



Moonstriker (The Summertide Chronicles #4)

Author: *Sam Burns*

Category: LGBT+

Description: I've spent the better part of a decade trying to save the world. Twice a century, Mount Slate threatens to erupt, and for my entire life, the four families in charge haven't seemed to care about their impending doom.

So it fell to me to try to fix things.

To make peace.

Me, a man whose greatest skill is pissing people off so much that they challenge me to a duel, and then killing them in that duel.

Now the moment is here, and my clever stone is telling me that one man—a sweet, innocent, infuriating judgmental bastard—is the only one who's capable of saving the world. And I have to help him do it.

I'm starting to wonder if the world is even worth saving.

Total Pages (Source): 36

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 1

Kit Emrys (Moonstriker)

I keep telling you, you're going to like him , Nikka said, her tone long-suffering and entirely done with me.

That fucking well made two of us.

And I keep telling you , I answered back, clipped and tense as I took a corner sharper than necessary in the car, you can't force that to happen .

Mount Slate loomed over us, its dour black presence the only thing on the horizon for miles around. It was also the only thing we'd centered our whole fucking lives around for the last decade. It was hard not to hate the giant slab of rock for all the stress it had caused me and time it had taken up.

That's not what a mountain is , Nikka informed me. And Slate's not just a mountain, either. He's a volcano .

In the moment, she sounded so fucking much like my brother Frost that I groaned aloud.

I do not need a lesson on what mountains are. Or volcanoes. I'm not a fucking scientist, and I don't care.

In my mind, she pouted, but at least she had finally gone quiet on how much I was

going to love Aubrey fucking Sagara.

She'd been telling me about it...well, in bits and pieces, since we'd bonded. First in tantalizing hints of what the future held, so that I'd ask for more. Someday you'll be the most famous duelist in all the Summerlands . Then in concerned imperatives in the middle of the night. We have to get the families together or there'll be a disaster. Slate could explode, and all humanity would be impacted.

Then ten years ago after I'd left home, Nikka and I made The Plan.

Painstakingly detailed and relying on too many outside people and actions to be trusted entirely, it was a plan full of holes and possible disasters. Unfortunately, one of the most important things I'd learned in my near-thirty years of life was that I quite literally couldn't save the world by myself.

I needed help. I needed the families to start the peace process, because even if I'd been born one of them, I wasn't a real Moonstriker anymore. In fact, I'd never been in a position to have that power, even as Delta's supposed oldest son. I couldn't have gotten Delta to start peace proceedings no matter what I'd done.

I'd had to wait for Adair Courtwright pressing Oberon Gloombringer, and then Rain getting attached to the idea of peace. Everyone else, from Oberon's sister Titania to Caspian Sunrunner, had needed to come to the conclusion that peace was needed. All I'd been able to do for that situation was keep Huxley Dawnchaser in check enough to keep him from murdering everyone in Gloombringer Castle. Left to his own devices, he'd have killed not just Oberon, but Oberon's sister and my brother and even Caspian Sunrunner, simply because they might have stood in his way in the future.

But you did save them , Nikka said, her voice annoyingly chirpy and pleased. It was hard, but not impossible, to blame her for being self-satisfied about that. We'd saved

everyone's life, after all. It had been fucking impressive, and gone a long way to mitigating my decade-old nightmare of running through a Gloombringer Castle flowing with rivers of blood.

We whipped around another corner going ten miles an hour over the speed limit, and the car gave a series of irritated beeps letting me know I'd encroached on the outside white line. Annoying. I'd wanted a new car—needed one, even—but new cars had all sorts of “features” that felt more irritating than helpful. If I couldn't keep track of where the lines on the road were, should I even be driving?

Should you? Nikka asked. You're being reckless. Maybe we're the only people on the road this close to Slate, but that doesn't mean you should be careless with your own life. You still have to finish this. We're not done yet .

And that . . .

Well, I couldn't lie to myself. That stung. She didn't mean to make me feel like she only cared only for what I could do to fulfill her goals and not me as a person. That was just what happened because of how she was. She was so much like Frost that it had occasionally hurt me to listen to her after I left home. She was logical to a fault, and she always thought of The Plan first and feelings second, whether the feelings were hers or mine or anyone else's.

It was good and helpful and exactly what I needed to keep my brain on track, because the truth was that I was a fallible, distractible human being.

It was just that sometimes it did feel like I was only a tool. A means to an end. That was what I'd been to Delta on our best days. Most of the time I'd just been an inconvenience. Sometimes, I'd been a way for her to force my father into line.

I was useful.

I'd rarely in my life been anything more than that to anyone.

Bullshit , Nikka said, breaking into my pity party. All your siblings love you and don't see you as a tool. Your father would let the world burn for you. And Aubrey ?—

Aubrey. Always fucking Aubrey Sagara. Illegitimate son of the dead Oberon Gloombringer, Aubrey Sagara was all Nikka cared about half the damn time. He was going to save us all. He was a shining light among humans, so rare, so perfect, blah fucking blah blah.

He's important. You can pretend you don't like him all you want, you're going to ?
—

“Yeah, yeah,” I agreed aloud even though I was alone in the car, and there was never a need to speak aloud to have Nikka hear me. “Aubrey is a perfect little ray of sunshine and I'm going to fall hopelessly in love with him. Like something from one of those cheesy movies where time stops and string instruments play and flowers bloom. Not fucking likely, Neek. I saw the guy once, and sure, he's cute, but he's nothing special. I've fucked people way better looking.”

She gave a little humph, but didn't bother responding.

“Nothing to rebut that? Remember that dancer in Verisa last year? She was something?—”

There's no point in telling you the facts when you've decided to be stubborn. The fact is you're going to love Aubrey. You just are. No matter how stubborn you want to be about it. Everyone is going to love Aubrey. He's ?—

“The special-est little princeling ever to prince, I know.” I turned down the long drive

to the chalet, frowning as we crossed the rather slender two-lane bridge over a jagged dip in the mountainside. That seemed precarious. It was also the only road that led to the chalet.

The chalet.

A quarter of a mile up the drive, the chalet was ultra-modern and sleek...or it had been fifty years ago. For me, now, looking at the place brought to mind bellbottom pants and olive or rust-colored kitchen appliances. It was held up on enormous wooden beams, because the mountain beneath wasn't a flat space, but, well...a mountain. While the style could have been graciously called Tudor, with a broad sloping roof that I assumed was intended to let the snow slide off easily, the place was more window than wall.

It was hard to blame the architect, considering...

I stepped out of the car at the end of the drive into surprisingly crisp air, considering it was still the tail end of summer and not properly into fall at all. Given the altitude, though, I doubted it ever got hot here like in Verisa. But the real draw was the view. The mountain on one side, and on the other, a wide swathe of rocks and forest followed by a small town in the valley below that looked positively idyllic.

Mount Slate had snow on its cap year round, and now was no exception. As dark and foreboding as it always was in my mind, symbolizing the deaths of everyone I loved and everything I'd ever built or cared about, the fact of its presence was somewhat more benign in person.

Or rather, it looked that way. The mountain was still the most dangerous thing in the Summerlands—it just looked pretty, so I was dismissing it. I, of all people, should have known better. Early in my career as a duelist, people had dismissed me as being a pretty, useless thing.

I now had twenty-five formal duels to my name. Twenty-three people dead, two shamed, and not a single loss. Not ever.

Kit Emrys didn't lose.

Neither did Mount Slate. It was quiet and pretty at the moment, yes, but I knew better than anyone that it had the potential to destroy everything.

He's not so bad when you get to know him, Nikka said, but her voice was tight and strained. She sounded a little like Frost when he was trying to explain to people that Delta wasn't the worst person alive, but even he was struggling to believe it.

I watched the distant white cap of the mountain for a moment, then turned away, sighing. If you say so. But it's kind of hard for me to tell, when I literally can't get to know him.

When I turned away from the mountain, a young woman was coming down the front steps of the house, smiling at me, so I didn't have time to debate Slate or Aubrey with Nikka anymore.

It was time to play prince.

"Good morning," she said, holding out a hand for me to shake. "You must be one of the Moonstriker contingent. I wasn't expecting anyone to arrive until the afternoon, so the cook hasn't made breakfast, but?—"

I shook her hand with my right, and held the other up to wave off her worries. "I don't need anyone to go out of their way to make food for me. I stopped in town for breakfast."

At that, she perked up. "Oh, in Yomi? They have the best pancakes."

Contrary asshole that I was, I wanted to deny it, but that would have been a lie. The place had, in fact, served me the best pancakes I'd ever had. Sure, every bite had felt like I was tightening a noose around my own neck, but still, somehow they'd been delicious.

Yes, I was being melodramatic. But for the last decade, Nikka and I had been working on The Plan, working out every detail of what came next and next and next.

And next was almost over now.

I had to get fucking Aubrey Sagara to Mount Slate, and that was it.

The end, game over.

Yes, we'd been successful through now, even the precarious parts of the plan that relied on other people having worked out for the best, even when Dane fucking Sunrunner had almost ruined everything. But soon, I'd have no control left. I'd have to rely on Aubrey to finish the job I'd started. I couldn't lie to myself about it, I was a little bitter about that. Relying on other people was never something I excelled at, and Aubrey...well.

Regardless, it was almost over, whether we lived or died.

Then? I had no fucking idea what I'd do next if I managed to survive what was to come.

I gave a heavy sigh and nodded at the woman, much to her apparent confusion. "Yeah, the pancakes were great." Then I waved at the mostly empty drive. The only vehicle other than mine was a dusty, utilitarian-looking truck that had to be two decades old. None of the major family members I knew had ever dreamed of driving such a thing. "So no one else has arrived yet?"

She shook her head. “No sir. Mr. Moonstriker—that is, Mr. Frost Moonstriker—said a party would be arriving in the early afternoon and requested lunch for four.” That was sweet of Frost, clearly having included me in his number. The woman held up a hand and started ticking off fingers. “There was a Mr. Adair Courtwright who said another party of three would be arriving this evening. Lord Moonstriker said he was arriving this afternoon with Lord Dawnchaser. And the Gloom—that is, the Duskbringer called to say she was arriving with her nephew, also around lunchtime.” She glanced around, as though worried someone in the middle of nowhere on the mountainside might be listening in. “I didn’t even know the Duskbringer had a nephew. I thought she was the last of the line.”

Suddenly, I could only sympathize with the young woman, who clearly had not been warned about the myriad messy issues between all the ruling families. She had no idea who was arriving from where, or how many of them were suddenly fucking members of the Moonstriker family.

Apparently, Moonstrikers were getting around these days. Funny, given how prudish Delta had taught us all to be.

I sighed and nodded, as much to myself as to her. I was first. No one else was going to explain this mess to her, then most of them would be surprised their rooms weren’t to their liking. “Okay, so Lord Moonstriker and Lord Dawnchaser will be sharing a room. Same for Adair and the second Lord Moonstriker—his name is Rain. Delta Moonstriker will need her own room, hopefully far away from anyone sharing a room. She’s not a big fan of the idea of people having sex, like, I’m pretty sure the two kids she gave birth to involved artificial insemination. Frost will share with the Sunrunner, Ember will need her own room, and...well, I don’t know anything about what the Duskbringers are going to want.”

Yes you do , Nikka pointed out. Fortunately, she was inside my head, so I didn’t have to explain her words to the woman. When I didn’t speak up again, Nikka sighed, and

if she'd had eyes she'd have rolled them. Stubborn .

“Sorry for all the complication,” I told the woman, ignoring my stone and her dramatics. “The ruling families are sort of a mess.”

Far from seeming put off, she beamed at me, shaking her head. “Not at all. It’s...it’s actually a bit of a relief. I don’t know about the rest of the world, but I was starting to worry. There was never news about any of the heirs dating or marrying. It’s good they’re finding people. This time around has been scary enough, Mount Slate shaking for months before you all came out. My father said that last time the moment there was a single quake, the families came and handled it, so I was starting to worry you’d all forgotten how. I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

And that was what it all came back to. Our families had the Summerlands in a stranglehold, unable to oust us and handle the future themselves, because only we could stop Mount Slate from erupting. I wasn’t sure we deserved that power, after everything.

No. That wasn’t right. I wasn’t sure Delta deserved it, or Oberon or Dane or Huxley.

Well, no, everyone in their right mind was sure that Huxley Dawnchaser was getting just what he deserved now, sitting in a prison cell. He certainly didn’t deserve power.

But Rain? He deserved everything. I didn’t know Titania, but she seemed nice enough. Florian Dawnchaser had proven to be a happy surprise, and frankly, Caspian Sunrunner was a miracle in human skin. Or dragon skin, depending on the moment.

So maybe she was right. She...I blinked. “I’m sorry, I didn’t ask your name.”

She laughed at that, not seeming put off, and inclined her head. “I’m Zana. Mr...”

Shit, of course I hadn't introduced myself either. "Kit. Kit . . . Moonstriker."

At that, she gave me a weird sort of curtsy, and motioned toward the house. "Excellent. Can I show you to a room, Mr. Moonstriker? Or were you staying with one of the other guests as well?"

She winked at that, and I did not grumble at her. Just at Nikka, for feeling smug in the back of my head. "Nope, not staying with anyone else. A room near wherever you're putting my father or brother would be good. That would be...Oddly enough, wherever you're planning on putting up the Dawnchaser or the Sunrunner, since they're dating them, respectively."

She laughed and shook her head, but motioned for me to follow her. Then she paused, looking at my car, its tiny amount of passenger space stuffed with backpacks and bedrolls and such. "Would you like some help with your bags?"

I shook my head, reaching into the passenger seat and grabbing a single duffel. "Just bringing this one in. The rest of it is staying in the car for now." She seemed relieved, and I couldn't blame her. I wasn't looking forward to carrying most of it myself.

For at least one night, though, I was looking forward to a nice soft bed and meals cooked by a professional. Any day I could avoid damned granola bars was a good day.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 2

Aubrey Sagara (Duskbringer)

Aunt Titania was kind of the best.

She was worried that she “wasn’t as fun now that she was sober,” but that just wasn’t true. She was kind, and sweet, and funny as heck. I’d read once that people were often funny because of childhood trauma, and that tracked with her.

It was probably mean of me, and people always said not to malign the dead, but I blamed my father for how much she hated herself.

If her own brother hadn’t spent most of her life telling her she wasn’t good enough, she wouldn’t believe it so deeply.

“You should’ve seen his face when I told him we were going to retile the entryway,” she was saying, clearly holding back laughter. “You’d think I’d told him we were going to replace his children with similarly sized lizards. Like boring black-and-white tile was just the best thing in the universe and color was pure evil.”

I shook my head, sighing, but it was easy to imagine Titania’s old butler being horribly offended by the sunset-colored tiles she’d replaced in the castle’s entry. Most of the castle staff loved Titania and were excited over everything she did, from formally changing the family name back to Duskbringer to pulling out the bland black-and-white marble tiles in the entryway of the castle and replacing them with stunning hand-painted ones covered with swirls of blue, gold, and purple.

The old butler, though, had been a holdover from not just my father, but his own father, the man who'd made the switch to black-and-white in the first place.

I'd been given to understand that they were very similar people, my father and his. After more than a lifetime of working for the two of them, the butler—Smythe—was absolutely scandalized whenever anything was changed away from their preferences.

“He'll probably survive,” I pointed out.

She shook her head, then paused, leaning it to one side and causing a cascade of red curls to tumble over her shoulder. “I mean, he's not gonna die, obviously. But he's been starting to make noise about retiring. Which is probably reasonable anyway. He's like ninety or something.”

I thought he wasn't quite that old, but I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd been nearly eighty, so I didn't try to correct her. Who knew? Maybe she was right. Some stone types prolonged the lives of their bonded humans. For all I knew, he was a hundred-and-fifty. It wasn't as though we were friends and I'd asked him.

The car we were in—an enormous black limousine that had almost given me a heart attack when it had arrived to pick us up at the airport—rounded a curve in the road, bringing us to a new side of the mountain. Not that it looked terribly different from the previous side, but it did bring our destination into view.

“The chalet.”

Aunt Titania had been casually referencing it for weeks now, since I'd gone to stay with her at Rain Moonstriker's request.

Not that it was a trial to stay with Aunt Titania; it just hadn't occurred to me to return to Gloombringer Castle after the way I'd left there. Heck, as easy as it was to refit

Aunt Titania in my brain as Duskbringer, the castle remained firmly Gloombringer in my mind. It was the definition of gloom: enormous, gray stone, and full of dusty relics of a bygone era that should perhaps have been left in the past.

All but her.

But Rain had been right. Aunt Titania was strong and impressive, managing to pick up leading a family and its lands seamlessly...but she was also lonely.

There wasn't a lot I was capable of doing. I didn't have a huge expensive education or any natural talents other than the strength it took to lift heavy stuff, but there was one thing I could do: exist. I could be Aunt Titania's rock. Show up, be company, listen to her, and speak in return. It wasn't even a trial, because again, Aunt Titania was a delight. She was the polar opposite of my nasty father, caring and hopeful and interested in everyone else and their issues.

She reminded me of my mother, who I'd lost less than a year ago, and if I was a comfort to her, well, she was doubly so to me. It was good to have that kind of influence back in my life.

Titania seemed to notice the direction my eyes had gone and turned to look. She sighed, watching it with something almost like trepidation.

That caught my attention, because she'd never seemed bothered by the idea of the chalet before. "Are you okay?"

She sighed again before turning back to look at me. "I'm...not sure. I wasn't alive the last time we did this. Oberon was practically a baby at the time, and he got hurt when they were doing . . . the thing. Whatever it is. What if I screw it up?"

"If anything is going to 'screw it up,' Aunt Titania, it's the fact that either Dane or

Rachel Sunrunner destroyed Nausa. You'll do fine. You've handled everything the world has thrown at you this year, and that alone is really impressive." Leaning toward her, I tugged her into a sideways hug, and she let her head fall onto my shoulder.

"Thank you for coming."

"Always. I'll always be here for you."

I ignored her answering snuffle, because as much as she was better than my father or hers, Aunt Titania had been brought up with the weird notion that having emotions was something to hide. Something to be ashamed of. So we didn't talk about feelings, staunchly pretending they didn't exist.

Frankly, I had no idea how my mother had ever existed in their world with them at all. She'd never been one to hide her feelings.

We turned onto a smaller road leading from the highway to the chalet, and it took me a moment to realize the road didn't have painted lines because the whole darned thing was just a driveway. For one house. More than half a mile long and dark smooth asphalt, so it was clearly well cared for, but...

Unless Aunt Titania had been wrong, literally no one lived in the place. Why expend so much effort on a house no one lived in, that was only used for a week once every fifty years or so?

It was just like the giant limousine for the two of us, or her living alone in the giant freaking castle of our ancestors. It didn't make any sense, and the people who lived that life didn't even think about it. They didn't ever consider it odd that entire nations revolved around them, while they sat around playing croquet and day drinking.

Not that Aunt Titania did that. No, she didn't drink at all anymore, and she'd been hard at work since inheriting Gloombringer, trying to turn the lands around and make them something good again. But it wasn't easy to fix an entire economy. Amalion City was the biggest city in all the Summerlands, full of people at or below the poverty line, who were desperately trying to eke out a living however they could. She couldn't just magically change that in a month.

Of all the rich people I'd met since discovering my heritage, though, Aunt Titania was the one I absolutely knew could do it. She just needed time and resources, and she had both. Sure, Rain Moonstriker was a great guy, and I knew he would want to help, but I didn't think he'd ever seen true adversity in his life. He'd been raised in a literal ivory tower, as a prince, with a family who adored him and took care of him. He'd never wanted for anything.

Aunt Titania knew what it was like to go without. Maybe not without food, but without love and care. Without respect.

We pulled up to the head of the incredibly long driveway, and I was almost overwhelmed with the sheer luxury of it all. I hadn't ever seen a piece of glass that big outside of movies, but two entire sides of the house were just...covered with it. No walls, only glass, showing an interior that was also straight out of a movie, with dark wood beams on the ceilings, at least one crystal chandelier, and so much white furniture that it looked like they'd had a snowstorm inside.

Mom had always laughed at white sofas in movies, and said they wouldn't last a week in a real home. Real people spilled things. They got dirt on things. Buying white furniture was just silly and frivolous.

Aunt Titania, as much as I loved her, never worried about ruining a sofa.

There were two cars parked to one side of the drive, a truck and a sleek cherry-red

sports car. More familiar, in front of us near the entrance to the chalet, was an enormous shiny white SUV. I didn't recognize the people climbing out of it, but it was just like the one Rain Moonstriker had driven me to the bus station in, and the dark-skinned man reaching into the back had the whitest hair I'd ever seen, despite the fact that he was clearly quite young.

Moonstrikers, then.

A handsome guy in a leather jacket took a bag from him, grinning with a million shiny white teeth, and the feeling that I was lost on a movie set was exacerbated. It made more sense to me now, why most people in the Summerlands were obsessed with the leaders of the four families.

My own father had probably been photogenic, and he'd certainly been handsome, but I'd never understood the appeal of the taciturn rich man who had never once smiled in my memory, either on television or during the short time I'd known him in person. These people? They were like something from a TV show, or an ad for liquor or an expensive car. They were young and beautiful and happy, and who wouldn't want to know more about them?

The driver of the limousine opened the door for Titania, and as she was climbing out, I found that I couldn't move a muscle.

I wasn't a part of this world. I didn't belong out there, with them.

In the moment, I wasn't sure if I didn't want to be part of it, or if I was afraid it simply wouldn't accept me. I'd step out of the car, and the whole scene would crumble, the people staring at me because I was a dirty mechanic's rag hung on the pristine chrome towel bar that held bleach-white towels intended only for rich people.

Titania slid from the car with her usual graceful ease. She was a part of this world.

She smiled at them, and they smiled back. The young man in the leather jacket walked over. “Lady Duskbringer. Nice to see you again under better circumstances. I hope you’re doing well?”

He’d been at Gloombringer Castle, I remembered suddenly. One of the people there for the failed peace summit? I hadn’t exactly been introduced around, but I was sure I’d seen him there.

No, I’d been my father’s shameful secret. The son he’d only wanted in theory, but not in reality.

“I am, thank you,” Aunt Titania said to him, then turned to introduce me, only to find the place by her side empty. She cocked her head, confused but still smiling, and leaned toward the open door of the car. “Aubrey?”

I couldn’t stay in the car. But I couldn’t...this wasn’t my place. I looked down at my hand to find with some surprise, that it was trembling. Both of them were.

I, in fact, was trembling. All of me. Like there was a machine vibrating in my belly, and I couldn’t stop myself from moving along with it.

Titania poked her head back into the car. My head snapped up to meet her gaze, and thank goodness, the shaking stopped. “Come on, kiddo. You’ve got to meet the Sunrunner and his friends. If we go fast, you’ll be able to get to know them a little before yet more people arrive.”

“Probably a good idea for everyone to get comfortable before Mother arrives and tries to take charge of everything,” a dark-skinned young woman with a cloud of obsidian ringlets said, rolling her eyes. She met my gaze as I stood from the car and smiled. “Not that you have to do anything she says, obviously, but she’ll totally try to boss you around.”

She was smiling at me like I was in on a joke, when I didn't even know who her mother was.

Behind her, the young man with white hair sighed and shook his head. "She will. Perhaps you can just remind her you're not a Moonstriker."

"This is Frost," the handsome young man who'd spoken to Aunt Titania said. "And his sister Ember. They're Moonstrikers, though I suppose that's pretty obvious."

Aunt Titania grinned back. "It is." She wrapped an arm around my waist and tugged me forward. Suddenly boneless, I let her. "This is my nephew Aubrey. Aubrey, this is the Sunrunner, Caspian. And Frost and Ember Moonstriker."

The Sunrunner. The handsome guy with the million-dollar smile in the motorcycle jacket was the Sunrunner. Of course he was.

If Oberon had been anything like him, our people would have been a thousand times more interested in his life, and frankly, they'd already been obsessed. I swallowed hard and nodded to them, but they didn't seem to notice that I was terminally awkward. They just kept pulling stuff out of their car.

Noise drew my attention, and I turned to find a woman and man coming down the stairs from the chalet. She was lovely, in long flowing clothes that made her look almost like a priestess of some kind, her dark hair in two perfect braids on either side of her face.

Him?

He was . . .

If Caspian Sunrunner had made me feel like a moviegoer who could never be worthy

of his star power, this guy made me somehow feel like an actual peasant. He was wearing a skintight red suit that showed off every perfectly sculpted muscle on his body, his stark white hair—another Moonstriker, clearly—in a cut that probably cost more than every single thing I'd ever owned in my life, and the way he moved...I'd never met a human being so...slinky before.

The outfit he was wearing rang a bell in my memory, again from the movies. Was he wearing a dueling costume? As if some ridiculously rich scion of the Moonstriker family would ever be an actual duelist?

Aunt Titania's brother, Puck, had died in a duel before I was ever born, and it was the last time I'd ever heard of a member of a major family in a duel.

As he neared, it became clear that every part of him was equally beautiful. He was literally stunning. Smooth skin, angular jaw, high cheekbones...something about the way his features came together was slightly vulpine, and yet, the overall effect was almost impossibly beautiful. Any evil queen asking her magic mirror who the fairest in all the land was would be offered an image of his face.

Just looking at the way he walked made me feel clumsy and wrong-footed.

I'd always been too big, born almost nine pounds, and it had been a problem exacerbated by puberty when I'd shot up to over six feet tall by the time I was sixteen. I'd eaten every scrap of food in the house to keep up with the growth, and I still worried Mom had gone hungry for it, even though she'd always assured me everything was fine. Even now I had horizontal stretch marks on my sides from where I'd grown almost three inches in a single summer.

I'd also put on a ton of bulk starting when I'd taken a job to pay for the extra food I was eating, and ended up lugging boxes around six hours a day after school. The extra weight hadn't ever gone away, even in my recent lean springtime after Mother

passed when I hadn't been able to properly take care of myself. There wasn't a ton of money to be had in untrained work carrying heavy objects, after all.

Frost Moonstriker beamed at the new man, going in for a hug immediately and eliciting a mutter of, "You just saw me yesterday, you great oaf."

Oaf.

Because Frost was...well heck, he was taller than me. One of the only people I'd ever met who was taller than me, in fact. Of course the beautiful man thought tall, bulky men were clumsy, oversized bumbler.

When he pulled away, he smiled at Aunt Titania. "Lady Duskbringer." Then he turned to look at me for a moment, his expression saying I was the very last thing he wanted to look at in the whole world, his lips pursing in annoyance at...what? Were my clothes not tight and shiny enough? My hair not in the right dramatic cut? "Well," he said with a sigh. "Best we get to work bringing the things inside."

He headed for where the driver was pulling Titania's and my suitcases out of the trunk. When he got there, he stopped and waved me over. "Let's get this done so we can get to lunch already, yes?"

Did he...did he think I was a servant, and he was bossing me around? What the actual hells?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 3

Kit

The asshole was cute.

Of course he was.

He was looking at me like I was the swamp muck about to stain his shoes, eyes narrowed in irritation and jaw clenched tight, and he was cute.

I was used to rich assholes thinking I was garbage. Mere employees were nothing, after all, and once I stopped being Winter Moonstriker, eldest son of the Moonstriker family, and started being the duelist Kit Emrys, that was all I was to them: the hired help.

He was probably offended I expected him to help carry his own fucking bags. Imagine the offense, having to do something for yourself. I had grown up around people like that, as much as Delta hadn't allowed me or my siblings to think that way, so I didn't know why I was surprised.

The son of the man who'd brought gloom to the world for close to thirty years wasn't likely to be an exception to that rule.

That's not what it is , Nikka said, a sigh in her tone, but I ignored her. She'd been telling me how amazing Aubrey fucking Sagara was for years, and I was done with it. He was going to have to prove how perfect he was before I believed it, and so far, all

he'd proven was that he didn't want to help carry his own bags.

Frankly, it reminded me of his father. Combined with his wide, muscled shoulders that weren't at all camouflaged by the dark jacket he wore, and those cornflower blue eyes, it was impossible not to see his father in him. His hair was the same chestnut brown as Oberon's had been as well, though his had gold highlights. Very real looking gold highlights, almost like he spent time in the sun rather than having them bleached in a salon for hundreds of dollars.

Lady Duskbringer cocked her head at me, but smiled gamely. "So, not a duelist after all? I thought the white hair was dyed. Aren't the kids doing that these days? Everyone wants to look like a Moonstriker, so they're bleaching their hair?"

I rolled my eyes and tried not to groan, but the annoyance wasn't aimed at her. In truth, I was half afraid I'd started that particular fashion trend, since I'd been claiming I bleached my hair for years, and I had traveled widely while at the side of one of the most important men in the Summerlands. It had gotten attention.

Aubrey glared even harder, because of course he did. "Something wrong with that?"

I rolled my eyes. "Wasting time and money in order to look prematurely old? I mean, I guess not, but I'm not inclined to do it. I miss the red hair I was born with."

Titania jerked back as though shocked. "Red? You were a redhead?" Then her face softened into a smile. "Like Cove. His hair was red before he went white, wasn't it?"

"It was," I agreed, turning back to her with a smile. I was always happy to talk about that particular subject. "Which makes sense, because he's my father. He'll be arriving this afternoon with Florian Dawnchaser."

Suddenly, Titania was absolutely beaming at me. "I didn't know Cove had a son! The

sly fox, he never said a word.” Then she ducked her head, as though embarrassed. “I know we rather...fell out of touch over the years. Our families and all that?—”

“You don’t have to explain yourself,” Aubrey told her, taking her arm and patting her, giving me a sharp look, as though I’d demanded the explanation of why she and my father hadn’t spoken about my existence.

I ignored him, meeting her eye and waving away the worry. “It wasn’t public knowledge until recently. No reason you’d have known. I don’t think even Iri knew, from what Father has told me.”

She blinked in astonishment, then nodded to me, stepping forward into my space as she took me in, studying my features. It wasn’t terribly unusual, as reactions went. People were always fascinated by duelists, even as they were repelled by them. I’d never had someone enchanted by the fact that my father was my father before, though. It was nice, if only because it meant people other than me knew.

He’d finally claimed me, the way we had both always wanted, and it was a rush every time I was reminded of it.

My father loved me.

Zana was standing back, letting us interact, but when things went quiet for a moment, she stepped up. “Lunch is going to be served in a few moments, if that’s agreeable for everyone. We could wait for Lords Moonstriker and Dawnchaser?”

“Oh no,” Frost denied, shaking his head as he slung a second bag over his shoulder, then slammed the door of their SUV. “Uncle Cove and Florian wouldn’t want that. They’re not much for formality, and they would never want anyone to be hungry waiting on them.”

Pride bloomed in my chest at that, because once, Frost would have been the first to say we all needed to wait, because of social rules Delta had driven into him for years. It seemed that in my absence, my brother hadn't just grown up, but realized that some rules weren't quite so hard and fast as Delta always said.

But then he paused, cocking his head. "When did the other Moonstriker party say they were arriving?"

Of course he was worried about that. Bending the rules that Delta had drilled into him was all well and good, unless Delta was the one who might be inconvenienced by that freedom. Delta would always be the type to insist that people should go hungry waiting for her.

When Zana looked to me, concerned, I lifted my chin to Frost. "In the evening. If she's angry people ate lunch without her when she doesn't intend to arrive till seven, she can deal with that herself."

Frost cocked his head, considering, then shrugged. "I am hungry. It would be a long time to wait." He paused like that for a moment, and I suspected I was the only person present who knew the turmoil happening in his head.

Well, no . . . I wasn't. Not anymore.

As though to prove that exact point, Caspian reached over and took his hand. "If your mother is annoyed, she can complain to me about it. The notion of waiting seven hours to eat on her account is crap, and we're not gonna do it."

Frost looked down at him, and the smile that bloomed on his face was as beautiful as it had been rare during our childhoods.

Somehow, seeing Caspian cut straight through to the heart of the matter, alleviating

Frost's worry and settling him so effectively...it was both a good thing and a bad one.

It was perfect, in fact. My brother was happy, and I'd never wanted anything else.

But also, I wasn't at the center of that happiness anymore.

Which was fucking ridiculous, because Frost and I hadn't seen each other for almost ten years before The Plan had started coming together over the last few months. I'd missed him, yes, thought of him almost every day. I was sure he'd missed me too. But we weren't children anymore. We had both grown up and changed and had lives of our own.

Or, well, Frost did.

I had the next week.

I had The Plan.

And then...well, who knew? I might be dead. I might have any amount of time at all. If we succeeded, I would finally have the chance to make a life of my own. Well, assuming Nikka didn't come up with some new world-shaking horror I had to head off another few decades in the future.

I wouldn't do that to you , she muttered. I mean, unless the world was going to be destroyed again. But I don't think it is. At least, not that I've seen yet .

Again, I tried not to groan aloud. Way to be reassuring , I told her, then turned my attention back to the people in front of me. "So, why don't you follow Zana, and she'll take you to your rooms and then the dining room, and I'll help carry in the Duskbringers' things, then we'll all meet in the dining room for lunch?"

Zana bit her lip, as though worried that she wouldn't be able to manage every single thing, but I smiled my most charming smile at her. "You showed me the suite you'd planned for the Duskbringers. I think it's perfect. Two bedrooms, right?"

At that, she perked up and nodded. "Yes, two bedrooms. The Oak Suite. You don't...mind?"

"Not in the least. Anything that'll hurry lunch. The pancakes were good, but whatever the kitchen has been working on smells excellent, and I'd rather not wait."

She grinned and ducked her head, then finally turned to Frost, Caspian, and Ember. "Please let me show you to your rooms, then. On Mr. Moonstriker's advice, I put the three of you in the Cedar Suite. It's also got two bedrooms, but Mr. Moonstriker said you'd prefer two to three?"

"Two is perfect," Caspian reassured as the four of them headed up the stairs toward the door.

"Oak Suite, Cedar Suite," Titania said, quiet but not whispered, cocking her head. "Interesting."

"Mmm," I agreed. "She put me in the Walnut Room, and believe me, I tried not to take offense."

Again, Aubrey glared at me. It was a shame, because his eyes were beautiful when he wasn't narrowing them into slits in my direction.

Titania gave the giggle I'd rather been hoping for when I'd said it. "Did you think she was trying to make a comment on your intelligence?"

I shrugged, turning back to where her bags were sitting near the back of their car,

picking up one shiny black suitcase and pushing it into Aubrey's hands. "I won't deny I can be a bit of a walnut sometimes, but I prefer to be the one pointing it out, you know?"

I picked up another black suitcase, and an army green duffel that looked like it'd seen better days, slinging it over my shoulder. The final bag, a small one that looked intended for toiletries, I once again held out to Aubrey. It was certainly benevolent sexism at work, but I'd been taught never to ask a "lady" to carry anything. There weren't a lot of women I thought of that way, admittedly, but Titania Duskbringer was one.

If it'd been Ember, I'd have probably handed her the biggest bag, just to be an ass.

Aubrey was still glaring at me when I turned toward the house, and he huffed. "I'm not your servant, you know."

I lifted a brow at him. "What, I'm yours? This isn't exactly Gloombringer Castle, buddy. No army of servants to carry things for us, just Zana and two others. You're not expecting them to drop everything and come fetch and carry for you, are you?"

Titania gave a little squeak that sounded like surprise, and grabbed Aubrey's arm, taking the smallest bag from him and leaning her weight on his large frame. "I'm sure that's not what Aubrey meant. This is all just a little overwhelming." She glanced nervously between the two of us a moment, then let her eyes go big and soft. "You know what I mean. This whole situation is just so much."

It was a manipulation, clearly learned from years of being in the presence of sexist assholes who thought she was a delicate flower who might swoon at any moment. She was damned good at it, because my first instinct was to take care of her. My second was to be impressed.

I cocked my head to the side, smiling at her. “You’re very good at that, Lady Duskbringer.”

At that, a slow grin crossed her face. “You’re just like your father, Kit Moonstriker. It is Kit, isn’t it?”

“It is,” I agreed. “But I promise I’ll try to keep my misogyny to a minimum, and you won’t have to get the vapors to keep me from being an ass.”

“Deal,” she said, sticking out her hand to shake.

Bemusedly, I accepted. What else could I do?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 4

Aubrey

Kit Moonstriker. Son of Cove Moonstriker, the man who'd spent my entire life ruling a quarter of the Summerlands. In a house full of important people, of course he was one of the most important. And like every rich person I'd ever spent much time around, he'd managed to clock me as a nobody before I'd ever said a word to him.

Probably my no-brand-name clothes or the way I stood.

I didn't know anything about clothing brands, so I couldn't have placed his, but just the way he stood was like defiance in human form. His shoulders tall and straight, held almost rigid, and his head straight up from his neck, like his spine was a fused steel rod. I'd never met anyone who didn't slump at least a little. Even the Sunrunner had stood in a comfortable slight slouch, like a normal freaking person.

Kit Moonstriker walked like he was in a parade, or being inspected by the military, or something like that. Like he knew everyone was watching him, and he meant to be impressive.

And of course everyone was watching him. He was beautiful. His ass was as on display in those ridiculously tight pants as if he'd been wandering around naked, a perfect bubble only highlighted by the eye-catching red fabric that barely held it in. Clearly, this was a man who spent a lot of time in the gym doing squats to get and maintain that kind of perfection.

And why not? It wasn't like he needed to have a job and earn a living like the rest of us.

He seemed to be aimlessly wandering through the hallways, but before I had a chance to suggest he should give up and go get someone who knew what they were doing, he stopped in front of a door and poked his head inside. Then he opened it the rest of the way, waving to the room inside like it was the prize on a game show. "Here we go. Cedar Suite. You can tell by the smell."

My mother had a cedar chest when I was a child, and I remembered the scent with fondness. Sure enough, there it was when we went into the room. Light and airy, but no less distinctive for that. The streaky reddish wood the furniture inside was made of was a giveaway as well.

And the chalet was full of rooms named for different woods? Once again, it was a reminder of just how much money these people had. In my childhood, with the exception of that one wooden chest, the names of woods were at most to indicate veneers or paint colors. Who had the money for real wood furniture, let alone specific extra-expensive types like cedar and walnut?

"I'll take that case," Aunt Titania said to Kit, motioning to the case of hers he held in one hand. "The other is Aubrey's."

He gave her an over-the-top melodramatic bow and held out the bag to her, then when she took it and headed for one of the doors, he turned toward the other. Toward...my room.

I dropped Aunt Titania's suitcase and rushed over, like somehow if he took my bag into the room I was going to be staying in, he'd see into my very soul. It didn't matter that I'd never seen the room before in my life; it only mattered that I keep him out of it.

“I’ll take that,” I told him, grabbing the strap of my bag. “You can go get your lunch, and we’ll be along in a while.”

He turned toward me, the movement so smooth it felt like he’d been expecting to do it, planning for how to turn while looking the most graceful a person could look. He lifted a single snowy brow at me, judgment radiating off the expression, and something about it made me draw myself up to my full height. If he was gonna judge me, darn it all, I was going to use everything I had at my disposal, and the one thing I had for sure was the fact that I was over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and an imposing physique. Maybe I’d only been in one fight in my whole life, but he didn’t know that.

He didn’t react like most men did to the full size of me, either, and I couldn’t say it surprised me. He was probably used to having a bodyguard or something, and guys like that were often my size. On the other hand, he did look me up and down, assessing and...my cheeks flushed at the frank sexuality of the expression on his face. The tiny smirk that played across his lips told me he knew he’d surprised me.

“And you know where the dining room is?” he finally asked after a long moment of silence.

Truthfully, I had no idea where the dining room was. I also didn’t much care in that moment. I was willing to starve the entire time we stayed at the chalet in order to get rid of Kit Moonstriker. To not have him in my space, looking me over like I was a poor, sad little disappointment.

“Oh, I’m sure we can find it,” Aunt Titania said, coming out of the other bedroom and heading toward where I’d dropped her bigger suitcase. “You don’t have to hang around on our account, Kit. We appreciate you showing us up here, but it’s not like it’s your job to show us around. Plus your brother and sister just arrived, and I’m sure you want to see them.”

He grinned and shook his head. “I was staying with them in Verisa before this. I know from the way Frost acts you’d think we haven’t seen each other in years, but that’s just because I left home when I couldn’t put up with his mother anymore, and we didn’t see each other for a long time before last month.”

At that, Aunt Titania’s face scrunched up. “Well that’s about the most relatable thing I’ve ever heard in my life. Honestly, I always wondered how four kids put up with Delta. She’s...” she bit her lip, as though only just realizing she was talking about his own aunt. Mother? Honestly, I was a little confused, since apparently the others were his siblings, but not his father’s children.

“Insufferable?” he asked Aunt Titania, no hesitation to insult his relatives.

I couldn’t say much, since my own father had been terrible and hateful. If I wanted this Delta to be a saint that he was inappropriately maligning, that was only because I didn’t want to agree with him on anything. Except that Aunt Titania also didn’t like her, which meant she probably was awful.

Aunt Titania giggled, her shoulders shaking. “I haven’t seen her in a long time, but when we were young she was...very serious. And opinionated.”

“By which you mean judgmental,” he said, sighing and leaning against the bedroom door. Then he seemed to remember himself, shaking his head and reaching down to the strap of my bag. “Sorry, I forgot I still had this and you wanted it.”

He pulled the bag off and handed it to me, just like that. Like he hadn’t been intentionally being an ass at all. I didn’t have a lot of faith in people—or in him specifically—but it was...good. No need to fight for what was mine, which I’d probably be terrible at. No need to argue with him or explain my wish to not have him in my room.

I slipped past him into the room, barely taking any of it in as I tossed my bag on the bed and slid right back out, closing the door behind me. It might have had an open toilet in the corner for all I'd paid attention to it.

Aunt Titania was leaning on the couch in the middle of the room, cocking her head at Kit. "So I thought Delta had four kids, and Cove didn't have any."

Thank goodness I wasn't the only one confused.

Maybe I didn't want to like Kit, but in his favor, he didn't seem offended by Aunt Titania asking questions about his family. "It's a long story, but my grandfather made a deal with my mother's family, and it involved me being claimed as Aunt Delta's child."

Aunt Titania screwed up her face again. "I'm so sorry. I think Cove would have been an excellent father, and Delta..." She stopped and ducked her head, flushing. "Sorry. I know I shouldn't talk about things I don't know anything about."

He grinned in return. "Delta was exactly what you think. Maybe a little worse. But my father was still the best, even if everyone tried to make him stay out of my life. He still named me. Still took care of me whenever he could. He's amazing."

"He is," she agreed. "And he's dating Florian Dawnchaser. Isn't Florian...younger than you?"

Again to his credit, Kit just shrugged. "He is. He's a good guy. All that matters is that they deserve this. They both had a difficult start in life, and now they're making something better together." Kit's smile turned almost predatory for a moment, and reached up to run a finger along the tip of his own nose. "Plus Florian almost broke my nose a while back, so I know he's got what it takes to care for the people he loves."

Aunt Titania's eyes bugged, but a moment later her tinkling laughter filled the room.

Me, I wasn't sure what to say. He approved of someone almost breaking his nose? That didn't seem right. He also didn't look like anyone had ever broken his anything. The guys I had known who'd had broken noses had big knobby bumps on them. They also had scars and cauliflower ears and other stuff to show the violence they'd lived their lives with. Kit Moonstriker didn't look like he'd ever done anything more strenuous than a sweaty workout.

Finally, he pressed off the frame of my bedroom door and headed back toward the entrance to the suite. For some reason, having him farther away from where I was going to be sleeping made me feel like I could breathe again.

When he reached the exit, he turned back toward us. "Did you two want to do some settling in, or do you want to head down to lunch now? I'm sure Zana and the other staff would be happy to bring food to you if you're not in the mood to be social."

I scoffed automatically, without even thinking first. Of course he was willing to volunteer the staff to go carrying trays around like they didn't have better things to do with their time. Only a spoiled rich boy would automatically jump to that.

He didn't even glance at me, just looked at Aunt Titania. She, on the other hand, seemed to have been entirely taken in by his rich jerk charm. Of course she had. Poor Aunt Titania had been treated like a child and an inconvenience by my father her whole life. Someone giving her the tiniest bit of respect now was like a brave new world, so she was still overwhelmed every time it happened.

"You're right," she said, and it took me a moment to remember she wasn't responding to my thoughts, but Kit's question. "Whatever it is they're cooking smells delicious, and we weren't even traveling that long. We have the shortest trip to get here of anyone." She turned to me. "Unless you want to eat in the room, Aubrey?"

I shook my head, probably too fast and too much, ending up looking like a dog trying to shake off water. “No, of course not. There’s no reason to put out the staff on my account. I’m sure they have better things to do than cater to me.”

When I turned back toward the door, Kit was looking at me, head cocked in confusion. Of course he didn’t understand that the staff had better things to do. He’d probably never thought anything was more important than himself in his entire life.

Aunt Titania either missed the tension, or she was very good at ignoring it, because she offered him a beaming smile and motioned to the door. “Well in that case, lead on, Kit. I can’t wait to get down to work. Or to see your father again. Or Rain. He was a lovely young man.” Then she paused. “Wait, isn’t Rain the heir to the family?”

“He is,” Kit agreed, and his tone was still quite casual, which was a little odd. Wasn’t Aunt Titania saying that Kit wasn’t the heir to his own family? He didn’t seem to care awfully much. “Rain’s the baby of the family, but we’ve all known since he was five or six that he was going to be the next Moonstriker. A born diplomat, our Rain. It’ll be a good change for the family. Father will get the rest he deserves, and Aunt Delta...frankly, she shouldn’t be in charge of a fishbowl, let alone the lives of the people who live in Moonstriker lands. She’s entirely missing the empathy gene.”

He opened the door and held it, motioning for us to precede him. Aunt Titania did without hesitation, so I followed after a moment, not wanting to be left behind.

“I know all too well what you mean,” she said to him, sighing. “My family wasn’t so great with empathy either. At least it kind of makes sense with a Moonstriker, but for us...it was awful.”

His expression was perfect sympathy as he nodded to her. “It’s against your family’s very nature. People who bond sapphires should always have a feeling for others. It was why Duskbringer lands were always more heavily populated than the other parts

of the Summerlands. They had a leader who cared for them, and even more, who wasn't afraid to say so." He shook himself then, and waved it off as though it didn't matter, smiling at her. "Things will be better now. Every family in the Summerlands has someone in charge who cares about its people. Or at least someone on their way to being in charge. Now we can start doing the work to fix the mess our parents and grandparents made."

I almost stopped dead in my tracks and stared at him. I'd spent a lot of time thinking something similar while working with Aunt Titania trying to fix things in Amalion City, but it had been the last thing I'd expected to hear coming from the mouth of this man. A man in perfect expensive clothes with a perfect beautiful face—a man whose car had to be that red sports car in the driveway that was worth more than the house I grew up in.

Had I been wrong?

Chapter 5

Kit

Aubrey was expecting me to eat some babies or something, I realized as we headed down the stairs. The way he'd been so concerned about not putting out the household staff in the chalet, that meant something.

To be honest, I'd never paid much attention to the Gloombringer—or Duskbringer—family. Nikka had told me early on that Adair would handle that aspect of The Plan, so I'd been grateful and entirely ignored that quarter of the Summerlands. Adair had been true to her word, perhaps the most perfect piece of The Plan that I hadn't had any control over, so again, I had ignored Oberon and Titania and their drama.

Meeting Oberon had made me grateful I hadn't had to deal with him—he'd been almost as bad as the fucking Dawnchaser. Sure, he hadn't been trying to kill people and take over like Huxley had, but he'd been so puffed up with his own self-importance that I was sure I'd have ruined the whole damned plan by socking him right in the face if I'd been forced to spend more than a meal or two in his company.

Adair Courtwright was clearly a saint, and as such, the perfect match for my baby brother.

I led the Duskbringers down to the dining room, which wasn't at all hard to find—most of the main floor was open-concept, with the main sitting room separated from the dining room only by an enormous fireplace that was roaring away.

Caspian, I noted, had taken the seat at the table closest to the fire in question. Poor little desert-dweller that he was, he was struggling with the temperature this far up Mount Slate. Frost sat beside him, though he'd taken off a sweater he'd been wearing on the trip, and rolled his sleeves up as well.

That was my brother. No complaints about how hot he was that close to the fire. Always, he thought of other people before himself. That was doubly true with Caspian, since he loved the guy.

For once, I left well enough alone. I'd given Caspian enough shit when he and Frost had been busy falling in love, and repeatedly misjudged the man, so I owed him at least keeping my mouth shut when he was struggling now and then. I'd been gone from Moonstriker lands long enough that honestly, it was a little colder than I was comfortable with as well.

It wasn't like the ridiculous tight duelist costumes I wore held a lot of heat in. They weren't made for that sort of comfort. They were made to stand out. Like those little neon frogs in the jungle whose bright colors were like a sign that said, "only come over here if you want to get your ass killed."

That was me, a neon frog.

But it seemed to work for me, so I wouldn't complain.

Lunch was very Moonstriker, a hearty autumn squash soup with other vegetables, served with a side of crusty whole-grain bread. It was odd, how when I'd first left home I'd eaten meat at every meal—reveled in it, like that little bit of rebellion was the most important thing in the world. And now? Well, this was nice. A little taste of one of the good parts of my childhood, eating soup and bread with Frost.

I smiled at the bowl and looked up at him. "Roasted vegetables. You said those are

healthier than boiled ones, didn't you?"

He smiled over at me, nodding. "They are. Not that there's anything inherently wrong with boiling, but some of the nutrients leech out into the water, which is often then thrown away instead of being used. So you lose a lot of the things that make the food healthy by boiling them."

And with that, we were off into Frost's head, with an in-depth discussion of the relative nutritional values of vegetables, what was lost in cooking water, and what the nutrients were good for.

It was just perfect.

It helped that I had Caspian on my side now. Rain and Ember had always been fine with Frost's rambles about science facts, but Caspian was more like me—he liked them. He actively encouraged Frost to talk about things, interested to learn more. Or maybe we just both wanted to hear Frost talk about something he was passionate about.

And my little brother was passionate about so many things. It was great.

Lady Duskbringer listened with polite interest, which was all I ever expected from strangers with my brother. As long as they weren't rude, they were fine.

Aubrey, on the other hand, kept looking at me as though I was a dog performing a new trick, and one he hadn't expected at that. He didn't pay much attention to Frost, but that didn't matter. Caspian and I asked enough questions for everyone.

We were halfway through lunch, and we'd moved into how healthy fiber was, when Zana showed Dad and Florian in. I stood from my chair, beaming at him, before I realized I had no idea what we did now. The limits of our relationship were in the

middle of a huge redefining, and whatever I did next was likely to have far-reaching consequences.

What if I did something weird or wrong?

Dad had no such concerns. He strode forward and drew me into a hug, squeezing me tight. “I’m so glad you’re all safe.” He turned to look at Caspian, who’d also stood, and oddly enough, pulled him into a hug too. “Thank you for protecting my boys. They’re everything to me.”

Caspian ducked his head as Dad turned to pull a slightly confused Frost into a hug as well. “They’re kinda everything to me too. I mean, well?—”

“Frost is,” I clarified for him, throwing him a wink. It didn’t especially hurt not to be the center of Caspian Sunrunner’s world. It would be nice to have someone feel that way about me, but it was more important that Frost did.

It struck me, then, that it might be nice to have anyone feel that much about me. I couldn’t complain about what I had now. Having my father was more than I’d ever expected out of life, and I’d long had nothing at all, living with Huxley fucking Dawnchaser, who didn’t love anyone but himself.

But it’d be nice to have someone who looked at me the way Caspian Sunrunner was looking at my brother.

You know... Nikka started, in the tone that said she was about to start in about fucking Aubrey again, and I sighed at her.

Please don’t. He’s still glaring at me for no apparent reason. I don’t need to deal with that.

But he's hot , she pointed out. You noticed that yourself, the way you were looking at him earlier .

She wasn't wrong. When he wasn't trying to disappear into his own shoulders, Aubrey was hot as the hells. Hot as Mount Slate, I supposed. He had broad shoulders and thick arms, curly chestnut hair and piercing, almost violently blue eyes. But whenever he wasn't trying to disappear, he seemed to be glaring at me.

Funny, how much Nikka had built him up, only for him to seem to dislike me as much as I already disliked him on principle.

He doesn't , she disagreed. He can't dislike you, it doesn't make any sense. He doesn't even know you. Usually everyone likes you right away, and then they get to know you and realize you're not nice .

I sighed and slid down into my chair. I rarely had an outward reaction to anything Nikka said anymore. In my line of work, it had been important to cover up all emotions, even ones aimed internally—but this, it was tempting to groan at.

Regularly, I thought to myself how much Nikka had in common with Frost, and this was one of those things. Neither of them were the kind of asshole who called themselves “brutally honest” as an excuse to say douchey things. They were just inclined to state facts as they saw them, and then be confused that the facts were “brutal.”

Like telling me people liked me because I was pretty, then they got to know me and realized they didn't like me after all. It wasn't wrong at all. It wasn't even something I tried to avoid. It just also kind of sucked sometimes, knowing that to most people I was pretty, but not much else.

That, of course, was when the universe decided to prove me wrong.

“Kit!” cried an excited voice nearby.

I already knew who it would be, a smile forming on my lips before I’d even completed the thought, let alone spoken. I stood again and opened my arms, only for them to be instantly filled with Florian Dawnchaser’s younger sister, Fawn. I hadn’t realized they were planning to bring her, but it sort of made sense. She was bonded to Soz as much as Florian, and frankly, anyone who met her and didn’t love her was a cold-hearted monster.

Like her father.

“Winnie said you’d be here,” she gushed as she pulled back, looking up at me with sparkling bright green eyes. “She said that you and Nikka had to be here, because we were all going to die without the two of you. She said I should thank you for giving up everything in your whole life to try to save us all.” She leaned in and lowered her voice to a stage-whisper. “Just like one of the characters in the stories! She said you left home with nothing, like the miller’s son in the fox story.”

I blinked at that for a moment, trying to process it all.

Winnie, of course, was Fawn’s stone. And apparently her stone was aware of what was going on, in a much deeper way than any of the humans present. Not for the first time in my life, I wondered how much stones communicated with each other.

Also funny, the fact that I’d named myself for the fox in the story she was referencing, not the hapless miller’s son who was left to fend for himself after his father died. The fox had found him, saved him, and managed to see him married to a princess by the time all was said and done. Frankly, I preferred to see myself as the fox, benevolently helping the people who couldn’t manage for themselves, rather than the bumbling hapless miller’s-son-turned-prince.

Still, I was never going to tell Fawn that she was wrong. Fawn was one of the few utterly perfect creatures that I knew of, and hurting her in any way was monstrous.

Instead, I motioned to the table. “Why don’t you all sit down, and I’ll go find Zana and see if the kitchen has enough lunch for the three of you as well?”

“You didn’t need to—” Florian started, but he was cut off by his sister.

“Thank you, Kit. It smells yummy. Is it tomato?”

That set Frost off, who was also an enormous fan of Fawn, and he began to explain to her about the squash soup, and how it was quite popular in Moonstriker lands. I took the opportunity to go find Zana, who it turned out, had enough remaining soup to feed an entire sportsball team.

“That’s a lot of soup,” I said, lifting myself onto my toes to peer into the industrial sized pot.

She smiled at me and shrugged. “We usually end up with more guests than we’re warned about ahead of time, so we like to be prepared. At worst, we eat soup for a few days. No one minds. It’s good soup.”

That figured.

“It’s very good,” I agreed. “Can I help carrying a tray back to the dining room?”

She laughed, waving me off. “I get paid to do a job, and you lot rarely ever let me do it, since you almost never visit. Let me do my job this once.”

So I headed back out to find that they were all still sitting in the dining room, but had turned the enormous wall-sized television in the sitting room on. Since there was no

divider, it was easy to see from the table.

They'd tuned in to the news, of all things.

"—report says that he choked to death on his dinner last night," a woman was saying, and wasn't that a fucking appetizing thing to be listening to while eating our own lunch?

The shot pulled away from the face of the woman who'd given the report, to her and a man sitting across from her at a news anchor desk. He looked oddly bemused for someone who had just heard a thing like that, and shook his head, slowly. "Gee, Carrie, that seems like such bad luck. Oddest thing I've ever heard of, for a Dawnchaser."

I blinked, staring at them, but no longer seeing them.

Fawn, sitting next to where I was standing beside the table, tugged on my jacket cuff. "You should sit down and finish your soup. Our father being dead doesn't mean you shouldn't eat."

Her father being dead.

Huxley Dawnchaser was dead. Choked on his own dinner.

I let my body fall into my seat once more, staring into the middle of nothing. Was I bothered? I did, in fact, seem to be. But...why?

I'd hated Huxley Dawnchaser with every part of my being. It was incomprehensible that I was bothered by his death. Huxley's last act as a free man in my presence had been an attempt to kill me, as ridiculous and ill-planned as it'd been.

So why did him dying bother me at all?

He'd been a monster, and the world was better off without him. Not having to put him on trial saved Florian and Titania a whole lot of trouble.

But I had also spent five years at Huxley's side. I'd killed people at his behest. And now I would never see him again, and part of me hurt, because it was like I'd lost a piece of myself, even if it had been a horrid, diseased piece.

I was never, ever going to tell anyone else that. Not when his own children were sitting there listening to the news story, seeming unaffected, eating their soup when Zana delivered it, and commenting only on how good the food was.

I couldn't even explain it to myself properly, I wasn't going to try to explain it to anyone else.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 6

Aubrey

Lunch was mostly quiet for a while after the new arrivals.

Lord Moonstriker and Lord Dawnchaser. The former was unmistakable on sight, and his very arrival made me jealous of Kit Moonstriker. His father practically leaping forward to embrace him like that was...well, it was certainly something I would never have.

It made me miss my mother, who'd very much been the kind of person to do that.

Florian Dawnchaser, on the other hand, was somewhere near my age, and much more reserved. Aunt Titania introduced us and we shook hands, but he remained quiet as he ate his lunch.

His sister was another matter entirely.

I couldn't help blinking in shock when she dismissed her father's death, but then...well, how much had I reacted to my own father's death? I'd barely known the man, and what I had known, I hadn't liked. I hadn't reacted much different than Fawn.

Well, no, I'd at least been surprised by news of his death, if not emotionally affected all that much.

Mostly, hearing about Oberon's death had made me mourn Mother again. My mother had been a near-perfect human being. Kind when she could be, and a vicious fighter when people tested her. Smart and strong and entirely unwilling to ever give up.

If I could be half the person she was, I'd consider my life a success.

Aunt Titania talked about Mother often, and seemed to hold her in the same esteem as I did.

Well, no, that wasn't quite right. Sometimes, I thought perhaps Aunt Titania had been in love with Mother. She got this wistful, faraway look when she talked about the things Mother had done or said in her youth. At first I'd assumed she was simply missing a bygone era, but then I had realized Aunt Titania didn't really miss her youth. Her father had been cold and controlling, her older brother distant, and her younger brother...well, he'd died. Even if she had fond memories of him, I imagined it would be difficult to think about him at all most days.

Like it was still hard for me to think of Mother, even though her death had been after a long illness, and not sudden and violent like Titania's brother's.

Most of the people present drifted over to the other side of the room when they finished eating, watching the news or talking in low voices about things I wasn't privy to, so I was the odd man out.

I suspected that would always be the case in this sort of situation. I hadn't been raised among these people, didn't know them, wasn't married to or sleeping with any of them. I simply didn't belong.

I turned to Aunt Titania, hoping for the proverbial port in a storm, only to find her deep in conversation with the beautiful dark-skinned woman who'd arrived with the Sunrunner. I almost didn't recognize the look on her face, because I'd never seen it

on her before, but when the woman returned it with a coy lowering of her eyes, I realized that maybe I did recognize it after all.

Aunt Titania was flirting with the woman.

“Everybody likes Moonstrikers,” Fawn Dawnchaser said to me as she leaned in, her eyes also on Aunt Titania and the other woman. “They say Dawnchasers are pretty, but everyone wants a Moonstriker. Maybe it’s because they’re so smart.”

I turned to her, cocking my head to the side. “She’s a Moonstriker?”

She nodded back. “She’s Frost and Kit’s sister, like I’m Florian’s. They went all the way to Sunrunner lands to protect her cause she asked. Like Florian used to protect me from Father.”

I blinked at her for a moment, not sure of how to respond to that, because...well. Her father was the man who was dead, whom no one cared about. I supposed it wasn’t a shock he’d been the kind of man someone had needed protection against, if that was how everyone felt about him.

I shook off my astonishment after a moment and smiled at her. “I’m very glad you had your brother for that.”

“Me too,” she agreed, as she looked over at where he was leaning against Lord Moonstriker. That was a lot to deal with. The Moonstriker was exactly what I might have pictured as a child. Tall and imposing, with a serious demeanor that made me wonder if he ever smiled...well, until he looked at Florian Dawnchaser, and he did smile. It transformed him from the terrifying powerful figure I’d always expected him to be into a person I could imagine having a conversation with. From a statue to a human being. Fawn turned back to me, her head cocked at an angle that reminded me of a bird, and asked, “Do you have a brother?”

“I’m afraid not.” I glanced around and realized that made me unusual in the room. Among the rest of them, only Caspian was an only child. Even Aunt Titania had once had brothers, even if they were both now gone. Maybe it was something about being in a ruling family—they’d been required to have lots of children to ensure succession lines or something.

This, for some reason, made Fawn screw up her whole face in what looked like concern. “That’s no good. I’d give you Florian, but he’s very busy now. Dawnchasers are terrible, you know.”

Again, I had no idea what to say to that. Wasn’t she a Dawnchaser? “That’s very kind of you,” I hedged. “But I’ve managed so far without a brother. I think I’ll make it. I have Aunt Titania, after all.”

She turned and looked back at where Aunt Titania was definitely flirting with the beautiful woman, watching them a moment. Then finally, she nodded. “Cove likes her, and he’s a very good judge of people. That means she’s good.”

Cove.

Aunt Titania called the Moonstriker by his given name as well, but that fact didn’t make it any less surreal. I supposed if they liked each other, it didn’t make sense to call each other by titles.

Still, it was all so very strange.

“She is,” I agreed. “Aunt Titania is the best. I don’t know what I’d have done without her since my mother died.”

“Oh, mine too,” Fawn said, beaming, like it was something wonderful that we shared. Then her face fell. “But that was a long time ago. She died when I was born, so I

didn't know her. Did you know your mother?"

"I did. I grew up with her, lived with her until this spring when she died."

Her face went soft and slack, and somehow, despite never having known her own mother, and clearly disliking her father, there was nothing but empathy in her gaze. "I'm so sorry. It's good you have your aunt. Having people is important."

I ducked my head, nodding, and tried to be subtle about wiping my eye. "It is. It's very important to have people, or even just one person."

She patted me on the hand, and then stood up, heading over to practically drape herself across the laps of her brother and Cove Moonstriker.

Surreal. It was all surreal. Like going from watching a movie to being thrust inside it, interacting with people you'd only ever seen on a screen before.

A moment later Aunt Titania bounced over to take Fawn's empty seat next to me, barely suppressed excitement bubbling in her eyes. She took my hand, squirming in her seat like a child who needed to go to the bathroom.

I raised a brow at her. "Something you need to discuss?"

"You have to come to dinner with me on the terrace. Did you bring a sweater?"

"I did. And . . . okay?"

"Well, with me and Ember Moonstriker. I told her I'd bring you. So...I have to bring you. I didn't want it to be weird. Is it weird? She's too young for me, isn't she? It is weird."

I turned our hands over and grabbed hers, holding it tight and meeting her eye. “Aunt Titania. Cove Moonstriker must be close to twice his beau’s age. I’m almost certain that you’re younger than him and she’s older than Florian Dawnchaser. If anyone judges you for it, screw them.”

Her shoulders dropped and she nodded, letting out a deep breath. “You’re right. That’s right. It’s okay. But you can come to dinner, right?”

I couldn’t hold back my smile at her. “Of course I can. I’ll be happy to.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 7

Kit

Lunch drifted into socialization in the sitting room, which...well, it wasn't for me.

Father wanted to snuggle with his boyfriend, which I couldn't blame him for—it was a little on the chilly side, and I was far too used to mild Dawnchaser weather to be comfortable at anything with a temperature lower than a warm spring afternoon. But everyone was talking about plans for after the meeting at the chalet was over, and that?—

Well, I'd been living a long time with The Plan. Trying to move all the pieces into position. After The Plan succeeded hadn't been a consideration in that. I had no idea what I would do after the meeting was done.

I knew it , Nikka said, sighing piteously. Vex warned me, but I ignored him, and he was right .

Should I even ask what he was right about?

I took a perfectly good monkey and gave him anxiety by telling him stone business .

Of course. That sounded very like my brother's stone. Just as I'd always seen Nikka as being like Frost, Vex had always been a little more like me than I cared to admit aloud, and it sounded exactly like something I would say.

I'm fine, Neek. I just...we've been working on this a long time, and I didn't have time or interest in planning what came after. Not when I didn't even know if we'd succeed. This was more important than that.

And now you have nothing. Her tone was so dramatic that if I hadn't known her so well, I'd have thought she was fucking with me, trying to get a reaction.

I still don't know we're going to succeed, you know, I pointed out. It was terrible and manipulative, trying to turn her mind back to worrying about The Plan, but seriously, there was nothing in the world that made me more uncomfortable than feelings. I deeply did not want to discuss what I was going to do with my life once The Plan was over.

It was even worse than chatting with Delta about my future plans, because I knew Nikka wouldn't approve of me being a duelist anymore. It had been a means to an end, a way to get myself into Dawnchaser court. If I kept doing it all the time, why, I might get myself killed.

Like The Plan couldn't have done that on its own.

She gave a deep sigh, and I worried we were going to have to have that conversation right then, but like a gift from the gods of old, Ember arrived at that moment, dropping herself with force into the seat next to me.

"Hey," she said, as unsubtly as a freight train barreling down the tracks I was sleeping atop.

I lifted a brow at her.

"Don't look at me like that. I haven't even said anything. You don't know?—"

“What do you want, Ember?”

“Maybe I just want to talk to my big brother who abandoned us all to Delta’s tender mercies when we were kids.” She stuck out her lower lip in an exaggerated pout that I was sure got her her way with most people.

I rolled my eyes. “You were seventeen when I left. The only way you were a kid was in the technical sense, being very slightly underage. And I don’t feel guilty for leaving. We both know I did what I needed to.” She scowled and looked away, eyes flicking back and forth as though she was desperately searching for something. “You know if you want something from me, you can just ask.”

She glanced back up at me, eyes still searching. “Can I?”

I leaned in and pressed my shoulder to hers. “You’re still my little sister. Even if I’m a shitty older brother.”

Weirdly enough, that seemed to confuse her. “But you weren’t, Kit. You were the best older brother. That was why we were all shattered when you left. You were always there. Always helped and fixed and protected. Honestly, I...I think leaving was the first thing you ever did for you.”

The whole world seemed to go silent at that, even the constant buzz of Nikka in my head.

“I thought you knew we felt that way.”

I swallowed hard, bracing myself, and shook my head. “I didn’t—I’m sorry if my leaving?—”

“No, don’t apologize. I just...I guess I thought you were tired of living your life for us

and wanted something for you. I couldn't really blame you." She leaned her shoulder into mine, but then just seemed to entirely deflate against my side. "I missed you."

"Missed you too."

We sat in silence like that for a moment, and while I saw Frost glance over, everyone else left us alone. Like they realized it was an important moment for us, whether they'd heard the conversation or not.

When Ember finally dragged in a slow, deep breath, I decided to break it.

"You did come over because you wanted something, didn't you?"

She gave a giggle, followed by a wet sniffle as she pulled herself up and turned to me. "I need you to have dinner with me tonight."

Affecting a flirtatious look, I pursed my lips at her. "Now Ember, I know we're technically not related by blood, but?—"

"Ew, gross, don't be a jerk," she demanded, elbowing me in the side. "I mean"—she glanced around and lowered her voice—"Lady Duskbringer invited me to have dinner with her, and she's"—she waggled her eyebrows and made an hourglass figure with her hands—"you know. Gorgeous."

"Also intelligent and talented and possessing of perhaps the strongest will I've ever seen in my life," I added, pressing a hand to my chest as though offended by Ember's focus on physicality.

Ember didn't seem to notice, just sighed. "Is she? She seemed kind of awesome, but I've never met her before today."

“She used to be one of the most skilled duelists in the Summerlands,” I added, since it was one of the things I actually knew about her. Sure, I’d spent most of a week in Gloombringer Castle, but I hadn’t become besties with her. Most of what I knew was from Huxley Dawnchaser’s self-involved rambling over the years I’d worked for him. The man had actually told me to steer clear of her, just in case she was still as good a duelist as she’d been in her youth.

I’d mostly been offended he’d thought so little of me.

“She’s also a recovering alcoholic, if I understand correctly,” I added. I didn’t want to be a tattletale, but it seemed like a good thing for Ember to know if she was going to pursue the lady. It might save on misunderstandings, if Ember just didn’t drink around her to begin with.

Ember seemed to take that onboard with no issues, nodding. “That’s good to know. I’ll make sure the staff doesn’t include wine with dinner. But...but that’s the thing. She asked me to have dinner with her out on the terrace, and I said yes, but—but she’s bringing her nephew. And that’s, like, super awkward, right?”

I took a deep breath and worked hard not to groan. “You want me to come to dinner with you and Titania Duskbringer, to distract Aubrey?”

She bit her lip and looked so hopeful that frankly, if she’d been asking me to shoot myself, I’d have been hard-pressed to say no. “If that’s okay?”

I sighed, nodding. “Of course, Ember. Anything to help the course of true love.”

“You don’t think I’m trying to shoot outside my league? She’s the freaking Gloom—um, Duskbringer. That’s weird. Been saying Gloombringer all my life. It’s...It’s nicer, though.”

“It is,” I agreed, and then turned back to the subject at hand. “And there isn’t a single woman in the world out of your league, little sister. You’re a fucking catch, and she’d be lucky to snap you up. So of course I will come along and play wingman. Professional nephew distracter, that’s me.”

She jumped out of her chair, grinning, and twirled around. “I’m gonna go figure out what to wear. And talk to the staff to make sure there’s no wine. I’ll meet you on the terrace at five?”

“At five,” I said, nodding and trying to stifle my amusement. She was excited, and I didn’t want to do anything to dampen it. Ember deserved something good in her life.

She left, and things quieted again, everyone watching some television show.

I didn’t even try; I’d never managed to feign interest in television, and I wasn’t going to start now.

Instead, I stood, turning to head back up the stairs toward my own room for a little quiet time.

Halfway up, Nikka gave a tiny sound, and it was . . . odd.

Something wrong, Neek? I asked, almost by rote.

There was a moment of silence before she answered. She—Ember, that is, she said leaving home was the first thing you’d ever done for yourself.

Oh. Shit. Nikka ? —

But you didn’t leave home for yourself. You did it for me. Because of The Plan. You did it for everyone in the whole Summerlands.

Sometimes, it was really fucking inconvenient that Nikka knew me so well, and worse, that she could practically see inside my head. With anyone else, I could bluster and claim complete selfish douchebaggery, and they'd sigh and dismiss me as an asshole. It made everything easier when people did that. They tended to stop noticing me at all when they thought I was a hopeless asshole.

Kit , Nikka said, her voice smaller than I'd ever heard it before. Have you ever done anything for yourself?

And damn it all, I didn't have an answer for that.

Not because I was some selfless perfect creature who only cared about others. But because I just didn't fucking know. Who had time to worry about themselves when the whole world was in danger?

Tomorrow , I told her. I can worry about that tomorrow.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 8

Aubrey

Aunt Titania was more cheerful than I'd ever seen her before while she was getting ready for dinner. Getting ready for her date, really. She took a curling iron to her hair, which I didn't understand at all, since her hair was naturally a riot of red curls. Did she need it more curly?

Me, I'd have given anything to remove the curls from my hair. They were inconvenient, and made it look messy even right after I combed it, sticking up in all directions, and it only got worse the shorter I got it cut. I'd tried one of those military cuts back when I was in high school, and went around looking like I'd stuck my finger in a light socket for a month till it grew out.

"Should I wear green or blue?" she asked me, poking her head out of the bedroom, curling iron held next to her head, the curls that framed the left side of her face wrapped around it.

I didn't want to say that they both looked fine and were essentially the same outfit, so I considered for a moment, then nodded. "The blue. It goes with your eyes."

She nodded seriously, darting back into the bedroom.

It was maybe the cutest thing I'd ever witnessed in my entire life. I wished my mother had ever gone on a date. I wished—but no, it was too late for that. There was nothing left that I could do for Mom other than fulfill her last request to me, and "be

happy,” which it turned out was more complicated than I’d initially thought.

It would make me happy, I decided, if Aunt Titania was happy. She’d been through as much awfulness in her life as Mom, and never once put herself first, which I thought made her a rarity among the rich and privileged. Hopefully Ember Moonstriker would be a good match for that, and she’d want to lift Aunt Titania up as much as I did.

I suspected they would forget I was there in five minutes flat, and I could just claim a headache and go to bed early, leaving the two of them to spend the whole rest of the evening together.

When Aunt Titania seemed well and truly distracted with readying herself, I ducked into my own room. I didn’t exactly have a wardrobe to “dress for dinner,” but I felt like people would notice if I wore the same thing to two meals in a row, so I rooted through my bag for one of my two button-down shirts. Frankly, it was a bit ridiculous that I even had two, since I’d only ever needed one, just for special occasions. But Mother had insisted I needed a new one a few years ago, because the first was getting a little tight.

I’d kept both, of course, even if the older one strained at the seams a bit when I wore it.

I grabbed the first one I found in my bag and dropped it onto my bed. Hopefully it wasn’t too wrinkled from being in a bag for...well, for a while. It wasn’t like I’d unpacked my things at Gloombringer Castle. I pulled off the T-shirt I was wearing and tossed it on a nearby chair, reaching for the shirt.

Sound drifted in the open window, which...why was it open? The main room of the suite had glass from floor to ceiling, which didn’t open or close, but my bedroom had one glass wall and one wooden wall with a window laid into it. For reasons I didn’t

understand, that window was open.

I went over to close it, and my attention was grabbed by an annoyed feminine voice. “I’m just saying, we should start choosing a surrogate right now. I’m not rushing, but these things take time. You have to find just the right person.”

“We’re thinking of adopting,” a male voice said, and I’d have recognized Adair Courtwright’s sweet tenor anywhere. He was the first rich person I’d ever known, and still one of the kindest.

The woman, whoever she was, was apparently scandalized. “You couldn’t! Children of the Moonstriker line?—”

“Like Ember?” Another man asked. I made it to the window and looked out to find Rain Moonstriker, Adair, and a woman. I wanted to say she was an older woman since she had white hair, but with all the Moonstrikers around, it was hard to say if that meant anything.

Rain and the woman were wearing those incredibly formal outfits like he’d dressed in back at Gloombringer Castle, coats with high collars and fancy embroidery, but Adair looked...well, he was wearing just what I planned to wear to dinner. Pants and a button-down shirt. His sleeves were even rolled up, and he looked so much more comfortable than any other time I’d seen him. He was looking at Rain like he’d hung the moon, and it was absolutely adorable.

The woman seemed none too thrilled with whatever Rain meant by asking about Ember, and she went quiet, sighing and turning away. “Where’s the house staff?” she demanded after a moment. “They’re supposed to be here to greet us. These bags aren’t going to carry themselves.”

Rain dropped his head and shook it, looking defeated, but Adair smiled gamely and

walked up next to her at the back of their white SUV. “No, they’re not. That’s why it’s our job to carry our own bags like the adults we are.”

I loved that guy.

There was a soft knock on my bedroom door behind me, and I quietly finished closing the window before turning away. “Come in. I’m just putting on a shirt for dinner.”

Aunt Titania poked her head in. “I just heard one of the staff in the hallway, apparently the last party just arrived.”

I nodded and motioned to the window. “Rain Moonstriker and Adair Courtwright, with an unhappy woman.”

Titania let out a laugh that chimed like a bell. “That’d be Rain’s mother Delta. She’s a nightmare, just like Oberon was. I’d avoid her if I were you.”

“Is she also Ember’s mother?” I asked. I was still trying to figure out all the family relationships.

Titania leaned her head one way then the other. “Kinda. Ember is adopted.”

Ahh. Suddenly it all made sense. Delta wanted blood-related grandchildren, and Rain wasn’t interested in pandering to her leaving his sister out. That seemed very like the Rain I’d met before.

Aunt Titania shook off her interest in the arrivals and did a twirl in front of me, bright blue silk swirling through the air. “How do I look?”

“Stunning.” I quickly buttoned my shirt the rest of the way and tucked it into my

pants, then held out my elbow to her. “Am I an acceptable escort?”

She beamed at me. “You’re a perfect everything, Aubrey.” She reached out and grabbed my elbow, leaning on me. “I’m so glad Adair found you and brought you home, even if I’m sorry you ever had to meet Oberon.”

I smiled down at her and realized the truth even as I said the words, “I’m glad he found me too. It’s fine about Oberon. I’d rather know the truth than feel like I missed something by not meeting him. But I also know I would be missing out if I didn’t spend time with you.”

She sniffled, burying her face in my shoulder for a moment, and then muttered, “You’re not allowed to be sweet like that. I’ll ruin my makeup.”

“And you’ll still be gorgeous, and I think she knows that. Why else agree to have dinner with you? If the woman in the driveway just now is her adopted mother, I’m pretty sure she’s going to catch trouble for not coming to dinner with everyone else, so she’s agreed to get in trouble in order to spend more time with you.”

Aunt Titania gasped, looking up at me, her blue eyes luminous and damp. “Do you think so? That does sound like Delta. Maybe...maybe I should ask if she wants to do dinner a different time.”

I leaned down and kissed the top of her fluffy hair. “Nope. I’m absolutely certain she’d rather have dinner with you than that woman.”

Maybe Ember hadn’t heard the conversation in the drive just now—or maybe she had—but regardless, when a person had an attitude like that, it had a way of coming across whether they intended it or not. I didn’t doubt that Ember Moonstriker knew her value alongside her siblings was considered relative, at least by the woman who’d apparently raised her.

Kit was doubly lucky, I thought, to be her nephew and not her son.

Except...well, he'd implied he had been raised as her son, hadn't he? Which meant that in her mind, he was probably in a similar situation to Ember. Not her real child, and therefore lesser.

Dammit, I hadn't wanted to feel bad for him.

"Shall we get down to dinner?" I asked Aunt Titania, desperate to distract myself from the whole train of thought.

"Yes, good idea," she agreed, taking a bracing breath and then practically tugging me toward the door.

We got out to the terrace, and Ember Moonstriker was already waiting there, looking beautiful in black pants and a bright blue shirt that almost exactly matched Aunt Titania's loose, flowing clothes. The same color as Aunt Titania's Duskbringer eyes.

The way Ember's eyes caught on Aunt Titania and held, skimming her and then racing back up to meet her avid gaze, biting her lip like she was trying to hold back gushing commentary?

Oh yeah, this thing was in the bag.

Well, except for one monkey wrench in the works.

Kit Moonstriker was sitting at the table next to Ember.

How the heck was I supposed to leave them alone to get to know each other better if he was there?

I was sure I scowled at him, and his return smirk was just as infuriating as every other thing about him. It was like he did it on purpose.

“Ahh, I do love a dinner companion with a ferocious scowl,” he said lightly as we arrived at the table. Fortunately, Aunt Titania and Ember didn’t even seem to notice.

Instead, they were in the middle of the all too familiar “oh my gods I’m so lucky” stare.

“You look beautiful,” Ember said, her voice breathy. Oddly enough, she moved so fast to pull out a chair for Titania that she almost seemed to flicker. Moonstrickers were supposed to have time powers, though, weren’t they?

Aunt Titania sank into the chair without glancing at it, staring up at Ember and smiling. “I love your hair. It looks so much less unruly than this mess.” She motioned to her own curls.

I personally suspected they had similar amounts of trouble with their very curly hair, but it was adorable to watch them argue the point.

“Oh no, it’s beautiful,” Ember said. “Like a sunset.” Then she gave a nervous giggle. “Duskbringer, I guess.”

Aunt Titania giggled as well, and leaned forward onto the table.

I took the remaining seat, not wanting to speak up and break the moment for them.

Finally, Ember sighed and leaned back, adjusting her position in her chair and trying to compose herself. “I hope you don’t mind that I brought my brother. I already talked to the staff to make sure there’d be enough food for everyone.”

“I’m sure I can keep him out of your hair,” I told her, trying to bolster Aunt Titania as much as anything. She had brought me not to come between them, but as a buffer to make sure things weren’t weird. She didn’t need to be worrying about entertaining Kit Moonstriker.

He lifted one of those obnoxious white eyebrows of his at me, unimpressed as ever. “Really, I can’t imagine how much attention you need. It was...Aubrey, right?”

How was it even possible to be as much of an insufferable ass as he was? I wanted to reach out and slug him, and I wasn’t by nature a violent person.

How much attention did I need?

I wasn’t the one who’d come to dinner uninvited. The one who was trying to take attention away from where it belonged.

He also clearly hadn’t worried about changing for dinner, wearing the same ridiculously tight red duelist costume. The one that showed off every freaking line on his body, from his narrow waist to his long, muscular torso, to... nope, he was sitting down. I was not going to think about his ass as we’d followed him to the suite.

“Yes, it was Aubrey,” I ground out through clenched teeth. “I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name.”

He leaned forward, grinning, planting his elbow on the table and his chin on his fist. “Kit. But that’s okay. Most people just call me ‘you there’ or ‘boy.’ I’m sure you’ll fit right in.”

The unmitigated gall of this . . . this asshole .

I ought to?—

My breath stuttered, and only when I struggled to draw in another did I realize it was happening again. Like in the car. The shaking. My whole body was shaking, starting from the inside and flowing out into my extremities. I could barely lift my hands, they were flapping around so badly.

That was when the noise started in my head, just like the noise at a movie theater before the movie started, the ad from the sound company, only it didn't start low and ramp up, it was just suddenly there, and loud, so loud that I couldn't hear anything else.

The others were talking. They rushed around, Kit leaping up and practically jumping over the table to get to me. Aunt Titania looked panicked, and I could see her mouthing out my name, but all I could hear was that deafening noise .

Everything went black.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 9

Kit

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

No, seriously.

Aubrey'd been about to snark back at me, which was cute—almost endearing—when he'd started convulsing instead. A moment later he dropped, and I barely had time to jump and catch him before his head hit the ground, his body still shaking uncontrollably as he lay on the tile floor of the terrace.

My hands were shaking almost as much as he was, because what the hells was I supposed to do? I'd never been so helpless in my fucking life.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. His whole body went slack and he started breathing properly again. Within seconds, he was blinking, staring up at me with those giant bright blue eyes of his.

His voice was low and raspy when he asked, "What the heck just happened?"

Now, I had a clue what had happened. Nikka had warned me that this was going to be hard on him, and I hadn't expected otherwise. But seeing it in person, it was somehow worse than I'd been expecting.

"You just had a...I don't know, was that a seizure?" Titania asked, her voice high and

watery, clearly holding back tears. “Should we go? Take you to a hospital? Where’s the nearest hospital?”

Aubrey, as I’d rather expected, was already shaking his head in denial. Then he paused, winced, and put a hand to his temple. “No. I’m okay. I just...I don’t know what happened. One minute everything was fine, the next everything was shaking. And there was a loud noise.”

“I’ve heard of this,” Ember said, though she was biting her lip. Ahh, the problem with being one of the normal-ish members of a genius family. Half the time you didn’t trust what you knew, because someone else around was surely more clever than you, right? I’d done the same for years. When Titania and Aubrey looked at her like she held all the answers to everything and no one shouted her down, she took a deep breath and continued. “The altitude. Some, um, mountain climbers have noticed it as an issue, being exposed to high altitude for the first time can cause seizures.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. It wasn’t what was wrong with Aubrey, but it was as good an answer as anything, and frankly, I needed Titania and Aubrey to not rush back to Amalion City to find a doctor for him. Titania seemed on the cusp of doing just that, so if Ember calmed her down, that might help. I turned back to look at Aubrey. “Have you ever been up this high before?”

Slowly, he sat up, still trembling slightly, but he shook his head. “No. I was...I was born near the coast. Out in The Banks in Duskbringer lands.”

I hadn’t known that for certain, but it had been a reasonable enough guess, from his slight accent—it was barely noticeable, but it was there. Most people I’d known in my life had called it “Gloomer,” because of its origin on the coast of what had then been called Gloombringer lands.

I looked at Aubrey and hoped his pride was on the same level as mine, and wouldn’t

allow him to back down if challenged. “There you go, must be that. I mean, unless you feel like something else is wrong with you. Do you think you need to go to a doctor?”

It was subtle, the tone and facial expressions I used to imply that going to a doctor sounded like weakness to me. I didn’t want Titania to pick up that I was manipulating him. Hells, I barely wanted him to pick up on it.

Nikka had spent a decade telling me how Aubrey wasn’t like other boys, but I had doubts about that. And there, in that moment, he proved me right. He drew himself up, those wide shoulders going straight and taut, and he shook his head even as he winced at the motion. “I’m fine. If it’s just altitude, I can handle it.”

Titania frowned, clearly not impressed with our nonsense, but she also didn’t say anything. She’d probably put up with a lot more ridiculous blustering from her brother in the last forty-some years, so I wouldn’t have been surprised if she couldn’t even put a finger on why the conversation bothered her.

But no, she proved herself more clever than I’d hoped. “Are you sure, Aubrey? Your health is the most important thing. There’s no need to be too proud to go to the doctor.”

Damn her for being sensible.

“Why don’t we let him sleep on it?” I asked. “He looks exhausted.”

Aubrey’s eyes narrowed at that, and shit, trying to play on her concern was all well and good, but if it further activated his need to be the big strong man, he was going to hurt himself by pushing too hard.

So I jumped back in before he could get his back up too far. “Hells, I’m tired after

just driving here, let alone driving here and then having a seizure. I might go to bed, too. Why don't I help Aubrey back to his room, and you two go ahead and have dinner?"

The look on Ember's face alone would have been payment enough for my service, pleased and grateful, if still a little worried about Aubrey. Titania glanced back at her, then ducked her head when she found Ember watching her avidly. It was the fucking cutest thing ever, and clearly Aubrey was not immune to how adorable it was.

"That seems like a good idea, Aunt Titania. I'll go get some rest, and you stay and have dinner. I'll talk to you in the morning. Okay?"

"Okay," she said, drawing the word out, uncertain but hopeful. "Are you sure you don't want to go to a doctor?"

"If it happens again, I'll think about it," he agreed, squeezing her hand tight. "Promise."

Maybe I hadn't given Aubrey Sagara enough credit for his intelligence. Promising made her feel better about it, even if what he'd promised was literally worthless. Promising to think about a thing was as useful as an IOU written in lipstick on a bar napkin. It was a trick I'd used myself, because so many people were taken in just by the word promise when said with conviction.

Titania let me help him up, and while he was more reticent about it, he allowed it as well. I was rather impressed, because the man was a solid wall of muscle. I hadn't been expecting that. He looked big, sure, but that was because he had those wide shoulders and was almost as tall as Father or Frost. I'd assumed the baggy T-shirt had been masking a thin frame.

But no. He was built like a bull under there.

I valiantly refrained from copping a feel. Just because he was hot didn't mean I liked him. Not that I hadn't fucked plenty of people I hadn't liked very much, but this was a very different situation.

Still, I'd agreed to see him to his room, so I dutifully brought him all the way upstairs to the door to the Cedar Suite.

He didn't thank me, just nodded, which was frankly more than I'd expected. Then, just as churlish as he'd proven already, he turned and shut the door in my face.

Ugh. Good riddance. This whole thing couldn't be over soon enough.

Then I could figure out what I was going to do with the rest of my life.

I did consider heading right to bed, or at least to my room to read, but then my stomach growled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten dinner. Dammit.

So I slunk down the back stairs, avoiding going past the terrace windows, and made my way into the kitchen.

Weirdly, Rain was in there. He was talking to Zana, who smiled and blushed at him before ducking out of the room. That was my littlest brother. He charmed everyone, whether he was trying or not.

Well, Except Oberon Gloombringer and Huxley Dawnchaser, but those two had both had their heads so far up their asses they hadn't been able to see anything but themselves.

He turned to smile at me. "Kit. I heard you were here, but we hadn't seen you yet. How are you doing?"

How was I doing? That was...I just blinked for a moment, completely at a loss. How was I?

You're a disaster , Nikka sighed. But even I know that's not what he needs to hear .

Fair, that.

"I'm fine," I said instead, giving a halfhearted shrug. "It's good we're finally here getting this done."

Funny, referring to something that had been my whole life for so many years in such casual terms.

He sighed and nodded, glancing down at the kitchen counter before leaning against it. Damn Moonstriker formal clothes. I did not miss wearing so much white that I had to check every surface I might brush against for dust. "It is good. But Zana tells me you just took Aubrey to his room. Is he okay? Should we get him to a hospital?"

And that? That was a weird reaction when he didn't even know what had happened. I knew Rain had met Aubrey at the peace-summit-that-wasn't, but how had he gotten so attached that he would risk the world for one guy's health? "He had a seizure. Ember said she'd heard of people having that reaction to high altitude before. He'll be fine."

He frowned, biting his lip, but nodded. "It's...not unheard of. But it could be something serious. Maybe?—"

"Seriously, Rain, he's fine. He was back to his old charming douchebag self less than five minutes after the event." I waved a hand in the direction I'd come from. "He slammed the door of his suite in my face and everything."

That inspired one of Rain's usual bitchfaces. "You didn't think maybe that had more to do with you than him? I've met Aubrey, and he was very nice to me."

"Everyone is nice to you unless they're a giant gaping asshole. Your judgment is inherently flawed, because you're too nice. And important. To those of us who are normal, non-rich, non-future-family-heads, Aubrey's kind of a dick."

Rain remained unimpressed, scowling at me, disbelieving. Still, after a moment he shook his head and continued. Dammit. "Regardless of how Aubrey feels about you or why, it's important that he's okay. He's...important."

"Yeah, yeah, last heir to the Duskbringer, blah blah?—"

"Not that." He looked to where the cook was working busily across the room and took a step toward me, leaning in. "When they met for the first time, and Adair saw his threads? He passed out."

For a moment, all I could do was blink. Threads? Passed out?

Right, threads. Adair was bonded to a moon tear. He saw the so-called threads of fate. Huxley had more than once complained about how he wanted the special magic boy for himself. I had always thought he wanted the magic for himself more than he gave a single damn about Adair.

If Adair had passed out upon catching a glimpse of Aubrey, it meant that Aubrey's threads must be unusual. Overwhelming, even. Ugh. So Rain and Adair were already sort of aware of what I'd been working toward all along, even if they didn't understand what it meant. This was the problem with the families not communicating with each other. No one knew everything.

And me? I was never going to be the one to start show and tell.

Instead, I waved it off. “It’s not an aneurysm or whatever you’re worried about. He’s going to be fine. I promise.” I leaned in, looking him in the eye. “You could tell if I were lying, don’t you think?”

“I could,” he agreed. “But Kit, how exactly are you so sure what it isn’t?”

I sighed and rolled my eyes, letting my body fall against the counter. The cook, a lovely, motherly woman came up and set a tray of sliced, toasted bread slathered with butter on the butcher block next to me, and I turned to look at her, wondering whether she’d complain if I stole a piece.

As though she’d read my mind, she turned toward me, assessing, then pursed her lips and clucked at me. “Too scrawny,” she said with a sigh. “Let me get you some soup.”

I could have kissed her.

“Kit?” Rain prodded, still standing there, inconvenient little bugger that he was. Little siblings, man.

I sighed and turned to him. “If I tell you I know exactly what’s going on, and it’s under control, will you leave me alone?”

“Not too likely, no.”

Of course not.

He stepped right up next to me, and for the first time, I realized that my brother was the same height as me now. Also, he was pretty good at being intimidating. Bravo, Rain.

“You planned what happened at the summit,” he said, voice still low. “And I love

you, and you're my brother, but you knew Oberon was going to be killed and you didn't try to stop it. I can't trust that you have everyone's best interests in mind. What if it turns out that Oberon's son is just as expendable to you as Oberon was?"

It was a valid point, and I couldn't deny it. Worse yet, if Aubrey dying meant that the world would be saved, I wouldn't have hesitated to follow through with The Plan anyway. One life weighed against millions was a price I was willing to pay, even if that was unethical and immoral of me.

My little brother knew me all too well, really.

I threw my hands up in the universal sign of supplication, and lowered my head, never failing to meet his gaze. "I promise, I don't believe Aubrey Sagara's life is in danger. If anything, I intend to protect him." I huffed when he remained unmoved. "Dammit, I brought a whole fucking bag of granola bars for his whiny ass, what more does everyone want from me?"

That, finally, caught Rain's attention and sucked the seriousness out of him. "Granola bars?"

"Yes, granola bars. He's one of those fucking weirdos who likes them."

He took a step back, eyeing me up and down for a moment, but he didn't ask how I knew that. He just shook his head, lips pursed, looking surprisingly much like his mother. "Are you planning for any of us to be killed? For there to be violence?"

"Mount Slate is gonna be an asshole," I answered instantly. "But no. I don't think anyone else is going to be violent, and if I can stop it, no one is going to die here."

That seemed to satisfy him, and he nodded, though he was still watching me, his demeanor something between hostile and confused. Then, even more weirdly, he

threw his arms around me. “I missed you, you know.”

Aww hell, what could I say to that?

I hugged him back and whispered, “Missed you too, little brother.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 10

Aubrey

When I turned twenty-one, some of the guys on the docks had insisted on taking me out to celebrate my “adulthood,” and spent the entire evening refilling my beer until I couldn’t see straight. They were stand-up guys, so they’d made sure I got home safely afterward, but that didn’t change the fact that in the morning, I woke up feeling like I’d spent the night sucking on a used sweat sock and my head was actively trying to cave in.

I’d never gone out drinking again, because it wasn’t a feeling I’d been eager to repeat, and the spinning head and laughter of the night before hadn’t been enough to offset the suffering in the morning.

But there I was, years later, with that same pounding headache and dry mouth, wishing for death, or at least darkness.

The room was too darn bright, with too much glass and not enough wall.

There was so much noise everywhere. Aunt Titania bustling about the other rooms in the suite. Someone inhabiting the room on the other side of my own. The freaking electricity in the wires inside the walls.

Had I always been able to hear that? Maybe there was a fault in the chalet’s electrical system. It was a pretty old house, so that wouldn’t have been a huge shock.

Or . . . not a huge surprise, anyway.

Might end up being a huge shock.

I blinked my eyes open, staring at the high wooden ceiling beams for a moment, listening to Aunt Titania singing in the other room.

Singing.

Aunt Titania.

Oh yeah. Dinner must have gone well. As much as it hurt my head to do it, I dragged myself out of bed and slowly dressed for the day.

When I opened the door to my room, Aunt Titania was standing in front of the mirror on the wall, fluffing her hair. She turned and beamed at me, but as she took me in, the expression fell into one of concern. “Aubrey, sweetheart, you don’t look so hot. Did you not sleep? Is it?—”

“I’m okay, Aunt Titania,” I promised. My voice was on the hoarse side, and she pursed her lips at me, dubious about how okay I could be when I sounded like that, so I cleared my throat and tried again. “The thing last night just took it out of me. I’m sure I’ll be fine. It didn’t happen again or anything like that.”

That, unlike the promise that I was fine, did seem to appease her.

“Maybe you’ll feel better after breakfast,” she conceded. “I think I smell maple syrup. I know you love all those sweet breakfast foods.”

I wouldn’t have suggested otherwise—who didn’t like pancakes?—but the truth was that she was the one who loved sweet things for breakfast. I suspected it was because

she'd lived with Oberon for so long, and the man had apparently been disdainful of anything that tasted good.

I had yet to hear a single thing about my father that made me wish I had gotten to know him better.

"Sounds good," I agreed with her. I wasn't especially hungry, but I suspected that eating something would help. It had helped on the morning of my hangover. I'd thought my mother was trying to torment me when she'd showed up with fried potatoes and scrambled eggs for me to eat, but once I'd managed to eat them and keep them down, I had felt quite a lot better.

So after a few more minor adjustments to her hair, we headed out of the suite and downstairs toward the dining room.

"So," I asked, casual as possible while we walked, "how was dinner?"

She blushed and giggled, ducking her head so that her hair fell in an auburn cascade that covered her face. "It was...nice."

"Oh, nice?" I asked, leaning in and pressing my elbow into her arm. "Is that what they're calling it these days?"

She giggled again, leaning back into me, then turning and burying her face in my arm. "She's kind of amazing. She's so...smart. And gorgeous. And fun. It's been years since I just had dinner with a woman and—you know?"

Oddly enough, while I'd never yet been on a date, I thought maybe I did know what she meant. Aunt Titania had only rarely in her life managed to do anything for herself without being made to either compromise or feel guilty by my father, selfish asshole that he'd been. I suspected it was half the reason she'd spent close to twenty years of

her life drunk, though she'd never said as much to me.

No, she would never excuse her own behavior like that—only the behavior of others.

“Hopefully this won’t take too long,” she said, sighing and leaning into me. “We’ll go up to the mountain this afternoon, since everyone is here, and see if we can take care of things. Then we’ll get you back to Amalion City and take you to a doctor.”

“I’m really?—”

“I know, I know, you’re fine. You’re a big strong man who can handle all things, but I’d feel better if we got you to a doctor. Seizures are nothing to mess around with. I know, we’re worried about protecting the whole Summerlands from Mount Slate right now, and that’s the only reason I didn’t drag you back to the city last night.” She looked up at me, her blue eyes huge and luminous. “You’re all I’ve got, Aubrey. I can’t go losing you too. Who would be my wingman then?”

I chuckled and ducked my head at that. “I knew it. There had to be a real reason you wanted me around.”

She wrapped both arms around my one and squeezed tight. “There is, you know.”

It was Duskbringer for “I love you,” and we both knew it. Nothing more needed to be said on the point.

So I smiled at her and nodded back. “I’d drag you to a doctor too. I’d like to keep you around for a good long while as well. I imagine Ember would too.”

That brought the giggle and blush back, and all was right with the world.

Well, until we walked into the dining room, and the vibe in there was...heck, it was

terrible.

Everyone was silently sitting around the big table, stiff and formal and frankly, way overdressed for breakfast. Those Moonstriker clothes looked uncomfortable to survive in, let alone try to eat or sit or any number of other regular activities a person was required to do every day.

Back at Gloombringer Castle, Rain had made them look comfortable.

I supposed that meant the problem wasn't the clothes.

The older woman from the previous evening—wearing one of those stiff suits—was sitting in the middle of one side of the table glaring at Cove Moonstriker, who was also wearing one, sitting at a random corner of the table next to his boyfriend Florian.

If the woman was Rain's mother, didn't that make Cove her brother? What the heck had he done to offend her?

Meanwhile, Kit was sitting at the other end of the table, right next to the door we'd come in, feet kicked out and resting on a nearby chair, looking like the same insouciant asshole as usual. He was wearing a dueling costume that was an even brighter red than the one the day before. Or maybe it was the same costume, and there was something wrong with my eyes.

He sent us a lazy smile. "Morning, Duskbringers. I trust you slept well?"

Ember was frowning, though, and oddly enough the expression was aimed at me. "You don't look so hot, Aubrey. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe?—"

"I thought he looked rough too," Aunt Titania interjected. "Maybe...I could call our family physician, and see if she'll fly out here, so we don't have to leave."

Oh boy.

The very last thing I needed was Aunt Titania flying doctors out to meet me. Most people in Duskbringer lands could barely afford to go see a doctor when they were seriously ill. They sure as heck couldn't order a doctor to come see them. I never wanted to be the guy who was phoning up to order a doctor when the people around me still couldn't afford the bare minimum of care.

As though reading my mind, Kit scoffed. "By all means, let's summon a doctor from hundreds of miles away, make her cancel all her other tiny little pleb appointments, and inconvenience everyone we possibly can on Aubrey's behalf."

Aunt Titania scowled at him. "Aubrey's health is important. I'm not going to just sit by and?—"

"Let him go see a doctor under his own power?" Kit's voice was dry as dust, and he wasn't looking at Aunt Titania, but at me, as though I'd been the one to suggest flying a doctor out to see me. "There's a town not an hour from here, and they've got this handy dandy thing called a doctor's office. We can call ahead and make an appointment. Tell them it's an emergency, even, so they're sure to squeeze him into their schedule. Maybe inconvenience a few people instead of dozens or even hundreds."

Aunt Titania paused and cocked her head. "There is?"

Like she'd missed the insulting attitude of his whole speech, and only heard the information he'd offered.

He smiled at her, this irritating, ingratiating, beautiful smile, like he was a freaking angel, and leaned toward her, expression earnest and almost hopeful. The absolute asshole. "There is, ma'am. I'd be happy to drive him into town for you, since you're

needed for the meeting on Mount Slate, and Aubrey and I are just extras in this mess.”

She utterly melted. “Oh Kit, that’s so sweet. You’d really do that for us?”

“Of course,” he agreed, reaching up to take her hand. “This meeting has to happen, but if Aubrey needs a doctor, I can get him there easily. I can even call the office on the way. We can leave now. Or right after breakfast, if you think we should eat first.”

Biting her lip, she turned to look at me, gaze assessing.

“It’s fine, Aunt Titania. I don’t even need a doctor. I certainly don’t need you to fly one out for me. It can wait until the meeting is over and we’re back in Amalion City.” I motioned toward the empty chairs across from Delta Moonstriker, and she looked at them.

Or . . . no.

She wasn’t looking at the chairs. She was looking at my hand. Which was shaking again. Darn it all. I pulled it back and shook it out forcefully, as though that would stop the tremble.

Delta Moonstriker sighed aloud, frowning over at us as though finally deeming us important enough to acknowledge. “What’s going on? Why do we need a doctor?”

“Aubrey had a seizure last night,” Ember offered instantly, and she sounded oddly conciliatory. I didn’t like that on her, and somehow wanted to...to protect her from it. She bit her lip a moment, and then went on, looking as though she expected a rebuke. “I thought...that is, I’ve read that happens sometimes when a person is first introduced to high altitude.”

Delta pursed her lips, scowling, but as she opened her mouth, I decided whatever she was going to say, I didn't want to hear it. "That's true. I looked it up myself. And I've never been sick a day in my life before, so it must be that. I'll be fine. I'll see a doctor when we get home and?—"

Delta interrupted me, but I didn't hear it. All I could hear was the same surround sound roaring from the night before, as the whole world began to shake.

Chapter 11

Kit

Once again, I saw the moment Aubrey checked out and it checked in.

His eyes went blank, his whole body convulsing as he started to go down. I leaped from my chair faster this time, and since they were closer to me and I didn't have a whole table to get across, I managed to grab him around the waist and hold him up.

Titania also leaped in, holding onto him for dear life, her huge blue eyes filling with tears as we carefully set him down on the floor while his body convulsed.

"I can't—" she said, the words coming out wet and tremulous. "I have to?—"

"I said I'd take him to the doctor, and I'll take him to the doctor," I promised, trying to sound kind and helpful, like I was as in the dark as everyone else and only worried about Aubrey's health. "We'll go right now."

She bit her lip, watching him like a hawk, trying to check his pulse and likely failing, because he was still shaking. "I should go with you. This isn't as important as him."

"The entire world isn't as important as one man, who'll also die if we fail?" Delta demanded, her voice strident and entirely free of anything resembling sympathy, and it made me clench my teeth so tight my face hurt. I'd been thinking that very thing all along, and it annoyed me to have any thoughts in common with her.

Titania's jaw clenched, and she met my eye in time to see me roll my own dramatically. At that, she gave a single tiny laugh. I reached over and grabbed her hand, even as Ember slumped onto the floor next to her, wrapping her arms around Titania's hunched shoulders.

"Maybe I was wrong," Ember whispered. "Maybe?—"

"He's going to be fine," I told her, meeting her eye and holding it. "I promise you. Nikka says he can absolutely handle this, and it's going to go away."

Titania's head shot up, and she stared at me. "Your—your stone? A time stone? Says he's going to be fine?"

Delta, still sitting at the table, made a rude noise. "His diamond ."

She said the word like she was talking about a pile of shit I wore proudly on my person, because that was precisely how she saw it.

"Now is not the time, Mother," Frost hissed, turning back to glare at her as he joined us on the floor. His left hand was balled into a fist so tight that his skin was paling at the knuckles, and for a moment, I worried he might hit someone. Then I realized it'd probably be Delta, and that was fine. He turned to me. "Even if this is about altitude, and even if Nikka says he'll be fine, he needs to see a doctor. Let me help you carry him to the car."

Delta, though, was determined to have her say. I wasn't sure if she thought I was putting Aubrey in danger, or if it was the usual expected hate for any stone that wasn't her own, but she sighed and seemed terribly put upon as she pushed out of her chair and came over to look down on us. "His stone doesn't have anything to do with time, so he has no idea what's going to happen in the future. But really, we can't just go traipsing all the way back to?—"

And that, apparently, was the moment that my brother snapped.

“For one of the most educated women in the world, it shocks me that you don’t know aquamarines can be clear, Mother,” Frost snapped, his pale eyes blazing with anger. “Nikka has always been an aquamarine. Kit has always been bonded to a time stone. One that sees the future more clearly than any of the rest of us, since he’s obviously been preparing for this exact moment for ten damned years. So if you don’t have anything useful to add, stand back and let me help Kit get Aubrey to his car, so he can take him to the doctor.”

Every Moonstriker in the room, myself grudgingly included, went silent at the uncharacteristic outburst. Poor Rain looked like a deer in car headlights, like he thought he needed to do something, but in the face of Frost being the angry one, he simply couldn’t remember what it was. He’d always been the family peacemaker, but he’d never had to do it for Frost before.

Delta just stared at him, stunned.

None of the others seemed to want to interrupt what was clearly an important shift in family dynamics, so the tension just sat in the air for a moment as the two of them stared at each other.

Frost didn’t back down, and pride for the man my little brother had become bubbled up in me. Damn, he was good.

Delta took a deep breath, preparing to respond, and well, screw that.

I tapped Frost on the shoulder, getting his attention on me. “On three?”

He gave a curt, efficient nod, and we counted to three together, then lifted Aubrey. He’d stopped shaking, and was just pliant between us as I wrapped an arm around his

waist and Frost supported his shoulders—it was automatic, as though we’d been carrying men around together for years. Sure, it was because I wasn’t tall enough to properly get my arm under Aubrey’s shoulders to support him, but still. I didn’t work that seamlessly with anyone but my brother.

Titania ignored Delta, shooting to her feet and rushing ahead, opening and holding doors.

“Maybe I should take him,” she worried as we headed down the front stairs of the chalet. “The two of you were a little, ah, antagonistic. Plus I’d hate for him to think I’d abandoned him. I would never?—”

“He knows you wouldn’t abandon him,” Ember said, her voice low and soothing, and I turned to look at her in surprise. I hadn’t realized she had that in her. “But he also wouldn’t want you to leave this unfinished. He was about to agree to go to the doctor with Kit anyway, so there’s no reason to change that plan now.”

“Kit,” Aubrey mumbled, starting to come around.

I glanced up at him from a step below where he and Frost stood, but I didn’t think he was all there just yet.

Then he let out a scoff and muttered, “Handsome asshole.”

Frost gave a full belly laugh at that. “It’s like he knows you, Kit. Have you two met before?”

Ember also seemed amused, and well, it wasn’t wrong. He wouldn’t have been the first, tenth, or even hundredth person in my life who’d classified me precisely that.

Even Titania seemed amused, though, and that was useful. It might make her less

inclined to worry and insist on coming with us, and the last thing I needed was to be responsible for the lives of the entire remaining Duskbringer family. It was going to be hard enough to take care of Aubrey.

“Should we put him in the back?” Ember asked, hurrying ahead to get to my car first. She looked down into the backseat, head cocked at an angle. “Or, um, not. Why didn’t you unpack your car at all, Kit?”

“He’s just one guy, and he’s not that big.” I scowled at her. “It’s not like he’s Frost.”

She gave a little shrug that said she didn’t agree but wasn’t willing to argue with me, and opened the front passenger door, hitting the lever to recline the seat and pushing it back as far as it would go. “I guess that’ll probably work.”

She stood there until Frost cleared his throat, then seemed to realize that we were waiting for her to move and jumped out of the way.

As I’d expected, Aubrey fit just fine in the passenger seat of the car, especially with the thing entirely reclined that way. I pulled the seat belt across him and secured it as well as possible with him leaned halfway back, then tested it. Yeah, that should do the trick.

When I stood, Frost was looking at me, and it was just like our childhood. He knew. I knew. We each knew that the other knew.

“Is there anything else you should take with you?”

I glanced in the back of the car, at all my supplies, then back at him. “If there is, I haven’t thought of it in ten years, and Nikka hasn’t pointed out that I missed it.”

You’ve got everything , she promised me. If anything, I think you’re over-prepared. I

doubt we're going to need six gallons of water .

I did not roll my eyes at her. You just think that because you never need any water. Humans require quite a lot of it, every single day, remember?

Her only response was the mental equivalent of a shrug, because there was no way she truly could understand. I often wondered what it might be like to be a stone. To require literally nothing. No sustenance, no water, not even human contact, because as much as I hated the last, it was still a necessity sometimes, for my mental health.

I don't know about that , she interjected. Stones that get left alone for long periods of time can go funny. Sometimes, you know, they even threaten the whole world .

And point taken.

“Are you sure I shouldn't go?” Titania was asking, leaning on Ember and looking at the prone and admittedly pitiful Aubrey.

Frost, who'd been looking over my backseat packed with supplies, turned toward her with an empathetic smile. “They'll be fine. If Kit says his stone knows Aubrey will be okay, then he will be. Nikka's never been wrong that I know of.”

She nodded at that, but she was still watching Aubrey, biting her lip.

Frost leaned toward her, and his tone went conspiratorial. “And if they've been antagonistic toward each other, I have it on pretty good authority that's how my asshole of a brother flirts these days.”

She finally tore her eyes off Aubrey, looking up to meet Frost's amused gaze, and giggled. “Well, I wouldn't have thought that of Aubrey, but I guess it turns out maybe him too.”

I groaned and shook my head at them, but it wouldn't do to protest too hard. She was giving in, and giving me what I needed. Telling them they were wrong wasn't going to help at all.

So instead I closed the passenger door and headed for the driver's side. "I'll have Aubrey call you when we're done with the doctor, and let you know what they say. I know it's going to be fine, though. I promise. He's not dying."

She bit her lip, but nodded, even as she never took her eyes off him. "He's just...he's all I've got, you know? I need...I need him to be okay. He deserves so much better than this. Imri deserved better than this, and he's her baby."

She was tearing up, and that settled it, I had to get the hells out of there. I looked at Ember, who was already moving in to comfort her. Perfect. The romance I hadn't expected, but definitely needed to happen.

Plus bonus happy sister.

I gave them all a strained smile from the other side of the car and nodded to Frost. "We'll see you on the other side, okay? You all take care, and be cautious when you go up the mountain today. We're getting there, but this isn't done yet. Aubrey will call, and we'll be careful getting back. If cell service cuts out for any reason, I promise, we're going to be fine. Nikka and I have been planning contingencies for a decade."

Frost nodded, Ember watching me over the top of Titania's head with shrewd interest, and Titania nodded, wide-eyed and shockingly innocent, considering she was the oldest person present by almost fifteen years.

Probably had something to do with how she was the only one who didn't know me.

Without another word to any of them, I climbed in and started the car. Frost waved as we headed down the driveway toward the bridge, and oddly enough, I waved back.

It wasn't like I was never going to see him again.

We were just going to see the doctor, less than an hour away.

Still, something cold settled in my belly as the tires of the car made that distinctive click-thud as we crossed onto, and then off the bridge that led to the chalet.

It felt like an ending.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 12

Aubrey

“Thank you again,” a voice said, filled with genuine emotion. “I appreciate you fitting us in at the last minute like this. He’s really starting to worry me.”

My mouth was as dry as a wad of cotton balls again, but with a bit of coppery tang, like I’d maybe bitten my tongue. I blinked my eyes open, and cringed at the bright light everywhere around me.

“Oh, hey, he’s waking up, I’d better go and make sure everything is okay,” the voice said, and I realized they were talking about me.

Kit Moonstriker. He was talking about me.

I was worrying him?

I forced my eyes open again, blinking repeatedly and lifting my hand to shield them from the bright outside world. I opened my mouth to ask where we were, or what was going on, or why he was worried, but all that came out was a garbled mess of syllables that didn’t resemble words at all. Panic welled up in me at that, but Kit reached out and squeezed my arm.

“It’s okay. This will pass. I’m not pretending confidence in things I don’t know, and I’m not bullshitting you. Your brain is just a little scrambled at the moment. It gets better.”

I wanted to demand how he knew that, but I didn't think I could properly ask, so I didn't try again. Instead, I focused on breathing.

Kit glanced over at me, then back again, and that was when I realized he was driving. That, and there was a building behind his head. Rather, we weren't anywhere near the chalet. There were buildings outside the windows of the car.

He reached down to his clavicle, holding up a clear stone tied into a leather band. "This is Nikka. She's an aquamarine, and sometimes, she knows the future. She swears you're going to be okay."

My eyes focused on the stone, and it seemed to twinkle at me. I waited for the usual jab of jealousy when someone talked about their amazing stone powers, but it didn't come. Only the relief that Kit probably knew what the hell he was talking about when he said I was going to be okay. That I hadn't lost my ability to speak forever.

People losing their voices happened sometimes, I was sure. What was it my grandmother had said when she'd ended up in the wheelchair when I was a kid? Not all of us start out abled, Aubrey dear, but even when we do, best to remember that's a temporary state .

That had stuck with me in ways I suspected she hadn't intended, but also...it was good. It made me appreciate what I had, and that there was nothing inherently wrong with a person being disabled, when that day eventually came. That it did come to all of us, no matter who we were and what we did. Goodness, righteousness, and even money didn't stand as some kind of magical bulwark between humans and disability.

I'd just rather expected it to be something like my grandmother hurting her back and not being able to walk anymore, when it came for me. It had never occurred to me I might not be able to speak.

Still, I could handle this, regardless.

I took a deep breath, then another, focusing on words in my head. On how to form the one I needed.

“Doctor?” I finally managed to ask.

“Yes, that was the office of the doctor here in Yomi. It’s a pretty small town, but they’re the only doctor’s office anywhere near us, so they’re full service. Even better, their afternoon wasn’t too busy, so they offered to fit you in as soon as we get there.” He motioned forward. “We’re a couple miles away still, but I have to admit, I started to worry when you didn’t wake up on the way here. When I left the chalet, the plan was to let you decide whether you wanted to see a doctor, but?—”

I held up a hand, nodding my understanding. I’d have done the same in his shoes, so I didn’t need an explanation.

He squeezed his stone tight for a moment, and I imagined he was speaking to it. Ahh, there was the old jealousy.

It was lonely, growing up surrounded by people who all had a stone for a best friend and having none of your own. Even the people who bonded stones that didn’t speak had a sort of...well, a bond with them. There was a presence there. They were never alone.

I’d always had an acute sense that I was missing something important. That there was something wrong with me, and that was why no stone wanted me. It didn’t matter how many times Mother and Grandmother had told me they didn’t believe that was true. It had always been couched in the idea that someday I would bond, and I couldn’t help but wonder...what if I didn’t?

And then, of course, I hadn't. I was now twenty-two and still unbonded. I was the only person I had ever met who didn't have so much as a tiny diamond, and it was like living without a last name. Every employment application asked for stone information. Every college application, every government form, every person you spoke to at a party. "What's your stone?" was a safe question, because every adult in the Summerlands had a stone.

Everyone but me.

I sighed and closed my eyes to blot it all out. As much as Kit had proven to be an asshole, he hadn't done anything wrong just by bonding a stone. Maybe it wasn't my fault for not having one, either, but I couldn't blame Kit for my own baggage.

Plus it had been kind of him to take me to the doctor and not let Titania make it into a major production. Flying a doctor all the way to the chalet just for me had been the last thing I'd wanted—was still the last thing I wanted. As much as I also wanted to make Aunt Titania happy, that was simply too ridiculous.

It wasn't until Kit reached for the start button on the car that I realized we'd stopped. When the car was off and he'd removed his seat belt, he turned to me. "This is okay? I didn't want to force a doctor on you."

How oddly thoughtful of him. I took a deep breath, hoping for the best, and braced myself before trying to speak. "Okay."

He smiled at that and then motioned to the building to one side of us. "Here we are, then. The only doctor's office for fifty miles in any direction, and they're waiting for you."

I nodded, and was grateful when my body didn't rebel as I reached for the door handle. I was still trembling minutely, but it wasn't out of control or painful. Better

yet, the horrible noise was absent. Everything sounded strange and hollow, but it wasn't being drowned out, and that was what mattered.

Kit led the way into a small clinic, where we were met by a woman in scrubs. "Mr. Emrys?"

"That's me," he agreed, and that was odd. I thought it had been Moonstriker. Maybe he was Kit Moonstriker the way some people thought I was supposed to be Aubrey Duskbringer. But that would mean he'd grown up outside the rich family, wouldn't it? "And this is your patient, Aubrey Sagara."

The woman smiled at me, handing Kit a clipboard and motioning for me to follow her, and I didn't have much time for thinking about Kit's childhood after that. They weighed and measured and tested me for all the usual doctor stuff, but also, they tested my reflexes, my skin sensitivity, and then put me in a giant whirring machine that was almost as loud as the noise that kept coming with the tremors.

The whole time, they asked questions. "Does this hurt?" featured heavily, yes, but they also asked for a plethora of details about the seizures, and anything the two incidents had in common. Ironically, the only thing I had been able to think of was Kit's presence at both.

Kit, who'd finished filling out the information on the clipboard and handed it back to another woman, laughed and shook his head at that. "Are you suggesting you're allergic to me, Duskbringer?"

I lifted a brow at him. "Honestly? It wouldn't surprise me."

I didn't want to be an asshole to him, since he was being downright nice now, but really, he'd been fucking insufferable over the last day. Not that disliking something especially hard resulted in an allergy, but if it could, I'd have been deathly allergic to

Kit Moonstriker. Or maybe Kit Emrys.

Or maybe Kit Moonstriker was the asshole, and Kit Emrys was okay.

Finally, we were sitting together in a small room with just three chairs and a medical chair-bed-thing—what the heck were those even called?—and it seemed like the tests were done.

“Think I’m dying?” I asked, only half joking.

Kit hesitated before shaking his head, which was rather telling, I thought. “Nikka said you’d be fine,” he said.

It was odd, how important that seemed to him. Oh, not that I was going to be okay; I wasn’t naive enough to think he cared about me. But he’d said that his stone thought I’d be fine earlier as well, and there he was repeating it like a mantra. Like if that wasn’t true, he didn’t know what he would do.

“The doctor seemed worried.” I stared at the signage on the wall across from me, something about foot inspections that I wasn’t really absorbing. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a doctor worried about me before.”

“I had one slap me once,” he said, tone light, but it was false. He was trying to make us laugh, but neither of us were in the mood.

I turned and looked at him. “Do something unintelligent?”

Now that, finally, elicited a real response. A wicked grin. “Always.” Then he rolled his eyes and motioned to his costume. “I mean, come on. I’m a duelist. It’s my job to do ridiculous, inadvisable things.”

That? That took me by surprise. “You’re...actually a duelist? I thought dueling was illegal in Moonstriker lands.”

“It is,” he agreed. “Delta outlawed it herself. I’ve spent the last decade living mostly in Dawnchaser lands.”

I continued to stare at him, feeling a little like I was ramming my head into a brick wall rather than having a conversation. “But...why?”

He snorted at that. “Too much to believe a man just wanted to be a duelist?”

“Yes.”

“Some of them do, you know. They train their whole lives. They love their job. For a while, anyway.”

The room was silent a moment, and I realized he had no intention of explaining further. So clearly, I had to prod him. “But you don’t. You said some of them, that implies not you. So why do it?”

He reached up and brushed his fingers against the aquamarine around his neck, sighing, then looked at me again. “Like I said, Nikka sees the future. She knew this was coming, and where I needed to be. Given my skill set, the best way to get into Huxley Dawnchaser’s good graces so we could mitigate his behavior, was as a duelist.”

That was bizarre. Almost incomprehensible. Why had he even needed?—

The doctor chose that moment to come in, smiling at us, and took a seat on the remaining empty stool in the room. “How are we feeling? No more tremors?”

I shook my head. If anything, the tremors had decreased since I'd woken up, and hadn't returned. "I feel...miserable. But no tremors."

"You said this is your first time at altitude, which is a possibility, of course. Have you...are you a musician, by chance? Learning a new trade?" She paused, looking at me a moment with her head cocked, then asked, slightly more dubiously, "Recently bonded a stone?"

That caught Kit's attention like nothing else had. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, there's some hearing damage," she said, motioning to a file folder in her hands, "which could just be incidental from ambient noise at a workplace or music venue, but there are some other abnormalities that I've only ever seen once before, and that was in a traumatic bonding."

I blinked in shock at the very notion. "What the heck is a traumatic bonding?"

"In the previous case, the child was too young to be bonding, and hearing the stone's song caused her some hearing damage like this. In addition to the way your brain is reacting, well...this looks a lot like that. She also had seizures before the bond was able to complete."

I shook my head. "But I don't have a stone. I've never bonded."

She nodded. "I saw that, and that's quite unusual. It's not the oldest I've ever heard of someone bonding their first stone, but it's close. Is there any chance that there's a loose stone in the vicinity of where you're staying that's trying to bond you?"

All I could do was sit there and stare at her. Was she saying that now, now, I might be bonding a stone? And worse, that I was so fucking broken that I was physically reacting like a small child?

Chapter 13

Kit

“So, should we take it that you didn’t find anything we need to worry about?” I asked, while Aubrey sat there staring at the doctor.

It looked like the poor guy was broken. Did he not want a stone? That was hard to imagine, when it was something that would set him so far apart from every other person in the Summerlands. Sure, some people liked to be different, but no one wanted to be that different, did they?

The doctor opened the folder in her hands and scanned it again. “No, we found no sign of infection or other illnesses that might be causing the seizures. No bleeding in his brain, no tumors, just strain and exhaustion.”

“I’m not—” Aubrey started, then cut off, shook his head, and went silent again.

I grinned at the doctor and shot her my best finger-guns. “All right then, doc, I think we’ve got all the info we need, and Aubrey here just needs some time to process that. We pay up front?”

The doctor seemed troubled by the idea of us leaving, like she really wanted to get to the bottom of Aubrey’s problem, but she was out of ideas if he didn’t have a handy dandy stone in his pocket that it turned out he was bonding.

I had news for her.

Mount Slate wasn't gonna fit in anyone's pocket anytime soon.

Half an hour later, we were back in the car, heading back toward the chalet at a much slower pace than I'd set on the way to the doctor's office. Five miles an hour below the speed limit, precisely.

Aubrey was still and silent in the passenger seat, stewing on whatever it was that had him bothered. Maybe people with stones had just been such assholes to him that he'd decided he wanted no part of us, let alone to become one of us. Maybe he treasured being a unique butterfly or?—

"I was getting used to being a freak, you know?" he asked me suddenly. "Yep, only guy in the whole world with no stone. The pitying looks when people found out, and the way no one seemed to need your help anymore, like not having a stone made you a child to them."

Honestly, I didn't understand. I'd bonded Nikka at a pretty average age, unlike Frost, who'd bonded so young that people hadn't believed him when he said he could hear Vex. It hadn't helped when the song he'd described hadn't sounded to them like what they knew of stones. Because Vex, like my brother, was a unique creature.

Like Aubrey. One too young, the other too old.

I imagined both had been treated like shit over it.

I'd watched Fawn Dawnchaser, too, treated like a child by assholes around her despite being nearly twenty, so it wasn't a new concept to me. People liked "us versus them" categories, and as long as they had a "them" to revile or pity, sometimes both, they were happier about their own lots in life.

Given my experience with both Frost and Fawn, I doubted what Aubrey wanted was

sympathy. Problem was, I didn't know what the hell else to give him.

"Sounds shitty," I finally said, as simply as possible. "I didn't like being treated like a kid when I was one. If someone did it now, I'd probably slug them."

He snorted at that, which seemed like a good thing to me. He wasn't glaring or scowling, so that helped as well.

We drove in silence again for a while, the only noise the road beneath our tires.

"You really think there's a stone up there at the chalet that I'm bonding?" He stopped and shook his head. "That doesn't even make sense. Why would they keep random unbonded stones up there with almost no people around? At best, that's sort of mean to the stone, making them spend all that time alone."

It is , Nikka said, her voice low and words coming slower than usual, and I could feel shame radiating from it. He's very lonely .

Jesus, Nikka, that's terrible .

I couldn't think of anything else to say, because I couldn't properly imagine it. I'd thought I had left Frost to fend for himself when I'd left home, but he'd still had Ember and Rain and Dad to take care of him. He'd always had Vex. He hadn't been literally alone.

But Slate was. Yomi was the closest town on any side, and it was miles from the base of the mountain proper.

Except, I knew that sometimes distance didn't matter to stones.

But Iri can talk to Delta and Rain from here, even though they leave her in

Moonstriker lands, can't they?

They can , she agreed. That kind of travel and distance is possible after bonding. But it's not possible to bond from that far away. Bonding requires proximity .

I sighed and considered pulling over to the side of the road. But no, we hadn't gotten to the right spot yet, and I wasn't taking any chances. Not now. Not after all those years of careful planning.

"It would be cruel to take an unbonded stone out here to the middle of nowhere and not let it around people," I said, trying to keep an eye on both his reaction and the road at the same time. "There's a reason stones are kept in public places, even the enormous, rare priceless ones. To give them the opportunity to bond. Society decided that monetary value matters less than the will of a sentient stone. Less than bonding. But there are things that do still matter."

"More than the self-governance of a sentient being? I thought the Summerlands were built on a foundation that says otherwise."

As much as politicians and rich assholes both in and out of the four families had disagreed with that over the years, he was right. It was the foundation on which we'd built our country. Rugged individualism required individual free will, and that included stones.

"That's true. There's just one problem with that idea, in this case."

He scowled at me. "What, one stone is special and doesn't get a say? What, is it a murderer, and the chalet is a prison?" He paled at the notion, rubbing his chest and swallowing hard. "Is it? Do you keep stones up there that shouldn't bond people? Fuck, am I bonding a monster?"

“No, Aubrey.” He kept staring off into space, so I nudged him with my elbow. “Hey, look at me. It’s not a bad stone. Nikka’s called him grumpy before, and lonely, but she’s never implied he’s anything but basically decent.”

He’s more than that , Nikka whispered, so low I wondered if she was afraid someone would overhear her. He’s...he’s Father, in a way. We all come from the mountain .

I blinked at the notion for a moment, but...well, hells, it made perfect sense. Technically, geologically, I knew stones were formed inside the crust of the earth as a whole, and not only under Mount Slate, but in more recent years? Since they’d become the smaller, separate, sentient beings that they were? It only made sense that they thought of Slate as a home, of sorts.

A parent.

“If he’s so great, then why is he alone up here?” Aubrey demanded, twisting around in his seat to stare at me. He was starting to sound a little hysterical, which made sense, because I was being too damned cagey.

We passed mile marker eighteen.

How many times had Nikka mentioned that number to me?

This was it.

I waved my hand at the mountain looming over us. “Because we can’t take the whole damned mountain into Amalion City to meet people!”

Chapter 14

Aubrey

The whole damned mountain.

I sat there, staring at him, my chest heaving, but it didn't feel like I was really breathing.

I wasn't . . . anything, was I?

No, I wasn't there in the car, looking at Kit, demanding answers. I wasn't breathing, I wasn't thinking, I wasn't living this life.

This had to be a dream.

Any moment now I would wake up to find that I was sick with the same pneumonia that had taken Mother, a fever of a hundred and five, and this whole situation was a sweaty fever dream.

I wasn't Oberon Gloombringer's son. Mother had never once mentioned him to me in my entire life. This whole thing was a fevered fantasy where I got to be the special child of my whole nation, thus proving my worth to everyone who'd ever doubted me, including—and maybe especially—myself.

I wasn't the bastard child of a family of no particular distinction. I was the heir to one of the four families. I was someone .

It was all nonsense, and I didn't know why I'd ever believed it was real.

"Look, I know it sounds crazy," Kit said, sighing and shaking his head, like he could read my mind. "Believe me, it's not something I'd have ever thought up on my own. A mountain as a stone? It's ridiculous."

"But you did come up with it," I pointed out. "No one calls Mount Slate a stone. No one has ever suggested to me that it's possible to bond a whole darn mountain. But here you are, saying exactly that. That I'm supposed to bond Mount Slate."

"Nikka knows," he said, hand going to his throat. "She told me."

"She knows about the mountain? Or she knows, what, my future?"

He groaned at the question. "It's complicated."

Oh no. I was not putting up with that crap. He was going to give me answers, and right now. "Then uncomplicate it."

"She knows the future. Sort of. Some of it. And she told it to me, so we made plans on how to fix things. How to get people where and when they needed to be. How to stop Huxley Dawnchaser from ruining everything, and how to get everyone here. To get you here."

To get me here.

His entire goal had been . . . to get me here.

The road went rough beneath the car tires, and I turned to look at him. "We've never even met. How did you know I would come?"

He blinked at me, cocking his head, his stone twinkling between his fingers. “If you’re alive, you always come. Every time. Nikka says...she says you’re very loyal.”

Was I?

For Mother, sure, I’d always been loyal. Grandmother had died before I’d figured myself out that much—I’d only been about twelve when she’d passed away. But was I loyal as a rule? I certainly hadn’t been loyal to Oberon Gloombringer.

I’d hardly even been sad when I’d heard about his death on the news.

But when Aunt Titania had asked me to come, I hadn’t hesitated a moment.

The car gave a hard jolt, and I turned to look out the front windshield. Had the road been this rough on the way in? I hadn’t remembered it. Maybe Kit had taken a different route than Titania’s driver.

But the road looked perfect and smooth.

So why was . . . everything . . . vibrating?

I lifted one hand from my lap to find it shaking, so I lifted the other as well. Like leaves about to fall from their tree.

“Shit,” Kit said. “Are you about to have another—Fuck!”

I turned to look at him, and suddenly he was entirely focused on driving in a way he hadn’t been before.

“Wh-what?—”

“It’s not just you,” he said through clenched teeth. “It’s the fucking ground.” His knuckles were going white where they were gripped tight around the steering wheel, and for some reason his eyes were trained not on the road, but to the side of it. “Come on, come on,” he muttered, and I could feel the car accelerating even through the increasing vibrations.

“Y-you should s-stop. Th-this is d-dangerous,” I managed to shove out past the shaking in my core. It didn’t feel quite the same as the other times. The shaking wasn’t immediately out of control, and the world wasn’t going dark. The noise started again, but this time more like it was in the movie theater, starting low, then increasing in tone and volume.

He shook his head and pressed down hard on the accelerator. “Nope. No slowing down. We need to be on the other side.”

“O-other side of wh-what?”

He was still staring at the side of the road when suddenly he hissed, “four,” and slammed on the brakes.

Mile marker four. What the hell did that have to do with anything?

I turned around in my seat to look at the tiny sign, like the back of it would give more information.

As I watched, behind us, the middle of the road went dark.

No.

Not dark.

It was a crack. A split in the ground, and as the rumbling increased, the crack did too, growing and growing, heading off vaguely in the direction of town, and widening until I wasn't sure I could leap across it, even at my best.

The car skidded to a stop, and I turned to look at Kit. Unless there was another road, we were now cut off from town. Why had that been the plan?

The shaking went uneven, increasing in one side of my body, and Kit reared back, but he wasn't looking at me, he was looking at the road. I turned to see...rocks. Everywhere. Had part of the mountain collapsed in front of us?

I could barely breathe, not just because of the tremors, but because, because...a crack in the road behind us big enough to swallow the car, and rocks scattered across the pavement ahead. There was a box of maybe a hundred feet in which we could have stopped without ending up in one or under the other, and Kit had managed to pull right into the middle of it.

Mile marker four.

I collapsed against the seat, gasping for air and staring at the rockfall ahead of us, and it took me a moment to realize that the trembling had stopped. I hadn't even blacked out this time, but given the fact that we'd almost died, it felt like a very small favor.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 15

Kit

I'd have stopped the car the moment the ground started to tremble, I knew. It was what you were supposed to do when there was an earthquake. Not that I had a ton of experience with driving during them, but I'd have done it out of instinct if nothing else.

Who wanted to be moving forward at sixty miles an hour while the ground shook under their tires?

But Nikka and I had discussed The Plan step-by-step hundreds of times over the years, fine-tuning things like this moment. Hit the brakes the moment you pass mile marker four. Not the second you see it, definitely not any later than when you pass it, but the exact second the nose of the car passes it.

And we were alive.

To what end, precisely, I wasn't certain yet, but alive was better than the other option.

Are you okay? Nikka's shaky voice asked, small and nervous.

Was she worried I was going to be angry with her? Surely she could tell that I was fine.

That was when I realized that I was laughing out loud.

Hm.

Okay, her concern made more sense.

I stopped myself, gulping down one deep breath after another. Then I forced my fingers to let go of their iron grip around the steering wheel, and slowly, deliberately, put the car in park before turning it off.

I was the one shaking now, rather than the ground.

Adrenaline , I promised Nikka, trying to placate her with half of the truth. Like after a duel. I'm just...it's one thing to plan a moment to death like we did, it's another entirely to succeed when you get there .

But you did , she pointed out. You were perfect. You did it all exactly right, and we're fine .

For myself, I thought that "fine" remained to be seen, as we were currently trapped on a stretch of road about a hundred feet long, on the side of a mountain that still kind of wanted to kill everyone in the whole world.

Thank fuck for sports cars that stopped on a dime.

Still, everything was going to plan so far. I had to keep telling myself that for as long as I possibly could. It was the only thing keeping me sane. It sucked, but it was correct. It was what we had needed to happen. One foot in front of the other until the path was done, because it had been the only path Nikka saw that led to the right outcome.

It was still unnerving, letting someone else look at all the possible futures and decide which was best, but she was Nikka. She was one of two individuals in the world that I

trusted completely, so if she said this was the best outcome, then it was. The only way I'd have questioned her was if she'd said Frost was wrong about something.

Why would I say that? she asked, fully distracted from her earlier worry. Frost is the smartest human in the world. Disagreeing with him would be illogical .

I had to choke down another laugh, though this one was slightly less hysterical than the last. Of course she would think that. They were basically the same, just one was a stone and one a human. But that was why I trusted them both.

Staring at the mess of rocks across the road before us, I trusted her more than ever before. If not for The Plan, which she'd forced me to go over again and again in exact detail, we'd be dead.

It was odd, but my mind sort of snagged on that in the moment, and I gave a whole-body shiver.

Dead.

We could be dead.

I'd been in dozens of duels, and in each of them, my life had been in danger. I'd protected Huxley Dawnchaser for years, and every moment I'd stood at his side had been dangerous. I'd been the only stop between everyone who wanted him dead and their goal, and however competent or (over)confident I might be, I was still just one man.

But here we were, sitting between a yawning chasm and a rockslide, and for the first time, I felt it like a creeping shadow at my back: my own fucking mortality.

Next to me, Aubrey was breathing deep and seemed to have stopped shaking, this

time without passing out or falling down. That was good, because I had no idea whatsoever how to deal with seizures.

Sure, I'd been confident I knew what was causing them, but that didn't make me a doctor. It didn't mean I knew what damage they might be doing to his body or brain. I only knew that he was going to live until this moment. I hadn't known whether he'd be healthy for it.

I still didn't know?—

In my pocket, my phone started to ring. I hit the button on my seat belt so I could slide my hand into my pocket more easily, and answered the call with hardly a glance at the screen. “You all right, little brother?”

“We're fine,” Frost said, though his voice was a little shaky. “You?”

“Yup,” I agreed, opening the car door and stepping out onto the pavement. “Just peachy.”

Behind me, Aubrey scoffed, but I heard him move to get out of the car as well.

Frost seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, which was a little odd, but endearing as ever. “Okay. Well, you can't come back.”

“Can't we?” I glanced over at Aubrey, who was looking at me in question over the hood of the car as he rounded it toward me, shaky on his feet but determined. He had no idea what was happening, I remembered, and looked down to my phone, pressing the speaker button.

“No,” Frost's volume increased to echo across the rocky landscape. “The bridge to the chalet is out. You can't get back in, and we can't get out.”

“Well, that is why I offered to be the one to go to begin with,” I pointed out. “I’m not a family stone holder, after all.”

Aubrey lifted a brow at me, like he wasn’t sure what the hell I was up to, and hey, I wasn’t up to anything at all. This was one of those rare times that was true, and I was a little offended that he assumed otherwise. I shot him a glare, and he returned it with a purse-lipped schoolmarm expression that said I was eternally full of shit.

Asshole.

On the phone still, Frost sighed. “Yes, well, obviously, they’re even more worried than before. We haven’t gotten word of any outside damage yet, but it was pretty bad here.”

“Oh, there’s damage,” I assured him, glancing back at the chasm behind us. “There’s definitely damage. They might have to send a helicopter up to rescue people at the chalet. I don’t think the roads are going to be functional for—fuck, maybe ever.”

“Ever?” Frost asked, and bless him, he didn’t sound dubious, but horrified. “What happened?”

“I’ll send you a picture,” I promised. “They’ll probably have to build a new bridge or something. But for now, are you lot safe to get up the mountain?”

“It’s...well, we’re going to take the climbing gear, just in case. We can’t tell from here if the path has been damaged. They want to go this afternoon, because obviously, it can’t wait any more. I’ll let you know when we get more information. But you...I’m sorry, Kit, but it looks like you’re going to have to sit it out.”

I refrained from laughing again, but just barely. I just smiled at the phone for a moment, then sighed and shook my head. “You be careful, Frost. No matter what

happens, you need to be okay. Take care of yourself.”

“Of course,” he agreed. “They’re all worrying about what they have to do, so it’s up to me. And Fawn and Adair. We can handle it, I promise.”

“I know you can, little brother. I’d trust the three of you more than anyone else.” I had, in fact, already entrusted the three of them with the fate of the whole world, but it wouldn’t help to tell him that in the moment.

It never helped to hear just how much was riding on your actions.

“So I guess you should just get a hotel room. If, um, if they have a hotel in Yomi.”

I did laugh at that, and Aubrey was looking between the rocks and the chasm, then back at me. He mouthed, “Aren’t you going to tell him?”

So I met his eye and mouthed back, “Why?”

He stopped and cocked his head, looking at our surroundings again, and finally nodded.

“You let me know how things go, okay?” I told my brother. “For now, Aubrey and I are going to get our shit together and figure out what to do next. We’ll be in touch.”

“Of course,” Frost agreed. “Please . . . please do keep in touch.”

“You’re not losing me again,” I assured, before hanging up the phone.

Aubrey looked at me, then at the bags in the back of the car. “I don’t imagine you have anything that’s going to be useful while we’re trapped out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Aubrey, my friend, it just so happens you’re in luck. I mentioned that Nikka sees the future, didn’t I? Well Nikka and me, we like to be prepared when she says we’re going to be trapped in the middle of nowhere.”

I opened the back door of the car and started pulling out bags. “Sleeping bags, water, candles, fire starters, flares, first aid kit”—I paused, pulling out one bag and glaring at it, then tossing it to him—“fucking granola bars.”

The bag hit the center of his chest, and he caught it easily, which I had to admit settled my nerves a little. He raised an eyebrow at me. “Problem with granola bars?”

“Not if you enjoy punishing yourself,” I shot back. “I didn’t bring a hair shirt, though, so you’ll have to suffer with normal clothes.”

He raised a brow, but didn’t respond to that, just unzipped the bag and pulled it open. The absolute asshole, his eyes lit up when they hit the fucking granola bars, and he pulled one out before closing the bag back up and slinging it onto one shoulder. “What else can I carry?”

He sounded positively fucking chipper about the idea of trekking through the mountainside carrying bags.

“I’ve got a whole set of backpacking rigs in the trunk, or whatever the hells you’re supposed to call them, so you can carry your sleeping bag and other stuff. And there’s some light climbing gear too. Nikka said we wouldn’t need the heavy-duty stuff, thank fuck.”

I only hoped she was right about that. I knew enough about climbing that I might manage it myself, but I didn’t know enough to teach Aubrey how to do it on the fly. Not without probably getting both of us killed.

The area we had to get through wasn't terribly steep, though, since we were still at the base of the mountain. We just had to get to the path behind the chalet, and while it was going to be a pain in the ass, coming at it from the direction we were, we'd be able to ignore the bridge being out and head straight to the mountainside and skirt the edge toward the goal.

From the path, well, Nikka always said, "the rest wrote itself," so I kept hoping that meant my job was done once we got there.

Optimistic, maybe, but I was allowed that once in a while.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 16

Aubrey

“We’re not going back to town,” I told Kit, for some reason trying to keep my irritation with him going despite the bag in my hands.

A whole bag of granola bars.

No, not just granola bars, but the good kind. The expensive ones we’d never been able to buy when I was a kid, with real chocolate in them. There had to be five boxes worth of them in there, all different kinds, with almonds and cherries, and peanuts and chocolate, and just...If I’d come across the bag ten years earlier, I’d have thought I’d died and gone to a better place.

Stranger still, given the way Kit had reacted to them, he couldn’t stand them. So knowing he was going to be trapped out here with me, he’d gotten them specifically for me.

But he kept acting like he hated me.

Kit turned, strapping a backpack across his midsection, and rolled his eyes. “Obviously we’re not going back to town.”

“But you—you told your brother...” What had he told his brother, exactly?

Aubrey and I are going to get our shit together and figure out what to do next. We’ll

be in touch .

Not a word about where we were or where we were going.

His lips quirked up in a wicked smile. “Figured that out, did you? I told Frost what he wanted to hear, and it made him feel better. He doesn’t need to be worrying about us while he’s busy trying to deal with Delta’s inevitable tantrum when the current stones don’t work.”

When the current stones . . .

“What?” Yes, there was a note of panic in my voice, because what? The current stones weren’t going to work? Slate was going to continue shaking, threatening to...to...

“Don’t get your panties in a twist,” Kit said, holding another backpack frame out in my direction. “We’ll fix it. Or, I suppose, you’ll fix it.”

Right. Because he thought I was going to bond the whole mountain myself, and then why would we need to worry about the family stones at all?

Wait.

I blinked a moment, staring into space, stunned. Why would we have to worry about the four—or five—family stones, if Mount Slate could bond a person? For a moment, the idea felt freeing, like the whole of the Summerlands could be free of...of what, though?

If my father had still been the man in charge of Duskbringer lands, then sure, being free of him was better for everyone. But he wasn’t. Aunt Titania was, and she cared about what was best for everyone.

I was in a fog as Kit packed us up, securing the straps on the packs and making sure we were bringing everything with us, including more extra water than even I thought necessary.

When I looked at the gallon jug he was carrying in addition to the canteens attached to the packs, he shrugged. “Don’t want to run out of water. Can live without almost anything else for a while.”

Odd, how he’d packed everything up without asking for my help or complaining that I was too distracted to offer it.

Finally ready, he went up to the passenger side of the car and opened the glove box, pulling out a worn, brown folded piece of paper. He flattened it out on the now closed trunk of the car in front of us and motioned to something that I couldn’t focus on because?—

“How old is this map? Is that hand-drawn?”

“It is,” he agreed, smoothing it out with one hand and smiling at it. “And I don’t know how old it is, but it cost me a fucking fortune. The important part is that Nikka said it was accurate. This is where we are. That’s where the chalet is. And we need to follow this little hiking trail up and around to come in behind the chalet.”

I watched his finger follow a tiny line around, through fields of little trees and over enormous hand-drawn rocks, before turning to stare at him. “Are you serious? Mountain climbing?”

“Like I told you,” he said, waving dismissively. He was always so dismissive of anything standing in his way, such an unapologetic asshole. I rolled my eyes at him, but he ignored me. Also as usual. “We’re not going to need the heavy climbing gear.”

“I don’t suppose it occurred to you that I don’t know how to use any climbing gear? Not even the...not heavy kind. Whatever that means.”

“We’re hardly going to be climbing at all,” he said, sighing and clearly wanting the conversation to be over already. “The chalet is barely a few dozen feet higher in elevation than this spot. It’s just that some of the terrain is a little rocky is all.”

A few dozen feet, he said, like that was nothing.

“Have we forgotten that I’m having seizures because of that elevation?”

He turned and looked at me like I was a particularly slow child and he was waiting for me to catch up with the rest of the class. When I just stood there staring at him, he sighed and turned back to the map. “You’re not having seizures because of the elevation. You’re having seizures because the whole fucking mountain is trying to bond itself to your brain.”

Oh, right.

The impossible: me, bonding.

Not only that, but me bonding to the whole of Mount Slate. Not a single stone, but a giant mass of them all together. I still didn’t understand how that was possible at all, but there was Kit, acting as though it was a foregone conclusion.

Because his stone could see the future, and apparently that was what she’d seen. Me, bonded to a whole mountain.

I shook my head, and I wasn’t sure if I was denying the words or simply...confused.

None of it seemed possible. I wasn’t even sure I wanted it to be possible. I’d always

wanted to be “normal” and bond a stone. A simple stone, like everyone else. A sapphire or agate or amethyst. Maybe a diamond, even. As long as it was a stone, and I didn’t have to deal with the fact that I was an adult and unbonded anymore.

I’d once had a potential employer look up my criminal record when I’d put in a job application and listed no stone, because he was convinced it wasn’t possible for an adult to be unbonded unless they’d committed some crime so heinous that it had warranted severing. Needless to say, I hadn’t gotten the job even though he’d been proven wrong.

Still, Kit was demanding that the two of us hike up half the mountain. Yeah, maybe it wasn’t the steep part and we wouldn’t be scaling sheer cliffs, but that didn’t mean it was nothing.

“This is crazy,” I told him, and he rolled his eyes. Never interested in hearing a dissenting opinion. Well he could freaking deal with it and listen to someone for once. I spat the next words with a vehemence that at least got his attention, even if he still didn’t seem to care all that much. “I literally know nothing about this. I can’t climb a mountain. I don’t even know how to...to camp.”

At that, he lifted an eyebrow. “You’re telling me you’ve never, not once in your life, slept rough?”

I glared at him. “I wasn’t homeless.”

That got me the other eyebrow. “What’s wrong with being homeless? I’ve been homeless. It just means you don’t have the money society thinks you should have to pay for a roof over your head, which is frankly bullshit.”

“The Gloombringer always said”—he pursed his lips at that, and he wasn’t wrong, but darn it, not everything Oberon Gloombringer had said was a lie. Was it? “They

say that most homeless people are mentally ill and can't take care of themselves."

For a moment, Kit just stood there, staring at me. Then he let out a sound somewhere between a laugh and a scoff, shaking his head. "First of all, that's bullshit. Second, think about that for a minute. If it were true, do you think being mentally ill means anyone deserves to be unhoused?"

I stared at him, then leaned back onto the back of the car, eyes not focused on anything at all because...what kind of excuse was that not to help? It was crap, pure and simple, and for years I'd accepted it as just the way things were. Acceptable to dismiss an entire group of people for reasons that didn't even make sense.

Was I a monster?

"Don't feel too bad," Kit grumbled, turning back to look at the map again. "They're using psychology against you when they say things like that. Just...worry about it another time. We'll work on fixing the world when we're sure we've saved it so it can even be fixed."

It was the closest thing he'd ever been to nice, and I wasn't sure how to handle that. Also, what did a man who'd grown up rich care about fixing the world? One who dressed like a duelist, who'd said he had been a duelist, which Aunt Titania rightly thought was one of the worst things plaguing the whole of the Summerlands?

But at the same time, he wasn't the Moonstriker heir, and he'd seemed unimpressed by the idea of flying a doctor out to the chalet just for me.

Who the heck was Kit Moonstriker?

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 17

Kit

I was a little sorry about leaving the car behind. It had been ridiculously expensive, exactly the kind of flashy thing people would expect Kit Emrys to drive, and thus, I rarely got the chance to drive anything like it. But it had also been necessary to get where we needed to be, and more importantly, to stop fast enough to keep from hitting the rockslide.

Also, it had been nice to have a truly great car for once. Maybe I didn't fit my reputation as much as people thought, but sometimes I did like shiny, flashy, pretty things. Who didn't?

Still, the car was well and truly trapped where it was, so there was no moving it anytime soon.

It had been just like the bags and water and annoying granola bars: a tool to get Aubrey and me to the end of this mess in one piece. Or, well, two pieces.

What mattered was the end result, not what it cost to get there, because the cost of us not getting there was more than anyone in the Summerlands could afford.

Carefully, I folded the map back up and tucked it into a pocket on the side of my hiking pack.

I didn't need the map anymore, not really. I'd made this hike before by myself.

Three times.

I knew the route as well as I knew any ground in the world, because I had been determined that I wasn't going to be caught unprepared at any stage of this plan.

"It's right up here," I told him, motioning toward the trees. "We can make it almost halfway before nightfall, and then do the rest tomorrow if we're quick about it."

He looked dubious, and fuck him for that. Did he think I was doing this on a whim? This was the culmination of a decade of planning, and I wasn't going to let him be the monkey wrench in the works that screwed everything up.

"It's not even fifteen miles," I said, motioning with my hand toward the trail. Was he just determined not to try? So help me, if I had to knock his ass out and carry him?—

With a deep sigh, he finally started putting one foot in front of the other, following me toward the trees. Thank fuck. Maybe he wasn't as big as Frost, but he was still taller than me, and more muscular by a fair bit. He was heavy.

"Thought you didn't want to give up and go back to town," I grumbled at him as we headed into the thick evergreens.

He shot me a glare back. "There's a difference between giving up and going back, and...whatever this is. Hiking? Rock climbing? I didn't sign up for that. I would never do that." Then he gave a literal shudder, while continuing to shoot daggers at me with his eyes.

And that, I couldn't help but laugh at. Guy was over six feet tall and looked like he lifted heavy things for fun, but a little hiking was too much for him? "What, big strong guy like you hasn't ever been hiking before?"

His scowl didn't falter for a second. "Of course not. I"—he looked away, seeming almost embarrassed—"I work for a living. Lifting and carrying, working heavy machinery, and some construction when I got old enough. That's how I got like this. I don't go to the gym or parkour or BASE jump or whatever sport is in vogue for rich people this year."

"BASE jumping? Seriously? How much of a rich wastrel do you think I am?" Given the sour look he shot back at me, I suspected the answer was something like "how big of a rich wastrel is it possible to be?" Thankfully, he didn't respond, so I didn't have to hear it.

Though . . . I did kind of like the word wastrel.

I found the trail with ease, pointing it out to Aubrey as we stepped onto the slightly worn ground covered by brown pine needles. I suspected that once it had been much clearer, but it had slowly grown over, because no one came up here.

Still, it stuck in my craw, the notion that he thought I was some kind of pitiful rich boy who'd spent my whole life lounging around, living the high life on the people's dime.

"I've worked for a living since I was a teenager, you know," I told him, and the tone sounded waspish even to me. "Paid my own rent and everything."

He raised a brow at me, and while the expression wasn't well-practiced, it was all the more damning for it. "You have an apartment?"

Damn him. "Not...at the moment. I'd been working for Huxley Dawnchaser for the last year, so he was giving me room and board."

"So you were staying at his mansion, and he was paying for all your expenses?" He

sounded like he thought it was a gotcha, and I half expected him to follow up by suggesting that I'd been fucking Huxley for cash.

"I was his bodyguard ," I informed him, attempting to keep all emotion out of it. That was hard to do, given the work I'd been doing for Huxley, but...well hells, would Aubrey think it was better or worse, that I'd killed people to protect a monster? That I was a duelist, and I'd killed lots of people, for varying reasons, some valid and some entirely fucking ridiculous. I'd never killed a good person for a bad reason, but I'd certainly done the opposite a few times.

I was pretty sure I'd even killed a good person for a good reason at least once.

The memory of that moment—no. It wasn't time for that. It went into the box along with everything else I'd done in the name of The Plan, to be looked at after I'd succeeded in saving the Summerlands.

If we didn't succeed and Slate exploded...Well, this close to the mountain, I wasn't likely to have much time to dwell on all the terrible things I'd done, no matter the reasons for them.

Aubrey was giving me a sidelong look. " You were a bodyguard. You put yourself between someone else and danger." The way he stressed "you" was downright insulting, but I tried not to snap back. Or hit him. He'd believed I was a duelist, so why was this so hard?

"Every day," I agreed, barely holding down my irritation.

He continued looking at me like I was entirely full of shit, but what could I say? I'm Kit Emrys, most famous duelist currently alive in the Summerlands? True or not, it wasn't the sort of comment that made anyone think you were a good person or a hard worker.

Besides, even if it did, I couldn't prove it was true. I wasn't even carrying my sword, because there'd been too much else to carry on this trek, and I wasn't going to be fighting an enemy that could be bested with a weapon. The lack made me feel naked, among other things.

It was fucking annoying.

Aubrey was fucking annoying.

Why had Nikka ever thought I would like him?

You will , she prodded, and I scoffed.

Aloud. Oops.

Aubrey looked back over at me. "Problem?"

"Nikka keeps telling me you're a prince among weasels, and I'm not sure why she's so determined to defend you. And frankly, for the first time in all the years I've known her, I'm wondering whether she's lost her marbles."

I wanted to tell him that if he kept scowling at me that way his face would stick in that expression, but I figured that would be taken about as well as the rest of the conversation. Maybe Aubrey really was a prince, but in the end, I didn't think he and I were ever going to get along. He was a judgy little prick and I...was too.

Yeah, fuck everyone, whatever .

But then he sucked in a hard breath, staring at the road behind us.

I turned to look at the same spot, to see if something else awful was happening, and

as such, almost missed that he wasn't looking at the scenery at all. He was having another goddamned seizure.

I spun back to face him, and with the heavy backpack and water weighing me down, this time—?of course this time—?I didn't reach him before he hit the ground.

Fortunately, the layers of dead pine needles were probably softer than the pavement we'd not long left behind.

Less fortunately, he went down hard, shaking like a leaf, and it didn't end quickly.

So I knelt next to him, pulling his head into my lap and just...waiting.

What the fuck did I know about seizures? It was an old wives' tale that you were supposed to keep seizing people from biting their tongues, I thought. Maybe. I remembered some old chestnut about putting a spoon in their mouth for that, but that seemed likelier to result in broken teeth than protection.

Plus, you know, I didn't have a spoon even if it didn't sound like a terrible idea.

Just a backpack full of stuff, or like...my fingers. Seemed like a terrible idea to put my fingers in his mouth while he was shaking uncontrollably.

Though it didn't sound like a terrible idea overall. He might be an asshole, but he was sexy as fuck with the giant muscles and broad shoulders and pouty plush lips, just like his father. Only it was all sexier on Aubrey, because he wasn't an entire asshole who only cared about himself.

He at least cared about Titania.

And the way his eyes softened when he looked at her was downright beautiful.

No, bad brain. No distractions, not while Aubrey was seizing.

Although...what the fuck else was I supposed to do? I had no idea.

It was all terrible.

Worse for him, I was sure, but not having something to do had always been a nightmare of mine. There was nothing I hated more than feeling useless, and that was precisely what I was right then.

It was over in a moment, or possibly an eternity, and then we were just lying there in the dirt and pine needles, waiting.

Aubrey was unconscious. Or asleep. Or something. I checked his pulse, and it was steady and strong, so that was good. He was pale, and his skin a little clammy, but that wasn't a huge shock, was it? This whole thing had to be traumatic, both for body and mind.

Are you sure he's going to survive this? I asked Nikka, and I couldn't bring myself to say it aloud. Didn't want to even think it might be true, that he was going to die while saving the world.

Sure, he was kind of a jerk, but so was I. I sure didn't want to die doing this, even if I was prepared to do so if necessary.

He is , she promised. The seizures will stop once he's properly bonded to Slate. His brain just needs to figure out how to communicate with the mountain, and it's...it's a lot. It's hard for even us. There's a reason we don't just come visit regularly to satisfy him .

I didn't fully understand, but even after years of knowing the truth, it was hard for me

to imagine the mountain as a single entity that could bond with a human mind. Which, I supposed, was part of the problem. It was more complicated than that. Probably more complicated than my simple mind could handle.

There had to be a reason I hadn't bonded the mountain in my many trips up to climb the trail as practice, and none of the people in Yomi had done it over the years. It had to be something more than just chance. Had anyone else ever bonded the mountain? There was no way for me to know, if Nikka wasn't aware.

Maybe it was a new concept, and the mountain hadn't even thought of bonding a person of its own before. That didn't seem awfully likely, though.

Maybe it required an adult mind, but one that hadn't previously bonded a stone, like Aubrey.

I couldn't think of another person like that in the world.

Wouldn't that just chap Delta's ass? If it had nothing to do with genius or an impressive lineage, but something as simple as needing someone who hadn't done a thing before? I snorted at the idea, imagining her most offended expression.

"Funny?" Aubrey asked, his voice hoarse.

"Nope," I denied. I wasn't going to explain what I'd been thinking, since frankly, it was shitty that I was amused about something that was causing him pain. "Just waiting for you to wake up. This might"—I swallowed hard, looking up the trail—"it might take more than a day. I always forget that no plan of battle survives contact with the enemy."

He lifted a single brow, and this time it looked more natural than before. Was I teaching him to be a sarcastic asshole? Great. "I'm the enemy in this metaphor?"

“You’re...” Dammit, he was. “That’s not entirely how I intended it, but—I’m not saying having seizures is your fault, just that climbing a mountain while having seizures isn’t quite as simple as what I was envisioning when I was planning.”

It was annoying as hell, really, that I’d overlooked something so important.

But I was nothing if not flexible. I needed to find a way to make this happen anyway.

The world depended on it.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 18

Aubrey

I was still lying there, covered in pine needles and dirt, head in Kit's lap, when he loosened his pack and turned it so he could rifle through it, pulling out a length of slick white rope.

After replacing his pack, he set to...to tying the rope to my waist. "What are you doing?"

He paused the quick, efficient movements of his hands, turning those cool gray eyes on me. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Thanks, but I'm not really into that," I said, trying to scoot away from him but still slow and sluggish in my own skin, so I didn't get far. "I'd prefer to be the one doing the tying up."

Slowly, so very slowly, he lifted one white eyebrow at me, and...it was odd, I'd thought him so cool before, so unemotional, but suddenly it was like I could see a thousand emotions behind those pale eyes. Oddly enough, not all of them were arrogant disdain. His face was still blank, but those eyes?—

"If we're going to talk bondage, it's going to have to wait until after we save the world, little Duskbringer," he said, lips quirking up on one side.

Arrogant, I'd been thinking about that expression. And it was. He was the best at

something and he knew it. But there was something else in there as well. Something dark and demanding and?—

Maybe interest.

Interest in . . . me?

The distraction of his fathomless eyes lasted until I realized he'd gone back to tying me up. Then, when he finished tying the rope around me, he gave a few feet of slack and wrapped it around his own waist.

“Wait a minute. What are you doing? I don't?—”

“Seizures,” he said, sighing. When I didn't respond, he looked up at me. “Battle plans and engagement, remember? I didn't account for the seizures on this hike, so now we need to do that.”

“And it involves bondage?”

“It's not a real climb, but there is a grade. There is some climbing. And I'm not going to have you die because I didn't think this through. So from now on, you're with me, literally. I'm not losing you sliding down the mountain because you have another seizure and fall at the wrong time.” He finished the knot around his own waist, a pretty thing with multiple loops that I couldn't have recreated while I was looking straight at it. I certainly couldn't have undone it with my seizure-clumsy hands.

The same as the one that secured the rope around my middle. I might have been able to slide out of it, but it was relatively snug around my waist, so probably not.

“You want to tie me up as recompense when this is over, we can discuss that then,” he said, cool and matter of fact, expression unmoving. “First, we have to save the

world.”

My whole body shivered at that.

We have to save the world .

Him, sure. He was the beautiful rich important guy, son of the Moonstriker, who walked with a feline grace I couldn't even understand, let alone duplicate. His eyes hid oceans of feelings he didn't share aloud. He was the kind of person who saved the world.

Me, Aubrey Sagara, dirt poor nobody from The Banks? I was not.

“Is that the only reason you're here then? The only reason you're helping me? To save the world ?” I shoved up into a seated position, thinking I'd push right up to standing, but I had a moment of vertigo instead.

I wasn't sure why it bothered me suddenly, that he was there to save the world, but it did.

He grabbed one of my arms, steadying me, pressing the other hand into my back. Supportive.

“We never even met before you arrived at the chalet, Aubrey. I don't know you.” His tone was conciliatory, and the words almost too quiet to hear, like they were shameful, and for some reason, it made me downright mad.

I jerked away from him, leaning against a nearby tree as I tried to push myself up to standing. “I know that. But there's always, you know, human empathy. Caring about people.”

For a moment, he just sat there in the dirt, staring at me and blinking rapidly. I'd have said it was like he was trying not to cry, but that wasn't it at all. It was more like a broken computer.

His mind had gone strangely blank, and—how did I even know that?—he was trying to reset something.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said when he came back. “I don’t—I’ve never spent much time with a Duskbringer before.”

“What the heck does that have to do with anything?”

“You know, a Duskbringer. Sapphires. Emotions. Caring .” He said that last as though it was a bad word, almost whispered, like he didn’t want anyone to hear him saying it.

I shook my head vehemently. “No, that’s not me. I’m not a real Duskbringer. That’s Aunt Titania. I wasn’t raised like that, with—with sapphires and power and all that.”

“No, you’re not understanding me,” he interrupted my ramble, pressing up off the ground and damn him, even that was graceful, like his whole body simply flowed upward, while I was still leaning against a tree, panting like a dog. “I was raised by Delta fucking Moonstriker. The last time she saw an emotion in passing, she shot it down. With prejudice. I don’t—What I’m trying to say is that I—” He broke off and gave a strange, strangled noise, running his hands up his face and burying his fingers in his hair, then yanking at his long forelock with both hands. “I’m saying I have no fucking idea how to have emotions right, because I was never taught how. Caring about people? That’s not on Delta’s list of preapproved tasks for the rearing of small geniuses.”

We stared at each other like that for a long time, the moment feeling like it was inside

a bubble, removed from the whole outside world. Me leaning hard against a pine tree, my hands gripping the rough chunks of bark as though my life depended on it, while sap seeped into the gap between two of my fingers. Him frustrated, raking his hands through his mussed hair, his chest heaving with emotion that...apparently he didn't know how to deal with.

Suddenly, I was laughing. Not hysterically, necessarily, but also...not other than hysterically.

"We're going to save the world," I said aloud.

Nope, that didn't make it feel any more real than before. He stared at me blankly, so he didn't get the joke.

I tried again. "Me, the unbonded mistake of a human being, and you, the ice prince who doesn't know how to feel things. Us. We're going to save the world."

His frustration turned into an outright scowl, and before I could worry about how I'd offended him by basically repeating what he'd told me, he huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. "No one is a mistake. Not being bonded to a stone is...it's random fucking chance. It doesn't say a thing about who you are."

Me? He was defending...me? Not himself? Before I could jump in with all the arguments I'd ever been given on why he was wrong and I was, in fact, broken, he continued.

"And fuck yes we're going to save the world." He stepped in close to me, and when he did he had to tip his head up just a little to look into my eyes. How had I ever imagined he was unemotional? Those gray eyes roiled with a fury of emotions. "And not despite our perceived flaws, Aubrey. Because of them. Because I'm an asshole and too stubborn for anyone's own good, especially my own, Nikka and I spent a

decade finding the one way to do this. And because you're unbonded, Aubrey. Because you're unbonded and an adult, you've got room inside you to bond a whole fucking mountain. It's not a failing, and it doesn't make you weak or broken. It's why you can save the world."

I stared down at him, and when I started blinking rapidly, it wasn't from confusion. It was because my eyes were stinging with emotion, and I had no idea what to think or do next. "The Gloom—ah—Duskbringer bloodline?—"

"Fuck that," he spat. "It's got nothing to do with bloodline. If it were that, you'd have bonded Verelle, and that would be that. You probably couldn't do this anymore if you'd bonded Verelle. Nikka couldn't see it, and that, among other reasons, was why we didn't try to keep you at the castle when you first met Oberon."

Before I could really process that he'd known who I was when I first came to the castle—when I didn't even remember meeting him at the time—he reached out and squeezed my arm. "How are you feeling? Should we take a break?"

I scowled at him, shaking my head, and even though the motion gave me another moment's vertigo, I pushed off the tree and straightened myself. "No. I'm fine. We should get moving. Like you said, this might already take longer than we want, and with how often Slate is rumbling, that can't be good."

He looked up at the mountain above us and gave a little shudder. "No. No it can't. Frost's estimations said we should have time yet, but I don't think that's right anymore. I think Nausa being broken changes things. And the fact that they're here, and planning to follow through, but can't actually give him what he wants. Not anymore."

I frowned at that, because he'd just spoken to his brother a bit earlier. "Then why didn't you tell him not to go forward with contacting Slate? You could have?—"

He laughed.

When I just watched him, waiting for him to stop, he did, cocking his head in confusion. “You’re...you’re serious. You think Delta Moonstriker would ever listen to me ? The woman doesn’t even listen to her favorite son half the time. That’d be Rain, by the way, because he’s both personable and didn’t have the poor taste to turn out smarter than her.”

I considered that a moment. Frost, then, must also be her son, of the people I’d met. The implication being that he, on the other side, had had the “poor taste” to turn out smarter than her.

My own mother had always said I was smarter than her. Whenever anything like that came up, she’d always said I was better than her at it, no matter what it was. That her whole goal as a parent had been to see me surpass her in every way.

Thinking of Rain, and even more so of Kit, in the light of a parent who wanted the opposite of that...well, it was eye-opening.

Not for the first time, I thought I’d been lucky to grow up in the middle of nowhere, without knowing anything about my family. I wasn’t smarter than Mother at all. She’d been a complete genius for getting away from Gloombringer court and leaving it far behind her.

Not sure how to respond to that without seeming incredibly smug about my own mother, I turned toward the barely visible trail up the mountain that Kit thought was going to be so very easy to trek. “Less than fifteen miles, you said?”

“Pretty sure,” he agreed. “It’s never taken me more than eight hours to get from here to there, even carrying a heavy pack and with the bits of climbing.”

So simple. I wanted to sigh at him because it wasn't even close to that simple, but that wasn't going to do us any good in the moment. We needed to get moving if we were going to get back to the chalet.

If he was right about everything, and Slate was going to be angry about Nausa and who knew what else, and...and somehow, I was going to be able to bond a whole mountain, even if that still seemed like something from a movie rather than reality...Well, either way, we needed to get there as soon as possible.

I took a step forward, and my ankle almost twisted out from under me. I'd hurt it when I fell during the seizure.

Gritting my teeth, I stepped down again, forcing it to take my weight even as it protested. We didn't have time for me to whine about my ankle. The whole world was in danger.

Chapter 19

Kit

He was so fucking stubborn.

My brain wanted to paste the “insufferable” label on him, but it wasn’t...that was, I understood why he was forging ahead even when he was obviously still groggy from the seizure. It was just fucking annoying that he wasn’t thinking things through.

I considered offering to help him somehow, to carry his pack or...whatever, but there was no need to put it out there. I knew Aubrey barely at all, but I already knew how he’d react to an offer of support.

Sounds familiar , Nikka offered, oh so helpfully. Who else do I know who’s stubborn as hell and insists on doing every single thing on his own?

Ugh. Damn rock, always pointing out facts, like they mattered or something.

Funny how I’m always a rock when you’re mad at me , she mused. I wonder if Aubrey will call Slate a pile of dirt when he’s angry with him .

I almost choked on my tongue at the idea. As powerful as she was, Nikka was the size of the top joint of my index finger, and she could only affect a single person at a time. Slate was a whole fucking volcano. Who would ever call him names, even relatively benign ones?

Aubrey will , she answered, blunt as ever. It's just like you and me. Maybe someone else would be afraid of me, but you're not. Lots of people are afraid of stones like Iri or Soz. But their holders can't be afraid of them, or the relationship wouldn't work in the long term. I know Iri had some trouble early on with Rain, because he found her intimidating. And how do you react when you realize that you intimidate someone?

I sighed, nodding to myself. I don't respect them as much.

Exactly.

Well, I supposed, if anyone seemed able to match a mountain for stubbornness, Aubrey might well be the guy. He was obviously dizzy or something, because every half dozen steps or so, he made a weird wiggle with one leg, like...no. He wasn't groggy or dizzy at all.

He was in pain.

Aubrey was hiding a fucking limp.

Gods damn it. An injury was the last thing we needed right now, and it was all my fault for not paying close enough attention to him. For letting him fall when he'd had that seizure. And now he had to suffer in pain because I hadn't been fast enough.

"Should we rest?" I asked.

He didn't even answer, just gave me a grunt and kept walking. It was fair, since we'd been walking less than half an hour, and offering to rest was probably a little insulting. Except that he was injured, so he shouldn't be walking at all, let alone hiking a barely there trail over a slippery bed of pine needles on a sometimes downright steep grade.

It was only fifteen miles, but it was a hard fifteen miles, uphill the whole way.

I swallowed down my irritation and further offers of rest, and resolved to just keep an eye on him in case he stumbled. I was already worried about another seizure, so a broken ankle would just be the icing on that shit cake.

I really would end up carrying him the whole way, which...I could probably do, but it was going to be hell. Maybe he wasn't as tall as Frost, but he was over six feet, and with those muscles, he had to weigh two hundred, easy.

Ugh.

So I kept going, just behind him, watching his every move like a hawk. When he started clenching his jaw, I couldn't tell if it was in pain or in annoyance with my hovering, but he didn't say a word.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of silence between us, the sun started to slip behind the horizon, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"We should stop for dinner," I announced, and it sounded loud and too-bright in the silence of the mountainside, echoing up the rocks above us, even with the thick pine trees all around. Birds flew from nearby trees at the unexpected noise of it. I tried my best not to cringe at it all.

He slowed and turned a glare on me, so I pointed to where the sun was touching the horizon. "It's going to be dark soon. We can't continue in the dark, since we might walk right off the side of a cliff. So we should find a place to stop and make camp now."

He turned to look at the sun like maybe I'd been lying about it going down, his lips pursed in irritation, but finally, he nodded. "Fine. I suppose."

He supposed .

Fuck, he might be more stubborn than me.

I didn't know whether to be annoyed or impressed.

On the other hand, he was going to have to be able to out-stubborn a mountain to properly bond it. I supposed that made sense. If anyone was going to be able to manage a feat like that, it was him.

I quickly located a spot with enough clear space for a campfire and two sleeping bags, without too many rocks on the ground to dig into soft sensitive bits in the night, and motioned toward it. "Right there works."

We'd made it less than half as far along the trail as I'd hoped before stopping time, but in this moment, that couldn't matter. We could only get as far as Aubrey could make it. Trying to force it when he was hurt was only likely to hurt him more, and then we'd end up taking even longer.

As much as his face was set with determination, and he'd refused to acknowledge his pain while we were moving, the relief on his features when he sat down, leaning his back against a thick tree trunk, was palpable. His whole face went slack and eyes slipped shut, and he took a deep, slow breath, then another.

For a second, I thought he'd fallen asleep, just like that. Then, without opening his eyes, he asked, "You said there are sleeping bags on these things? It's freaking cold up here, so I hope they're warm."

I wasn't sure exactly what to say to that, since...well, I thought they were warm, but I was a Moonstriker. I'd grown up in the frozen north, where we thought the temperature water froze at was nice and brisk, and we didn't call it cold until you got

down to “will lose fingers by going outside without gloves” temperatures.

I’d have offered him his own sleeping bag as well as mine, but again, I didn’t think that would be well-taken.

Also . . . what ?

I’d have offered him my own sleeping bag?

Since when?

I didn’t even like the guy, why would I offer him comfort at my own expense? I didn’t do that for anyone other than Frost, Ember, or Rain. Or Fawn, I supposed. Maybe Adair.

Ever.

It was . . .

It was since he’d made that face at Titania when she’d suggested flying a doctor to the chalet for him. Since he’d insisted on going forward, not back to town after the incident on the road. Since he’d hurt himself and kept going, and I didn’t believe it was only because he was being a stubborn asshole.

Aubrey was...more complicated than I’d first decided, when we had met. He wasn’t just a stubborn asshole.

He still was one, though.

And I kind of liked that too, in the end.

After all, so was I.

In the back of my mind, Nikka gave a little sound like clearing her throat. Speaking of stubborn assholes...

You're never going to let this go, are you?

No I am not.

I sighed, trying not to do it too loudly, lest Aubrey think I was annoyed with him, and we end up in another pointless fight when, as it turned out, Nikka had been right all along and I liked the bastard.

Damn it all.

It still grabbed his attention, those bright blue eyes flashing open and up to meet mine. Dammit, they were pretty, too. Not that I hadn't noticed he was pretty before. He looked a lot like his father, who had been a hunk of grade A beefcake. I just hadn't been interested in Oberon because he'd been the bad kind of asshole. Also, he'd been afraid of me. It was hard to find a man hot when he was scared of me.

I unclasped my pack and dropped it to the ground, then knelt down and started rifling through it. I was sure I'd included...there, inside the first aid kit, an elastic wrap bandage.

Pushing the pack aside, I scooted over to where Aubrey was practically collapsed, his back against a tree. He was watching me already, so I waved the bandage around.

His lips tightened, and I could almost hear the rejection of help he wanted to give. After a moment, though, he sighed and broke eye contact, glaring so hard at the pine needles beside him that I wondered if they might catch fire. "Probably not a bad

idea.”

“Excellent,” I said cheerily. I tried not to be too insufferably smug about getting my way, because we didn’t need another fight about this. It was hard not to be a little smug, though. Smug was my natural state of being.

His glare told me I hadn’t been successful anyway.

I took his shoe and sock off, cursing myself for not making sure he was wearing shoes suited to hiking before we’d left the chalet. What a ridiculous oversight. The ankle didn’t look too bad. A little red and maybe a touch swollen, but like it was walkable. It made me feel a little better about his stubbornness. He hadn’t been insisting on marching on a broken ankle. Just a twisted one.

Was that a technical term, I wondered?

Still not a doctor.

I wrapped the thing up just like I would have done my own, then slipped the sock back over it. “I don’t have better hiking shoes for you, but there are some clothes—including socks—that I thought would fit you. Well, that Nikka thought would fit you.”

We’d spent five minutes in the superstore arguing about what size he was, and I’d given in and bought the larger size she’d been insisting on, since in the end, it was easier to wear clothes that were too big than too small.

In retrospect, she was probably right. He wasn’t quite as wide as his father had been, but Aubrey was a sturdily built guy.

Just your type , Nikka pointed out.

I rolled my eyes as I turned to dig through my pack again. I've slept with people of almost every type there is, Nikka. I don't have a type .

Yes you do , she denied. If Knight hadn't been another duelist, you'd have stayed with him. You like men like that best. Big strong ones who can hold you down. Because almost no one can. But who better to be stronger than you than a man who can bond a whole mountain?

I loved Nikka, really I did. But in that moment, I also hated her just a little bit.

I yanked the bag of beef jerky out of my pack and shoved a piece in my mouth. That got Aubrey's attention, so I held the bag out to him. Gingerly, he took a piece, nodding to me. "Thanks."

I wanted to react with my usual angry snark, but again, we didn't need that. We needed to get along, at least well enough to see this through. And...I didn't need to give him even more reasons to hate me. Not as long as I had to be climbing a mountain with him. "No problem."

A moment later, he pulled out the bag of granola bars that I'd given him. He stared into it like it held the lost emerald city of legends, then bit his lip and held it out to me, like I should choose first.

Ugh. They were all bad, couldn't I just leave them to him?

You can't subsist on jerky , Nikka said sourly, giving me a little mental poke.

I can for two days.

But he's hurt his ankle , she pointed out. It might be more than two days.

I fucking hated when she was right. I inclined my head to him, reaching in and taking a bar at random. They were all the same anyway.

He smiled at the thing. “Cherries. They’re my favorite.”

I blinked down at the bar, then put it back and picked a different one. He frowned, like it was offensive I didn’t want the bar. Dammit. “I don’t want to take your favorites. We might be out here a few days. You should be able to eat the ones you like.”

For a moment, he stared at me, like I’d spoken in a foreign language or something. Then he picked up the cherry one I’d put back and opened it up. “You don’t like cherries?”

I sighed, because I didn’t want to have the conversation. We’d been butting heads over nothing for days, and I didn’t want to do it anymore. Now that I’d realized I didn’t hate him, it was just tiring. “I love cherries. But I don’t like granola bars at all,” I confessed. “I like cereal, with milk. Granola bars are just cereal with no milk. It sucks.”

“But they have chocolate,” he said, holding it up and pointing to a stripe of chocolate. “Cereal doesn’t have chocolate.”

I raised a brow at him. “You just haven’t had the right cereal yet. We’ll get you some when we get back to civilization.”

He shrugged, took a huge bite, chewing and swallowing before speaking up again. “These are perfect for me. I like it without milk.” Then he frowned at the bar. “Not that I’m saying no. I...I like cereal too. Just—thank you. For these. I appreciate them, especially if you got them just for me, and you didn’t even want them.”

And that? Well damn him, that was almost sweet.

Chapter 20

Aubrey

Kit Moonstriker was too darn pretty for anyone's own good. Not in that way where I was trying to feminize him or anything, oh no. He had slightly androgynous features, sure, but it wasn't about gender. It was about an overall effect that made me keep looking at him even when I shouldn't.

Staring at people was uncomfortable and rude, that was what my grandmother had taught me.

We talked some, mostly about food, since it seemed to be a relatively harmless subject. It was still a little overwhelming, the notion that he'd gone out and spent so much money on granola bars, just for me.

Why hadn't he just gotten food he would like?

That would have better fit the initial impression I'd had of him.

Or no...it would have better fit the assumptions I'd made about him when we'd met.

He built a small fire, but I was already nodding off by the time he got it going. It had been a long damn day, and I just didn't have the energy for?—

“Where's the puppy?” the voice demanded.

I frowned at that, and at the angry buzzing in my guts, like a ball of bees in my stomach. “I don’t have a puppy.”

It made a weird sound, almost like a growl, and I wondered if the voice was a dog. Except dogs didn’t talk. Right? “I want the puppy. ”

“I always wanted a puppy too,” I answered. “But it’s like my grandma always said, we don’t always get what we want. Sometimes we have to settle for reality.”

The bees got louder, and beneath me, the ground started to shake.

That was what woke me up—the ground shaking.

Because that part wasn’t a dream. Maybe there weren’t bees in my stomach or a deafening voice demanding puppies, but the ground was definitely shaking.

Except . . . the voice was also real.

Puppy! it shouted over the noise of the quake, tone like a petulant toddler, and my ears rang with it.

Across from me, Kit was frantically smothering the fire in dirt and pine needles. He looked up at me, eyes concerned.

Concerned for me, or just the fact that we were having another darned earthquake?

I shook my head, sitting up, trying to push away the dream.

Where is my puppy? the voice demanded again.

Fuck.

That was . . . it was real. The voice was real.

Kit pulled a hand back, hissing in pain when it came in contact with one of the hot rocks he'd placed around the edge of the fire to keep it contained. Still, when he opened his mouth, it wasn't to curse or complain. "Are you okay? You're not...no seizure?"

He was right, I realized. The last few times there had been an earthquake, I'd also had a seizure.

Slowly, I shook my head. My gut was still buzzing, not from bees, but...well, I didn't know what it was from. I had no idea what the heck was going on, other than?—

Puppy!

There was a cracking sound, and five feet away from us, one of the enormous pine trees tipped over, making the long, slow fall to the ground, then lying on its side with its roots exposed.

And that was more than enough. As my grandmother had told me as a child, tantrums would not be countenanced.

"Stop that!" I shouted, at the top of my lungs.

Puppy ...The voice was talking about Nausa. He wanted—Slate wanted Nausa. But surely an ancient mountain understood death. Trees and small animals must die around him every single day. Why would he act as though death was a new and incomprehensible thing?

Maybe because stones didn't die, so this was new and unfamiliar territory.

There was a pause in the shaking, and Kit froze as well, stopping his work to make sure the fire was out.

So I...I kept shouting. "I'm sorry Nausa is dead. It's sad. We're all sad about it, but you can't destroy the whole world because you're sad. It's not allowed!"

The shaking didn't start again, at least I didn't think it did. But suddenly I was shaking. It wasn't a seizure, for which I was grateful, but I didn't have a better explanation for it, either. My whole body was just trembling, almost like I'd worked so hard that my muscles had turned to jelly and simply holding myself up was too much work.

I curled myself into a ball, knees pulled up tight to my chest and arms wrapped around them, and stared into Kit's gray eyes, which were shining with worry in the moonlight.

We sat there for long moments in the silence before Kit checked his work with the fire, then stood, circled its charred remains, and sat next to me on top of my sleeping bag.

"That was good," he said, his voice subdued like I'd never heard it before. "You did a good job."

I blinked, turning my head and laying it on top of my knees, staring at him. "You're kidding, right? I...I shouted at a mountain. It didn't—I didn't do anything."

"But you did do something. The quake stopped, didn't it?"

I hadn't really thought it through that far, but I supposed it had. Had the mountain really stopped because of me? If so, was he chastened because I'd yelled, or angry with the tiny, obnoxious ant who'd had the temerity to yell at him?

Kit leaned in, pressing his arm into my side, his whole body a long, warm line against me. I was freezing, I realized, startled. Sure, I was sitting up, most of my body outside the surprisingly warm sleeping bag Kit had given me, but it seemed I was colder than that warranted.

“Nikka and I were talking about it today,” he said, keeping his voice quiet and soothing, almost like he thought I was a wild lion who might bite him if he misspoke. Almost so quiet I struggled to hear him and had to lean in. “She said that you shouldn’t be afraid of your bonded stone. That if I were afraid of her, she couldn’t respect me.”

It made sense. It was hard to imagine not being frightened of a mountain, except...was it? I was only afraid of Slate in an abstract sense. I was afraid of the possibility he would kill everyone and everything I loved by exploding.

I wasn’t afraid of the mountain specifically. I didn’t know the mountain personally, and all I knew so far was that he was apparently devastated by Nausa’s death, which didn’t speak ill of him. If anything, being devastated by loss made him more...human, in an odd way. At least that helped me understand him better. Slate didn’t sound like a monster at all, just someone who was sad they’d lost a friend.

Puppy , came the tiny, almost quiet grumble.

I glanced over at Kit, and he didn’t react at all.

Because, I realized, he couldn’t hear the voice. The mountain was speaking, and I could hear him. I was the only one who could hear him.

Kit had been right, as much as my mind had been shying away from the very possibility.

I was bonding the mountain.

Holy crap.

Chapter 21

Kit

I pulled my sleeping bag to the other side of the fire—to the other side of Aubrey, bracketing him between the still warm spot where I'd put the fire out and myself, because he couldn't seem to stop shaking. I wasn't sure if he was cold, but it seemed like a good bet. He was from a warm area in Duskbringer lands, so the mountainside had to feel constantly cold, to say nothing of the fact that he seemed to be almost in shock. Bonding a mountain felt like it might do that to a guy.

He also didn't pull away from me, which made that seem even more likely.

It wasn't like he wanted to snuggle with me. He was just emotionally vulnerable at the moment, because he was in a completely new and unfamiliar situation and didn't know how to react to it.

I couldn't imagine I'd have reacted any differently, given his circumstances.

And when I'd been a child, reacting to similar, if never precisely that strange, circumstances, my father had always taken good care of me. Always told me that there was no shame in wanting human contact.

On the other hand, it was almost impossible to imagine being in Aubrey's current circumstances. I'd been bonded to Nikka more than half my life, and bonding a stone changed you. It changed the way you interacted with the whole world. Bonding was synonymous with never being alone again in your life, not even if some part of you

wanted to.

Do you want to? Nikka asked, sounding more curious than hurt at the idea.

I stared up at the stars and considered for a while before answering. I wasn't an automatically reassuring kind of guy, and Nikka wouldn't have appreciated a knee-jerk denial anyway. She wanted to know how I actually felt. Finally, I shook my head. Not now. Maybe when I was a teenager, full of angst and determination that only I, in all the world, could possibly understand my amazing existential suffering .

You were pretty determined that you were alone then , she agreed. Even when I was with you. And I've never been very good at emotions, so I don't think I helped very much .

You did fine. There wasn't much anyone could have done to help, but you and Frost gave me everything I needed. That's just a tough time for every human. Hormones and all that crap .

Next to me, Aubrey gave a tiny snore, and relief coursed through me. He might not be happy about all this, and fuck only knew if his body was healing from all the trauma of the last few days, but at least he was getting some sleep.

You should too , Nikka said. I'll keep watch and let you know if anything happens .

Thanks, Neek .

It was only years of practice that let me disengage my mind and slowly drift off. That, and my utter trust that Nikka wouldn't let anything happen to us while we slept.

I woke to Aubrey's face and it . . . was strangely not annoying.

He was gorgeous, after all. It was a damn sight better than waking up to look at Huxley Dawnchaser across a breakfast table while he said shitty things about his kids. Or his cousins. Or anyone that came to his mind, really—the single constant about Huxley Dawnchaser had been the fact that if a person had his attention for longer than an hour or two, he'd find a reason to hate them. He'd never hated me to my face, but that had just been sensible. I'd been both dangerous and protecting him, and it would have been ridiculous to piss me off.

Not that Huxley had been ugly to look at, at least not on the outside. But Aubrey? Well, annoyingly enough, he was beautiful on the inside as well as the outside.

It was harder to see Oberon in Aubrey like this, when his face was slack and untroubled in his sleep.

Innocent.

Oberon had left innocent so far behind him that by the time I'd met him, I suspected he hadn't remembered what it looked like on his own face.

That innocence wasn't so different from how Aubrey always looked, but asleep, there was none of the strain of the last few days there. No worries about seizures or Slate or climbing a mountain while wearing cheap, flat-bottomed tennis shoes. No crease between his brows and downturn on his lush lips.

I watched reality set back in as he blinked his eyes open a moment later, and it...well, it wasn't as bad as I'd half expected it to be. He turned from his back to his side to look fully at me, raising a brow.

“Watching me sleep? That's a little creepy, isn't it?”

“It is,” I agreed, nodding, then sat up and stretched before going on. “I was just

thinking you don't seem as stressed as I would be, in your situation."

He blinked at me, then pushed up. "Are you kidding? I'm freaking out. This is ridiculous. I'm...bonding. Me. And not just bonding, but bonding a whole mountain. I don't know how to do any of this. It's overwhelming. It's impossible. What am I supposed to do?"

"That's just it," I said. "You may be shocked and not sure what to do or how to do it, but you're not still scowling and denying it's possible. That's what I'd be doing."

And that made him laugh. Not like a mean, sharp bark of laughter at my expense, but a real, full-bodied belly laugh. So much of one that it left him wiping tears from his eyes. "That's...that's incredibly honest of you. Thank you. I...I appreciate it? Because I don't feel like I'm handling it well. But my mother always said there was no point in putting off the inevitable by pretending it wasn't going to happen, and she was right. If I'm actually supposed to bond a mountain, I don't think I can stop that from happening."

I pushed up out of the sleeping bag and set to rolling it back up to carry it. "It sounds like she was a clever woman."

He beamed at the very mention, nodding. "She was the best. I was lost without her for a while."

"I suppose it'd be rude to say I wish I could trade my mother for yours, but you have to understand, my mother is a literal monster. Ethically speaking, it would be an excellent trade for the whole world."

He bit his lip at that, frowning, and I could see the problem in an instant.

"Ask whatever you want. I'm harder to offend than I look." After clipping the

sleeping bag to the frame, I dug into my bag to find some clothes to change into.

“So Frost is your brother. But his mother isn’t your mother? And...Ember? And Rain?”

It was my turn to laugh. “We’re a bit messy, the Moonstrikers.” I launched into the full, detailed explanation of the four of us being raised as siblings, and the real blood relationships between us, only pausing when I pulled my shirt off and realized he was staring at me with a goofy smile on his face. “Never seen a man change clothes before?”

He shook his head, surprisingly dismissive, even as he gave my chest a surprised twice-over. Also, dare I think, an impressed one? “Nah, change wherever. Guys down at the docks were never body-shy. It’s not—It’s just, even though everyone screwed up with all of you, you’re still a unit. Still siblings, even though in the technical sense, you aren’t.”

And, well, he wasn’t wrong about any of that. Technically, none of them were my siblings, and some of us had no parents in common at all, but...I shrugged. “It’s not about that. They’re still my brothers and sister, because we chose to be that to each other every day for our whole childhoods, in the same way that Delta never acted like much of a mother to any of us, even though she’s the biological mother of two of us.”

“And Cove was your father, even though he couldn’t claim you. Reading you stories and all that, because he wanted to be a part of your life. It almost sounds like he was more of a parent to all four of you than she was.” He bit his lip, expression going wistful. “I only met Oberon the once, and I...I’m not really sorry I didn’t get to know him better. But I do wish I’d had a father sometimes.”

I couldn’t help the face I made at the notion of Oberon as a father, but I nodded. “Yeah, you’ve got the right idea there. You’re lucky the only thing you inherited

from him is your looks. The man was a complete ass.”

Aubrey lifted a brow at that, his lips quirking up, as he reached over to open his own pack and inspect the clothes I’d gotten him. “My looks, huh?” he asked, without looking up at me.

“Oh please. You have to know you look just like him when he was young, and he was fucking hot.” I balled up my old shirt and stuffed it in an empty section of the bag, then reached for the blue pants I’d set aside for the second day. “There’s not a convenient place to clean up, unfortunately, so we’re just gonna have to start being smelly. Hope you’re okay with that. The only stream anywhere near here flows down the east side of the mountain, toward Dawnchaser lands, and it’s farther from us than the chalet.”

He waved me off. “Like I said, I worked at the docks. If I were afraid of smelly guys, I never would have managed that.” He pulled his own shirt off, and fuck me, but I almost swallowed my tongue.

Yeah yeah, after lifting him I’d known he was hiding muscles for days under those baggy T-shirts, but it hit different actually seeing it. He almost looked like one of my obsessive gym-going peers in the dueling game.

Maybe I wouldn’t be able to carry him.

Also, I was never going to get that image out of my head. Aubrey Duskbringer, shirtless and still a little sleepy, smiling up at me.

Fuck me sideways.

Literally.

“So Oberon was hot, huh? Spend some quality time with him, did you?” The faux-lascivious look he sent me was almost...no, it was. It was totally playful. Like we were friends and he was fucking with me.

I laughed and shook my head. “Fuck no. Like I said, it’s good all you got from him was his looks, and I definitely don’t sleep with guys that arrogant. Also, he was scared of me, which totally kills the mood.”

His smile faltered, and he cocked his head. “Scared? Why would he be...” he trailed off rather than finishing the question, squinting at me as though I was just coming completely into focus. “You’re...actually a duelist. Like, not just a person who duels, a professional duelist. You said—you said you paid your own rent. And had a job. And worked for Huxley Dawnchaser.”

Had he thought I was dressed up for a costume party when we’d met?

Admittedly, I didn’t have to go around in the outfit anymore, since I wasn’t technically working. Hells, dueling was banned everywhere now. Caspian was having a little trouble getting his people to follow the new rules, but every family lord had unilaterally banned it, and I wasn’t going to be the one to disappoint that little ray of sunshine by illegally dueling in his lands.

Just picturing the look Frost would give me made my stomach turn.

“I was,” I agreed. “For close to ten years. Oberon recognized my name when we met, and he was scared. No bigger turnoff than a guy who shrinks away from you.”

And then I waited. Waited to see Aubrey’s reaction. Waited for him to shrink away from me as his father had, or moralize at me like Delta. Even Rain hadn’t been able to resist a little of that, though from him it had been concern rather than superiority.

After a moment, he nodded. “How else were you going to get close to someone like Huxley Dawnchaser? That’s...you really have been planning this for most of your life.”

Like a balloon with a pin stuck in it, I deflated. I’d been all prepared for an argument about how I was a professional murderer, but instead he’d just...put all the pieces together and figured out exactly why I’d started it all.

Dropping to sit on his sleeping bag next to him in order to take off my shoes and socks so that I could change pants, I nodded. “It was the only way to get close to Huxley Dawnchaser. Plus honestly? I was really good at it. There’s not a lot else I’m good at. So even if I had plans for after this, I don’t anymore. Dueling is illegal, and I’m not—I’ve never been a school guy. I’m never going to be the scientist or mathematician Delta wanted us all to be.”

Aubrey slipped his shirt over his head, smoothing it down over his hot fucking abs, and then leaned over to bump our shoulders together. “You’re in pretty good shape. You could come work the docks with me.”

I laughed. “Like Titania’s ever going to let you back to that life. You at her side is keeping her sane.”

He scrunched up his nose at that, but nodded, sighing. “You’re probably right. I won’t say I want to abandon her to it, but her life is a lot. I don’t ever want to be in charge of a family. I keep trying to talk her into having a kid. Even if she doesn’t want to, you know, have a kid, it’d be good to have someone there to take her place.”

I paused, dropping my shoes in front of me and turning to him. “Or maybe...maybe it’s time to make sure that the people could go on even without a new Gloombringer. Or Duskbringer. Or...any member of any major family. That’s what Caspian is trying to do in Sunrunner lands. Make the people better at self-governance, so that no one

like his aunt can rise again to cause so much harm.”

“Titania would like that, I think. I’ll have to talk to her about it. If, you know, we survive this mess.”

I leaned over to bump my shoulder to his this time. “No doubts. We’re going to be fine. We’re doing great.”

He scoffed. “I twisted my ankle yesterday when I fell and we both know it. It was nice of you to let me keep my dignity, but I’m kind of a mess.”

“You’re literally having seizures because a mountain is trying to squirm its way into your head. I think it’s a fucking miracle your brain isn’t oozing out your ears. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t survive it.” Then I popped the button on my pants and slid them down as I stood up.

Idly, I wondered if it would have been better if I’d bought and worn underwear for a change, but every pair of pants I owned were made in the style of dueling clothes, and the lines showed through. It was a bit of vanity, but I didn’t like the way it looked.

I glanced back at him as I pulled the blue pair of pants up, and it turned out he wasn’t so completely immune to naked skin. His eyes were averted from my bare ass, a flush high on his cheeks and lip pulled between his teeth.

Well then. That wasn’t so bad, was it? He might be a straight up hottie more than I’d realized, but at least I was pretty sure he thought the same of me.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 22

Aubrey

Ass.

So very much bare ass.

Smooth and round and just...oh boy. Kit Moonstriker was too sexy for anyone's own good, especially mine. I did not need to get an erection before trying to change into the sweatpants he'd bought me.

I turned away from the epic view and busied myself with dressing, focusing less on his mass of creamy smooth skin and more on how utterly humiliating it would be to have to stand there with an erection when he was so...so cool and unaffected by everything.

Okay, maybe it turned out he wasn't that cool and unaffected by everything, but he was still a thousand times smoother than me.

Smooth and so very hot.

I cleared my throat as I tugged the sweats up over my hips and returned to a sitting position, then started rolling up my dirty clothes to put...somewhere in the pack, hopefully not touching the clean ones. "My mother would have been annoyed with me for pretending I wasn't hurt yesterday. She used to call it my masculine instincts steering me down the stubborn path."

Kit laughed at that, shaking his head. “Seriously, she sounds kind of great. But I’ve also got masculine instincts that sometimes make me act like a stubborn ass, so it’d be rude of me to poke you for it. Especially since, you know, that’s basically what I’ve been doing since we met.”

What he’d been...“No, that—I mean, maybe, yeah, but it wasn’t just you. I saw you that first day at the chalet and my first thought was...well, something about how you looked like the kind of guy who belonged at a place called a chalet.”

“Arrogant and good at skiing?” he asked, but there was a mischievous grin on his face when he did it. “Definitely yes to the first, but I’ve never cared for skiing, if we’re being honest.”

“I thought you were dressed as a duelist.” When he seemed confused and started to respond, I shook my head and held up my hand. “Like as a costume. Not that you were actually a duelist. It struck me as...”

“Rich dilettante playing a role he thought was cool and clever?” He wouldn’t have been the first rich asshole who thought pretending to be a duelist was fun. Some of them had gotten themselves killed doing it over the years.

I winced, but nodded. “Yeah, basically. Sorry. That’ll teach me to make assumptions. Grandma used to have a saying about the roots of assumptions being asses.”

He laughed again at that, and his laugh was nice. I’d half expected it to be slinky and a little sly like the rest of him, but instead, it was just honest. It felt like maybe...maybe it was something he didn’t share with a lot of people.

“Honestly, it sounds like you dodged a bullet, avoiding being raised by Oberon at court. Even Titania was a bit of a mess for most of those years because of first her father being an ass, and then her brother’s death. The Sunrunners of the previous

generation were constantly high and didn't bother to show up for anything. Delta was rigid and cold as the solstice in the arctic. Dawnchaser...well, he was always a monster." A strange look crossed his face at that, and I caught a moment of pain in it before he turned away.

Odd.

"You worked with him for a long time, if he was just a monster. I don't think I could have done that." I pretended distraction, focusing on putting my socks on over the bandage wrapped around my ankle, and didn't look up when I saw motion from the corner of my eye.

"He...I did, but he was a monster. He was awful to his kids. And his cousins. And strangers. He hated almost everyone he came into contact with at some point, and when he hated you, he was cruel."

That stymied me for a moment. I was sure I'd seen pain, but that was a rather definitive statement, wasn't it?

Except no.

There was one person Kit hadn't mentioned in all that.

"But he didn't hate you."

He slumped heavily against the tree next to him, sighing. "He tried to kill me, the last time I saw him as a free man."

Okay, that didn't make any sense. "But he didn't hate you?"

"No," he admitted, like it was something shameful. "He was trying to kill me to hurt

my father. He...he never hated me. I might have been one of the only people he thought was too dangerous to piss off. So he wasn't cruel to me. I think...I think in some ways, he saw me as an equal. Or at least, as exactly like him. So he treated me differently than everyone else." He slid down the trunk of the tree, until he was sitting back on the ground, staring off into the middle distance. "I want to say he was wrong, but...was he? I've also spent the last ten years dismissing everyone's suffering because none of it mattered to The Plan. Only The Plan was important to me. Just like only his plan made any difference to him."

I scoffed aloud, and his eyes snapped to mine. "Sorry, you're going to have to forgive me if I'm being ignorant here, but his plan was to take over the world and rule it, right? Killing everyone who was in his way?"

He pursed his lips, nose scrunched like something smelled awful, and nodded.

"And your plan was to save that same world from almost certain destruction? Save everyone possible?"

He sighed, his head lolling back to smack against the tree behind him, and I winced at the noise. "Basically. But it's not like it's selfless. I live in the world, you know. I was saving myself as much as anyone."

"Nope. If that was the plan, it would have been easier for you to plan for how to survive the explosion. Make a nice bunker filled with canned food, that kind of thing. That's a way easier plan than yours. I mean, who even thinks 'hey I can stop that volcano from exploding'?"

That actually pulled a smile out of him, but then he shook his head, as though I were wrong. "I did say I was stubborn, right? Besides, I knew before I started planning, that no one I loved would go hide in a bunker with me. So that was never an option. Frost would never forgive me if I let everyone die without trying to stop it. So it's not

like I'm secretly a good guy."

"Apparently it's so much of a secret that not even you've figured it out," I joked.

It made him smile again, but he shook his head. "I mean, you said it yourself. You thought I was a fake duelist, because someone like me would never be a real one. But I wasn't faking it. I've killed more than twenty people in duels. Some of them because Dawnchaser ordered me to."

For a moment, I just watched him. It was clear enough that part of him expected me to be angry. Maybe even wanted it, or he wouldn't have continued pushing, pointing out all the ways in which he was deficient.

Was he looking for absolution? No, that didn't make sense. He was too smart to think I could give him that, even if he wanted it. So instead, he was looking for the opposite. He fully expected me to turn on him, angry, and lash out because he'd done terrible things in his quest to save the world.

"You became a duelist because of your plan. Because it was the way to get close to him, to be able to stop him. Right?"

He looked away, nodding.

"Was there another way to get close to him?"

Sighing, he shook his head. "Not reliably, no. The only thing he wanted added to his life was someone to kill the people he found inconvenient. But does that excuse the fact that I did it?"

Part of me wanted to dismiss it all. To tell him that anything he did on his quest to save the world was justified, but...well, it wasn't that simple. He knew it and I knew

it, and if they were bad enough, the things he'd done in his plan were going to haunt him for the rest of his life.

A life that was hopefully going to be nice and long, thanks to his efforts.

“You’ve been deferring how you felt about it all, because why worry about the things you feel bad about before you even know you’ll succeed?”

“No point,” he agreed, staring up at the sky through the forest canopy. “If I’m going to be dead, what difference does it all make? I...I thought sometimes, maybe that would be better. I could die doing this, and then I’d never have to deal with it all.”

I stared at him in silence for a second, blinking, a yawning pit opening in my gut at the idea of him dying on this quest. I didn’t know him well enough to give some passionate speech about how people would miss him, and that no, that wouldn’t be better at all, but in the moment, I couldn’t relate it back to his family or any other loved ones I didn’t even know.

I just thought...I barely even knew him, and if he got himself killed, I never would.

A few days ago, I’d have accepted it without much thought.

Today . . .

No.

“Absolutely not,” I told him. “That wouldn’t be better at all. And if you go trying to get yourself killed, I’m going to kick your ass, duelist or not. Even if I have to train in order to do it.”

He lifted a brow at that, finally raising his head to look at me again. For some reason,

it made me sigh in relief when he stopped staring blankly at the sky. “I’m the best duelist in the Summerlands. Not to be an arrogant dick?—”

“Of course you are,” I agreed. “The Dawnchaser wouldn’t have hired you if you weren’t, so you had to be.”

He sighed and nodded at that, finally stretching and then pushing back to his feet. Part of me uncoiled at the motion, even though I knew the conversation wasn’t over. But he was moving forward, not just fixating on the question of whether he was supposed to live through this quest of his.

He was.

He had to. I didn’t know why, but suddenly, that was the most important part of this whole disaster for me. He’d always planned for me to live, because I had to bond the mountain, and that didn’t help anyone if I died. But he’d only cared about his own life insofar as he had to survive to see his plan through.

I saw a sudden flash of Delta Moonstriker in my mind’s eye: the woman who’d raised him as her son. Whom he said was cold and rigid. Whom I had yet to see acting any way other than rude and selfish.

My mother would have hated her. I kind of hated her, in that moment, because she’d taught Kit that was acceptable. His life didn’t matter, only the goal.

I was, I decided, going to give her a piece of my mind when we got back to the chalet safely. She was a jerk, and it seemed like people didn’t tell her that often enough.

Shoving myself up and then grabbing the sleeping bag, I started rolling it up to reattach it to my pack. It slid apart in the center as I started to curl the end up and...what the heck?

In a moment, Kit was behind me, his hands on mine, guiding my motions. “It’s harder than it looks,” he said, his breathy voice brushing against my ear as he spoke. “It only looks easy because I’ve done it a thousand times. I lived rough for a few years when I first left home.”

Homeless, he meant. He’d been homeless. And I’d made such an insensitive comment the day before?—

“I was just grateful it wasn’t supposed to rain while we were doing this,” he added. “Getting rained on in your sleep sucks.”

A rich dilettante, I’d thought him.

I’d been so willfully ignorant.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 23

Kit

Thankfully, Aubrey didn't mention my having to stand on my toes to help him roll up his sleeping bag.

The man was just too fucking tall for anyone's good.

On the other hand, maybe he hadn't noticed. Small favors from the universe.

Aubrey set up his own pack, slowly but with confidence, apparently having watched me closely the day before. Since his independence seemed important to him, I kept my mouth shut about how much time it was taking, and let him do it. It wasn't like we had a plane to catch...

Just a volcano to keep from exploding in a fit of anger.

But Nikka wasn't buzzing in my head that we needed to rush, so maybe we were doing okay. Or maybe she didn't know.

I sure as fuck didn't.

When Aubrey managed to close the clasps over his own chest, that held the pack, frame, and sleeping bag on his back, I was impressed with how quick a learner he was.

He ate another of those ridiculous fucking granola bars as we went, and for some reason, it made me want to retroactively slap his father. Every time he took a bite of dry, crumbly oats and honey and chocolate, and smiled about it, I thought that if Oberon Gloombringer had been any kind of decent person, Aubrey would have always had all the granola bars he'd ever wanted.

He'd have never thought a relatively inexpensive thing was a luxury.

Oberon would have married Aubrey's mother, and they'd have been a family.

And maybe the world never would have been in danger.

Or maybe Aubrey would have bonded a stone as a child like the rest of us, and there would be no one who could do what he was doing now, so we would all die. I didn't know for sure why he hadn't bonded as a child, or how he was able to bond Slate now, so there was no way for me to be sure.

If there was one thing I'd learned from planning with Nikka over the years, it was that sometimes small changes had consequences you couldn't properly foresee, because you couldn't predict how people would react. People like Caspian's uncle, Victor Berents, were always a problem to properly predict, because while he was a criminal, he also did have a conscience, and cared about some things.

People like you , Nikka pointed out. It was always hard to see what you'd do, if you didn't tell me .

I had to hide my smile at that, lest Aubrey think I was amused by something he was doing. I'm confusing, am I?

Not confusing , she hedged, just...you think differently from most people. Frost is always logical. He thinks in a straight line. Other people are emotional. They think in

circles. Somehow, you manage to do both, sometimes all at once. I struggle to follow .

Well, I'd always confused everyone else, so why not a stone who could see the future?

Aubrey tucked the plastic wrapper from his granola bar into a pocket on the backpack, and when he caught my eye turning around again, he ducked his head. "I know, glutton. How much can one guy eat?"

I blinked at that for a moment, because I'd been thinking nothing of the sort. I didn't think I'd ever contemplated how much Aubrey ate, in any way, other than maybe "how much food should I bring on this hike?"

So I tugged the jerky out of my own pocket and stuffed a piece into my mouth. It took forever to chew and swallow, but I thought it made an important point. "I brought like fifty of the damn things," I finally said, still trying to get the last remnants of beef from between my teeth. "And I told you I don't like granola bars. So who else is gonna eat them? Besides, you're like seven feet tall. Aren't you supposed to eat a lot?"

"I'm not seven feet tall," he said, laughing and shaking his head, so mission accomplished. "Barely over six. Not as tall as your brother."

"Yes, and Frost is a giant. He eats at least four meals a day, because he's enormous and needs extra food for all that bulk. And he's a mathematician, so he's smaller than you in other ways. Not all brawny."

Aubrey made a face at the word mathematician—the same face the majority of people made, like the very existence of such a thing was incomprehensible and maybe a bit painful to consider, then he winced and looked back to me, checking if

I'd noticed.

I laughed. "I don't like math either, don't look at me. I'm not the family super genius." I pulled up my arm and flexed the muscles there. "I'm a jock like you, even if my muscles aren't as impressive."

That, finally, fully distracted him and got him laughing.

He seemed lighter on his feet than the day before, so it seemed that his ankle had healed some overnight, but he still stopped and leaned against a tree for a second, his shoulders hunched as he laughed so hard he shook.

It hadn't been that funny, so I stepped in a little closer, in case this was the precursor to another seizure.

I wasn't going to let him fall again.

I hadn't insisted on tying us together that morning when I'd pulled out the rope and he'd made a sour face at it, so I needed to be extra careful in other ways.

He finally got his breath back, though he was still a bit wheezy, and leaned his back against the tree, meeting my eye. "You're the best duelist in the Summerlands. You said that. You weren't exaggerating. I don't...I don't think you do that. I think you're easily a bigger 'jock' than me. My muscles are just from?—"

"Work. Just like mine. And my job is now literally illegal in the entire country. Yours is not. So who's the real winner here?"

He cocked his head at that, considering, then nodded. "I guess that's a fair point. Do you, uh, have a plan? I really could get you a job on the docks. The state finally figured out we hadn't been able to pay the taxes on Grandma's old farmhouse for

years, and took it. I think they were planning to knock it down. So I might be begging you to keep this sleeping bag when we're done. Maybe I'll be the one without a home." He winced again, clearly still thinking about our discussion of homelessness the day before.

Good. It was good that he cared.

Because as much as he still thought he was a dockworker—"Aubrey, you're never going back to The Banks. Titania needs you, and even if she didn't, there's Slate. I mean, Nikka and I never discussed it, but there's a decent chance you're going to be living in the chalet to be close to him, don't you think?"

His brow drew together, a line down the center as he considered. "But...but it's not my house. And it's so cold up here."

"But you'll be doing a service to the whole Summerlands by taking care of Slate. It's a job. You should be paid for it. Why not be paid in part with a house? Besides, your aunt already owns a quarter of the chalet. It exists because of the need to appease Slate. For the cold, I promise, you'll get used to it."

He considered that for a long time, staring off into space. Just when I was worried he was going to come up with some reason that no, people shouldn't take care of him in exchange for helping to protect them, his eyes went unfocused and his face went slack.

That look.

For the first time, I reacted properly to it, before anything started to shake.

I hit the mental button in my brain to activate Nikka's power—the one I actually used, rather than her awkward ability to see into the future, and everything slowed

down around me. Or maybe I sped up—I was never sure which it was, and I wasn't Frost, to care that much.

I leaped forward, putting my hands on Aubrey's shoulders and holding tight, lowering him gently to the ground just as he started to shake. A moment later, the ground beneath us started to shake as well. It was even more surreal when slowed down to a crawl, but it let me react as necessary, keeping his hand from smacking into the tree, or his ankles from twisting out from under him.

I held him against me for the long moments it took him to stop shaking, but when he blinked his eyes open, so very slowly, I realized...no, it hadn't been that long. It had been much shorter than any of the other times, I'd just been activated, so it had felt as long to me.

Was that good, that it had been shorter?

I cut the power, reaching down to squeeze his hand. "You okay?"

He sighed, but he didn't yank away or seem angry. Just a little resigned. "I think it's getting easier? Maybe I'm just getting used to it."

I scowled at the idea of getting used to seizures but shook my head. "No, this was shorter. Maybe...maybe once the bond is settled, it'll stop?" Fuck, I hoped it would. I didn't think he'd live a long, healthy life if he kept going like this.

Maybe...Maybe I shouldn't be doing this at all. Maybe I should be taking him as far away from Slate as we could get. Give him a chance at a safe, healthy, seizure-free life. Why should he have to deal with this, all because one mountain wanted to throw a damned tantrum?

That wasn't fucking fair.

While I was in the habit of quoting Delta's words to me when I was a child, that life was never fair...I wanted it to be. For Aubrey, I wanted life to be fair. I wanted this to be fair.

I wanted him to have the life he wanted, not just the one we needed him to have.

Fuck me.

I cared about him.

I hate you a little right now , I told Nikka.

Nikka, of course, was all sympathy. I know. I'm sorry. If it makes you feel better, I think he's smarter than you, so he'll figure things out quickly. That's why I've been working on you all these years, so you wouldn't go all stubborn on me and refuse to love him even when you do. Even after he realizes he loves you too .

Little early for that , I shot back. I like him. I want...I want him to be happy. I'm not doodling our names inside little hearts in my notebooks .

She only scoffed in reply, because she didn't need to say anything else.

Because I might be a stubborn asshole, but I knew myself, and she knew me. I was never going to be the heart-doodler. I didn't even own notebooks. Caring about Aubrey was...so much more than I gave almost anyone in my life, ever.

I was well and truly screwed.

I fucking cared about him.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 24

Aubrey

Not a baby , came the grumble in the distance, and I stopped focusing on my conversation with Kit, trying to hear the words carried on the wind.

Not a child.

Don't need to be spoken to like I don't understand things.

The words weren't distant anymore then. They were right there in my ears. Right there in the tremble of my gut. In the slight vibration of the tree at my back. In the strange, slightly painful way my head felt, ill-used and sore, like the time I'd had swimmer's ear as a child.

Was he complaining about how I'd yelled at him the night before? About my grandmother's almost always pithy takes on life? I hadn't intended to offend him, but in the moment, it had been instinct to shout back that he had to stop. That he couldn't always have what he wanted.

The world slipped away and there was only the voice.

Frozen woman and her ugly words.

Okay, that wasn't about me, because even failing understanding of gender, I doubted anyone would ever call me that.

Don't know why Iri likes her, the grumbling continued . She's always been a mean one. Too smart, too quick, thinks only smart and quick ones are good enough. What's the word?

I knew the word he wanted. It was one I'd immediately pasted onto Kit in my mind, but one that had turned out to be wrong about him.

Arrogant.

There was a pause, and I realized that the word had come from me, not another grumble from the voice. From the mountain.

Yes , he finally agreed. Arrogant. She's a smart girl, but it's made her arrogant, especially since the fracture. She doesn't understand that not everything is about being the cleverest rock in the ground. S'why the ground was never good enough for her .

I focused for a moment, and pushed my thoughts into the world, the same as the one before. Because she didn't like being the cleverest?

No. Loves being the cleverest, Iri. But...she wanted other clever ones. And humans, they're...they're quicker than rocks. So quick. Too quick. Always there and gone. Never stop and wait a minute for you to hear yourself think .

I could understand that frustration. I wasn't an unintelligent guy, but I'd never been anything resembling fast. I liked to take my time and think a thing through before making a decision or moving forward, or even replying to a question. It sometimes frustrated people, who seemed to be constantly in a hurry around me.

Unless he just meant that we lived and died too quickly, which would also make sense, assuming this was Slate I was talking to. He'd been standing in the middle of

the Summerlands since before there had been a Summerlands. Why shouldn't he think we were so short-lived as to be near-irrelevant?

No , he grumbled. Not that. Too fast, yes, but they never stay the whole time. Never stay long enough to talk. Always take the children and leave me alone again . Always alone .

With a jerk, I opened my eyes, and only then realized that I'd closed them.

Kit was holding me against him, looking worriedly down into my eyes, and for a long moment, I fell into that cool gray gaze. His eyes were so deep. Like the sea on an overcast day. Filled with all the things that made him Kit. He was so beautiful. And he was worried about me.

"You okay?" he whispered, his voice hoarse and oddly croaky.

I couldn't hold back a sigh at that. Was I okay?

"I think it's getting easier? Maybe I'm just getting used to it." I wasn't in full-body pain this time, at least. My head didn't feel like it was splitting open, just a little sore, and I hadn't had any trouble talking at all when I woke.

Kit scowled, but he shook his head. "No, this was shorter. Maybe...maybe once the bond is settled, it'll stop?"

I considered. The last few hadn't been as bad. Not as painful and without all the side effects of the first few. Maybe that was it. Maybe I just had to get used to speaking to the mountain. Learn how to do it without losing consciousness, because that was unsustainable. If I had to have a seizure every time I spoke to the mountain, I didn't think I was going to live terribly long that way.

Still, I'd...I'd spoken to the mountain. We had actually communicated. Exchanged words, not just him complaining and me yelling at him to stop throwing a fit.

More than that, I thought that maybe I was starting to understand the root of the problem.

He was lonely.

I'd have been lonely too, out here in the middle of nowhere with no humans living nearby. All the stones he wanted to visit with lived far away too, and maybe they couldn't speak to him unless they were nearby. Or maybe they got distracted by their outside lives and just didn't speak to him regularly. I'd never been much of an extrovert, hated parties and loud places, but that didn't mean I wanted to be completely alone all the time.

"He's lonely," I finally said, though I didn't move from the safe haven of Kit's arms. "Everyone always leaves him alone, so he's lonely. And he thinks Iri is arrogant."

Kit smiled at that last, shrugging. "I mean, I don't doubt that she is. She only bonds with the smartest people she can find, so I was right out."

I smacked his chest with the back of my hand. "Intelligence isn't everything."

"I know. I don't feel bad about it. Frankly, I'm grateful I never bonded Iri. It sounds like a ton of responsibility."

And that? I had to laugh at him.

"Right," I agreed sarcastically, drawing the word out. "Because the man who spent years coming up with a plan with his stone to save the world and then painstakingly enacting it is definitely bad at responsibility."

He waved me off, but then reached for me again, helping me slowly get back to my feet. “That’s different. I didn’t have to stay in one place and do a boring job like run a family. I got to go places and do things and leave the responsible stuff to Rain and Frost. I’d say Ember, but she’s more like me, poor sucker.”

“She’s perfect for Aunt Titania,” I said, sighing as I stretched my muscles and tried to make sure I hadn’t further hurt myself this time. “She needs someone to keep her from getting more like her family—or, like our family used to be. You know, all stoic and serious and emotionless. She still feels like that’s what she’s supposed to do, even though it didn’t work for any of them.”

Kit rolled his eyes. “Of course she does. Brainwashing is a powerful thing, and she spent her whole life being told that was the way to be. But the Summerlands were a better place when the Duskbringer family were true to their emotions instead of trying to repress them. Being cold stoic jackasses is my family’s job.”

“No wonder you worry you’re a failure,” I shot back. “Clearly you’re no good at that.”

His insouciant grin was answer enough, and it gave me a little bubble of...something in my chest.

What was that emotion, even? Joy?

I hadn’t felt that since Mother had died, but...no, it wasn’t exactly that. It was something else. Something that made me want to inch closer and closer to Kit, until I lost track of where he started and I began.

I glanced down at his lips, pink and lush and...

You’re going to leave with him , the mountain grumbled.

I blinked, looking around, waiting for another seizure to take me, but nothing happened. Clouds swirled overhead, and a bird trilled in a nearby tree.

What if I don't? I tried to ask, to shove out into the air, the way I'd done in my...during the seizure? While unconscious? I didn't really have the right words for it.

The whole mountain seemed to sigh, from the stones beneath my feet to the trees, to the air itself. No. Don't want to force you to stay. Want...want to go see with you. See Verisa. See the Tower of the Moon. But I'm too big and awful and frightening. No one wants to be with me .

You're really not. This is...if Kit and I weren't doing this to save the world, it would almost be nice, hiking in the woods , I admitted.

Like him , the mountain said, and I could almost feel his attention on Kit. And Slate did...like him. He comes and stays sometimes. Climbs the same little path over and over. He has fractured little sister. Good that someone is taking care of her .

Fractured...did he mean Kit's stone? I suspected that Kit would have said she was taking care of him and not the other way around, but that was okay. People—and stones, I supposed—were always better when they were taking care of each other.

I felt a hand on my elbow, and turned to see Kit looking at me again, or maybe still, but the worry was back on his face. “You drifted off again. I was afraid you were going to...”

Fall down and break myself, no doubt. I shook my head, then stopped and looked around. “I didn't have a seizure?”

“No, just stared off into space a minute.”

“I’m—he’s talking to me. We’re talking.”

Cautiously, he smiled at that. “That’s . . . good?”

“I think...I think it is.” I nodded, turning back to the path, filled with more energy than I’d had before. “We should get going. I’d rather not sleep on the ground again if we can avoid it.”

He winced, so I suspected that we weren’t going to make it to the chalet that day, but still. Moving forward. That was the way to be, always moving forward.

I smiled and reached down to twine my hand with Kit’s. What was more, he let me, and smiled right back. Maybe he just wanted to have a hand on me in case I took another tumble, but that was okay. It was a start.

Right then, everything felt like a fresh, new start.

We’re going to be okay , I told the mountain.

He didn’t respond, but that was okay too. I turned back to the conversation with Kit.

“So Slate is lonely. Do you think we could...I don’t know, get people to move closer? I guess they’ve wanted to stay away because you know, volcanoes are dangerous, but I don’t think he wants to hurt anyone.”

Kit cocked his head at that. “I get that. People have avoided the fuck out of me for the last ten years because I’m scary.” Then he paused and made a pained face. “You think he’s fully in control?”

He was thinking of his own time as a duelist, I realized. The fact that he’d worked for, and killed people for, Huxley Dawnchaser. So maybe sometimes people had been

sensible to fear and avoid him.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But we’ll find out, and one way or another, we’ll get this fixed.”

Kit smiled back at me, and we went back to the trail.

Chapter 25

Kit

Aubrey was as high as a kite.

I had vague memories of my own bonding, and thought I'd been similar for a few days afterward.

Ironically, it had also happened on this very mountainside. We'd been visiting the chalet because Delta had been trying to make a connection with Dane Sunrunner. He hadn't shown up, and she'd never tried again, but that hadn't mattered to me at the time.

What had mattered was going out to hike the mountainside and finding Nikka there, just a tiny unassuming piece of rock on the ground. She'd been clear and filthy, and I'd thought her a simple piece of quartz at first, a common stone that rarely had enough resonance to truly bond a person.

Still, the moment I'd picked her up, there had been a hum in the air. Something soft and sweet and somehow almost...kind. It had been odd for me at eleven, because until that moment, only Frost and my father had ever been kind to me, so having the feeling come over me like a blanket and a cup of cocoa had been a revelation.

I'd never known a feminine presence to be anything other than an authority figure, and I didn't much like those.

Rain had been a precocious six-year-old at the time, and he'd frowned at her lying in my hand, cocking his head. "Is that a diamond? Mother says we shouldn't touch diamonds, just in case."

She did look a bit like a diamond. Too small to show her true blue shade, she'd almost looked like a broken piece of glass sitting in my palm, with her edges worn smooth by time and friction.

But it hadn't mattered. The moment I'd heard her soft voice in my mind, I'd known that it didn't matter if she was a diamond. She was a part of me. When she told me about what was coming, about Slate's possible eruption, well...then I couldn't tell everyone about her ability with time.

It had been my first instinct, to tell Delta and get her to fix everything that was going to go wrong. She'd been a terrible mother, sure, but fixing things was what mothers were supposed to do, wasn't it? You were supposed to take your problems to them, and they'd fix them, because they were supposed to take care of you.

But when I'd suggested that route to Nikka, she'd panicked and painted the most vivid description I'd ever heard of all the ways that would go wrong. Delta would march straight to Slate and demand that he do as she commanded, Nikka told me. And while Slate was a reasonable fellow according to her, he didn't deal well with that kind of know-it-all arrogance.

I couldn't much blame him, because neither did I. As a frustrated eleven-year-old, though, I hadn't been able to do much about being ordered around. As a fully grown volcano, no one controlled Slate.

In many ways, I'd admired the volcano. Not only was he annoyed, but people had to listen to him. We didn't have a choice.

Looking back, I supposed it might have been a seminal moment, since I'd shaped myself into someone scary enough that people felt they had to listen to me. Was it a good thing, that I'd decided to model myself after a volcano?

Probably more a childish one, but it was a little too late to change that.

I didn't have time to let my thoughts wander like that, though, because Aubrey wasn't going to pay attention to his surroundings, so I had to do it for him. Case in point: he was staring up at the sky and almost ran smack into a tree.

I grabbed his elbow and steered him around the thing, and he looked down quickly, first at my guiding hand, and then at the tree, like its existence was confusing. "Sorry, I was..." and then his gaze drifted back up to the clouds and stayed there as we continued walking in silence.

Half an hour later, he started again, right where he'd left off. ". . . just thinking about how the clouds look like eddies of water in the sky."

I glanced up at the low-hanging gray clouds and nodded. "I suppose they do. But they basically are that, so why not?"

"They—they are. I hadn't thought about it that way." He looked back up at them, and I started to worry he was going to end the day with a crick in his neck from staring up all afternoon. "They're the same shade as your eyes," he added after a while, and that was...

He'd noticed what color my eyes were? More than that, he was making such romantic comparisons as clouds?

I bit my lip, considering. It was...nice, I thought. Nice that he'd noticed my eyes. That he cared what color they were. He'd already said he thought I was a handsome

asshole. Or maybe he'd said jerk, since he seemed terminally allergic to cursing.

No, I was pretty sure it had been asshole.

If I'd managed to inspire him to curse, what did that say about me?

"It's an unusual color," Aubrey said, again, continuing like there had been no pause in the conversation. "Like your stone. Not that—not that clear is an unusual color for a stone, but it's an unusual color for an aquamarine. Isn't it?"

"It is," I agreed. "Delta decided she was a diamond, and I think she almost disowned me on the spot."

He turned, head cocked, and looked like that was the strangest thing anyone had ever said to him. "Are Moonstrikers only allowed to bond aquamarines?"

"No, it's not that; it's...diamonds are simple. They're not clever and impressive. For close to twenty years, Delta believed all Nikka did for me was boost my reflexes, and that wasn't good enough for someone she called her child."

He stared at me a while, apparently no longer aware that we were still walking, since he didn't even look down when I had to steer him around another tree. It was odd, and almost unnerving.

"He thinks she's an arrogant brat," he said finally. "He's...disappointed in her. It's sort of like she's his kid, and he's disappointed."

"Delta?" I was disappointed in her, for sure, but it seemed odd that the volcano even knew she existed,

He shook his head. "No, Iri."

At that, there was a little sigh in my mind. I didn't even need to ask—I knew why.

“Well, I kind of agree. She ignores Nikka. They all talk, you know, the stones. Except that Iri ignores Nikka as though she doesn't hear her.”

He stopped walking, so I supposed he did remember, on some level, that he was doing it. Turning toward me, he reached out and lifted Nikka with the hand that I wasn't gripping to keep him from running into a tree.

Normally, I'd have smacked away anyone who was so presumptuous as to touch Nikka, but...it didn't feel presumptuous of him, for some reason.

His eyes didn't seem to focus on her, but past her, and he gave a tiny smile. “She can't hear her,” he told me. “She's not ignoring her. Your Nikka is fractured little sister. They”—he finally looked up at me, some surprise on his face—“she used to be a part of Iri, but broke off. They resonate on the exact same frequency, so she can't hear her.”

My hand immediately went to wrap around Nikka, and I was almost overwhelmed with her emotion. Relief. Tears stung my eyes.

Iri didn't hate us. She just couldn't hear us.

“It's why Nikka has the time abilities that Iri doesn't.” He cocked his head and his eyes widened a little, like he was saying the words, but they were a surprise to him at the same time. Because they were. Because they were from Slate himself. “Iri can stop time, turn it back, but she can't speed up her bearer like Nikka does or you. And she can't see the actual future. They're things she used to be able to do, before the fracture. Now they're for Nikka.”

He let her fall back to my chest, looking up into my eyes, and I could see the surprise

in his cornflower blue ones.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to?—”

“It’s fine. We didn’t mind.” I squeezed his hand, and I wasn’t sure if it was supposed to be a reassuring gesture or a reminder that we were also holding hands, and I didn’t mind that either.

It turned out that I didn’t mind a lot of things, these days.

But hells, why not? My whole life was changing, right this moment. If we survived, I had to find a whole new path. I’d been trying not to think too much about it, but my chosen career was literally illegal now, and frankly, I couldn’t be too sorry for that. Dueling had always been a means to an end, and I would be happy to move on.

I just had no idea what to move on to.

It wasn’t like I was good at a lot of things.

Aubrey was already back in his own head, though, his eyes gone distant again, and then, he turned once again to look at the sky. “So gray,” he mumbled, and I had to fight off laughter.

He was so freaking high.

I turned us back to the path and started walking again. And if I missed his company while his brain worked through its new connection, well, no one needed to know.

When the sun was high overhead—even though the cloud cover meant we couldn’t really see it—I reached into his pack and pulled out one of his damned granola bars, sliding it into his free hand. By rote, he unwrapped it and ate it. I took the wrapper

before he could stuff it into the pocket on his sweatpants and put it with my own trash, so it'd be in one convenient spot when we got back to the chalet.

Even with him silent and thoughtful, it was a nice hike.

I'd always enjoyed it, all the way back to when I'd been a child on this mountainside, even if I hadn't been on the exact same trail then.

It wasn't far from here , Nikka pointed out. Where we met .

I remember , I agreed. How are you doing?

She...she doesn't hate me. I spent so long thinking she hated me. She just doesn't know I exist. It's a strange thing to have to refocus. I wonder if the puppies that used to be Nausa will also be unable to hear each other .

It was a good question, and also a very Nikka thing to focus on. Not the emotions of how this affected her, but the logical parts of how this fact affected everyone.

I shrugged, not being especially careful to keep Aubrey from seeing me have a conversation in my head. No way to know yet, but it would make sense. Unless the breaking intrinsically changed them in a way it didn't change you. Or the fracture, Slate called it .

He did , she agreed. I suppose we'll find out soon enough. He...he missed me. I'm not sorry I went with you, but I'm sorry I've been a part of the problem, making him lonely .

Me too , I said, and oddly enough, I found that it was true.

“We have to go that way,” Aubrey said, startling me out of my own thoughts.

He was pointing off the trail. I pointed at the path before us. “The chalet is that way.”

He nodded, turning to meet my eye, and while there was still all that slightly wild, high emotion that came from the bonding, there was also something clear and rational there. He wasn’t saying this because he was high. There was a reason.

But...The Plan had always been to go toward the back of the chalet. Not off the path. And it was The Plan for a reason.

It was The Plan .

I hadn’t deviated from it in a decade, not once.

I swallowed hard, looking Aubrey in the eye. He was determined. Not angry and stubborn, like with his ankle the day before, but set.

Like the mountain.

I took a deep, admittedly slightly shaky, breath, and nodded. “Okay then. That way.”

And we left the path, and The Plan, behind us.

It looked just like the path, which wasn’t a shock—it was a mountain, mostly covered with pine trees. What was going to change? Still, my stomach wrapped itself up in knots, reminding me that this wasn’t The Plan, like a blaring fire alarm lighting up my whole body in warning.

Not The Plan. Not The Plan. Not The Plan.

We were starting to get to the rocky edge of the mountain, where there were fewer trees and more, well, rocks. It took more focus to climb there and not slide around on

loose gravel or take a wrong step onto a spiky rock formation. That was good. I had to focus on something other than not The Plan.

Not The Plan.

We climbed that direction for almost half an hour, and came around a turn on the mountain to find a rocky outcropping that led into a small cave. Interesting. I'd never seen this before.

I'd never deviated from The Plan before.

We crawled up the side of the rocks and onto the lip of the bottom edge of the outcropping, a huge flat chunk of slate hanging over our heads.

Ha, slate on Slate.

I turned and grabbed his hand again, since we'd had to let go while climbing, and helped him up. The outcrop stuck out a bit from the rest of the mountain, and there was a panoramic view of the whole mountainside. It was stunningly beautiful.

As we stood there looking out at the mountain, the sky opened up, and rain started pouring down all around us.

I looked up at Aubrey, who was beaming like he'd just been given every solstice present he'd ever wanted, all at once. He looked down at me, eyes shining. "Slate said it was going to rain. And that we'd be safe here."

He was breathless, and I didn't think it was from the climbing.

I couldn't stop myself.

I pushed up onto my toes and pressed my lips to his.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 26

Aubrey

Kiss.

Kit.

Kit kiss.

In a second, everything else became a distant notion, unimportant and just...rain? What was that? Stone bonding? Who cared? The volcano could have erupted, and I'd have barely noticed.

Kit was kissing me.

His lips were hot and just a little bit dry, but inside his mouth, that wasn't dry at all. His tongue pressed between our lips and into my mouth, slick and claiming and...

He wrenched himself away from me, panting. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—shouldn't have?—"

No no no no no, that wasn't what I wanted.

That wasn't right at all.

I ignored Slate, who was still in the back of my mind and painfully curious about

what was happening, grabbing Kit around the waist and pulling him against me. I plunged my fingers into his hair, holding the back of his head and pressing his lips against mine once more.

This time, I was the one with the questing tongue, demanding entry into his mouth. He opened to me without a second's hesitance, and it was perfection itself.

We shuffled into the alcove made by the enormous slab of stone over our heads until his back hit the end of the space, and I kept pushing. I pressed him up against the stone, our mouths still fused together, hot and constantly moving, as though if I tried hard enough I could get even closer to him. Our bodies were pressed together from forehead to toes, but I needed—I needed more. Needed to be closer. To be in the same space as him. To bond Kit like I was bonding Slate. To be one person.

I finally pulled back when my throat constricted in rebellion, breathing in deep gasps, finally realizing that I hadn't been getting enough air. If his own desperate breathing was any indication, Kit was in much the same situation, but he wasn't complaining.

His arms were wrapped around my neck, and he was leaning up into me, like he wanted this.

Wanted me.

"We shouldn't," he said, and my instinct was to pull away at the implicit rejection. To tell him that fine, if he didn't want me, then I didn't want him either, and in fact, he could just leave me there and I'd manage on my own.

Because it was what I'd always done. I'd only ever had Mother and Grandmother, and no one else had ever wanted me, not for real.

For some reason, this time, I didn't jerk away and isolate myself.

No, it was because of Slate.

How weird was that, from every angle? The mountain was in my head, and he thought Kit and I were cute together.

But it was that. It was because of his constant, reassuring presence. Slate was beneath me, next to me, above me, and he was telling me this wasn't a rejection. He didn't know what it was, but he was sure that Kit liked me as much as I liked him.

Maybe more than like.

So I reached up with one hand and cupped his cheek. "Why the heck not?"

"I..." His cloud-gray eyes clouded over, and he squeezed them shut. "I'm not a good person, Aubrey, and maybe I'm being presumptuous, but I don't think you've done this before. I'm no good. I'm a demanding, frigid asshole, who fucks people and then gets the hell out before the sheets even cool. I shouldn't be anyone's first."

I pushed him harder into the stone and grinned down at him. "In case it's escaped your notice, we don't even have sheets, and unless you want to abandon your plan completely, you can't leave me alone." He tried to open his mouth, to protest more, but I leaned in and sealed our mouths together again, stealing his self-hate and trying to fill him with myself.

Sure, it wouldn't work for good, and it sounded like he needed a ton of therapy, but I was starting to realize that Delta Moonstriker had been perhaps the worst mother of all time, short of being abusive.

Her intentions had probably been (mostly) good, but she was truly terrible.

But I couldn't give him decades of therapy in this moment. All I could give him was

this. I pulled back, both of us panting again, and shook my head. “You’re not what you think. Yeah, you’re an asshole, whatever. You’re also good. Because you care about that. About what I deserve.” I pressed my forehead against his and stared into his eyes, distorted as they were by the proximity. “But Kit, I get to decide what I deserve. And I don’t know if I deserve anything in particular, but what I want? That’s you. Arrogant, stubborn, imperfect, whatever you want to call yourself, I don’t care. You’re also gorgeous, and more important, you’re good. And kind. And you care more about everyone than most of them realize. I think the only people back at the chalet who really saw you were your father and Frost. Maybe Fawn Dawnchaser. The others, they all buy into this duelist persona you’ve built. The asshole who only cares about himself.”

“I am an?—”

“Don’t even try it,” I said, and pushed in for another kiss. When I’d managed to stop him again, I pulled away and looked down into his eyes. “You’re here. You spent the last ten years trying to save the whole world, when you could’ve chosen a different path if you were really all that selfish. You can play the arrogant, selfish asshole with everyone else, but I’m never going to believe it. I see you , Kit.”

He shivered against me, like he truly understood what I was saying. Like he was naked in front of me, and it was a completely alien concept, being so bare before another person.

It probably was. He’d spent all those years being the terrifying Kit Emrys, best duelist in the Summerlands. The way he’d talked about it, with no art or pride or even interest, I didn’t doubt it was the truth. He was the best at his plan-chosen profession, which was now entirely outlawed.

Frankly, it sounded terrible. At least hard physical labor as a profession would never be against the law, even if eventually my body wouldn’t be able to handle the abuse.

Right now, though, duelist and laborer didn't matter. We were just Kit and Aubrey, in an alcove on Mount Slate, in the middle of a random afternoon rainstorm. I reached up to the clasp on his backpack rig-thingamajig, and opened it, pushing the packs to the floor behind him, then taking mine off and setting it against the back of the alcove as well.

Then I pulled Kit against me, lighter for having shed all that weight, and kissed him again.

When I went to pull him down to the rocky floor, he shook his head and turned to the packs, fumbling with some of the straps on top of them. "The sleeping bags," he said, his voice rough and smoky from all the kissing. "Not just going to have sex on the ground, with rocks cutting into my ass."

I grinned at him. "Aww, are you trying to make my first time special?" He looked up at me sharply, and I stepped in, putting my hand on his to still it for a moment. "It is. It...will be. But that's okay. I choose that, Kit. Choose you."

This time when I leaned in, the kiss I laid on his lips was soft, almost chaste, but it somehow managed to leave both of us breathing hard anyway. He just knelt there like that a moment, his cloudy gray eyes shut, lips slightly parted, breathing.

So I unlatched the sleeping bags, untied them, and flung them both out, one atop the other, to give us the cushiest possible base to start with. It wasn't much, but he was right, and it was better than the hard, rocky ground.

"Don't imagine the plan included condoms, or?—"

He snorted, shaking his head with annoyance. "Nikka suggested it, but I...we're hiking up a mountain. This is ridiculous. Plus I had decided to hate you."

I smiled, wrapping my arms around him and pulling him onto the sleeping bags with me. “I decided to hate you too. Funny, how that didn’t quite work out. But I’m not . . . I mean, we can go without, if?—”

“I’ve never gone without before,” he admitted, biting his lip, but then he offered that sly grin of his. “But I’m willing to give it a shot, here and now. With you.”

I nodded, my words failing me, and then I lowered my lips back to his.

Long moments of kissing, while the rain pounded against the rock above us, were exactly what I’d wanted. What I’d never realized they would be, just this silent perfect communion with another person. With Kit, whom I’d never really hated at all.

I’d hated what I had thought he symbolized to me, but that was just an image that had never been him. Just like the terrifying “best duelist in the Summerlands” wasn’t really him either. It was what he was capable of, sure, but it was an armor he wore to avoid anyone seeing the squishy, vulnerable inside of him.

When I rolled atop him, he didn’t roll off the sleeping bags trying to take control back. Didn’t protest, or even tense beneath me as though being under me was uncomfortable. No, he arched into me, pressing his achingly hard cock up into me, his whole face slack with lust.

He liked it.

Wanted me there, above him.

I ground forward, pressing my cock into his, and groaned at the sensation, even with multiple layers of cloth between us.

I had to get his clothes off. Had to see him, had to touch him. He let me strip him, and

my fingers, while clumsy with the rush to get him naked, managed the task well enough. His skin was perfect everywhere, just as smooth and blemish-free as the ass he'd bared to me that morning.

I felt ungainly by comparison, but when he slipped my shirt off over my head, he ran his fingers over my chest and the light dusting of hair there, staring as if transfixed. "Fuck," he muttered. "You're so gods damned gorgeous."

Me, gorgeous. Plain old brown-haired, blue-eyed Aubrey Sagara, the poorest kid at school, who didn't even have a bonded stone.

Except now I was bonding a whole mountain, and the most beautiful man in the world was looking up at me with admiration. With naked lust. It was even more surreal than finding out I was Oberon Gloombringer's heir had been.

I leaned down and kissed him again, then left a trail of kisses down his neck and chest, laving his nipples, then nipping them lightly with my teeth, making him cry out and buck up against me.

When I reached his groin, I had a moment of indecision. I could try to suck him, but I had literally no experience with that, so what if I wasn't good at it? I licked my lips, looking up at him, and he groaned, his head falling back against the packs behind him. "You can't look at me like that. I might die before we get to the main attraction."

"Like what?"

"Like...all innocent and fucking lustful. Like that." He shook his head, pushing up and pressing me onto my back. I wondered if he'd been waiting for the chance to take control, but instead of shoving me down, he...he...oh?—

“Kit,” I managed to squeak out when he swallowed my cock whole. He looked up at me, amusement in his eyes as he licked his way around me. The sensation was almost more than I could handle, his mouth and tongue and the movement and...and then I realized that one of his hands was moving behind him. For a moment, I thought he was working his own cock, but no. No, he was pressing fingers inside himself. Just the image blew my mind, and almost ended the whole encounter quite prematurely. “Kit, what are you doing?”

He pulled back, taking a deep breath and grinning at me. “No lube,” he managed to say after catching his breath. “Gotta get you nice and wet, so nobody gets hurt.”

Get me wet.

Was he saying . . . ?

Yes he was. He was opening himself up, and getting my cock wet and...Kit wanted me inside him. Cue another desperate moment of holding back my impending orgasm. Our eyes met, and his drifted shut as he moaned around my cock, the vibrations zinging through my whole body.

I shoved him back, pushing him down on the sleeping bags again and climbing atop him.

“Are you ready for me?” I asked, and though my voice was hoarse with want, he understood, and nodded.

“Please.”

It was the sweetest thing I’d heard in my whole life. I might be inexperienced, but I’d seen porn before. Read romance novels. I knew what I was doing. I lifted his legs up and open, splaying them over my knees and nudging my cock into place at his

entrance.

Impatience personified, he shoved his body toward me, trying to impale himself on me, so I lunged upward, grabbing his hands and holding him down, forcing him to wait for me. I was trying to keep from coming before I even got inside him, but the action seemed to drive him even higher. He moaned, wriggling against me as I held him in place, sliding into him inch by inch.

He was so hot, so tight inside, I could have entirely lost myself in the feel of him. But instead, I found myself mesmerized by his face, eyes scrunched shut, lips hanging slack, every bit of his expression ecstasy.

I'd thought he was beautiful before, but like this...well, it was absolute perfection.

He was perfect.

I bottomed out, and he wrapped his legs around my waist, pushing his whole body against me. Like he wanted what I wanted—to get closer than we could even get. To push together until there was no Kit and Aubrey, but just one person, forever entwined.

Reluctantly, I pulled back, eliciting a whine from him, but when I shoved back in, it turned into a gasp and another moan. “Aubrey. Fuck, Aubrey.”

“Mmm,” I agreed, and leaned in to nibble at his neck again. He tasted of salt and sweat and probably a bit of dirt, since we hadn't showered for over a day, but no part of me minded it. It was just Slate, and he was a part of me now.

We were all a part of each other, I realized. All stones and all humanity, intertwined inextricably. There was no such thing as separation, it was an illusion created by free will and variable distance.

But we were all still made of the same star stuff, and all went back to it eventually, even Slate.

I moved inside Kit, as he was already firmly inside of me, in so many ways. I thrust forward, making him moan, and felt the connection between us. Our bodies, our minds, our souls.

I pulled up, towering over him, squeezing his hands tight in mine as I fucked him, over and over. “You’re mine, Kit Moonstriker.”

His eyes shot open, wide with shock, but he didn’t deny me. He gasped for breath and writhed against me as I kept pounding into him.

“Mine,” I reiterated. “You were made for me. Perfect for me. Found me and got me here. Pulled us all together. And now you belong to us. Forever.”

He continued to stare at me, gasping for breath, but he pushed back into every stroke of my cock. Finally, he gave a short nod, a tacit agreement. Then he tightened his legs around my waist and added, “Mine.”

“Yours,” I agreed immediately, without missing a beat or a thrust into his perfect willing body.

I shoved hard into him, and he gasped, reaching down to grab his own cock between us. It started spurting before he even wrapped his fingers around it, thick strands of sticky come spattering across his chest.

And that was enough for me. The image of him coming on my cock, agreeing that he was mine—nothing in the world could have held off the orgasm any longer. I shoved hard into him as my cock pulsed, balls drawing up tight, and I came, marking him as my own deep inside.

I knelt there above him for a moment, panting, before letting myself wilt down onto the sleeping bags beside him, turning us both on our sides so that I didn't have to slide out of him. I wanted to stay there, a part of him, forever.

While part of me understood my earlier epiphany meant that I would always be part of him, and him of me, it was still more this way. More intimate. Closer.

All I wanted in the world was to be as close to Kit as I could.

Chapter 27

Kit

If the ancient concept of the hells had been real, I would have certainly ended up there.

Being a duelist? Terrible. Deflowering the baby Duskbringer? Also not good. Encouraging him somehow, to play into my personal power kinks? Straight to the hells, for sure.

One of those hells had been for sexual deviants, I was pretty sure, because our ancestors had been weirdly prudish. Though people didn't much believe in hells anymore. They'd been a construct we'd invented in the days when we thought some agency outside of ourselves would enforce morality, instead of us having to do it ourselves.

Admittedly, we'd done a pretty poor job of it sometimes both before and after the invention and then de invention of hells, but that was normal human fallibility at work.

Next to me, Aubrey gave a soft snore as he slid onto his side, and something in my chest trembled strangely.

It's called your heart, Nikka said . I know, hard to remember because you've been so determined to pretend it didn't exist .

I scoffed, then froze, waiting to see if the movement had woken Aubrey. It had not.

Little wonder, really. He had to be exhausted, bonding a whole fucking mountain. Volcano. It served me well to remember always that Slate wasn't only a mountain.

Aubrey was full of energy from bonding and burning through it at a rate his body was unfamiliar with.

That last moment, when he'd loomed over me, so fucking big and hot and dominant, his eyes had glowed molten gold. I hadn't been worried for a moment that it wasn't Aubrey anymore, but it was definitely Aubrey with a huge power boost.

I had no idea what ability a bond with Slate might give him, but I could definitely imagine it being a lot to handle. Speeding myself up was enough for me to contend with; I didn't want to imagine having to figure out what to do with literal world-shaking powers.

Possibly world-ending powers.

We barely know each other , I said to Nikka, going back to her previous comment.

But he said it , she countered, and it felt a little like a game of "I know you are but what am I?"

I shook my head, trying to clear it of lust at the reminder. He didn't, though. It was...it was possessiveness. Ownership. He didn't say what you're saying.

Nikka was, as ever, unimpressed with my determination to see things from a clinical, uninvolved point of view. Oh please. You think someone like Aubrey Sagara is into no-strings kinky sex? He was a virgin. "Mine" doesn't mean kinky sex games. Mine means mine. It means he wants you to stay. Expects you to stay. And you want to

stay, anyway, so what's the problem, other than your allergy to feelings? Hells, he even said it in a way that didn't involve emotions, so you don't have to run away and shower to stop worrying about someone getting their gross sticky feelings all over you.

She wasn't . . . entirely wrong.

But me? I was. I was entirely wrong for someone soft and sweet like Aubrey.

I wasn't a long-haul kind of guy. I was a one-and-done kind of guy, and I'd rarely slept with a single person more than once.

The Plan was a long-haul plan , Nikka pointed out.

I scoffed. Sex is different than The Plan. Relationships are different .

She didn't say I was wrong, but I could feel her doubt. Why did she expect the way I'd handled all my previous relationships to change after all of five minutes of civility with Aubrey? We'd hated each other on sight, and?—

No you didn't. You had decided to hate him before you ever met because I told you that you'd like him, and he got the wrong impression of you and jumped to conclusions. Conclusions he's since reevaluated .

She wasn't wrong, and it just annoyed me to admit it, so I went quiet, watching the rain outside the tiny alcove we were in.

Slate had led him here when they'd decided it was going to rain. Or maybe Slate had known it would rain. It made sense that Slate would be able to accurately predict that, as long as he had been around. He knew what incoming rain looked like.

I pressed a hand into the warm soil beside the sleeping bags, wondering what it might be like to be bonded to the whole mountain. I could feel Nikka against my skin, feel the way she vibrated when she spoke to me. Could Aubrey feel the whole mountain vibrate when it spoke to him?

Could he see what was going on all over Slate's surface?

Could they both see our families?

I groped around until I found where my pants had been tossed, pulling my phone out of them. Unsurprisingly, it had no connection all the way out there. It was also running out of battery. I had a power pack in my backpack, but there didn't seem to be a point to it, since I doubted we'd come back into range of a cell tower before we got close to the chalet, and by then we might as well just walk the rest of the way.

It wasn't like I desperately needed the tiny farming simulator or the calculator app out here in the middle of nowhere.

What I wanted was to talk to Frost. To see him, safe and sound. And my father, and my other brother, and my sister, and Fawn Dawnchaser, and...and the others as well, I supposed.

I doubted I'd stop worrying until the moment I saw them all, alive and well and unconsumed by an exploding volcano.

I sighed, and as I did, the ground beneath me started to tremble.

Shit shit shit.

What now?

I turned to look at Aubrey, to see if he was having another seizure in his sleep. Or worse, if he was...if all this had been for nothing, and I'd failed, and?—

Aubrey rolled onto his back, somehow managing to wrap an arm under me and pull me close to him even in his sleep. With the other hand, he reached out and patted the ground, past the edge of the sleeping bag, like one might pet a cat that was sitting in their lap.

A moment later, the ground stilled, and a strange calm filled me. Or maybe the air around me. Contentedness.

Huh.

Carefully, I managed to pull one of the sleeping bags from the stack, unzipping it and throwing it over the top of both of us like a blanket, since Nikka had told me it was going to get cold the last day, and snuggled back up against Aubrey.

Sure, I was a one-and-done guy, but...we weren't done yet, were we? He'd fallen asleep, and I was pretty sure we deserved another round before I went fleeing to Verisa to hide and avoid my feelings.

Knight would let me stay at his place if I asked, and...

Fuck me, but for the first time in my life, that sounded absolutely terrible. Running away and staying with my best frenemy, drinking vodka that tasted more like turpentine and trading thinly veiled insults, when Aubrey was right here, warm and open and smiling in his sleep, petting the fucking mountain like it was a puppy?

What kind of ridiculous person would I have to be, to do that?

Chapter 28

Aubrey

I woke on the third day of our mountain trek in pain.

That was pretty terrible, compared to how I'd felt when I'd gone to sleep. I'd been lighter, happier than I'd been in months when I'd fallen asleep. Maybe...maybe happier than ever.

The pain wasn't my head or my throat, though, it was my darned ankle again.

Kit was curled up next to me, warm and naked and so very beautiful, I wanted to just ignore it all and turn to him, ask if he was up for another go before we started walking for the day.

I could see it becoming an addiction— him becoming an addiction—all too easily. His soft white hair was in his face, and sleep made him look...not less sharp, exactly, but maybe less...ready.

That didn't make sense.

It was just that when he was awake, Kit was always ready. Ready for attack, or earthquake, or any other number of threats or irritations. There, like that, he didn't look ready for anything, other than maybe a day of lounging around in bed.

Lying beneath me, taking me in, and . . .

His cloudy eyes flickered open, and in the pre-dawn light they looked like liquid silver.

When he smiled at me, I almost melted back into the blankets. I could have just stayed there, content, forever.

Except that we couldn't do that.

Something about what we'd done already wasn't quite right. Wasn't enough.

It seemed like I'd already bonded Slate, yes, because he was talking directly to me, responding to me as though we were bonded, but I was sure it wasn't done yet. We weren't in the clear, and we had to get...somewhere, do something.

Which was incredibly unhelpful.

But at least Kit seemed to know where we were going, so I wasn't just following my own instincts, largely fumbling in the dark like I was searching for a light switch in an unfamiliar house.

"Morning," he said, then bit his lip. Like he was worried. Him, worried.

That was weird.

Had I been terrible at sex? Well, I'd fallen asleep right after, so that probably hadn't been too impressive. I winced. "Sorry I fell asleep on you. I..."

"No," he denied immediately, shaking his head, then stretching languorously. "I don't care about that. You've been hiking for two days, which you don't usually do. You're also in the middle of bonding a whole mountain, which no one ever does. It's a wonder you're conscious at all."

“So it, um, wasn’t disappointing?” I didn’t remember it being disappointing, at least not for me. I remembered it being perhaps the most incredible experience of my life, and I finally understood what all the fuss was about, but still, I had instantly fallen asleep afterward, so maybe I’d missed something important afterward.

He grinned, shaking his head and burying his face in my chest. That was a good sign, right? Him being unthinkingly close? Touching me without it being awkward? I tugged him closer, turning to?—

Pain shot through my ankle, reminding me of my issue upon waking up.

Kit sat straight up, looking down on me, his eyes wide and, I realized as I stared into their swirling depths...worried. He was concerned for me. Likely, he thought I was going to have another seizure.

It was decidedly strange, being considered fragile in any way. I’d never been that before, in any relationship. Well, not since I was a child, taken care of entirely by my mother.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, already patting me down, starting at my neck.

I decided that today, I was going to swallow my pride. My mother had always been right, and letting it get in the way was silly. Also, it saved Kit some time in his pat down, even if I might have enjoyed the experience.

“It’s my ankle,” I said, and my voice came out strained. “I think it’s worse than before.”

Did it hurt that much? I hadn’t thought so. It hadn’t interfered with our activities the night before, and I’d walked on it for hours yesterday, so?—

But when Kit threw the top sleeping bag back, he revealed a serious problem.

“Worse” hardly covered it. The ankle was swollen to twice its usual size even through the bandage, a large purpling bruise on one side and redness...well, everywhere.

I stared at it in shock, and he groaned. “Aubrey, why didn’t you tell me it was hurting you yesterday?”

I shook my head, just staring at the mess in silence for a moment before realizing—he thought I’d been doing the same as that first day, keeping it from him out of sheer stubbornness. “I didn’t, I swear. It didn’t hurt yesterday. It didn’t hurt at all until this morning when I woke up.”

He met my eyes, mildly skeptical, and I couldn’t blame him for it. I’d been trying to hide it once, why not again?

He slid down to sit at my feet, unwrapping the bandage that we’d left on overnight to reveal the mangled mess I’d made of myself. Gently, he pulled my foot into his lap and prodded the swelling, his fingers cool and clinical, almost like he knew what he was doing. Of course, he’d passed me off to a doctor when I’d been having seizures, but an injury? He probably had experience with that kind of thing.

I winced and had to hold back a yelp at the manipulation of my swollen ankle, but as I’d suspected, he backed off before I even made a sound, seeming to know when it hurt.

“It must be broken,” he said, scowling at it. “A hairline fracture, since I can’t feel a break, but this kind of swelling doesn’t happen for nothing.”

I almost hesitated to ask, but we needed to discuss it. “How far are we from where we

need to be?”

He looked away, not an avoidance tactic, but thinking, his eyes scanning back and forth as he considered. “A few miles. We’re close. I could go ahead and bring someone back to help?—”

I shook my head. “No. We have to go. We have to get there. Today. As early as possible.”

In front of me, he froze, not moving a single muscle and staring at a fixed point. What was wrong? Was the world trembling again, and I hadn’t even noticed? Was?—

I followed his sightline to find my own hand fingers buried up to the first knuckle in the dirt next to the sleeping bag. Like I was trying to dig it up, almost. Or go bodily into the mountain.

Weird.

That was very weird. “I have no idea why I’m doing that,” I said, but suddenly I couldn’t seem to tear my eyes away from the spot. Nor was I removing my fingers from the ground.

I couldn’t seem to summon up the urge to move at all.

Kit turned then, tearing into one of the packs. A moment later, something hit me in the chest and dropped into my lap. Then another. Granola bars. Both of them the cherry kind.

“Eat,” Kit ordered. “Then we’ll dress and go. There are just a few miles left, but it’s going to be an ordeal on that ankle. I’ll be right back.”

He fiddled around with his phone and a huge block of a power bank before stalking out of the cave, still naked.

That was so hot.

I could barely focus on the granola bar packaging to open it up, especially one-handed. That was when I realized that I still hadn't pulled my hand out of the dirt.

I looked back down at it, and...it didn't make any sense. I'd been commanding that hand for as long as I recalled it existing, but the task of moving it suddenly seemed nearly impossible. Finally, I used the other arm to forcibly pry it away, dusting my fingers off on the sleeping bag and hesitating to touch the ground again. What if every body part I pressed into the side of the mountain suddenly refused to follow my orders?

I'd managed to unwrap and eat one bar and was just starting on the second when Kit returned.

Unsurprisingly, he was still naked. It wasn't like he was going to have magically found clothes out there on the mountainside. But he looked really good doing it, so I wasn't going to complain. On the other hand, he was carrying a handful of sticks.

"This is ridiculous, and a terrible idea, and we shouldn't do it," he said as he knelt down at my feet again. "We're going to permanently damage your ankle, and we shouldn't do this at all."

"But . . . we're going to?"

"Are you going to agree to sit here and wait for me to call in paramedics with a helicopter?"

I scoffed at the very idea, and he nodded. “That’s what I thought. So I’m going to splint this ankle, and we’re going to go slow.”

I shivered, glancing around. “I’m...I’m not sure we have time to go slow.”

His lips peeled back from his teeth in an angry near-snarl. “The fucking impatient mountain can wait a few fucking minutes on your frail mortal body. I am not going to let you kill yourself to do this.”

For a moment, I stopped trying to open the granola bar in my hands and just stared at him. He was worried about me. Not only that, but he was saying the fate of the whole world, and The Plan he’d spent his whole adult life working toward, could wait...on me. On my wellbeing.

I desperately wanted to kiss him again, but he was all the way at my feet, and I couldn’t just bend myself around to make that happen when my foot was in his lap.

“Eat your breakfast,” he insisted, and went back to working on tying the sticks in a pattern around my ankle. I worried he wasn’t going to be able to fit pants over it and I’d wind up wandering the mountain as naked as he was, but then I remembered: sweat pants. That should do the trick.

As I’d thought, once he was finished, he helped me get a new pair on over the splint, and then he worked my shoes into the mix, expertly arranging everything so that it was hard for me to bend my ankle in any direction.

It kind of stunk, but also, I thought it might work.

Then he finally dressed himself, and that was a near-tragedy.

I wanted a world where he could just wander around naked all the time, I decided. It

would be the best world.

He knelt next to me, taking my temperature with his wrist just like my mother had done when I was a little kid and then nodding. Finally, he pressed two pills into my hand. “These will help with the swelling and any pain. . . but are you in pain now? You didn’t seem to be when I was splinting you.”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t hurt unless I move it.”

He cocked his head at me, seeming confused for a moment. “Is there pressure in your ears?”

I had no idea what the heck he was talking about, so I just shrugged.

Still, he spoke up a bit with his next words, which was a relief, since he’d been mostly muttering under his breath for half of the morning. “I think it’s Slate. Something about the bond is making you not notice that you’re in pain. Do tell him that’s bad, by the way. Pain is a good thing. It’s how we fragile humans know we should stop doing a thing. Say, walking for miles and miles on a broken fucking ankle.”

That would indeed be bad, if I stopped noticing I was in pain. I didn’t think it was that, though. I realized that the whole of yesterday morning was a little fuzzy around the edges, like my head had been floating away without my body.

Not like I hadn’t been in control of myself or anything so serious, just like I’d taken cold medicine, and everything physical had been muted.

Still, I wasn’t going to tell Kit that. He’d already been so down on himself. No doubt if I said that, he’d start thinking he’d taken advantage of me while I’d been in an altered state of consciousness. That had definitely not been what had happened, so I

didn't want to deal with even a second of him thinking it.

Even now, dealing with the pain of standing on the ankle, I wanted nothing more than to go back to the previous evening and hold him against me forever.

I could only hope that he'd let me, at some point in the future.

This time, when he reached for the rope to tie us together, I didn't even argue.

Chapter 29

Kit

Under most circumstances, mountain climbing wasn't my least favorite thing to do.

It was soothing, in a lot of ways.

There were steps to remember, sure, but if you did them and did them correctly, then you were fine. It wasn't like dealing with people, who lied and prevaricated about...well, everything.

While Aubrey had been stubborn about the ankle thing that first day, climbing in general was mostly like dealing with him. He was stubborn, yes, but also honest and forthright.

If the path looked dangerous, it was. If it didn't, it usually wasn't. Either way, the mountain didn't lie about it.

I wondered if the bond would be that way with Aubrey and Slate, too. Maybe it was best I wasn't bonding the mountain—it would be an enormous disappointment if it turned out Slate was a compulsive liar.

Aubrey wasn't so offended about being tied to my side as the first time. No, if anything he stuck closer to me than the rope demanded, leaning into me, sometimes wrapping an arm around my waist or twining our fingers together, when the path was easy enough to allow that.

I didn't pull away, and I couldn't figure that out.

I always pulled away.

One night, that was enough for me.

But I was pretty sure I hadn't gotten Aubrey's best performance last night, when he was exhausted from hiking and bonding, and my mind kept going back to next time.

Next time he'd be well rested, and we'd spend the whole night fucking.

Next time, we'd have a bed, not a couple of sleeping bags strewn on the rocky ground, leaving sharp bits poking slightly into my backside.

Next time.

In my pocket, my phone buzzed, and I stopped so fast that Aubrey had to grab onto a nearby tree to keep from toppling over. I winced and reached out to him, helping him steady.

Me.

I stopped to help someone who wasn't one of my siblings. Or Fawn Dawnchaser, I supposed, but honestly, what kind of dickbag would ever be mean to her?

Aubrey didn't even seem to notice, just waited, watching me, so I pulled my phone from my pocket. Still no connection, but there must have been, for at least a second, because there was a missed call and a text from Frost.

Hope you're okay. We're making no headway with the mountain, and Mother is getting stubborn about it, so we're going back up this morning. I'm starting to worry

nothing is going to work. Maybe you should take Aubrey and leave.

I stared at that last sentence for a moment, until Aubrey leaned in, grabbing my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Turning the phone so that he could see the message, I swallowed hard. “Frost is giving up. It must be going very badly.”

Aubrey scowled at that, then shoved himself away from the tree as I shoved my phone back into my pocket without responding to my brother.

“Then we’d better get moving,” Aubrey said, jaw set stubbornly.

Like we weren’t already moving faster than he should be on his ankle. Like he wasn’t wincing slightly with every step. My makeshift splint wasn’t nearly enough to do what needed to be done, and by the time we got there, he was going to need surgery—or worse, maybe we were doing unfixable damage.

He bit his lip, staring off into space, and nodded. “I can’t...it doesn’t seem like it’s the same as everyone I know talking to their stones. I can’t just mentally poke him and say something. But I have the sense he’s annoyed, and getting more annoyed. There’s a buzz in the air, and it’s wrong.”

Why in the hells hadn’t I just gone and grabbed Aubrey months ago, dragging him up here to see the mountain?

Because he wasn’t ready then , Nikka pointed out. He wasn’t ready until now. You couldn’t have even taken him up the night before we started this. He was only ready now .

We’d had this conversation before, of course, but I still didn’t fully comprehend. It

didn't make sense to me why Aubrey wouldn't be ready one day, and would be the next. People didn't change that much, that fast.

You really do .

I sighed, wrapping an arm around Aubrey and starting up the trail again. "Lean on me," I insisted. "I don't want you hurting yourself any more than necessary getting up there. You're going to need that ankle for years to come, you know."

He sent me a sly, sidelong smile and nodded. "Harder to manhandle you with only one working ankle."

My face flamed bright red, and I didn't meet his eye. "If that's what keeps you focused on staying healthy then...it would be, yes. Your brain also comes into that, so don't let the mountain turn it into goo."

That set him to laughing, though it cut off a moment later in a pained hiss.

Why the hell didn't you warn me about this, Neek?

Honestly? she asked, hesitant like she rarely was.

Of course.

Her voice was smaller than usual when she answered. I don't understand what's happening right now. I saw him doing this, but I don't know why he's doing it. I didn't...I don't like reminding you that you're my first human, and I don't really understand you all that well .

His ankle is broken , I said, and only at her horrified shiver did I realize that broken didn't mean the same thing to a stone as it did to me. To her, broken meant death. It

meant permanence. Human bones break, but they can heal too , I added quickly. He's not dying. Not dead .

You're sure?

Yes, completely sure. I won't let him die .

She sighed, and it was sheer relief. I didn't see him dying, but I don't see everything. It's all spotty here, because too much of it depends on things other people haven't decided yet. It's like having a dozen random pages from a book and not knowing how they fit together. Plus humans are always confusing .

It was my turn to sigh, and Aubrey turned to look at me, an eyebrow raised.

I shrugged, careful not to dislodge him. "I'm trying to explain to Nikka how broken bones can heal. Sometimes it's easy to forget that stones aren't human, and they don't really understand concepts we take for granted."

He cocked his head, nodding. "That makes sense. Broken isn't going to heal, for a stone, so it's a pretty big difference."

"She's also pretty reliant on seeing the future, because she can usually see a lot, but I guess right now it's a little up in the air, so it's?—"

Kit, there's something you need to know , Nikka interrupted. That was odd for her, so I didn't keep talking, just waited for her to explain. I'm not completely sure what it means, but in a second, Aubrey is ?—

"A second," apparently, had been quite literal, because as Nikka continued, Aubrey's hands flew up and the rest of him went tumbling down.

I activated my speed as he went down, grabbing first the rope between us, and then Aubrey himself around the waist.

Was he having another seizure?

He didn't seem to be, though. No, his eyes were wide and shocked, and his breathing hard, but he wasn't trembling with anything other than shock and fear.

And pain.

He'd slipped on some loose gravel, I realized, and his ankle hadn't been able to take the sudden change in traction. He'd gone down like a ton of bricks.

Aubrey sat there for a moment, biting his lip, not crying out or speaking at all, and I worried maybe he was having that other kind of seizure, where the person just went blank instead of trembling, but after a second, his shoulders slumped and head dropped, and he sighed.

Sorry , Nikka whispered.

It hadn't been her fault she hadn't warned us in time. After all, without her trying to warn me, things would have turned out exactly the same.

Aubrey lifted his head again, meeting my eye. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you both sorry?"

He frowned at that. "She doesn't have to apologize for me being clumsy. She's not responsible for that." Then he glared down at his ankle before looking back up to me. "But I'm pretty sure it's broken for real now. I felt a crack when I went down."

I cringed at the thought. Hoping it had been one of the sticks I'd splinted the ankle with, I went down on my knees in front of him and checked them. But no, it wasn't that. It was definitely the ankle itself, hot to the touch and swelling even more under my hands.

I reached for the pack and gave Aubrey more ibuprofen and water, in hopes of slowing that process a little, but there was no denying facts anymore. He was in no shape to be walking at all, let alone hiking the mountainside.

Chapter 30

Aubrey

How was I the weak link?

I was never the weak link.

I didn't get sick, didn't get injured, didn't show up to work hungover. I wasn't old enough to deal with the aches and pains the other guys got like a knee that knew when rain was coming or a back that needed a brace.

But there I was, sitting on the mountainside just a mile or two from our destination, with a broken ankle that was finally causing me a fair bit of pain.

Okay, no, that was my stubborn pride talking. The pain was almost blinding in its intensity. Every time I moved the ankle, a stabbing sensation shot up from it, through my entire leg and up into my hip, and I...I didn't even want to cry out with it or clench down on anything like people did in movies. No, it completely robbed me of the ability to tense my muscles at all, let alone move them as I commanded.

I mostly just wanted to go limp and cry a lot.

But we didn't have time for that.

Kit had been planning this for most of his life. We had to save the world, him and me, and I absolutely refused to fail at this, no matter what my damned body was

determined to do.

“You’re going to have to help me,” I told him. “I’ll use you as a crutch on the broken side.”

For a moment, he stared at me, mouth slack with horror.

Then I watched as reality dawned in those beautiful silvery gray eyes. He’d been planning this for years. He knew as well as I did that there wasn’t a choice. If we quit, that was the end. Everyone, including us, died.

That wasn’t a real option at all.

So I motioned with my right arm, waving him under it, and even though he looked sick at the very notion, he came up beside me and took most of my weight, pulling me up and letting me hop alongside him on one foot.

It was even slower going than the previous days had been, especially since I froze and had to work not to sob like a baby every time my ankle was jostled, which was often. It was instinct to step down on it, and even though it hurt, I had to fight not to do it.

“I’m going to kick your ass for this,” Kit growled as we walked.

I chuckled, though it came out embarrassingly wet and pitiful. “Me? What did I do, other than ruin a perfectly lovely walk in the woods?”

He scoffed, and I felt it more than heard it, as the feeling of having cotton in my head was back, but this time it was mostly muffling the ambient noise around us. I hadn’t heard a single bird, or the breeze on the mountain, or the random creaking and motion of the woods in a while.

“Is bonding always this weird?” I stopped and frowned at that, then shook my head. “Okay, silly question, I know it’s not always this weird, but...like yesterday. I kept drifting away and only being able to focus on Slate.”

“I acted like I was high for a few days,” he told me. “I wasn’t, really, but it was a strange sort of relearning of the world. Like I was suddenly able to see a dozen new colors and spent the week fascinated, looking for them everywhere. I kept slowing the world around me down, or speeding myself up, whichever it is, and watching every nuance of everything that happened.”

It sounded like the first time I’d gone over to a friend’s house, and they’d had a huge high-definition television. I’d been able to see the actors’ pores, everything had been so huge and detailed, and I’d spent hours staring at it, even though I’d had less than no interest in the teen drama he’d been watching.

His distant smile turned into a smirk, and clearly I was in this up to my ears, and maybe a little delirious, because my first thought was how sexy that expression was on him.

“A little like when I first discovered how my dick worked. Spent a whole lot of time focused on figuring that out too.”

I flushed at the thought, at the images that notion provoked. Not of a clumsy preteen Kit learning his own body, but of the current Kit, lying on his back in a bed—the picture in my head was my own bed, in my childhood home—exploring his body with those dexterous fingers of his.

I blushed and ducked my head, and only barely kept from toppling us both over with the motion. Darn it.

“Sorry,” he said, sighing. “That was a terrible idea. I’ll try not to distract you.”

“I didn’t mind,” I told him. “Maybe let’s talk about it later, when I’m not using you as a literal crutch. I’d love to hear more about it.”

He shot me a sultry look, biting his lip and looking me over, then sighed. “You’re like a fucking package of nothing but temptations, you know that?”

I let out a breathy laugh almost punctuated by a cry of pain when my toes dragged on the ground, shaking my head. “Can’t say I’ve ever been called anything of the sort before. Just plain old Aubrey.”

He shook his head, eyes closed. “Incredible. Are people in Duskbringer lands just not all that bright? Is everyone so good looking there that the beauty standards are fucked up?”

“You’re kidding. You’re...look at yourself. White hair, silver eyes, duelist body, and you think other people are ever going to notice me instead of someone like you?”

He shrugged, then paused to make sure it hadn’t tipped me too far over before taking the next step. “I’m nice to look at. It’s the first thing people notice about me. The second is that I’m an asshole and they don’t like me.”

We walked in silence for a while, and as much as I wanted to, I couldn’t refute his point. That was precisely what had happened. I’d seen him and thought he was beautiful, then I’d decided that he was a jerk and I didn’t want to be around him.

“You left out third,” I pointed out after a bit.

He snorted. “You think most people stick around to find a third thing?”

“That’s their problem,” I said, determinedly pushing on. “Because third is that your being an asshole is a defensive facade, and you’re actually a great guy.”

The look he gave me was pure incredulity, but he didn't say a word, and there was a flush in his cheeks that I didn't think was just exertion.

I decided to give him a break. "What about me? First I'm okay-ish to look at, then I'm also a judgmental jerk, and then third, if they stick around long enough, I'm still a judgmental jerk, only I'm using the wrong fork because I didn't know there's a salad fork and a fish fork and...I mean, how many kinds of forks are there?"

Kit cocked his head, as though considering, and seriously? How many could there be? Finally, he turned and looked at me, and entirely deadpan, said, "Thirteen, I think."

Thirteen.

Thirteen kinds of forks.

"Of course," he added, tone a little hesitant, "that doesn't include barbecue forks, since that's a kitchen tool and not an eating utensil. Same to serving forks. Oh, fondue forks, so maybe fourteen? But those will never be sitting by your place setting, unless they're the only utensil there. It's not like anyone has a fondue course at dinner."

"That's ridiculous," I said, almost breathing the words, because of the sheer shock at the notion of fourteen forks.

Kit waved his free hand, dismissive as ever. "If anyone serves you dinner with thirteen forks at your place setting, don't even bother trying to figure out which is which. They're just doing it to be an arrogant asshole, so you should deliberately use the wrong one for every course. Just pick a random one. Use the oyster fork for the fruit, and watch them seethe."

And that, okay, that was funny. Would someone actually seethe over people using the wrong fork? Were there really forks for oysters and fruit?

While staying with Titania, I'd worried if I used the wrong one, someone would think I was an uncouth boor, but that was probably because I'd read too many historical romance novels where characters who came from backgrounds like mine were always shamed by not wearing the right clothes or using the right forks.

"Honestly, it's not hard," Kit said, drawing me back to the present. "Start with the one on the outside, and work your way in with each course. If they're in the wrong order, most of the other people at dinner won't know that either, and they'll just use the next one in line, so you'll blend right in."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously." He turned to give me a smile. "Or I'll be with you, and you can just use whichever one I do."

"And will you be using the right one, or the oyster fork for the fruit, to make someone angry?"

He laughed, that beautiful honest laugh of his. "Depends on the host, doesn't it? If it's Delta, you can be sure I'll grab the serving fork right off its platter and use it to eat from. If it's Caspian or Titania, you can probably safely follow my lead."

That was a fair point, and what was more, I thought maybe I knew Kit well enough to be able to tell which it was. The stiffer and more unhappy he was around a person, the more likely he was to do something completely outrageous, just to make them angry. Like make mean comments about how entitled it was to fly a doctor all the way out to the middle of nowhere for just one man.

Though I supposed, in retrospect, that had been as much about getting me out of the chalet as anything else. I wondered suddenly, why hadn't we stayed in the chalet? It would have been so much simpler than trekking back through the woods and over the mountain.

Except that with the seizures, I'd needed to go to a doctor, if only for Aunt Titania's peace of mind. He could have told people I was bonding the mountain instead, but I doubted even half of them would have believed him, and if she had, Aunt Titania's response probably would have been to take me and run home.

No, it actually did make sense, taking into account the fact that Nikka could see the future. Part of me just wanted to look for an easier way—like Kit probably hadn't spent years talking things through with her, trying to find the easiest path.

I very much doubted he'd wanted to work for Huxley Dawnchaser.

No, he'd sacrificed more than I cared to think about, in order to save us all. I suspected that he was going to be dealing with the fallout of that for years to come. He'd said it himself: he was a duelist. He had killed people.

Even if they had all been monsters, that did things to a person.

I stopped, leaning against a tree, catching my breath and looking at him.

We would fix it, I decided, insomuch as a thing like that could be fixed. We'd get him a therapist, and I would spend every day of the rest of his life showing him that he wasn't a bad person like he thought.

He didn't seem to want credit for what he'd done. He hadn't even hinted to nearly anyone about what was happening. But with me, he wasn't going to have that choice. He'd saved us all, and he was going to have to put up with me being grateful.

Also, I was going to have to learn blowjobs. Maybe he'd teach me.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You look a little flushed, and your eyes are glassy. How much does it hurt right now?"

I definitely could not tell him that it might be because I was thinking about cocks. But also, it was strange. My ankle didn't hurt, right then.

The world was also getting weird and smeary, like it had been made of wet paint, and a toddler had just dragged their fingers over it.

A high, feminine voice laughed somewhere to my left. "This way," she said, drawing the last word out strangely. "We're over here. Come to us. Come home, little kitten."

Chapter 31

Kit

“Not a kitten,” Aubrey mumbled, and what?

I leaned in, patting his cheek. “Aubrey? You still there?”

“Not a kitten,” he reiterated. “She called me kitten, but I’m not. You. You’re a kitten. Kit kitten.”

Then he giggled. Full on giggled.

I checked his temperature as best I could, and this time, the skin of his forehead was hot to the touch.

Fuck.

But what was the fever from? The injury on his ankle hadn’t broken the skin, so there’d been no way for that to cause an infection. I didn’t remember seeing any broken skin the night before, or during my perusal that morning.

Lots of beautiful, golden skin, yes. No cuts or scrapes, certainly none that had looked infected.

But there he was, feverish and talking about women calling him kitten. Slate wasn’t a woman. Both he and Nikka had clearly used masculine pronouns to refer to the

mountain, and I doubted that Slate was genderfluid, at least not on such a short timeline. Mountains existed for eons, after all, so change made sense, but slow change, not instant.

Shit.

How bad was this fever? Was Aubrey completely delusional? How had he gone from not feverish to completely out of his mind in under an hour?

He didn't feel that hot, it was only just noticeable, but maybe he was one of those people who was affected more by fevers than average. Sometimes it was the big tough guys who had the most delicate health.

I just hadn't expected it from him, especially not after walking most of a mile with a broken ankle, to say nothing of all the miles before, when it had almost certainly been fractured from that initial fall. Aubrey wasn't weak, not in any way.

But now, here, with disaster looming and Aubrey giggling like a schoolchild about kitten Kit, I couldn't hold down the panic working its way through me. This was it. We'd gotten all this way, worked so hard, slogged through pain and broken bones and bent psyches and we were going to fail. The world would end, because I'd failed.

Clumsily, a hand reached out and petted my face. "Hey now. Calm down. Everything's okay."

I jerked hard, looking back up at Aubrey, who'd gone from giggly kid to concerned grownup in an instant, his blue eyes sober and serious.

How did he know I'd been panicking? I'd spent decades training my face to betray nothing. Most people I met called me a robot, cold and distant even in the face of disaster. Maybe a little smug, even at inappropriate times.

No one had ever thought they caught me panicking before, except maybe Frost.

But also, he was right, and I was.

Had been.

Just looking into his eyes was calming somehow. Those striking blue eyes, like bright bachelor's buttons, staring right into my soul and seeing the terror there.

Duskbringer, Nikka reminded me. They're always good with sapphires.

But he's not bonding a sapphire, I gritted back. He's bonding the fucking mountain. Because he has to.

But Kit. There are sapphires in the mountain. And emeralds and amethysts and...the mountain is where we were born. We were a part of it, until we came down and bonded to humans.

For a moment, my whole world froze. She couldn't be saying that Aubrey was bonding all the stones inside the mountain. That would surely kill a person. Or drive them completely bonkers.

"How did you know how I felt?" I asked, hoping for an easy answer. Maybe it had been obvious. I'd been breathing hard and sweating and?—

Aubrey cocked his head and squinted his eyes, seeming as confused as I'd been earlier. "I don't know. I just...felt it. Like I couldn't think straight, and there was a band around my chest making it hard to breathe, but then I realized it wasn't me, it was you. Is that weird?"

His tone said that he already knew the answer to that, so I didn't bother to tell him

that yes it was fucking weird.

It was impossible.

Aubrey wasn't allowed to bond a sapphire, or...all the stones inside the mountain. That wasn't possible, was it? At some point, with all those cacophonous voices, he'd lose himself. He would stop being Aubrey, and I was...getting sort of attached to Aubrey.

Shut up , I preemptively said to Nikka, and she didn't let out so much as a peep.

Aubrey smiled at me like he'd heard my thoughts and fuck, had he? Were not even my thoughts private anymore?

He leaned forward, pressing our foreheads together like he had the night before. "It'll be okay, I promise. We just have to keep going. We can do this."

He turned back to the trail, like he was the seasoned hiker and I the green newb who'd never been on this path before, leaned into me, and started out again.

How was I the one failing in the clutch, and he, feverish and delirious, the one who was still moving forward? Never before had I felt like such an utter failure.

Except when he leaned into me and smiled, putting his weight on me, it was hard to feel like this was failing.

Chapter 32

Aubrey

Everything was going to be fine.

I didn't think I'd felt such peace since I was a kid. Since before Mom had gotten sick, and I'd realized that the world was a screwed up, deeply unfair place, and sometimes the best people had the worst lives.

Puppy , the mountain grumbled beneath me, making his voice known for the first time that morning.

Nausa again.

For centuries, whenever Slate started to rumble, the four families brought their stones to a summit at the same spot on Mount Slate. Iri with the Moonstriker, Verelle with the Duskbringer, Soz with the Dawnchaser, and Nausa with the Sunrunner.

But right now Slate was annoyed with Iri, he'd made that much clear.

And Nausa, however it had happened, had been broken between the last meeting and now.

As a stone, that meant that Nausa—also known as the great wolf—was dead. Instead, her two pieces were their own creatures now.

Slate knew that was a thing that happened sometimes. He'd been the one to tell me about Kit's stone once being a piece of Iri.

But Nikka was a tiny chip, and perhaps the fracture Slate had spoken of had left Iri largely intact.

I was already leaning too hard on Kit, but I had to try this. I had to talk to Slate, to see if I could make him understand.

So I leaned into Kit as we walked, letting him guide my steps as I focused instead on Slate.

It was hard to really know how to do this because I'd spent so little time at it, but I let myself fall into it entirely. The vibrations of the ground under my feet. The feel of the wind on my face. The trees and rocks and even the squirrels and birds in nearby trees.

You understand that Nikka fractured from Iri , I said, shoving the words as hard as I could into the world.

Fractured little sister , he agreed. The immortal fox boy found her. They're good together .

The immortal...I had no idea how Kit was "the immortal fox boy," though my heart did leap at the notion of him being immortal. That would be good, Kit living forever. I liked that.

Still, not what I needed to be worried about right then.

Yes, exactly. So Iri still exists, and now there's Nikka too .

Nikka , he said, like he was considering the name. Okay. Nikka .

Good. That was good. Now, though, on to the hard part. I put the words together carefully as I pressed them out toward him. The same thing happened to Nausa. To the puppy. She broke. Only it wasn't a tiny chip off her that left her mostly the same .

It sat like a hollow in my gut, the idea of Nausa's death, and while it had always been sad, it had never done that to me before. It was how Slate felt, I was sure of it—even if I had no idea how I knew what everyone was feeling all of a sudden.

Puppy is gone . The words were whispery and paper thin, and the pain in them brought tears to my eyes. Or maybe it was the way I could literally feel what Slate was feeling. Puppy, my sweet puppy, was dead. I would never speak to her again.

She is , I agreed somberly. I'm sorry, but I don't think she left a big enough piece to be mostly the same, like Iri .

Beneath me, the ground trembled.

Kit jerked under my arm, spinning to look at me, his eyes wild, and I could almost taste the fear in him. He was worried I would have another seizure.

I was also crying, which didn't help, because when he saw that, the panic in him spiked.

"I'm okay," I managed to whisper through the tumult of everything happening in my brain. "Trying to explain to Slate about Nausa."

He winced at that, then at the ground, still trembling slightly beneath us. I didn't feel like the world was slipping away from me, though, not the slightest urge to tremble. That was good. Right?

I couldn't worry. I had to focus, push through.

There are two pieces of Nausa , I told him. When Caspian found her, he found that the two pieces were alive. So there are two puppies. Different puppies, not Nausa, but they are puppies .

Not my puppy. He sounded like a petulant toddler, and honestly, I couldn't blame him.

If someone told me my puppy was dead and offered me two in its place, I wouldn't see it as a great gift. It would still be a loss, because my puppy was gone.

On the other hand, I couldn't give Nausa back.

Nothing could do that.

Well, I supposed that Iri could maybe—but no. That wouldn't work. If it were possible, the Moonstrickers would have already done it. Maybe they were hesitant to use their gifts frivolously, but this was the world at stake, so they'd have done whatever they could.

I didn't know Rain very well, but I knew he would never let anyone suffer if he had a choice, even if I suspected, given Kit's feelings toward her, his mother would care considerably less about human suffering.

I'm very sorry about your puppy , I told Slate. I wish I could help. I wish anyone could make it better, but no one really can. Losing someone is always terrible .

You'll leave too , he grumped at me, but the shaking of the ground was slowing, so I hoped I was helping.

I couldn't promise I'd never leave, obviously, since I was human and I would inevitably die. I didn't want to leave the world in crisis when that happened simply

because Slate was angry at being lied to by another human.

I'll die eventually , I admitted to him. I'm human, and that happens to us. Not like stones who only die when they break. Humans always break eventually.

No, like the other .

Other? What other?

He made a sound that approximated a sigh, like everything in the whole world was so very tiring. Another boy came before. Like you. Strong. Smaller, though. But his mind was enough, I could feel him. Hear his songs. Then when he started to feel me, he ran away and never came back .

Well that was just rotten. I didn't know who the boy in question was, or when it had happened, so I couldn't have even told Slate if there was a valid reason for the guy leaving. Heck, I'd started having seizures when Slate had first touched me, so that alone was probably a valid reason to get the heck away, assuming a person was more sensible than me.

Not that I'd known what the episodes had meant.

Kit had sort of known, and if he'd told us I didn't doubt Aunt Titania would have dragged me away, no matter what Kit said would happen. Plus I hadn't liked him yet, hadn't trusted him yet, so I'd have probably gone with her.

I shook my head. This was no time to get distracted with might have beens. I'm not leaving , I told Slate. I will die eventually, but I won't abandon you before that. And who knows, maybe we can find someone else who can bond you before I die. Now that we know it's possible, people might like to come talk to you .

Don't want someone else , Slate said. He was pouting. I didn't want to be judgmental in this of all situations, but I was getting the distinct feeling that while an ancient and powerful volcano, Slate was also rather young, developmentally.

But that also made sense, didn't it? Geologically speaking, Slate wasn't that old for a volcano. Even if you ignored that, there was the socialization aspect. Stones alone took centuries to learn concepts, but when they lived with humans, the timeline sped up. Slate spent most of his time with very young stones who hadn't yet bonded humans, like Kit's Nikka. Other than that, there were the occasional visits from the four family stones.

And then he was alone with baby stones again, who he might or might not even be able to communicate with.

Always alone , he agreed sadly, but also as though he'd heard and understood at least some of my internal thought process. His voice was louder suddenly, like it wasn't in the rocks and the trees anymore, but right there inside my very head.

The world moved, and it took me a second to realize that it was Kit, wrapping himself around me. He looked horrible and tragic and sad, and I only had a moment to register that before the black spots moved in and I realized that darnit, I was about to pass out.

Again.

Chapter 33

Kit

When Aubrey stopped moving, I hesitated.

Sure, I was the one responsible for most of our current forward momentum, but if he needed to pause, he was also the one with the broken ankle. I sure wasn't going to tell him to suck it up and get moving.

By the time I'd turned to look at him, though, his eyes were sliding shut.

For a second, I was convinced it was another seizure, and of course, this one would be worse than the others. Maybe it would even kill him, and then I'd have truly failed everyone, including myself.

He didn't seize, though, just slumped right down toward the ground, pale and clammy and...fuck, was he?—

No. Not dead. His pulse was too fast, and now his forehead was almost ice cold to the touch, so...was the fever gone? Or was he sweating, and the evaporation was doing its job to cool him down?

But he wasn't dead.

But damn it all, we were less than half a mile from the end of the trail.

Gritting my teeth, I determined to make it the rest of the way myself.

But not without Aubrey.

He was just as heavy as I'd feared, and the only way I would be able to make much headway was with him slung over my shoulder in a traditional fireman's carry, but I doubted Aubrey would be too impressed if I failed to reach our destination because I'd been too determined to baby him and insisted on carrying him like a princess.

Fortunately, I didn't have to stop and untie the rope that connected us. I did have to drop my backpack, unclasping the whole frame and leaving it behind, since he wouldn't fit over my shoulder with it there, but then I just lifted him up, set him across my shoulder, and started walking.

The last part of the trail was a terrible place to be carrying him—there was too damn much loose gravel underfoot and actual inclines that needed some work to climb them.

I laughed to myself, almost hysterical with it. Aubrey would be so amused by the notion that he'd managed to bypass the hardest part of the climb by passing out. Or he'd be horrified and his pride would take a hit, but really, how much was he expected to deal with? I thought bonding the mountain and breaking his ankle while scaling that same mountain in order to save the world was more than enough, and if he wanted someone to fan him with palm fronds and peel his grapes from here on out, that wasn't the most unreasonable demand.

But he was alive.

That was what mattered.

So now I had to get him to safety.

To Frost.

Sure, Frost wasn't a doctor, but he was the smartest man in the world. He could figure this out. He could fix it. And if he couldn't, well, he'd know what to do that would fix it.

Right?

I must admit , Nikka said, I kind of want to say I told you so, but this also feels like the wrong time for that .

And that tore it. I did, in fact, laugh. It was hysterical, bordering on unhinged, but really, that was my baby girl. She was more like Frost than me, but sometimes it showed that I'd been the first human to find her and sort of raise her.

I'd have totally given you the old I told you so , I promised her. It's well deserved. I was an arrogant ass, as usual, and I was wrong. About everything .

Not everything , she disagreed. And you weren't an arrogant ass. You just always think you're less than you are, and Aubrey is clever. He realized you were wrong and decided to keep you. I blame Delta. She taught you that you were less when you were too small to defend your mind from her .

Eloquently put, and probably not too far off the mark. Not that I'd admit that, even to Nikka.

But it didn't matter, because she could hear my thoughts, and she knew.

Fortunately, Nikka loved me like Delta never had, so she kept quiet about it.

How long do you think you can carry him? She asked me, her voice small and

concerned. Your pulse is elevated. That's bad, right?

I didn't have an answer that either of us would like, so again, I kept quiet.

The tinkling laugh in my ear was . . . it wasn't Nikka.

And it wasn't in my head anyway, it was actually in my ear.

It was a person, laughing aloud.

My head shot up, and I looked ahead to the sudden realization that Nikka had activated my speed without me realizing it, and...well, somehow, the last half-mile had passed even faster than I'd been able to track.

Or maybe I was dissociating from the fucking trauma of carrying my unconscious, possibly dying, um...Aubrey...across half a mile of damned mountain.

I came around the last bend in the mountainside, almost falling against the rocky edge, to find Frost standing with Titania Duskbringer at the entrance to the mountain.

They both spun to face us, Frost going ashen and Titania squeaking like a mouse, and I almost fell into my brother.

"Bonding the mountain," I huffed out, with barely enough breath to force the words from my lungs. "Passed out. Broken ankle."

Frost, seeming to understand at least some of the issue, lifted Aubrey off my shoulder and into his own arms, giving me the chance to pull out a utility knife and cut the rope that held us together.

"What do you mean, bonding the mountain?" Titania demanded. "I just...We came

out here because Verelle said that she just finally heard Aubrey for the first time. He's bonded her."

Bonded her.

He heard a woman, he'd said. A woman who called him kitten.

Fuck me entirely. Was there even room in a person's head for a mountain and the fucking heart sapphire? What if it had been too much, and between the two of them, they'd scrambled Aubrey's brains for good?

What if he died?

What if?—

"Hey," Titania said, reaching up to grab my shoulder, much as Aubrey had earlier in the day when he'd been trying to calm me. "It's okay. You got him here. Everything will be fine." Still, she glanced over my shoulder at Frost, so it wasn't the most reassuring reassurance I'd ever gotten.

It was Frost who made a dent in my panic, his soft deep voice as soothing as it had ever been. "He seems okay, Kit. But you said his ankle is broken, and you've been climbing the mountain for two days. If he's also bonded Verelle and...did you say he's bonded the mountain?" His expression, firmly incredulous at the notion of a person bonding a mountain, suddenly transformed into something beautiful, a smile like the sun had come out. "That's why it's stopped responding to Mother. I was afraid she'd just angered it beyond repair, but if it has someone kind to talk to, why would it bother speaking to Mother anymore?"

Well that was a fucking excellent point. But still, I?—

Frost shook his head, turning to lean down and bump his shoulder to mine, since he didn't have a free hand to pat me with. "Come on. Let's go inside. We'll get Aubrey laid down and I'll look at his ankle. I'm sure one of the others has at least some rudimentary medical knowledge as well."

"I can call for a medical evacuation," Titania said, brandishing a phone. "They can have a helicopter here in an hour, that's what they said when we called after the quake."

And frankly, at this point, Slate could fucking deal. Or maybe it would explode and the world would end.

I didn't care anymore.

The Plan was done.

"Do it," I told her, and then I followed Frost into the mountain.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:32 am

Chapter 34

Aubrey

You have to wake up , the voice in my head said. Your friends are worried. I think they're angry with me. The woman with Iri is mean .

The woman with Iri.

Delta Moonstriker?

Angry with...me? Why would Delta Moonstriker be angry with me? Except, she wasn't my friend at all, and?—

No, not angry with you, angry with me .

Sure, yes, I'd gotten that, but who was—Slate. My friends were angry with Slate. Which friends? Why?

Maybe . . . maybe I hurt you. You're hurt, aren't you?

Was I? I distinctly remembered twisting, and then outright breaking my ankle, but that wasn't really Slate's fault.

Fell down because of the ground shaking. My fault .

Ah. That made sense.

Also hurt your brain because of me. They said that. What's a brain?

The seizures, he must mean. And while those had been because of Slate, because of the bonding, they also hadn't really been his fault. It wasn't as though he'd chosen for them to happen. It was just that...

You remember the fracturing? Of Iri?

I deliberately didn't mention Nausa, since that was a sore enough point without me using it as a point in a conversation.

Yes. He was suspicious now, hesitant.

Probably because he could hear my freaking thoughts, and knew I'd avoided mentioning Nausa, which meant I was prevaricating. Being bonded was going to take some getting used to.

A human is more delicate than a stone, and the bonding was causing something like that to happen inside me. I don't...I don't think I'm broken, but it's very hard on a person.

Was I broken? Everything was dark, so my eyes must have been closed. Maybe I was unconscious again. Maybe I was in a coma. Heck, maybe I was dead. Was that possible?

I'm sorry , Slate said, and the feeling of him being childlike intensified. The word hangdog, one my mother had often used when I was a kid, popped into my head to describe his tone.

It wasn't your fault , I assured him. Not unless you intended to bond me, and knew it would hurt me .

Don't know how to bond humans , he denied immediately. Never done it before, not this much. Just that one boy who went away .

You have to understand , a high, feminine voice said, and something in the tone told me the words were aimed at Slate rather than me. Humans are very fragile. Lots of things hurt them. This boy is very strong. One of the strongest. That's the only reason he could manage the bond with you .

I blinked. Was my head becoming the local coffee shop where stones came and hung out together?

The voice giggled. No, silly. I'm Verelle. I'm your birthright. Once you got close enough that I could sense you, I realized that Slate had initiated a bond. I couldn't bond with you before. You're very...

Thick headed? I asked. My grandmother had called me that now and then, and it seemed to fit in this case.

Again, she giggled. No. You just have very impressive mental protection. A strong mind. It's good. It's why you can speak to Slate. I'm afraid...well, I'm no amethyst to know for sure, but I'm afraid there is some damage.

My ankle? I asked hopefully, praying she wasn't about to tell me that no, I had brain damage, and I'd never wake up again.

No, it's not that. It's . . . well, wake up and see.

Just like that, wake up and see. Like I could control being?—

I started and gasped, sitting straight up and almost running straight into—into Kit. Who was hovering worriedly over me, biting his lip.

“Your aunt called a medical helicopter,” he said, and his voice sounded off, almost...small and distant. Worse than earlier, when I’d felt like my head was filled with cotton.

There it is , Verelle said. I’m not sure if it’ll get any better.

She sounded worried, and I . . . I grinned.

“I can barely hear you,” I told Kit.

He cocked his head, blinking rapidly. “I . . . I’m sorry?”

I shook my head. “It’s...damage. Verelle said I have damage. She doesn’t know if it’ll get better.”

He blinked harder, and—was he going to cry?

“No,” I said, grabbing his arms and tugging him toward me. I was probably talking too loud, I realized, because I couldn’t properly hear myself any more than I could hear him. I tried to consciously lower my volume. “It’s nothing. It’s hearing damage. I’m still me. I’m not dead or in a coma. It’s...my grandmother was mostly Deaf my whole life. I even know some sign language already. I was so worried it was going to be something important.”

I shook my head and laughed again, throwing my arms around Kit and pulling him against me. Then I realized something, and shoved back. “Unless...unless it bothers you. I could...maybe hearing aids, if?—”

“Fuck, you think I care about that, you asshole?” Kit smacked my chest, his lips compressed in such a hard line that it looked painful. Like he was desperately trying to hold in some strong emotion. “I thought you were going to die. I don’t give a damn

if I need to learn a new language. I'll start tomorrow."

"Why are we yelling?" Aunt Titania said—yelled, I supposed—as she came into the—wait, where the heck were we? I glanced around, confused. I'd expected that Kit's trail would lead us to the chalet.

This was not the chalet.

It looked like a mine shaft, or maybe a bit like the pictures of ancient kings' tombs, carved out of stone deep inside the earth.

"Aubrey's lost some hearing," Kit answered, still loud enough for me to hear him.

She came to our side, her blue eyes soft and concerned as she sat down next to me on the...well, frankly, it looked a little like a burial slab. A table, maybe? I hoped for table. I didn't need to be laid out on someone's bier.

Then a strange look crossed her face. "Oberon lost hearing out here too," she said, fascinated. "He came out with the family heads when he was a little boy, when they were meeting with Slate fifty years ago. And he..."

Understanding dawned on her face and she sat back, stunned.

I lifted a brow at Kit. "Not genetic, huh?"

He scoffed, still the dismissive jerk I...loved. "Please. It's just that no one unbonded and adult ever comes out here, because people like you don't even exist. Of course it was Oberon. But unlike him, you were an adult, and you finished the job. You—Slate's there, right? In your head? You bonded. The whole mountain."

I pulled Kit tight against me and pressed a kiss to his lips. "Yes. I bonded the whole

mountain. Thanks to you.”

I glanced up, trying to remember how I’d spoken to the mountain before, but I didn’t even have a chance to work at it before his voice popped into my mind, effortless and smooth.

I’m here. I can hear you now.

Because we’re . . . inside you?

No , he said, and there was almostlaughter in the words. Because we’re part of each other now. You did it. You stayed, and, and—you bonded. With me. Was the boy before really your father?

He was, I guess. I didn’t know him, but you were probably better off without him. He was kind of a jerk. I tried to find the words to describe Oberon to Slate, but instead, I found my memories of him playing in the back of my head.

I could feel Slate recoil at the unfeeling nature of the man.

Yes, I’m glad he didn’t stay. And I...I’m glad you did .

Me too .

“So,” Titania said, drawing the “o” out. “No explosion imminent? Because let me tell you, I was actually worried that Delta was going to start the eruption. She was trying to go all tough love on the mountain, and that’s not really how it works when you’re dealing with massively powerful entities, in my opinion.”

Kit rolled his eyes, clearly unsurprised by the woman who had raised him.

At Slate's slight recoil from the very idea, I nodded. "No eruption. But we need to not let this happen again. This is because everyone keeps leaving him alone. He's lonely. And he's...he's very young, for a volcano. You wouldn't leave a toddler alone just because he was big and a little scary, would you?"

Her eyes softened even more. "Of course not. And you're gonna outlive me, but we'll figure this out, kiddo. We'll make sure no one leaves him alone again."

"For now," Kit announced, giving her a stink eye that I didn't think she deserved, "you lot are going to pay for central heating to be added to the chalet."

And well, as much as I didn't want people to give me things in exchange for being born the son of Oberon Gloombringer, that was fair enough.

If we were going to live at the chalet to be close to Slate, I didn't want to freeze to death if I failed to start a fire.

Across from us, Titania laughed.

Chapter 35

Kit

Aubrey's hearing loss was nearly seventy percent, the doctor informed us with a serious, worried face in town a few hours later. I didn't know how they knew that number so precisely, but what the hells did I know about any of this?

We were back at the doctor's office in Yomi, and it seemed that Slate could communicate with Aubrey that far away with ease. I was hoping that as their bond deepened, we could do a little traveling without problems. After all, Father now lived hundreds of miles from Iri in Dawnchaser lands and didn't have trouble talking to her.

And after ten years of missing out on my siblings' lives in favor of The Plan, I didn't want to miss a single new thing, not ever again.

Delta was standing next to Titania, looking imperious and angry, scowling at the doctor as I sat next to Aubrey on the bed they'd put him in.

His ankle was too swollen to be casted right away, but thankfully, they didn't think he'd done any permanent damage by walking on it. They actually seemed to think my half-ass splint had helped.

“—get him into the medical center near Moonstriker Tower for cochlear implants,” Delta was saying to Titania, who looked worried as hell. I was annoyed Delta was even there, but no small town doctor was going to eject a family head.

Given the look on his face, though, Aubrey might do precisely that in a minute.

“No,” he interrupted, and every head in the room snapped around to look at him.

Admittedly, only the three of us had been allowed back, as well as the doctor and the audiologist who’d done the hearing test, but it was still weird, all four of them snapping around to stare at him.

Delta’s gaze narrowed, and she started to open her mouth, but Aubrey shook his head again. “I’m not much of a lipreader, but I’m pretty sure you said implants.” He turned to look at me. “She said implants, right?”

“She did,” I agreed, nodding for emphasis.

“Yeah, I’m not interested in that. So I’ve lost seventy percent of my hearing. So what? I’m not a musician. And even if I were, there’ve been Deaf musicians in the past, and they didn’t have cochlear implants. I don’t want them. I’m fine as I am. Kit said he’ll learn sign with me.”

Delta pursed her lips, barely glancing at me, and looking at Aubrey like he was the slowest kid in the classroom. “I understand you’re struggling with this, but you need to understand that my son?—”

“Nephew,” I interrupted, just because I loved the way being repeatedly interrupted was making the muscle in her jaw tic.

“My nephew is not the sort of man who follows through on?—”

“I really can’t understand most of what you’re saying,” Aubrey interrupted again, making me want to kiss him. “But I do have the feeling you’re insulting my Kit, which...really isn’t going to help here.” He reached out and grabbed my hand,

squeezing it tight. “Kit’s the reason I’m alive, you know? And the reason I successfully bonded Slate, which is why we’re all going to live to see tomorrow. So if you’ve got a problem with Kit, I guess you’re not a fan of being alive.”

Behind Delta, Titania pressed a hand to her lips, trying and mostly failing to hold back laughter, her shoulders shaking with the effort.

“Your Kit?” I asked.

Aubrey’s head whipped around to face me, and he smiled. “My Kit,” he agreed. “I don’t know if there are other Kits out there, but this one’s mine. At first I only saw what he was showing the world, and I kinda thought he was just an arrogant asshole. But then I realized he’s both an arrogant asshole and something else entirely. And this is crazy, but it turns out I’m in love with him. Can you believe that?”

The way he said it, like they were the easiest words that had ever come out of his brain and slid over his tongue, left me breathless.

Love. He was in love. With me.

“Good thing,” I choked out, struggling to keep my voice loud enough for him to hear. “Turns out he’s in love with you too.”

His grin at that was positively radiant. “I know,” he agreed. “Even if he has a hard time saying things out loud sometimes. I guess growing up, his mother was kind of awful to him. That’s okay, though. Mine taught me how to love someone. We can work together on it.”

“I’m trying to help,” Delta insisted, and Aubrey turned to look at her, gaze blank.

Clearly, he hadn’t understood what she’d said, only heard that she’d said something,

and he had no interest in asking her opinion.

Fuck, I loved him.

“Well at least it seems like you’re perfect for each other,” she muttered, turning away with a huff.

“Seriously?” I asked. “That’s it. The man risks his life to save the world, and your whole reaction is to offer him medical intervention he doesn’t need or want, and then you’re done?”

“What else does he want?” she exploded, the pent-up frustration of not being able to fix things herself finally coming out of her in a rush. “I offered him the best medical technology that?—”

“How about a simple thank you, Delta? You couldn’t fix it. You needed help. You needed him . And you haven’t so much as said ‘thanks for fixing this mess.’ Why is that so hard?”

You’re pushing kinda hard there , Nikka said. She was...kinda being nice. Sort of.

I pursed my lips, but didn’t give any other outward sign of the conversation. No, she was trying to take charge. She wasn’t being nice. She was trying to pay him off so she’d feel absolved of any culpability for the situation, even though she let Slate fester for her whole adult life, all the while knowing that eventually it would result in a volcanic eruption .

That’s probably true , she sighed. But she might have some good intentions. And I . . . I just . . . wish she were better .

I understood. I’d been dealing with Delta longer than Nikka, though, and at some

point I'd realized that hoping for better was fruitless. The woman had stolen credit from Frost for his solving of some mathematical equation when he was a kid. She wasn't secretly a decent mother and excellent person.

She was selfish and flawed and she was never going to be my mother.

But I did have to deal with her, for my siblings' sakes.

And her? She was standing there glaring at me, jaw clenched and not interested in thanking Aubrey for saving the whole fucking world.

I believed the technical term was "what a piece of work."

Finally, I just shook my head, rubbing ineffectually at the tension gathering between my brows. "You know what, it's fine. The important thing is that it's done. Aubrey did save us all, and it's over. We don't have to worry about Slate anymore. It's not like he's the kind of guy who needs kudos for his work."

Aubrey tugged on our twined hands, pulling me farther onto the bed. "I think you mean you saved us all," he said, kissing me on the cheek. "It was your plan. You got me there. You took me up the mountain. You took care of me when I couldn't anymore."

I lifted a brow at him. "Some people would say I manipulated you into all this. Forced you to bond the mountain. Twisted?—"

"Some people are jerks," he said with a sweet smile, tugging on me again, wrapping me in his arms and laying his head atop mine.

And that was that.

“Never, ever going to have grandchildren,” Delta muttered half under her breath, and I was all set to be pleased that Aubrey had missed the rather fraught topic for a brand-new relationship, but Titania apparently didn’t want to let that happen.

She gave first Delta, then us, a sweet smile that reminded me very much of Aubrey’s. “Actually, I’m pretty sure Ember is going to offer to be a surrogate for the boys. We were talking about it the other night, because she was worried I wouldn’t want to date someone who was pregnant.”

That was...a very serious conversation for another brand-new relationship. I, for one, was impressed.

Apparently, she’d also been loud enough for Aubrey, because he smiled back, bright and happy. “That sounds great, Aunt Titania. I’m sure Rain and Adair will want a kid. The two of you can be pregnant together.”

Titania blinked at him, staring, but I nodded. “Fair point. You’ll need someone to succeed you as Duskbringer.”

Her mouth dropped open, and she obviously wanted to deny it, to insist that would be Aubrey, but after a moment, she just nodded. “I guess I will.” Then a wicked gleam entered her eye, and she lifted a brow at me. “What do you say, Kit? Want to father the next generation of Duskbringers? I mean, it might as well be you, right?”

I was stunned into silence, but next to me Aubrey threw his head back and laughed.

Chapter 36

Aubrey

I don't like it , Slate whined. Too far. What if you never come home? There are people in your house too. I don't like them either .

The workers are supposed to be there , I promised him . They're installing the new windows . It's good, it's supposed to stop me from whining so much about how cold it is all the time.

You do whine about the cold a lot, he admitted .

Excuse me, Mr. Volcano, I was born on the coast where it's nice and warm. No snow, almost ever. I shuddered, thinking about the masses of snow we'd gotten over the winter, and that seemed to amuse him. Besides, this is fun. You've never been to a wedding before, have you?

No. What does it mean again?

It's like bonding, but for two humans instead of a human and a stone. It means they're promising to spend the rest of their lives together.

I sat up and stretched, luxuriating in the warm ocean breeze that flowed all through Sunrunner Palace. It wasn't sealed. There were no air conditioners. The bedroom they'd given me and Kit opened right up onto a balcony over the ocean below, so all I had to do to see the ocean was sit up in the enormous king-sized bed.

Kit was sitting in a cushioned deck chair on the balcony, eating some kind of pastry and staring out at the water, so I pulled myself out of bed and joined him. “Miss the ocean?”

He looked up at me, smiling, dropping the pastry onto a plate so he could sign back. “Not really.” He motioned to the spread on the table. “Coffee? Tea?”

I scoffed and took the glass of orange juice he held out to me instead, as we’d both known I would. Then I grabbed the second half of his pastry and took a bite. Almond, of course. His favorite.

And becoming my favorite, because I’d come to associate the flavor with him. An almond pastry in the morning was almost like kissing Kit, even if it wasn’t quite as good.

He sipped at a cup of tea as I settled in next to him and leaned his head on my chest.

“It’s nice,” he finally admitted, his hands flashing almost faster than I could follow, since we were both still learning the language. “But it’s not better than the chalet. I know Slate isn’t comfortable with us going far away yet, and that’s fine. But I like being back home too.”

Home, he said. The chalet. So seamlessly, he thought of the place as our home, because we’d been living there together.

“Me too,” I agreed. “It’s good to see your siblings, and Aunt Titania, and your father, but I like being at home, just the two of us.” I set my empty juice glass aside and tipped his face up to look at me. “Are you sure you don’t miss this? Everyone here knows you. It’s obvious enough that you were...you’re a worldly guy. You went everywhere and knew everyone, and now you’ve been with me and a staff of three at the chalet for almost a year. Well, three and the security contingent Delta hired to keep people from invading our privacy, but it’s not like you hang out with them. If

you want to?—”

He leaned in and kissed me, cutting off the flow of words. When he pulled back, there was just a tiny, peaceful smile on his face. “I miss home. I never missed this life.” He looked out at the ocean, cocking his head. “Though I think I’ll miss this view for a bit when we get back.”

“It is beautiful.”

After that, we just sat together in silence for a while, watching sailboats go by in the distance.

“So what’s it like, to have ended out the whole concept of dueling as the best duelist in the Summerlands?” the handsome, scarred man whose name I’d missed asked Kit.

I was wearing hearing aids for the purpose of the wedding, since it hadn’t been a reasonable ask to have three hundred guests all learn sign for my sake. It was uncomfortable, and I hated them, but I hated this guy even more.

His eyes fell on my Kit like a physical touch. Like he had the right to...

“We don’t really think much about it,” Kit told him, leaning against me. He spoke and signed at the same time, just because it was more comfortable for both of us, but also...it made it feel like his words were especially for me. “I don’t miss the threat of death every day I go to work.”

“So what are you doing now?” the guy asked, and I could tell that he was dubious. He thought Kit was lying and secretly missed that life.

I would admit to sometimes worrying the same. He’d gone from a flashy, exciting life with a shiny red sports car and tight sexy dueling costumes, to a quiet one with a four-wheel-drive SUV and a lot of flannel and fleece.

Not that he didn't still wear the costumes sometimes, on warm days. Or in the bedroom. Just because.

Kit smiled at him, then looked up at me, pointedly. I couldn't keep the flush from my cheeks, as the implication seemed clear. Then he shrugged. "Reading a lot. We planted flowers at the chalet in the spring, because Slate didn't know that was a thing people did. We're teaching him about humanity."

The man blinked, staring at him, then up at me for a moment. "Like...like the volcano's a kid? Like you're raising a kid?"

And that really was what it was like. Slate had never been around people all that much, since the closest town to him was Yomi, miles away, and before me, he'd never bonded someone to show him these glimpses of humanity that lived far away from him. Kit and I were teaching him about everything beyond where he was planted in the center of our world.

"Pretty much," Kit agreed. I'd once thought this dismissive asshole attitude was annoying, but now?

Well, it helped that it was no longer directed at me, but it also didn't matter, because everything Kit did was sexy as heck. From the way he stretched, lithe and languorous, every morning, to the way he was quick to offer that sly smile of his whenever anything amused him.

"Well, that's . . . I'm glad you're happy, I guess," the guy said, though he still seemed like he didn't believe it was possible.

We should kill him , Slate said. He wants to steal our kitten .

Funny, because normally I was the first voice of reason to tell Slate that he was overreacting to something, but in this case, I thought he might be onto something. I

didn't know who he was, but that bastard definitely wanted to steal my kitten.

"Hey you guys," Aunt Titania's voice tinkled from behind us. "I was wondering where you'd gotten off to. Delta was whining you'd probably sneaked off to screw in a closet, but I told her that my nephew is a gentleman, so if you'd run off to bonetown, you'd have taken Kit back to your room for it."

I cringed, sliding my hand down my face, even as Kit laughed aloud.

"Tempting, and now, tempting to talk him into a closet."

"No."

"Aww, spoilsport." Kit leaned in and grabbed Titania's hand, kissing the back of it like some kind of storybook character. Then he broke the fairy tale impression by opening his mouth again. "How've you been, Tits?"

She beamed at him.

It figured, really. Aunt Titania had finally found someone to refer to her by the horrifically inappropriate nickname that Dane Sunrunner had bestowed upon her as a teenager, and it was my boyfriend.

Pressing a hand to her very pregnant belly, she turned and looked behind us. "I think we're doing well. Ember's complaining a lot. You know, swollen feet, back pain. And it's all that and more." She leaned in. "But also? It's kind of fun. Plus no one tries to offer me booze like this."

It was a fair point. No one would offer a pregnant woman alcohol. Ember came up to join her, her gait distinctly more waddle-ish than Titania's. I blinked in shock at the sight of her.

She glowered in return. “Don’t. Yes, it’s twins. Fucking Rain’s always been an overachiever.”

“Ah,” I agreed, and then couldn’t think of another thing to say. An apology didn’t seem appropriate, even if it was the closest thing to the truth.

Kit, on the other hand. “You...are going to kill him, aren’t you?”

She made a face at him. “Tempting. But then he gives me the little puppy look like I’m the most precious thing he’s ever seen, both because babies and because he’s a sucker who loves me, and I can’t even hit him.” She gave Kit a glare. “You’d better decide, though, because I’m not going to spend my life doing this. First Rain and Adair, then Frosty and Cas, and then you, if you want. But just one. I’m not gonna spend my whole damn life having babies.”

“I will, if you want,” Titania offered brightly. “It’s great. We could get you a semi-matched set without anyone resorting to weird incest-y gene mixes.”

Ember rolled her eyes, motioning to her girlfriend but looking at Kit. “Do you believe this? It’s like she’s on vacation, she’s so happy about this shit.”

Titania leaned toward Ember, grabbing her arm and wrapping herself around it, staring up at her with sheer adoration written on every line of her body and face. “We have a family. And we all love each other. It’s the most amazing thing.”

And that? Well, Ember melted, leaning down to kiss Titania.

The orchestra, over in a corner, played a few strains of something, and it seemed as though everyone took that as a cue and headed toward the chairs set out on the beach for the wedding.

It wasn’t like weddings in movies, with someone walking down an aisle and everyone

wearing tuxedos. Caspian was dressed in loose, flowing white linen, and Frost—okay, Frost was dressed formally, in one of those Moonstriker style suits with the long embroidered coat. This one was white, with a great black dragon embroidered across the front, breathing fire up over his shoulder in a spray of red and orange gemstones that caught the light and glittered like actual flames. It was a very impressive piece of clothing, and I thought if I put it on, I would immediately spill ketchup on it. Even if I wasn't eating ketchup.

Kit had gotten me black slacks and a black button-down shirt with a red tie, and told me that was fancy enough for this, and that seemed to be true. Most people weren't dressed that fancy.

Kit, next to me, was wearing his red dueling costume, but his sword was still at home, hanging over the mantel back at the chalet.

It had been a means to an end, not his whole personality, and he'd been more than happy to set it aside for good, even if figuring out what came next had been a struggle. I'd been the one to insist on hanging it up. It was important, I said, that we remembered. Even if he didn't want the world to know the sacrifices he'd made to save them all, I thought that we should remember.

It'd been hard to keep the story from getting out at all, though, so my part was public knowledge. It had even been made into a movie, Kit and I—played by two gorgeous movie industry A-listers—being trapped on our way back from the doctor's office, forced to hike up the mountain with my broken ankle while I bonded Slate, having quite a few very dramatic seizures.

I didn't remember it being quite such a big deal, or so sexy, but the world had drunk it down and begged for more. Apparently it was suddenly all the rage to learn to sign.

I figured that could only be a good thing, because while most of those people were never going to meet me, it might actually serve people already living in their

communities.

For me? Well, Frost and Caspian were signing their vows, which was a bit of an overwhelming gesture, considering we only saw them in person a few times a year. Kit talked to Frost all the time—the two of them text messaging almost incessantly—but it wasn't like Caspian could leave Verisa often, and at least to start, I'd needed to be at the chalet a lot to cement my bond with Slate.

“—never knew that finding family could be so effortless,” Frost signed to the man he was marrying. “I had never been so easily accepted by anyone in my life, but then there you were. You never hesitated. Never made me feel like I was on the outside looking in. Like I was less because I was different. You took me as I was, and told me that was more than enough.”

“Because it is,” Caspian said when it was apparent that Frost was finished. “You are more than enough. You always were. You always will be. You're perfect exactly as you are, because of your imperfections. They make you unique and wonderful and the only man in the world I love. Who's ever looked right through the veils I cover myself with and seen me. You're everything. I love you.”

“I love you,” Frost said back, immediately, as though he couldn't possibly breathe one more time without saying it back.

I leaned down, wrapping my arm around Kit's shoulders and squeezing tight. With my free hand, I gave him the tiny shorthand sign for “I love you.”

He made the same sign with his own hand, then bumped his middle fingers against mine, as though making our hands kiss.

Ahead of us, Frost took Caspian into his arms and kissed him, rather more passionately than I'd ever seen at a wedding before. Not that I'd been to real weddings, only seen them on TV, so maybe that was the difference.

This is nice , Slate decided. I like weddings.

Me too , I agreed, pulling Kit in as tight as I could without dragging him into my lap. Weddings are pretty cool. Maybe we'll have one at the chalet, one of these days.

And Caspian will bring the new puppies to visit, Slate added, like that was a required part of any wedding.

And heck, maybe it was.