for so long. No, not stupid, exhausted. We’ve exhausted ourselves dealing with the surface battle to survive. Never having the resources to investigate below the festering hatred to see where the infection truly lies.”

“If that is as you say, how did they get to Her Majesty? Whose hand brought her illness on? If not your son, or you, then who? Marli Fleetwing? Your niece Zayli Steelscale? Remember Kolina, I know these guardians almost as well as you do. Who is left? Princess Astred and her crew. Do you accuse them?”

Kolina’s heart twisted. There was one that she could see cast a shadowy hand over the queen’s health.

Not out of spite or greed for the throne, but out of love for her nation and duty to obey orders from her superiors.

Zayli.

She would do whatever the council ordered her to do.

Kolina swallowed, mouth dry.

“Launia. We’ve seen pressure to ramp up aggression on the males before. A generation ago.”

A slight jerk of Launia’s head, eyes widening.

“We were both there.” She held Launia’s gaze, no longer so cool and remote.

“No.” Launia croaked, clearing her throat with a shake of her head. “No.”

Kolina waited, her turn to maintain silence as Launia worked through these new implications.

“That was a very long time ago. There’s no proof. No incentive to revive old wounds.”

“Isn’t there?” Kolina growled. “You heard Marli’s report. You read her words—the traitor’s words incriminating herself by that alone.”

“That doesn’t mean—,”

“By Marli’s sworn testimony, she recounted word for word all that she heard in her witness statement. And before that incident, we’ve always trusted and relied on her stalwart ability. Relay exactly what she sees and what she hears, and what she feels.”

Launia finally glanced away. “She didn’t relay her senses in that report.”

“No, she didn’t.” Kolina’s voice was soft in the cramped cell. “I think she was struggling with that one. Who would want to entertain the notion that their elders would betray them like this?”

Launia turned her gaze back to Kolina.

“But you and I both know otherwise, even if she doesn’t.”

Launia straightened at that. “And who is to say that this time, you’re not the one seeking to take control, by example of what your mother did the last time? For all I know, you weren’t looking for Kai at all. You could easily have gone back for the stone yourself.”

“At the same time that I was fighting a Consortium agent on an Aelefttherian beach?”

Launia grunted. Finally, she sighed, rubbing a hand over her tired eyes. “Kolina, we spent an entire generation suppressing what happened. To bury it, let it fall to legend and move on. We can’t dig it all up now. Not when Regina is vulnerable and Astred is missing.”

“Astred isn’t missing. She’s following a vision from Regina. And now is especially the time to rip off the scab of that wound that never truly healed. Did it?”

“A vision? I—”

The unmistakable tenor of the alarm reverberated along the stones of the chamber, even this deep underground.

Launia immediately turned to go.

“Let me out. You can’t afford not to have all warriors fighting.”

Launia’s expression registered regret as she searched Kolina’s face. “I can’t afford to let you out, in case you’re the one leading the enemy to conquer us.”

“You don’t believe that,” Kolina breathed, incredulous. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Launia shook her head. “No, I don’t. But the Council does, and I can’t take the chance that I’m wrong and they’re right.” She turned her back on Kolina, but paused before opening the door. “If the attackers are anyone other than who the Council fears them to be, I will send for you.”

The cell door screeched open and then closed with a clang of finality. Launia disappeared into the darkness, leaving it locked and spelled behind her as the alarm continued to reverberate through the cell.

Kolina's pulse beat erratically through her body, her dragon straining against the need to be at her sovereign's side, to defend her to the death.

L aunia mounted the tower steps two at a time. The dragonesses from the Crimson Claw had delivered their warning and were already back in the air to aid in the defense of the island. Scouts were imperative, as there was no confirmation as to which direction the enemy would attack.

Non-combative or flightless paranormals and human villagers streamed back and forth from their homes. Waiting fishing boats filled the small harbor and every dock and quay surrounding the island, loading what few valuables they cherished amid stacks of supplies. Without wind, escape would be painfully slow. For now, they would at least head away from the main island toward the trailing end of the archipelago, where the attack was less likely to occur. Thick jungle and hidden caves would provide some protection.

She hoped.

In times of war and conflict, the vulnerable were easy targets for the enemy to strike. The defending dragons would be hard pressed to shield both the citadel as well as the people spread out along the shore.

Overhead, guardians swooped out in all directions, the force of the wind from their wings buffeting her human form.

She grit her teeth, longing to go out and join them, but she needed to command things from here.

The Queen's Guard had gathered around Regina's sleeping form, moving her to a lower citadel bunker reserved for the vulnerable when leaving the island wasn't an option. Two shamans had been selected to be sealed in with her, continuing their

work to awaken her, while all others would be on hand to tend the inevitable wounded and dying. The children and frail elders would be taken much further down, into the most protected vaults.

The archivists were already securing the library. Valuable tomes, scrolls and artifacts detailing Aeleftheria's long history were being secured before heavy stone slabs were slid into place, sealing those levels from surface destruction.

Her thoughts tumbled back to Kolina, locked far underground in the traitor's dungeon.

She doesn't belong there.

Her gaze flicked across the citadel to the council tower, where some prepared for evacuation, and others prepared for battle.

Zadora Steelscale had led the accusations against her daughter Kolina and grandson Kai.

Launia's gut soured.

It isn't right. Kolina wouldn't do this.

She could never betray Aeleftheria.

She knew because she'd been there the day Regina had tasked Kolina with removing the stone from Aeleftheria before swearing them all to forcing the events to stay in the past. As of the moment the stone left Aeleftherian soil, every betrayal the Dragon Star had committed upon the crown had been struck from history and remitted to folklore.

Regina had ordered it. Every Aelefttherian living at the time had been ordered to never speak of events except in the capacity of storytelling.

Zadora hadn't deserved it.

Launia saw what toll resisting the star stone had taken on Kolina.

I can't imagine what it did to her, to be the one ordered to carry it away.

Launia watched the skies with keen eyes. The enemy finally knew where they were. Because of the traitor.

Who had cast the blame and sought to destroy the most loyal of Aelefttheria's servants?

Kolina had left Aelefttheria bearing the source of their greatest hero's power, who sulked in whispers of disgrace, withdrawn from the people to the shuttered tower of the Council. Whispers carried away by the wind, truths dispersed over the sea.

Order restored, Aelefttheria moved on. No one that Launia knew ever spoke of the reassignment. No one understood it. The story survived, mostly as that of a tale of glory and heroism. All the best deeds preserved. A model for new generations of Aelefttherians to shape themselves into. Though without a magic rock, to give them superpowers.

When Kolina had returned after that mission, she was deeply changed. She had borne a male child and abandoned him.

Launia recognized the look in her eyes, because she'd done the same. She recognized the steel in her spine she required to stop her from returning to him every day.

For Aeleftheria.

Because the Council declared male younglings too dangerous to exist on the island.

A council lead by Zadora.

Launia had never understood why. Why would Zadora be so protected? A privilege that obviously did not extend to her daughter.

Why?

She squinted into the northern sky.

Her heart stopped, allowing ice to streak from her scalp down to her heels.

“Oh, great Goddess, no,” she whispered. Her gaze dropped to the flurried activity below.

Not enough time.

Atop the guardian tower, she ran toward the ledge, shifting. Her cotton tunic and pants tore apart as she expanded into her dragon form, diving off the ledge. With a mighty breath, she swooped low, roaring.

The tiny people froze, looking up as she whipped past. Before she drew breath for a second signal, she streamed toward the boats, leaving all else behind.

The nearest patrols corrected course, surveying the sky where a lead patrol should have alerted them to the danger.

Should have.

From her vantage point, a single figure streaked across the courtyard toward the prison tower.

Marli.

Good.

Launia ignored her, heart lifting a fraction. She would let Kolina out. Goddess knew they'd need her merciless claws.

Turning her attention back to the roiling cloud of the enemy approaching, Launia determined to ensure the evacuees had enough time to get as far away as possible before all they knew was destroyed.

The vaults would hold.

Aeleftheria could be rebuilt.

Again.

So long as they defeated the invaders.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

Zayli Steelscale ran to her grandmother's suite in the council tower.

"The enemy comes. I have to join the other guardians. Grandmother, you must evacuate, you—what are you doing?" Her gaze swept the room, realizing nothing had been moved. Nothing was out of place. Nothing gathered or packed.

Zadora stood in the center of her room dressed only in traditional cotton garb. Not the council robes that Zayli had only ever seen her wear.

"I am going to join the battle. Those bastards will not defeat me."

Zayli froze, processing the words. "You cannot fight."

"Why in all the hells should I not?" Zadora's voice cracked across the room.

"You... I..." Zayli compressed her lips, seeking the right words. "When is the last time you took dragon form, let alone flew?"

"About the time you were toddling around the nursery, oblivious to life's harsh realities." Zadora approached the stone casement. The north-facing window framed a view of a growing mass. "Were I what I once was, I would have destroyed them all before any Aelefttherian sighted a single one, or ever knew of their existence," she growled.

"What are you talking about? There is no time to board a fishing boat; you'll have to go down into the vaults with the other matrons."

Zadora snorted. “I will not cower. I’m done standing by while this nation goes down the privy. I should never have left Regina on that throne.”

Zayli straightened, studying her grandmother, who’d suddenly lost her mind. “The Council should never have ordered me to give her that tonic you asked me to slip into her drink and food. It was a mistake. We need her more than ever.”

“She’s ill equipped to deal with real battles,” the matron snapped, glancing out the window again. The mass had grown considerably.

“What do you mean? She subdued the last invaders that dared set foot on Aelefttherian soil.”

“Those few feeble-minded idiots were nothing compared to what is coming now. That male dragon your cousin married is sizable enough, and he’d have seen Regina’s tricks and likely figured out a way to avoid succumbing to her. Your cousin surely would have seen to it. She was stupid to trust him. He’ll be bringing every male from that mountain with him to crush our independence.”

Every muscled tightened down Zayli’s neck and back. She looked out the window too.

Then he fooled me, too. They all did.

She’d met him, seen the work that he and his males were doing with Kymri and Elora’s guidance. Goddess, Astred had seen it too and thought it all genuine.

What of Kymri and Elora? Were they turned so thoroughly that they would willingly join in this attack? Or had they been set aside, or worse?

Zayli swallowed, casting another look through the open window. “Grandmother,” she

urged, voice soft and full of regret. “You must join the other matrons. We will handle this. I will protect you.”

Zadora cast Zayli an assessing glance before turning back to the approaching dark mass.

“In a moment of weakness, I let that usurper into my head, so that I would hand over my greatest power.” Zadora sighed. “And look where it’s led us.”

Zayli didn’t know what the old woman was talking about. “Those invaders are here because that Aelefttherian traitor’s dealings with the enemy led them to us. If not for her, they’d have never infiltrated us.”

“That traitor?” Zadora’s face twisted as she rounded on Zayli.

“I still find it hard to believe that Kolina would conspire so deeply with the enemy. But you were right, she had grown soft, as has Kymri.” Grief twisted Zayli’s chest.

She always seemed to have, or be, everything that Zayli was not. Everything just always seemed to land in the palm of her hand. And she just threw Aelefttheria away to go and rule over a mountain full of males. After everything they’d been through... Just tossed it all away. For a male. For power.

That final thought didn’t sit right in Zayli’s mind.

No. Not for power.

Zayli’s eyes flicked to Zadora, who still watched the approaching enemy.

The older woman turned her back on the mass, striding toward the door. “Come granddaughter, I will show you what Aelefttheria is about.”

Kolina heard the footsteps approaching long before the figure appeared before her cell door.

On seeing Marli Fleetwing's face hovering before her between the darkened bars, a smile played at her lips, but the situation was too dire to allow any sense of relief to flood her.

"Everyone is in the air," Marli confirmed, pressing the royal signet to an embedded crystal on the outside of the cell. "Astred left it to me, just in case." She held up the ring as she turned to race back toward the exit.

"She'll want that back," Kolina followed close behind as roars echoed back down the narrow, curved stairwell, followed by the unmistakable sounds of something very large flying very fast directly overhead.

"Of course. Who else is there for me to break out of imprisonment?"

Just as they emerged from the base of the tower, an errant tail smashed through the structure, sending stone blocks crumbling to the ground. Kolina shoved Marli aside and rolled in the opposite direction as several toppled from the upper levels above the door.

Regaining her footing, Kolina's gaze swept the skies over Aeleftheria.

Chaos.

She caught sight of whatever impacted the prison tower as it banked with two, much smaller guardians snapping at its wings.

"What the fuck is that?"

“I don’t know Kolina, I’ve never seen a dragon like it—if it’s even still a dragon. Astred’s crew alerted the island that the Consortium was on their way. As many of the townswomen as could flee did so on the fishing boats. The vaults are sealed, but with fuckers that big bearing down on us, I don’t know if they’ll hold.”

“We need to force it down into the ocean. Do what you can to help any remaining civilians reach safety,” Kolina shouted over another deafening rush of wings overhead, then started running toward the nearest clearing. Shifting as soon as there was enough space, her human flesh pinched as clothing and boots gave way under the pressure of erupting steely scales and expanding claws.

Her powerful wings drove her upwards.

Her suddenly heightened senses were momentarily overwhelmed with the chaos of battle, drawing her attention in every direction, assessing.

This... beast that she’d first seen from the ground was the closest to the citadel and a primary threat. It’s—his scent was wrong. Dragon, but not. He stank of a mixture of shifters, difficult to discern... and rot. Illness.

Ignoring that information, she twisted her body, wings working. She joined the pursuit. The scales covering her body were hard as steel, yet light as paper, adding to her speed. Reaching her target, he swiped at one guardian with a lion-like paw while his great bear-like jaws snapped at the other. He turned in a wide arc as they reached the edge of the island.

Kolina surged forward, jaws open. Using her speed and full body weight, she clamped down hard on his tail, dragging him further off balance, working his own bulk against him to spin him out and down toward the sea.

The guardians got a few slices into his wings, inhibiting his ability to right himself.

Kolina tugged and dragged harder as she clung to him still, adding to the imbalance, twisting to avoid his clawed hindquarters. Iron gray and steel blue flipped as sky and sea exchanged places again and again.

She'd go down into the water with him if she had to, though if she was too slow, he could drown her.

Her gut churned with another revolution, catching sight of a substantial form barreling toward them, but her head spun, their bodies on an uneven rotation. Her focus, as tight as the grip of her jaws, on this one thing.

Bring the deviant male down.

His wings fought to ascend, powerful tail whipped to the side, dragging Kolina toward his massive body. A hindquarter shot out, and solid bone caught her temple. The shock of the impact forced her jaws loose as her head rang and spots filled her vision. A second kick dislodged her with a deafening crack.

Acid filled her gut as her body refused to obey her command to hold on, but it was too late.

She fell.

He righted himself and dove after her, maw widening as he closed the distance.

Kolina sped, back first, toward the ocean, staring up at the terrifying sight, still unable to force her limbs to obey her commands to twist, to fly, to evade.

As she impacted with the surface of the water, a great mass erupted from it, jaws open and claws ready.

Carson.

Her heart fluttered as the two figures collided, creating a great thunderclap before disappearing below the surface that Kolina sank into. A tsunami sent her further away, tumbling through the water as she'd previously tumbled through the sky.

Still, she couldn't move.

The spots impairing her vision multiplied as she sank into the darkness of the ocean, staring up through the lighter layers toward the sky.

The shadow of another dragon drifted into view, hovering over the surface.

She continued her sink into darkness.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

A stred's fingers slid over the stone hidden under the scales on her chest while those of her right hand drummed her knee. Still six hours before they reached the North American east coast, and still more after that to Aeleftheria herself.

Kai's warm hand enveloped hers, calming the staccato of her hand and that of her pulse. His palm tingled against hers, soothing.

He was her sanctuary.

She looked up from their joined hands at him occupying the seat beside her, and Bayn beside him, offering both a wan smile.

"You know, I hate planes."

He leaned close, "I haven't met a flighted dragon that doesn't."

"Apparently Jori Mountainside loves them. The smaller and deathtrappier the better."

"I heard he was late to dragonhood, and doesn't know any better."

She laughed, shaking her head. Too much idle time, trapped, forced to listen to her thoughts, doubts and fears.

She rubbed the hidden amulet again, whispering, "Every time I close my eyes, all I see is the vision of the meteor streaking through the sky, obliterating everything around it." Dropping her head back against the seat. "I don't know why I feel compelled to bring it back, when logically it's likely the worst thing to do."

Kai's finger squeezed Astred's. "At least the seals are safe. No one but the queen can awaken the Mother."

She nodded, dropping her free hand to scrub at a loose thread on the hem of her shirt. "There is that. But nor can anyone awaken my mother."

"May be that is for the best. It keeps her out of this fight."

"And what if she's the key? What if we need her in this fight to win? I'm more than capable. I trained with the others, but I don't have her power."

"Perhaps, but you have a link with her?"

"At one time, yes. Other than that one dream message, not since I was a youngling."

Kai remained quiet as she turned pensive.

The amulet had called to Astred. Time and again she'd dismissed the idea.

I'm not a Steelscale.

But she had bonded with Kai.

A blood exchange, cementing their spiritual magics to one another.

We're part of each other.

The images of the vision came more often, shaking her resolve, seeing nothing else when she closed her eyes.

Destruction and desolation.

With the thing hidden against her heart, her pulse surged, racing and slowing erratically, causing her emotions to swing wildly, pushing her to the brink.

She'd never felt so out of control.

Her throat clenched as her chest tightened. "I just hope our luck hasn't run out, Kai... that we make it in time to stop whatever The Consortium are planning. I should be there—I should have been there from the start, the whole time. I never should have run away."

"It wasn't without purpose, Astred. The vision—"

Her voice hissed between them, "What if it was never anything more than a dream and a hallucination?"

"I was at the Nexus. I saw everything that you saw."

"Shared hallucination. We both drank whatever the witches gave us. Who's to say..." she threw up her hands.

"Don't do this, Red." Kai's gaze searched hers. "This kind of self-doubt doesn't serve you."

"And what about you and me? After this, when—if there is an after."

He drew back a few inches. "What about us? We said we'd figure it out, and we will."

She released his hand, rubbing her palms up and down her thighs. "I'm going crazy here, in this contraption." She turned blurred eyes up to him as the fear and pressure within her expanded again. "I can't lose her. I can't lose them. Not my people, not my

crew.”

He flipped up the armrest from between them, pulling her into his arms.

She let him, curling into his chest, ear to the steady beat of his heart, and closed her eyes to stop any tears from escaping.

No weakness.

She wouldn't fall apart. Not now.

Hopefully not ever.

He kissed the top of her head, stroking her hair and cheek.

Astred pressed her ear so that the sound of his heartbeat filled her consciousness, lulling the raging storm within her.

We're coming, Mamma.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am

No.

It was all Zadora Steelscale could do to comprehend what was spread out before her.

The sky was littered with writhing bodies, roars punctuated by screams, the booms of heavy beasts colliding mid-air.

Over Aelefttherian soil. Inside the boundary. Not beyond it, as was right. One of the massive enemy dragons had knocked Zayli from the sky, sending her crashing down into the rocky archipelago.

She lay prone, too still.

She'd darted ahead of Zadora, taking the heavy strike on her behalf.

Stupid girl.

The enemy male had snuffed at Zadora, dismissing the old dragon as unthreatening, before he turned away to face a clutch of guardians headed straight for him instead.

Zadora descended to check on her granddaughter, who'd served as her wing woman and defender, catching her breath.

Despite the fury of her spirit, it had been centuries since she'd last fought a battle, and it was taking time for her body to remember how to move like a warrior. Her reflexes were slow, the muscles stiff.

At her feet, Zayli had lost her dragon form and lay crumpled on the sand, unmoving except for the nearly imperceptible rise and fall of her chest.

Not dead.

Overhead, Aeleftherian guardians and civilian dragons alike battled in the skies, while some skirmishes destroyed swaths of island jungle along the archipelago.

In the distance, the small cottages that lined the main island's coastline were razed. Jagged piles of broken wood and tumbled stone. No longer homes.

Her chest tightened as her conscience pricked her sense of duty.

It was her duty to ensure the safety of Aeleftheria's citizens. Their queen.

From their enemy.

This wasn't making sense to Zadora.

How could it?

Dragons—yes. Male and female alike, attacking Aeleftheria. Dragon, and not dragon. Abominations, some. Augmented.

Different, like the shapeshifter hidden in the male dragons' mountain.

Paranormals, shifters of other kinds with wings sprouting unnaturally from their backs. Shifters that had no business in the air.

Not the male dragons she expected to come for them from the mountain, finally showing dragonkind there was no compromise. No alliances or partnership. No

peace.

Somewhere deep in the back of her thick skull, her brain registered that these enemies were Consortium soldiers. Her heart pounded in her chest as she took in the magnitude of the conflict facing them.

The next click of the cog brought Sam Egan's face to mind. Zadora had tricked the Consortium spy into coming to Aeleftheria alone from her undercover post at the mountain, bearing the seal.

My fault? Can't be.

She'd strategically taken Regina off the board so that she could guide Aeleftheria through Astred. Then Astred had disappeared, willing or not, with Kolina's son.

My grandson. No. I have no male issue. There will never be male Steelscales.

But she scanned the surrounding sky again.

Not the enemy she had expected, but that didn't mean the males were not also Aeleftherian enemies.

In the distance, more dark figures appeared.

Dear Goddess, no. I will never, ever forgive Kymri or Kolina for bringing this upon us.

She sank to her knees beside Zayli's inert form, brushing the hair from her forehead, seeing her lost daughter in her features.

"Your mother was the best of us. It can't end here."

Standing, she turned her face to the sky and the incoming enemy as she summoned her magic to slide into her beast.

I am still the Dragon Star, no matter the star was taken from me. I was tasked with protecting the crown and the Great Mother.

She wasn't long in the sky before another of the enemy rushed at her from behind. Instinct finally kicked in and she rolled aside, clipping him with her claws.

Righting herself, she turned, surging after him...

Her.

Zadora gained speed, closing the distance enough to realize that this dragon was female.

And not entirely dragon.

The scent was... Wrong.

Sam Egan?

No, not the same.

The opponent faced her, malice in her eyes, her snake-like tongue tasting the air as her slitted eyes blinked at Zadora.

She spared a glance toward other nearby skirmishes. Other beast-like dragons over coming the guardians. In the distance, Kolina fell.

Her heart stopped, attention focused on her surviving daughter, tumbling with a much

larger enemy toward the ocean.

Zadora's opponent's tail jerked forward.

Pain lanced her side where the barbed tail had struck her, forcing her attention to what was in front of her.

Not the mountain males.

The Consortium.

Pain of a different kind twisted through her chest, shattering her heart.

Reality erupted in a great roar from her depths, lashing out at the abomination hovering before her.

Her body took over as thought gave way to blind instinct.

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With a last glance at the overhead chaos, Marli noted with some small relief that the Aeleftherian guardians were not alone in the sky.

The terrible scream coming from the male that Kolina latched onto nearly burst her eardrums as she watched the veteran commander engage the much, much larger male while her Aeleftherian sisters continued to harry him.

Kolina should be with the queen.

Turning her attention to the grounds surrounding the citadel, she ran in search of any stragglers. She rounded the side of the citadel to find a cluster of women hiding in the shadows of the laundry hall's thick walls.

Marli skid to a halt, recognizing an old woman from the village. "What are you doing here? You need to find shelter."

"I couldn't find my granddaughter," she straightened, stepping aside to reveal a small wide-eyed child clinging to her skirts. "We'd been playing hide and seek."

She should have been with the other children, hidden away in the deepest vaults, reinforced with spells and wards. Vaults that were now sealed.

Marli approached, squatting before the precious child. "And you're so good, no one could find you."

The child nodded.

“I’m good at hiding, too. Shall I teach you a new place?”

At the girl’s second nod, she picked up the child and led the women through a warren toward the tunnels.

She led them, slow and careful, toward the beach.

“Where are you leading us?” the old woman asked as they ducked into a cluster of berry bushes.

“Do you know the tunnel entrance east of the bluffs?”

“It’s prone to tidal flooding.” The elder nodded.

“It is, but there’s a hidden chamber that isn’t affected and may be enough to keep you safe.”

They crouched as an enormous figure rocketed over their heads. Several guardians snarled in pursuit.

Zayli, Cindra and another dragon she didn’t recognize, though her scales identified her as being from the Steelscale house.

Zadora?

Who else could it be?

“I will lead the way. Don’t worry about us.”

Marli returned the child to her grandmother’s care as she described the access point of the hidden portion and specific hazardous segments to watch for.

From the top of the bluff, Marli watched over the small group as they picked their way along its perimeter toward the cave mouth, while surveying the battles.

Heart pounding, chest heaving, she watched and assessed, eyes flicking along the coastline and the surrounding landscape, seeking more stragglers.

Another earthshaking roar filled the sky. Her dragon magic rippled through her body in response, nearly triggering Marli's instinct to respond in kind.

Fighting against it, she forced her attention to the task at hand, no matter how much her dragon wanted to join the fight, to tear and destroy.

Find the vulnerable.

In the distance, pieces of a broken fishing boat floated on the wavy surface of the ocean.

She launched into action, instantly taking her dragon form, wings snapping out, ever watchful of threats from overhead.

Hovering over the wreckage, Marli lowered her tail to the five women clinging to anything that was large enough to support them. Two figures lay face down in the water.

The women clung to Marli's tail, weighing her down as her wings worked harder to keep her in the air. Carefully, she extracted the bodies in her foreclaws, struggling toward the nearest island, away from the main compound.

As soon as she was near enough to the ground, the women let go, dropping the last few feet. She settled onto her haunches and gently lay the unresponsive women on the sand close to a shelter of palm trees.

Their companions, one of whom was a shaman, immediately surged forward with efforts to revive them before Marli had time to back away in search of others.

She swallowed hard, fighting back tears of relief as Odson came into view. He flew, one claw curled into his chest carrying something—someone—toward Marli.

Landing on the beach next to her, he straightened his claw toward the women, gently laying the dragoness on the ground for their care.

Oh no.

Marli's heart rend.

Kolina.

One woman bent over her and called up, "She's still breathing."

Odson let go of his dragon magic. Marli did likewise.

They stared at one another for a few heartbeats, catching their breath.

"Astred and Kai are coming, but they were in Asia."

Marli swallowed, blurry gaze turning to Kolina's inert form. "I should have left her in the dungeon."

"Maybe. But she helped bring down a big motherfucker before he could do any more damage to the guardians keeping him away from the citadel. Carson got his teeth into him and dragged him down into the ocean. The guardians might not have lasted much longer against him if she hadn't intervened." He rubbed a hand over his face. "I couldn't get to her fast enough to provide support before he knocked her out."

“Zadora Steelscale—”

“She’s out there fighting, alongside Zayli.”

“We need everyone up there.”

Marli nodded, swallowing her grief, eyes drawn back to the skies, eager to get back into action. “Kolina’s tough. She survived the last hard battle. She’ll come through for us again.” Her chest heaved as she swept an arm skyward. “What are we facing?”

“Honestly, I don’t know, other than some kind of fucked up Consortium army. Some of them were rogue males from the mountain, but they’re nearly unrecognizable now. When we flew in, there were a couple of ships sailing toward the boundary.”

They ducked as something went screaming by, a large male homing in like a 747 at full speed.

“Jori,” Marli’s eyes followed as he swooped up, then sharply barrel-rolled down into an enemy, driving him down into the ocean, jaws mercilessly clamped on his throat. Her heart lurched as Stenlen and Goliath dove in after him.

“Kane’s team hit the menagerie. We don’t know what they had in it, just that it was nearly empty when they got there. Egan’s sister said they left with a large contingent and that they had the seal. They were arguing over which blood representative was going to martyr themselves as they swept through the compound, killing anyone they deemed too weak to be useful to them.”

“Blood representative? To trigger the seal? But why? They know they failed to get Jori’s seal. That doesn’t make sense.”

‘Total destruction.’ Marli’s dragon whispered, causing her heart to stutter. ‘What they

can't control, they will destroy.'

"Nothing about these power-hungry fuckers makes any sense, Marli. But there are more of them than us. Jori couldn't leave the mountain undefended."

"Of course not." She rubbed her eyes, turning back to the women still working to revive the unconscious. She didn't allow herself to judge whether the cause was lost or not.

They weren't giving up.

Neither will I.

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Kai had never seen anything like what filled the sky before him. Not in real life. It was something cut from an ancient tapestry or mural. An extended cut of a movie with sweeping vistas. A brutal mix of beauty and savagery.

Bayn streamed forward in his glittering crystalline cloud form, while Kai kept pace with Astred, their wings working endlessly.

None of them had slept since... he wasn't sure. There was no time to give into the fatigue, paired though it was with travel and stress.

A red speck appeared on the horizon, a much larger figure above it. The Crimson Claw. Beside him, Astred growled, suddenly drawing ahead, angling toward the threat headed straight for her crew.

Not having spent as much time in his dragon form, Kai lacked the dexterity he should have, and he trailed behind.

Bayn's particles sparked a split second before he streamed forward and out of sight. He materialized seconds later between the ship and the threat. Kai's heart pounded as they collided, his wings working harder. Bayn managed to pull the attacker down into the water, but the resulting percussive wave sent the ship rolling forward.

The overloaded ship.

Closer now, he could see the deck's surface was loaded with far too many people. The crew scampered up and down the rigging, trying to control the ship's roll as it tilted dangerously to the side. Screams drew him forward, faster and faster.

The dragons exploded out of the water, grappling for the sky and each other, compounding the waves already crashing toward the ship.

Tiny figures tumbled overboard, screams swallowed by the ocean.

Kai growled, drawing Astred's attention as he aimed downward.

On seeing that he had broken away to help her crew and people, she turned toward Bayn and the enemy dragon threatening her ship, claws extended.

Seconds later, it was the attacker that screamed in pain and fear as she crashed into him, ripping and tearing flesh and scales before he kicked her off.

As soon as the ship regained balance, the crew scrambled to get a rescue boat down to the water.

Kai bought the crew time, collecting the fallen before the sea could claim them, though he couldn't be sure he'd found them all.

Monitoring the adjacent battle, it was clear the attacker was intent on destroying the ship. Any chance he got to evade, he made another attempt to dash toward the vulnerable vessel. He simply would not break away. Bayn did what he could to block and contain, acting as a shield for both the ship and for Astred when the much larger enemy kicked her away.

They're targeting civilians.

Kai called out, drawing Bayn's attention, as he flew up to join the fight. He jerked his head, indicating that Bayn protect the ship as the crew completed their recovery work.

Exchanging positions, Kai drew on his shadow magic and arced around the enemy, throwing a cloud of blackness into his face, blinding him.

Astred struck, claws gouging deep across the dragon's softer underbelly. Blood sprayed through the air.

The enemy lashed out blindly as he twisted away, diving.

Astred darted in again, but the attacker both kicked and lunged, jaws latching, trapping her.

It happened so fast, she couldn't react in time.

With Astred trapped in his jaws, the attacker surged forward, intending to ram her down into the ship.

Banking, Kai descended, claws out to grasp the attacker's wings. As he connected, he let the shadow magic loose, drawing all three of them into an adjacent world where the Crimson Claw was a haze, visible as though through thick gray ice.

Using his body weight, Kai flipped them aside, doing all he could to disorient the attacker. Still, the bastard wouldn't let go of Astred. Her eyes closed as her body lost its tension.

No!

With a snarl, Kai clamped his jaws on the male's exposed neck and jerked as hard as he could. The crack of bone shuddered through him, and the male's grip released Astred.

Kai let go of the dead weight, following her as she began to free-fall.

He caught her with a claw, drawing her into him, wrapping his limbs and wings around her as they tumbled through the sky, his shadow magic still swirling around them until they plunged into the ocean. He took the full force of the impact, first with the shadow buffer, then with his body, cushioning Astred's smaller one.

Grappling with consciousness, he unfurled himself, struggling for the surface before her lungs filled with seawater. Her eyes opened on the ascent. She pushed away, clawing her way upward on her own.

Breaking the surface, she shifted into her human form, searching the sky, assessing the ship. Kai did likewise.

"Bayn is protecting the crew. The attacker is dead." Kai gasped for breath.

Astred's eyes were wide. "I—I couldn't stop that fucker from going after the ship. He was trying to kill them, Kai. In all the years we've fought with the males, they've never targeted our people like that."

This was a different kind of war.

Bayn called out, growling, eyes turned toward Aeleftheria.

In the distance, the sky continued to churn, with dragons fighting over the archipelago.

"Come on. Bayn will ensure the ship's safety before he follows," Kai swam away from Astred before resuming his dragon form.

He followed her through the water, building up enough speed to push up into the air to regain flight and altitude. The sensation of the dragon's neck cracking under the power of Kai's jaws lingered, churned his gut. He never in his life had imagined he

would ever have to kill another. Heart heavy, he now knew he could. Glancing at Astred's dragon form, his heart pounded, knowing that if he hadn't, she'd be dead.

He turned his attention to the chaos ahead.

So be it.

This is everyone's fight.

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The rush of wind and Astred's pounding heart filled her ears as they flew toward the battle raging over Aeleftheria.

What was left of her. Everything they'd built was gone. The Citadel and her towers were nothing but crumbled stone.

On the distant horizon, several ships approached, smaller winged figures launching to join the enemy ranks. Not dragons. Other.

She banked to intercept a few who were already engaged, threatening to overwhelm an Aeleftherian guardian and an unknown female defender, whose scent reminded her of one of the refugee camp dragonesses.

With no mercy left in her, she came in hard, prepared to shred and break, and rend limbs. Regardless of the GPSA's policy to subdue and contain, this was clearly a fight to the death.

Her throat thickened.

Odson had brought everyone with him that he could.

She wouldn't send their corpses back.

Unseen by their attacker, she angled the strike to the back of the enemy's neck. The snap of bone, the spray of blood. The enemy tumbled into the ocean. Eyes wide, the guardian and the refugee looked to Astred, chests heaving. They were exhausted, struggling to remain airborne.

Below them, those that didn't make it dotted the ocean, Aeleftherian guardians, allies, and enemy corpses dragged together by ocean currents.

Too late.

Too. Fucking. Late!

She roared her fury.

A dragoness with metallic scales soared past Astred's line of sight.

Not Kolina or Zayli.

Older. Scarred. Bleeding.

Zadora.

Astred dimly noted that she'd never seen any dragon so battle scarred as this one.

Dragon Star. Aeleftheria's greatest warrior.

And her greatest traitor.

The fury returned. Astred went after her, knocking her from her balance, sending her crashing to the island she seemed intent on.

Astred skidded to a halt beside her, allowing her momentum to lend force as she curled her claws into a fist, connecting with Zadora's snout with a scream fueled by betrayal and hatred.

The old dragon hesitated, seeing that it was Astred who attacked her.

She didn't evade or block the second strike, but collapsed and shrank into her human form at Astred's feet.

It was everything Astred could do to resist the urge to crush the old woman, prone in her submission.

Kai landed next to her, followed by several others.

Releasing her dragon, Astred screamed into Zadora's face, fist pulled back, ready for a third strike, "You did this! You destroyed us!"

Zadora glanced at the tree line behind her, inching away from Astred toward a figure curled in the shadows.

Zayli. Unconscious, bruised, bones at unnatural angles.

"Where is Kolina?"

Odson answered, nodding toward Zayli's inert form, "She's out of the battle too, alive but in bad condition. A few survivors are looking after her on one of the smaller islands further out."

Astred sobbed. "We need her. She's the only one that can do this. The only one I can trust." She turned on Zadora again. "You ordered Zayli to poison my mother."

"I did, your highness. Zayli is innocent of my plan. She believed she acted on Council orders, but they were mine alone."

"That is still treason," Astred snarled.

Odson stepped up to the two Aelefttherians. "Astred, she's been fighting as hard as the

rest of us. Leave this till later. We need to get back into the battle.”

Astred advanced on Zadora, who remained uncharacteristically on her knees.

She’d never bowed her head to anyone, let alone this level of submission.

“I need to know how to activate the stone.”

Zadora searched Astred’s face. “The Star Stone?” Her face lit up at Astred’s nod, her voice breathless. “Give it to me. I can end this.”

Astred stepped back. “It was taken from you for a reason, Zadora. No. Kolina is the only guardian fit to touch it. She didn’t succumb to its power when she transported it to safekeeping.” She drew a deep breath. “I’ll use it myself. Tell me what I need to know.”

“You can’t. You need the star blood in your veins.”

Astred glanced at Kai. “Which I now have, though somewhat diluted. I… hear it.”

Kai’s features registered shock at this admission as he searched her face.

Astred held her focus on the matron.

Zadora glanced between Astred and Kai, her expression crumpling. “Oh, no. No, Astred, no. You’ll lose the link to the Dragon Mother. You cannot bond with this abomination.” She hissed at Kai. “Kolina told me when you were born that are not purely dragon or purely tiger, but that you are both. Like those creatures out there laying waste to our home. She should have heeded my command to destroy you.”

Hatred burned through Astred’s body, so that her hand snapped out, slapping Zadora

hard across the mouth.

“Kai is my bond mate. My chosen life partner. You disgust me by speaking to anyone with such vile words, let alone a child of your own bloodline.” Astred drew a breath, suppressing the urge to strike Zadora again. Finding some measure of calm, she dropped her voice, “Release my mother from the spell you poisoned her with and all will be well, should we survive this mess you created.”

Zadora straightened from the shock of being struck. “But you’re the last of the Arakkil. The Oracle needs pure royal blood to maintain the connection. If you taint yourself, the Mother will reject you and we’ll all be lost.”

“Perhaps. But that will be up to the Mother, won’t it? Besides, if the current queen recovers, she might still produce another pure heir. Now tell me what I need to know.”

“No.”

“Astred, we don’t have time for this. They’re coming with the seal,” Odson growled, eyes to the sky. “We’ll find another way.”

“No, we don’t have time for this,” Astred advanced on Zadora again. “The vision was clear. The streaking star stone obliterated everything.”

“Vision?” Zadora gaped at Astred.

Seeing another of their own in trouble, Odson took off at a run, shifted and dove into the fight. The others followed to join the fight, leaving only Kai behind with Astred.

“Tell me how to activate it, Zadora.”

The older woman paled. “You would have asked Kolina to sacrifice herself?”

“No. I would have asked Kolina to lend her strength to help us defeat the enemy. But now that I’m here, I see that the situation is too dire, and far too late for that.”

“You’re too important to take that on, Astred. The survivors will need you,” Kai murmured to Astred. “Let me do it. I can use the shadow magic to protect myself from the stone’s influence.”

“As long as my mother still breathes, the people will look to her. This is my task. I was never cut out to be an oracle. But I will defend her with my life.”

“The stone will not do what you ask without absolute submission to it. No protection,” Zadora said to Kai. She turned her stare to Astred. “You have to give yourself to it, wholly and completely. Heart and soul.” Her gaze slid back to Kai. “Seems you’ve already given both to another, if, as you say, you’re bonded. The only way to break that kind of bond is through death.”

Kai would have to die for Astred to commit to the mission.

Or, Astred would have to die for Kai to commit to the mission.

Either way, Kai’s life was the price.

Astred’s heart pounded. Princess and council matron—no, Aeleftherian legend—stared at one another.

A flicker of understanding reached Astred.

She knows the pain of that kind of death.

Is that what made her this way? The loss of her bonded mate?

It was hard to imagine, and Astred refused to allow the thought to soften her as she held this traitor's gaze.

“Why?”

Zadora's brow rose, though she understood the question. “Because I should have been the one to guide Aeleftheria and protect the Dragon Mother all this time. It was my destiny.”

“You played straight into the Consortium's hands with your underhanded guidance.”

Zadora stiffened but accepted this. “I did.”

Screams continued around them.

“You hear the stone's call, therefore you understand what it demands. As I do. Give it to me, your Highness.”

“You cannot be trusted.”

“I was the legendary Dragon Star. Let me be her, one last time. For the sake of Aeleftheria and the Dragon Mother.” She searched Astred's face. “Before the seal arrives and destroys us all, on their terms. Because have no doubt, after seeing their tactics here, they will weaponize it and collect what, and who, remains after the fallout.”

Astred had already come to that conclusion.

“Let me ignite the sky, on our terms.”

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Z adora's heart slammed against her breastbone as she held the Heir's unflinching gaze.

The Star Stone.

Every cell in her body tensed with anticipation.

I never thought I'd hear its song again, feel its power.

The Princess studied her for a long moment as the battle continued to ravage Aeleftheria.

"Release my mother from your spell."

Zadora nodded, "She's safer as she is for now. If I die, you won't have to worry about the spell."

Astred's scowl increased, but she seemed to accept this. "How long do we have to prepare?"

"Not long. I was present when the seal spell was cast. The trigger boundary lay just beyond the archipelago tip. Ironically enough, where Kymri's fate crash-landed on our soil and turned our world inside out."

"I know it."

The little plane that Jori Mountainside had flown to find myths and legends still lay

wingless and belly up.

“This,” Astred waved her hand toward the sky, “is not Jori’s doing. If it weren’t for his arrival, we’d be alone in this fight you brought upon us.”

“Perhaps,” Zadora said, uncommitted to admission. “Perhaps not. But we’ll never know.”

Astred shook her head.

“Whoever cannot flee beyond that point should seek sanctuary underground. The Citadel and village entrances are inaccessible. You’ll have to seek the beachside and jungle access points.” Zadora turned her gaze out to sea and swept the sky. “There isn’t much time.” Zadora’s eyes dropped to the scaled patch of Astred’s chest, the most likely location the stone was hidden. “Give me the star, Astred, lead the others to safety. I will keep the enemy at bay for as long as I can.”

She ignored Kai’s tense step forward, hands curled at his sides, darkening as though he drew nearby shadows into them.

Astred lifted her hand to her chest as the scales retracted into her flesh, turning the amulet over into her palm amid a thin layer of swirling shadows.

Zadora’s pulse tripped, her hands reaching for it as it sang to her, muffled and distorted by the dark buffer, but still audible. Its trill called to her, lifting her as nothing else ever had.

At Astred’s nod to Kai, he dismissed the shadow protecting them from the star’s song.

Zadora closed her eyes against the sudden rush of tears, reveling in the melody that

burrowed into her being. She lifted her cupped hands to Astred, waiting.

The Princess placed the amulet, warm and light, into her waiting hands.

On contact, the stone's song rang through Zadora, amplifying everything that she was. Her body, soul and potential were bound to this gleaming chunk of star steel. Her namesake.

She opened her eyes, unable to believe she truly held her beloved star again. Her thumbs swept over its polished face and looped setting.

The tension in Kai's body told her that he heard the call, too.

And he'd resisted it. Impressive. Perhaps he's much like Kolina, after all.

She shunted away any sense of regret before it could form.

Wasting no more time, she pressed it against her own chest so that her scales would slide through the loops, holding it in place. With the amulet fully pressed against her breastbone, power surged through her, the surge sweeter than any other rush in this life. Not even the bliss of love making could compare to the connection she had with this little star that lived through her. It had consumed her long ago, formed her character, and altered her nature.

It made her the Dragon Star. She would be again, if only for a short while.

She looked at Kolina's male offspring. "Your mother loved you." She ignored the subtle tightening of his features, the clench of his jaw. "I don't know if you held any affection for her in return. I don't care. But if you have affection for our heir, you will ensure her safety at all costs. The survival of our people depends on her. She will be a formidable queen and fierce protector of the Great Mother."

Kai nodded, not offering any words, but his eyes held a warning.

If Zadora betrayed Astred...

He'd have a hell of a time prying the stone from my chest. But he would try. For her.

She turned to Astred, bowing her head. "Your Highness. Please ensure Zayli's safety, daughter of my lost daughter. She is loyal to Aeleftheria. Never doubt that."

Zadora met Astred's hard eyes and compressed lips.

"I will move my cousin to safety," Kai said, finally breaking his silence.

Zadora nodded.

It would do.

They backed away from one another.

Zadora ran, shifted and took flight, glancing back only once to see the male hybrid keeping his promise. He gently scooped Zayli into his large dragon claw, following Astred into the air.

Child of my living daughter. Grandson.

Zadora's wings beat hard and fast.

Behind her, Astred sounded the call for retreat, followed by the call to seek deep cover.

Zadora ignored the growl as the enemy combatants continued their savagery.

‘You did this! You destroyed us!’ Princess Astred Arakkil’s furious words slammed into her conscience. Heir to the throne, future oracle to the Great Mother. ‘You played straight into the Consortium’s hands with your underhanded guidance.’

I did.

Astred’s calls continued, growing fainter with distance.

The need to atone, to protect, to ensure Aeleftheria’s survival filled Zadora, coming into alignment with the stone’s power. It had never corrupted her. It had simply magnified all that she already was. The loss of her link to the Great Mother, her destiny to rule Aeleftheria broken, had altered her focus.

She’d tossed the bones of fate a few too many times and finally lost.

The masted ships, carrying enemy reinforcements, deadly non dragons to overrun and take control of the land for the Consortium, were close. Too close.

Which would hold the third seal?

If you can hear anything of my prayers, Great Mother, please bless my sacrifice.

Timing.

She swooped in, assessing, narrowly dodging an ejected harpoon aimed for her heart, while a fire ball spell struck her flank from another ship. If it weren’t for the boost of the stone, the spell might have caused more damage than it did.

She twisted, rising into the atmosphere.

In the distance, an iron ship waited.

It wouldn't risk losing power or navigation by approaching the magnetic barrier protecting Aeleftherian territory.

That one. That is the one that holds the head of this army.

She grunted as another well aimed spell struck her side.

Higher.

Then, she tucked her wings, limbs held tight and arced into a downward trajectory, twisting her body, gaining speed and force.

Zadora angled herself, drew a deep breath, and closed her eyes. Headfirst, she pierced the deck next to the middle mast, shattering the wooden ship, sending it careening into the next as she exploded through a bottom deck.

Pain streaked through her from the impact, jagged beams slicing under her scales as she went.

The stone's power dulled the pain even as her blood clouded the ocean.

Swooping toward the ocean's surface, she regained flight.

Her chest constricted, noting that she'd been followed.

Several Aeleftherian guardians, a couple of males, and some other unknown fighters set upon the ships, breaking masts, destroying harpoon launchers, and crushing spell casters stationed on the decks.

Zadora turned her attention to the ship waiting well away from the battle.

This one.

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Kai caught the silver glimmer in his grandmother's eyes as she accepted his promise before running off.

He'd heard enough of the Dragon Star tales to know that if this old woman was that legend, then there was a slim chance of failure.

"Collect any survivors you find and take them to the cave on the far side of the main island."

At his nod, she turned and flew into action.

Shifting, he picked up his wounded cousin and took off after Astred, who was sounding orders through alternating tones in her roar. Every Aelefttherian knew the signals and what they meant.

The others would follow their lead, or so he hoped.

Any Aelefttherians not engaged in fighting turned their attention to the seas and islands, flying low in search of anyone they could find.

Kai flew low over the next few islands, searching. Below, a cluster of women waved their arms, signaling him to descend.

He crouched so that the women could climb enough to pull their wounded up with them.

Kolina lay among them. He picked her up with his other foreclaw.

Her head lolled, eyes cracking open, voice weak. “Kai? My boy... you should not be here.” Her eyes closed again. Upon each of his paws, heat emanated from Kolina and Zayli’s bodies as their magic worked to heal themselves.

Once the non-dragons were secured, he carefully took off, headed for the island Astred had directed him to.

There were others arriving. Odson was already there in human form, carrying wounded into the cave.

“Tell Jori to get his ass back to Kymri’s side,” Odson shouted up to Kai.

Kai lay Zayli and Kolina as close to the entrance as possible to lessen Odson’s work before he left to find more as he went in search of Jori.

He found him in a cluster of writhing dragons fighting to destroy each other, as they bought time for the Aelefttherians to reach their vulnerable and get them to safety.

They were running out of time.

Snarling, Kai soared in, gathering his shadow power into his foreclaws, creating dark barriers to blind the enemy, while Jori and his males incapacitated them, taking them out of the fight. He roared, with a jerk of his head, indicating they fly away from Aelefttheria. They went, but not before making the rounds to draw the others away, leading the attackers in pursuit.

He went in search of Astred. From the north, a glint caught his eye: Metallic scales shimmered under the ruthless tropical sun as Zadora fought a dragon much larger than herself, moving toward the archipelago.

The sound of Astred’s furious screams drew his attention to her battle, and he turned

to help.

Her claws ripped out the throat of one as she spun her tail through the air, smashing the other's skull. Both fell into the ocean.

His gaze darted back to the approaching threat of Zadora and her Star Stone.

There was no time to get back to the cave. He rushed for Astred, driving her down to the nearest island, his entire body enveloping hers as he launched his shadow magic. They crashed into the sand next to an overturned plane, and the world around them turned grey as he forced Astred to tuck her wings and tail inside the barrier he extended, just enough to ensure she was fully covered. He didn't know if it would work, but he had to try.

The song of the star stone filled his head and vibrated through his body, calling to him as Zadora approached overhead.

Its power both challenged his shadow barrier and boosted his dragon magic, which he funneled back into the shield, praying it was enough. That he was strong enough to protect Astred from whatever came.

It didn't take long. The screams and roars deafened him as Zadora fought multiple enemies, nearly upon them. Kai fought against the urge to go to her aid, giving himself instead to the desire to preserve Astred's life, no matter what the cost was.

She was all.

He could not let her die.

Eyes closed, he tucked his head and tail under the protection of his wings, ignoring Astred's attempts to shove him off. She intended to go down fighting. If she survived

this, she'd probably hate him forever, but if she didn't, then it didn't matter.

Nothing mattered more than keeping her alive.

He gripped her tighter as the stone's magic vibrated harder, the closer it came. The screams of battle growing louder, until the sudden pop of silence. Astred stopped struggling. After several breaths, she rested her head against his.

Then, the rush of an inferno slamming into the shadow barrier swirled around them. Jaws clenched, he drew on every ounce of magic he had to reinforce the pocket of the netherworld he had built around Astred's body, as he held the liminal space between the shadow world and the earthly one.

The only sounds were the rushing of his blood and their breaths—both his and Astred's—and the crackling of his scales against the onslaught of the blast assaulting his magic and body.

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Once the rushing stopped, the sounds of wind and waves returned, and something bounced off Kai's dorsal scales with a hard clang and a thud as it hit the sand.

Astred twisted her head slightly to look up at him.

Still, he didn't move as they listened.

He wasn't sure that he could move, every muscle was locked in place. Every inch of his back ached, his wings more so.

Astred's magic fizzled against his chest as she released her dragon form.

Her small hands were soft against the rough skin of his dragon's cheek.

"Kai."

He opened his eye into her stricken face as she grappled with what had just happened.

"Let me out, Kai. I have to see... I have to see what's left."

He eased the hold on the shadow magic, allowing light to stream in through the spaces between his domed wings and haunches.

Everything ached as he struggled upright. He felt baked, like the one time he'd fallen asleep by the spring without a shade, only a hundred times worse.

Tilting his head to look over his back, his scales sizzled and gleamed like striated

titanium dunked in a scalding ion bath. His wings were blistered where the membrane was thinnest.

“Oh, Kai,” Astred’s hands followed his body, wanting to soothe the damage, but careful not to touch him, lest it cause him more pain.

He doubted he’d be able to fly like this, and swimming in ocean salt water wasn’t any more appealing.

Finally, both turned to look at their surroundings.

All that remained of the lush palm trees were charred sticks, resembling clusters of spent matches.

The sky was empty. No dragons or creatures of other kinds, no roaring and slashing. There wasn’t even a wisp of smoke. Nothing floated in the ocean. No broken boats, no broken bodies.

Finally, Kai released his dragon magic, allowing himself to collapse to his hands and knees with a strangled groan. As he did, a stream of glittering mist appeared overhead and descended to Kai.

The mist gave way to Bayn, his features drawn and pale.

“How is it up there?” Kai asked him between breaths.

Bayn swallowed, looking from Kai to Astred. “Bad. It’s really bad.” His throat worked as he settled his gaze on Astred. “The Crimson Claw is sailing back here to... uhm... to collect whoever is left.” His dark gaze swept the horizon.

“My mother. I have to see if she’s alive. Bayn, can you carry Kai?” At his nod,

Astred resumed her dragon form and took off.

“What the fuck happened, Kai?” Bayn helped him to his feet.

“Dragon Star. I think she—it happened right above us.” Kai rubbed a weary hand over his face.

Bayn shook his head, incredulous as he looked around what was left, approaching the crumpled hull of the overturned plane. Jori Mountainside’s plane.

“I was on my way back when I saw the light. It stretched over this whole area from just a few miles out there,” He gestured westward, arcing skyward to the east, “I’ve never seen anything like it. It all went white... and then nothing.” He bent, brushing sand away from something laying a few feet away from where Kai and Astred had huddled against the blast. Picking up the object, he shook off the remainder of the sand, light catching along its face.

He turned, holding it up for Kai to see.

A seal.

The missing seal.

“You’d better hold on to this,” Bayn held it out to Kai.

Kai threw up his hands, backing away, which brought a sharp pain arching through his shoulders. “I don’t fucking want it. You keep it.”

“Give it to Astred. And come here so I can do something about those burns. You look like you’ve been fucking barbequed.”

“You’re not wrong.” Kai reluctantly accepted the disc so that Bayn could draw his mist magic to soothe the burns.

“Like that time you sun baked yourself a little too long by the waterfall.”

“Yup, just like.” Kai grit his teeth against the sensation of searing cold on his burnt flesh. It took some time before the pain eased enough that Kai could stand the remaining dull ache. “Come on, we should go. I don’t want Astred facing all that alone. Especially if...”

If the queen didn’t make it.

Bayn nodded. “Come on.” He slid an arm around Kai’s waist, prompting Kai to do likewise. “Don’t let go this time.”

“Don’t worry, I learned my lesson the last time. Having my particles rip apart and snap back together is extremely unpleasant.”

“Good.” Bayn’s magic rose around them, spiraling their masses into the ether, dragging Kai through the sky with him after Astred.

Every island they flew over was as barren as the one they’d left, the island at the very bottom of the archipelago.

The main island was nothing but charred rubble.

Odson, Jori, and his men—massive dragons each—clawed at the rubble to reach the sealed vaults below. Figures clustered around, streaming out of underground caverns, dazed as they looked at their destroyed homes.

Some of Kai’s worries eased. If Odson was here, it was likely that Kolina was safe.

Astred landed as close to the destroyed citadel as she could without impeding the work of the larger dragons, who could work faster. An old woman carrying a canvas bundle approached Astred, offering her clothing from the sack, and a few words of prayer to the Dragon Mother.

Thanking her, Astred pulled the cotton fabric on, her gaze sweeping the survivors.

“Princess?” Astred turned back to the old woman. “I saw it all in a dream. You can ask Marli Fleetwing. She’ll tell you I told her so. I saw all of this. But I dreamed that we built anew. Stronger.”

Astred touched the old woman’s shoulder. “We will. Have you seen her? Marli?”

“Aye, she’s helping over at the children’s vault, digging away rubble with the others.

Kai slid an arm around Astred’s shoulders.

She didn’t turn to him. She wouldn’t. Not yet. Not until it was all done and her mother was found. Alive, or not.

The old woman offered him a tunic and trousers as well. “They won’t fit right, but, well, it’s something.” He thanked her for her kindness.

Kai held the recovered seal out to Astred. “Bayn found this in the sand near where we were.”

She hesitated, turning wide eyes on him before slowly reaching for it as though it might dissipate before she could grasp it. “No one has seen this in centuries.”

The dragons stopped digging.

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Astred gripped the seal, staring dumbfounded at Kai.

Nearby, Odson and the others stopped digging.

Breath held, Astred rushed forward, pressing the seal to her chest, hiding it with her scales as she'd done with its sister just days before. She dropped down onto the cleared slab that covered the vault her mother would have been removed to before the attack reached the citadel. Her hands brushed over the seams, seeking the lock.

"Marli? Someone bring Marli!" She twisted around, searching the faces of the onlookers.

"I'm here, Astred," she appeared at the top of the displaced rubble. "Here," she tossed down the heavy gold ring Astred had given her before she took off with Kai.

Astred pressed the ring to the spelled lock, willing it to still work despite the blast that had razed everything in sight. After an eternal moment, the tumblers clanged, and the slab dropped. She leaped off as it slowly slid aside. Heart pounding, she dropped into the dark hole as it was barely open enough. Kai was close behind.

"Astred," Odson called after her with a worry filled voice.

She raced forward in the darkness, hands skimming the stone walls, stumbling her way down to the thick oak door. Seeking with her palms and fingertips, she found the next lock. With one hand, she felt for the holes while she shifted the other into a claw. Gasping, fumbling, she worked in the dark to jam her claws into the finger holes.

Finally, after several tries, the locks pricked the flesh, drawing her blood into the mechanism. More tumblers thunked. Withdrawing her hand, she stepped back. The door slid into the wall, revealing a brazier-lit room.

The drawn faces of the two shamans tending to Regina, gripping sharp daggers in their fists, crumpled with relief at seeing that Astred was the one to open the door. She ignored them both, eyes on her mother's pale face, staring back at her.

Astred launched into her mother's arms as though she were a child.

Regina gripped Astred tight, kissing her forehead, whispering, "Everything's changed."

Astred leaned back, searching her mother's haunted face. "It has."

Regina's eyes slowly closed as she inhaled and nodded, stroking Astred's cheeks. "We will gather the survivors and honor the fallen." She released Astred so that she could stand.

"You won't be alone," Odson said from the threshold. He darted forward when Regina wavered on her feet, catching her before she stumbled.

"We never were." Her voice was a whisper as she turned her face to his. Ignoring the shamans, he drew her up into his arms to carry her out. They immediately followed, leaving Astred and Kai alone in the chamber.

He turned to allow her to precede him back to the surface.

She stopped before him, looking into his eyes. "Your arms and back?"

"Mending, thanks to Bayn."

She nodded, her gaze sweeping the bronzed planes of his face. The flickering light from the braziers cast his features in golden light and shadow.

She linked her hand with his, drawing it up between them, inspecting the strong lines of muscle and bone. “These magical hands...” She smiled up at him. “Seems there were a few things you didn’t share with me, either.”

“A few,” he allowed. “Discussions for later, when you visit me—after we clean up here, of course. I expect we’ll be busy for quite some time—”

Astred pressed her lips to his, unable to hold back any longer. Her hands slid up to cradle his precious face, as emotion threatened to cut off her words. She swallowed the growing knot in her throat, breathing against his warm lips. “I love you, Kai.”

He’d been at her side, trusting her lead every step of the way. He’d handed her incredible power. He’d fought to protect her with magic and spirit, flesh and bone and scale, to keep her intact and unscathed.

He smiled against her lips. “I know you do.”

Kai kissed her back, letting her know just how much he knew she loved him.

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From his penthouse suite, Kai swirled the whiskey in his glass as the sun descended toward the distant islands dividing the bay from the ocean. The crowded bay resembled an ambling porcupine's back, as ships swayed at anchor.

One stood out, seemingly afire under the brilliant sunset.

The Crimson Claw.

Even at this distance, Kai's keen dragon eyes watched the tiny crew women at work, repairing the rigging and sails. The vessels' sides needed patching, while an entire mast had been amputated.

He had as many days with Astred as the Crimson Claw needed for restoration before they set sail for another charity event.

"She's seen some spectacular battles in her day, but none like the one we just survived." Astred's low voice tugged Kai's attention away from the dazzling scene beyond the floor to ceiling windows. She'd just finished a video call with Kane, exchanging updates.

Red hair piled atop her head, fresh from a shower and wrapped in a thick bathrobe, Astred approached. A cloud of flowers and fruit clung to her moist body. Damp tendrils curled along her neck, drawing Kai's attention to the markings, reminding him of their bond.

He reached out, fingertips sliding along the thick fabric, drawing her closer. "So, what happens now, Red?" His gaze swept the red locks, hands following the path to

open the clip imprisoning them. Free, he reveled in their silkiness as tendrils tumbled over his hands, inviting them deeper into the mass.

“Carson is still working through everything they found aboard the vessel they captured. Kane’s team has used it to hit a number of other Consortium compounds.”

“This is good news.”

“Mhmm. She recommends that we take the seals back to the Nexus to be respelled, now that we have all three again. And with rebuilding in Aeleftheria progressing, with the help of the mountain dragons, my mother is keen to celebrate together.”

Kai lifted a brow. “Celebrate?”

She leaned back, searching his face. “The birth of your nephew, Kai. Have you not checked your messages?”

Nephew. Kymri’s baby. A boy, celebrated in Aeleftheria. His heart thumped a little harder, pleased for his little sister.

“I will call Kymri later. You’ll help me pick out a gift?” He smiled as he moved his hands through Astred’s hair.

“What do I know about babies?” Astred closed her eyes, lips parted as Kai gently massaged her scalp. “Your hands are magical,” she sighed.

“I don’t know anymore about them than you do. I’ll ask the Aunties, they’ll know.” He brushed his lips over hers. “And your lips are paradise.”

Her eyes opened, expression softening, except for the slightest curl at the corner of her mouth, before she dropped her gaze again. Her fingers slid up his exposed forearms to the rolled cuffs of his shirt, skipping to the open collar.

Kai suppressed a shiver as her fingers slid up his throat to his nape, pulling him down to her.

He descended, lips hovering a breath over hers. “We’ll be late for dinner.”

In response, her hands left his nape to draw the bathrobe from her shoulders, letting it drop in a heap at their feet. “And?” She pressed her lips to his, tongue swiping his lower lip.

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“Not for food.” Her hands were everywhere, unbuttoning, unzipping, tugging, pushing, so that he stood exposed. Her hand wrapped around his hard length. She met his gaze. “There will be time for eating and talking later. Right now, all I want is you. Only you. For the rest of our lives, however long that may be.”

His jaw worked as he swallowed the surge of emotion that burst through him. He traced the tiger marking her shoulder. Black and gold on her smooth skin. She did likewise, admiring the dragon spread over his otherwise unadorned body.

It was clear that she’d fallen back to that moment along with him. That moment of bonding, acceptance, connection so deep their souls met and made a promise. She wouldn’t be gone in the morning because she finally trusted him enough to love her as she needed him to. As equals in all things.

He’d proved himself to be worthy of her love and trust and the wellbeing of her people. He was strong enough to be her mate. Though he didn’t know if they could recreate that feeling every time they touched, he sure as hell was going to try.

He slid his arm behind her back, then her knees, scooping her up to his chest. “I prefer dessert first, anyway.”

She uncharacteristically squealed and laughed, full and throaty, as he carried her into the bedroom, running through his mental list of all her favorite positions and tricks.

Approaching the high bed, he gently lay her back.

Arms tight around his neck, she pulled him down so that he leaned on his elbows, looking into her beautiful face.

Red hair fanned out behind her head on the duvet, and he gave into the desire to touch it again, running the silky strands between his fingertips. One of his favorite things to do.

“Kai.”

His eyes flicked back to hers instantly. He released the curls to trace the delicate line of her brow. “Astred.”

She swallowed, once. “I love you.” Twice. “I always have. Since the moment we met.”

He smiled, his thumb slid over her cheekbone. “I know.” He touched his lips to hers. “I’ve always known. I just had to wait for you to know it, too.” He breathed next to the shell of her ear.

Astred opened her eyes into his, closer now, irises reacting to his inner power as he stared into her. She purred, inviting him to touch her.

Kai growled against her throat, dragon and tiger urging him to take her.

He would, but not yet.

Her skin was soft and silky under his palms as he caressed her breasts, ribs, flat belly

down to her hips and thighs, until she writhed from his attention. His lips followed his hands, licking, tasting, delving until she was slick and begging.

He became engorged, knowing she'd never begged anyone else for anything in her life. Still, he ignored her pleas, pushing her just a little further.

Unable to take any more, she pushed him back, straddling him.

Locking his arms around her, he sat up so that they were face to face.

She held his gaze as she took him into her warm channel with a gasp.

Locking her in place with his hands, she rotated her hips, grinding against him.

He held her gaze as she worked faster. Rising together.

I see you. I know you.

Her lips parted, her channel gripped hard with her cry.

All of you. Forever.

He gave in, tumbling over the edge with her.

Always.

~ END ~