



Rapunzel's Gambit (All That Glitters #4)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: Some princesses would rather be the villain than the damsel in distress.

Desperate to rid his kingdom of a troublesome dragon, King Harrigan offers his daughter's hand in marriage to any man who can slay the beast, but Rapunzel refuses to be pawned off. Deciding that a life of crime is preferable to wedding some power-hungry suitor, Rapunzel fakes her own kidnapping and joins forces with the cunning dragon plaguing her own kingdom.

Together, they plot a grand scheme that would amass them both riches beyond their wildest dreams. As the lure of a reward for the princess's safe return attracts men tempted by greed and Rapunzel's flirtations, the would-be heroes soon become the ones in need of rescue atop a tower only accessible by dragonback. But as her alliance with the dragon grows more precarious and dangerous, Rapunzel is forced to question whether she's trusted the wrong side.

Amidst the chaos, Griffin, the humble but brilliant squire, emerges as an unexpected ally. His quick wit and resourcefulness stand in stark contrast to the arrogant knights he serves, and Rapunzel can't help but take notice. On the chessboard of fate, the swindler princess of Rookwyn must make her own moves with every calculated gambit and soon realizes...

The real game was never about knights, kings, and queens, but about how a mere pawn could become a legend.

Rapunzel's Gambit is a no spice, diabolical fairytale retelling packed with villain vibes, a dragon/princess con artist duo, and banter that will have you laughing out loud. Join a diabolical princess on her daring swindles in this part of All That Glitters—a 12-book series brimming with Tales of Treasure and True Love. Each book stands alone and is written by a different author, so pick your next adventure and remember... not all that glitters is gold!

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CHAPTER 1

A chorus of boos from the crowd reverberated in my ears as Father stood to speak to our kingdom's subjects. I spotted several clutching over-ripe tomatoes and braced myself for what would inevitably happen as soon as the speech was over.

"A blight has plagued this land for too long," he began.

"You're the blight!" one man shouted, shaking a fist in the air.

Additional angry shouts rose from the crowd to agree, but they were indistinguishable over the low rumble of mutinous muttering. The sentiment was obvious enough that I felt no desire to decipher the exact wording. I fixed my attention on the back of Father's head, as if riveted by the silver sheen of his short-cropped hair that formed a horseshoe shape under his gold-embossed crown.

"This dragon from the west has been burning our crops and feeding on our sheep and cattle, and if we do not take care, it will come for us, too!" Father continued. "I'm aware of your struggles. I know people have been going hungry."

"Lower the taxes and we won't be hungry!" a woman shouted spitefully. One of the knights guarding the platform put his hand on his sword and took a threatening step forward.

"It is the dragon's fault that the tax rate is so high," Father responded. "If it weren't for its constant raids, everyone would have more. And I have a plan to solve the problem."

I heard a few in the audience shushing others as the noise level decreased slightly, everyone eager to hear what aid would be given to offset their losses. Such hopes were quickly dashed, however, as I knew they would be. Father never had any intention of depleting our kingdom's coffers for anyone's benefit but his own.

"Therefore—" Father waited for total silence before he continued, "I will offer my daughter's hand in marriage to the first prince or man of noble birth who can kill this menace!"

What?! I felt countless eyes shift over to fix on where I sat, frozen in shock, on the raised dais. A murmur of interest rippled through the crowd, but it all sounded like the buzzing of bees as my mind raced to process what had just happened. I couldn't believe that Father would offer to auction me off to some unknown man, as if I were some paltry trinket to be won at a tournament. Was this his way of getting back at me for the many pranks I'd played on him and his friends in the past?

For the people's benefit, I schooled my facial expression into one of acceptance, as if I had always known I would be sold off this way. I shivered, partly because I was always cold, and partly at the prospect of how my future, and the futures of so many men, had changed so drastically in a matter of minutes.

"What about until it's killed?" a haggard-looking elderly man cried out. "I don't want to marry a princess; I want to feed my family!"

"Stop the taxes!" his friend shouted, and everyone broke into an uproar again, so loud that guards stepped in front of my father, shielding him from the irate civilians. At this rate, ripe tomatoes would be the least of his worries.

Father held up his hands to placate the crowd. "I'll look into lowering the tax rate," he vowed. "But in order to continue the imports of food, we wouldn't be able to lower it significantly without supplies being disrupted, and that means killing the

dragon. None of us want any children to starve.”

I resisted snorting. Of course Father would lead with weaponizing children’s safety and security against their terrified parents. I knew enough of the kingdom’s finances to confidently say that there were other avenues we could pursue if we wanted to lower the taxes. No one had to go hungry. The villagers were correct; Father’s greed was the true blight on our land.

“We must beware the dragon,” Father warned them. “If it tires of taking our oxen and sheep, he could come for our children next!”

Several couples looked at each other in fear, but I wanted to groan in embarrassment. This was yet another scare tactic, a very effective one that distracted from the real issue at hand. Dragon attacks only ever occurred when one was challenged by a dragon hunter. Otherwise, they might occasionally steal livestock, but as far as I knew, none ever swooped down to snatch infants from their cradles. In the stories, only knights and princes who sought out dragons met terrible ends.

“Who is brave enough to challenge the dragon and win my daughter’s hand? If the people want to be ruled by one of their own, this is your chance. The future of Rookwyn depends on you!”

Several knights and noblemen began stepping forward, pledging their swords to the attempt and vowing that they would rid the land of the dragon to stop its pillaging. Father commended each one in turn, and I rose, still numb with shock, to greet each in the line of men, all of whom were eager to slay the beast and gain power.

Each of those vowing to hunt the dragon whispered words to me as he brushed his lips to my hand, all saying how he would win my favor, that it was an honor to risk his life for so beautiful a woman, and other comments that washed over me without ever sinking in. Was that the last time they would kiss a woman’s hand? Did any of

them know what was in store for them? Did they have any idea just how shrewd and intelligent a dragon was?

This was no mere boar that could be hunted with hounds or lances, scared out of its hiding place with noise and arrows. We were discussing a fully grown dragon, a beast more intelligent than any human, more powerful than a dozen war stallions, and covered with a scaly armor that, as far as I knew, was impenetrable.

Father hadn't proposed a noble quest; this was a suicide mission.

For the first time in what felt like years, we weren't pelted with overripe fruit as we were escorted off the dais and to the carriage. I'd heard tales of kingdoms in which the royalty were lauded with cheers and accolades everywhere they went, but if such stories were true, they never happened in Rookwyn or the surrounding areas. Our subjects had no reason to love us.

Greed was a pervasive infection that had been solidly entrenched in all the nobility and royalty I knew of. I even saw it in myself, though it disgusted me to know I was sometimes so similar to Father. He used to be kind and even playful at times, but ever since his parents had passed away several years ago and he took over ruling the kingdom, his former warmth had evaporated like the morning dew on a summer day.

* * *

On the carriage ride home, Father was the one who brought up the topic of my impending engagement. "I'm sure it must have come as a bit of a shock to you," he began.

"You think?" I spat back.

"Rapunzel," he scolded while straightening his crown, displaced from the carriage

bumping down the road riddled with potholes. “I don’t know why you’re so worked up about it. You’ve done similar things in the past.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve never pulled anything like the stunt you just did!”

Father shot me a withering stare. “You sent out an official decree on my personal letterhead that all nobility needed to present a poem praising my accomplishments before being allowed entry to the throne room.”

“That wasn’t harmful. That was just funny.”

“You wrote insults on Lord Morvain’s banner celebrating his twenty years of service to the crown.”

“Those were all true statements.”

One of his eyebrows arched up the same way mine did. “Not to mention how many men you’ve kissed just to humiliate me. Everyone has been saying I can’t control my own daughter.”

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms. “Oh dear,” I drawled. “What an appalling tragedy that is. We can’t have anyone thinking I have my own free will now, can we? Best slap me in chains now so you can control me better. Perhaps it would be best if you lead me around like a dog on a leash. Should I wear a collar?”

“Rapunzel!”

“It’s still different. What you did isn’t some harmless prank; these are lives at stake. It’s my future, and it is the lives of all those men. They’ll die trying to defeat a dragon; you know it, and if one doesn’t, then I’ll be forced to marry?”

“Don’t worry,” Father interrupted with a chuckle. “It isn’t like any of them will succeed. And besides, how will we know if they don’t try?”

The weight of his words crashed into me. It isn’t like any of them will succeed ? Father anticipated them all failing. He expected them to try and to be killed in the attempt, and to what end—to deflect some of the anger that they felt toward him? To prove that he was just as despicable a ruler as they believed him to be? To thin out those who might vie for the throne? He was willing to send his subjects on a suicide mission just to pretend like he was doing something to help them.

Father watched me through narrowed eyes. “You’ve forced my hand.”

“So you’re auctioning off mine? Pray tell, how did I force you to send dozens of men to their deaths?”

“You’ve offended so many of the surrounding kingdoms that I need to do something to regain their favor. The dragon’s lair is near the border of many kingdoms; this will benefit everyone.”

I met his glare with one of my own. “Except those you send to be slaughtered.”

“The lives of a few are a small price to pay if it stops the dragon stealing livestock.”

“It’s not too small a price if you’re the one who’s being sacrificed. Livestock isn’t the same as human life.”

“They signed up. They all volunteered. I’m not forcing anyone to do anything. Besides, if they do succeed, they will be the future queen’s consort. A fine deal, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t ask you, and you certainly never asked me my thoughts about you deciding

my future for me.”

“Your future was decided for you when you were born,” he said dismissively.

I sank back into the plush velvet seat of the carriage. What sort of reality was he living in which he could discard the lives of his citizens so easily? Did he think that the blood of his extensively trained knights came cheaply? Did he think that, with a snap of his fingers, he could replace an army? He was so consumed by greed and selfishness that he had become impossible to reason with.

The landscape flashed by outside the window, from the blur of fields of crops withered by the brutal sun to the craggy mountains pitted with caves.

No amount of glaring could ever convey the depth of deep-seated resentment and hostility I felt toward my father. We trundled past an orphanage, where children with sunken, hungry faces wearing heavily patched clothing stared with open mouths at the carriage whisking by.

“Why are you not sending more aid to the people? They’re struggling and you know it.”

Father stroked his bearded chin, averting his eyes from the orphans to stare out the opposite window. “You’ll see in time, Rapunzel. Peasants often bring about their own misfortunes. They resent paying the required taxes that pay for the military who protect them and the roads that they use, then they spend time griping about it, and because they wasted their time complaining, they consequently have less time to work, earn less because of their laziness, and then spend even more time sitting around blaming us for all the shortages they experience. It’s a vicious cycle. We mustn’t reward them for their lack of effort.”

I shivered slightly as I frowned at him. Had his disdain for the people always been so

apparent, or was it only becoming evident as I grew old enough to accept more of the responsibilities of ruling? What had happened to the caring man who used to read me stories when I was a child?

“When was the last time you talked with the people?”

Father raised an eyebrow as if he questioned my sanity. “Just today. You heard me speak to them.”

“No, you talked at them. When did you last listen to their concerns and ask for their input?”

Father shook his head, still stroking his pointed beard. “Royalty cannot afford such things. It would be a risk to my personal safety, and besides, peasants only know their small corner of the world. Imagine taking advice from someone who knows nothing of operating a kingdom. They know nothing about tariffs or foreign diplomacy or domestic affairs. They know their trades, and their responsibility to the kingdom is to perform their trade well.”

Father was an intelligent man. He could do complicated arithmetic inside his head and quote lengthy passages of great works of literature, but he hadn’t been a wise or compassionate king. The people truly hated him, but it didn’t bother him one bit. It hadn’t troubled me when I was young enough not to know better, but it did now.

I fidgeted with my handbag, opening and closing it again so my hands had something to do. “How can we rule the people if we do not truly know their circumstances?”

“I wouldn’t expect a young girl to understand the complexities of politics yet. This isn’t like one of your little chess games.” Father smiled indulgently at me, but a flame of hot anger leapt inside my chest. So, I was just a young girl who couldn’t understand anything? Was that why he offered my hand in marriage, because it was

the only value he thought I held? I wasn't going to stand for it. If only I could oust him from power and seize control of the kingdom now. I would be a better ruler than Father had been. But even so...he was still my father. I wouldn't initiate a coup against him.

What benefit was there to being a princess if I was going to be auctioned off to some power-hungry knight who saw me as a tool to further his own position? Why would I want to rule if my people hated me for my whole life? If I ran away or refused to be married, I was sure to be seen as shirking my duty or selfishly putting my own happiness before that of the kingdom. If I stayed and ruled as Father had, I would be hated, just as he was. The only other option was to wait for the next forty to fifty years for Father to die so I could take over and rule the way I saw fit, but the notion of eagerly anticipating my own father's death was repugnant.

No matter what, there was no way to win.

Before the carriage had come to a complete halt, I threw open the door and leapt down. The footman squeaked in alarm as I bypassed the stairs he normally unfastened for me. I stumbled upon landing and nearly dropped my handbag but hastened to right myself and stalk away.

"Rapunzel!" Father called after me, reproach in his voice.

I didn't stop. I didn't care if he wanted to talk to me or explain himself or if he was simply concerned about the servants realizing we had argued. If he refused to extend me any courtesy, I would do likewise. He didn't deserve my respect or time when he clearly didn't value it anyway.

"Rapunzel!" he shouted again. "Don't forget about the ball tonight!"

There may as well have been a thundercloud hovering over my head as I stormed

through the gardens. I glowered at the dragon sculptures sprinkled throughout the gardens, maws open wide and ruby eyes glittering in the bright afternoon sun. Dragons. Father blamed all his problems on the one near our kingdom's border, but the people seemed much less concerned about the creature—and rightly so. It never troubled the citizens that I'd heard of, whereas Father's gross negligence caused immense suffering.

I kicked morosely at a stone that skittered away down the garden path, then closed the distance to where it lay and kicked it again, even harder. It felt cathartic to transfer my frustration into something else. It bounced against the marble fountain, and I raised my gaze to stare at the obstacle. Yet another dragon-related sculpture, this one a marble block shaped like a dragon spewing flame from the center of the fountain, with water pouring from its fanged mouth instead of fire. I stared into its jeweled eyes, which appeared alive as the light reflected off the gemstones. Fat fish swam lazily about in the pool beneath the dragon's carved claws, unconcerned with anything as they drifted about in the pool's glimmering depths.

As I lowered my hand to touch the water, they approached, eagerly searching for any tidbits I might have brought them, then retreated when they found none. I circled my hand in the pool. The summer day had warmed the water, and the gentle heat against my skin soaked into my hand just as desperately as the fish had wanted food.

A scarlet-crested jay fluttered down and settled on the dragon's sculpted head, piping its eerie melody to the sky. I moved on, dodging behind statues anytime I thought I saw a servant headed my way. Father would never deign to search for me himself, but I had no doubt he would send an endless stream of ladies-in-waiting to track me down before the ball tonight. Ugh, yet another one of the endless parties Father threw to flaunt his wealth to other kingdoms while refusing to aid his own people.

"Princess Rapunzel!" I had been spotted. I glared at the inscription chiseled into the plaque beneath the sculpture: Never trust a dragon. I snorted. Father had been aptly

nicknamed The Dragon King by the people. He was just as greedy, and the inscription was true. I shouldn't ever trust him.

“Princess Rapunzel!” the voice repeated, and I wearily looked around for the speaker. It was Harold. Both he and his father, Lord Morvain, were some of Father's most trusted advisors, and new anger flared in my chest. Did he have any idea about what Father had announced? Had he encouraged it? Harold was still unmarried and close to my age, but it was too much to expect that he would have any sympathy for my plight. He was just like all the royalty and nobility I knew—arrogant and self-absorbed. Harold looked very similar to Lord Morvain, with a hooked, hawk-like nose, shrewd eyes, and a thin build with wispy hair. One might have thought of them as bookkeepers, but I was more inclined to think of them as snakes—deceptive and cold.

“Harold,” I greeted him frostily, inclining my head a fraction of an inch. Was I like my own father? Surely I had the predisposition to be just as ruthless and cunning as he.

“You have a ball tonight,” he informed me, drawing up close. “Several of the knights planning to challenge the dragon will be in attendance, and your father wishes for you to greet each one personally.”

So he knew after all. Had all of Father's advisors known and neglected to tell me about it? I attended most of the same meetings Father did, from foreign diplomacy to domestic affairs and trade negotiations. How was I the only one unaware? They must have known I would object and therefore discussed it in secret when I wasn't around. I ground my teeth together. Of course they'd discussed my future without me.

“Did you hear me?” he asked, raising his voice a little. “I need to let your father know that you received his message.”

“I heard,” I told him. No matter how much Father wanted to control my life, I still had some freedoms. I coyly pulled my lipstick out of my handbag and coated my lips. “It’s a shame I won’t have any say in whom I’m soon to marry; I have my own preferences. Tell me, Lord Harold, have you ever seen our vegetable gardens?”

He curled his lip in disdain. “I have not. I have much more important matters to tend to.”

“That’s too bad. It’s very secluded this time of day,” I told him, lowering both my eyes and my voice. “Very secluded.” I took a mint from my bag and pressed it onto my tongue. “And I don’t need to start getting ready for the ball for another hour or two. Would you like me to show you the gardens?”

“I—oh!” I could almost see the gears working in his head as his expression shifted from condescending to cautiously hopeful. “Yes, I think I would like to take a stroll in the garden with you.”

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CHAPTER 2

Father's profuse swearing was accompanied by the pattering of many footsteps as his servants hurried after him, growing closer to the room where I sat, plucking at my harp and forcing myself not to smirk. The door flew open with an almighty crash. After finishing the last few chords, I slowly rolled my head around, an agreeable smile on my face that didn't match Father's murderous glare.

"Good afternoon, Daddy. What a lovely surprise. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Where is he?" Father thundered. Behind his back, the servants whispered to each other, hands concealing their mouths.

I blinked innocently. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I've just been here practicing my harp, waiting for the ball to begin. Where is who?"

Father's face was a delightful shade of deepest plum, and the veins on his thick neck throbbed rapidly. "Lord Morvain's son Harold. Where is he?"

I tapped my finger on my chin. "Lord Morvain...Lord Morvain...isn't he the one your subjects call the Dark Lord?"

"I swear, Rapunzel, you tell me where he is this instant, or I'll...I'll..."

"You could lock me in a tower," I suggested, eyes narrowed. "Or marry me off to any stranger you choose. Isn't that your plan, anyway?"

Father rolled his eyes so hard that he could have examined his own brain as he let out a long stream of air, cheeks puffed out so he resembled a plum more than ever. Then he forced a strained smile onto his face.

“Dearest, darling daughter, if you don’t reveal the location of my closest friend’s son right now, I swear I will marry you off to the next man who walks through the door, and I won’t care if it’s the chimney sweep.”

I put a hand up to my chest and widened my eyes in mock surprise. “You always suspect me when your friends go missing. That hurts.”

“Am I ever wrong?”

I raised a solitary eyebrow, glad I could make Father just as angry as he’d made me that morning. “All the time.” I went back to strumming my harp. “Did you know that the gardener’s shed near the vegetable garden is always unattended during the midday meal?” I shot him a wicked expression. “Harold’s head is so empty; he might have been hunting for a replacement among the lettuce.”

Father turned. “Go, go, go!” Two of the manservants sprinted back down the hall in the direction of the vegetable gardens.

I resumed playing the harp, immensely satisfied by how the gentle music was at such great odds with the venom in my father’s gaze. Minutes trickled by as he continued to glower. I smiled adoringly at him. “You’re such a wonderful father to listen and be so supportive of my musical endeavors.”

His eyelid twitched and he didn’t respond.

“Shall I play you another song?” I turned a page on my sheet music and narrowed my eyes. “This next number is called ‘ The Vengeance Sonata .’ It’s one of my

favorites.”

I played the melody, relishing how the vein pulsing in Father’s temple was growing more pronounced with each minute that trickled by.

“Your Majesty!” The head servant had returned, panting. “We found Lord Morvain’s son shoved into the gardener’s shed. He was unconscious and seems to have been drugged. He’s now in the infirmary being tended to.” The servant shot an uncomfortable look my way.

I put a hand up to my mouth and gasped dramatically. “Scales above, who would do such a terrible thing?”

“Leave us,” Father growled to the servants. “Let me know once Harold is awake.” Looking quite relieved to vacate the scene, they all scurried away, shutting the door with a snap behind them.

Without breaking eye contact, I idly strummed my harp. “I’m nearly done with this song, then I’ll finish getting ready for the ball, just like you want me to.” I flashed him a wicked smile. “I’m eager to meet all the rest of these men you’re so anxious to marry me off to. Will a chimney sweep be in attendance?”

He ignored my question. “Give me the rest of it.” He held his hand out expectantly.

With a smile, I handed over my sheet music. “Is that what you wanted?”

In a fit of rage, he ripped the papers to shreds and scattered the pieces into the air. “The wyrmsleep! Whatever you drugged Harold with! Where is it? Is there more, or did you use it all? Turn out your pockets.”

I watched the bits of paper flutter down. “This dress doesn’t have pockets, Daddy

dearest. Besides, wyrmsleep isn't even deadly. I don't know what you're so worked up about." How I relished using his own words against him.

"Give me your handbag."

I gestured at the table where it lay. Father wrenched it open and extracted a simple fan, a comb, my small tin of mints, and the tube of lip stain. Unsatisfied, he spent an additional five minutes scouring the bag for any hidden pockets or concealed seams.

"Take your shoes off," he ordered.

I slipped them off, followed by my stockings, then wriggled my bare toes as he shook the shoes as if he expected packets of powdered sleep aid to tumble out. I raised an eyebrow. "See? I'm innocent."

"As innocent as the dragon who keeps stealing all of my oxen," Father snapped. He closed his eyes and took a long, steadying breath. "Why are you doing this, Rapunzel? This is the third man this year."

"Why do you keep assuming I did it?"

A smile curled Father's lips. "Because you're exactly like I am, that's why—brilliant and scheming."

"And I'm the person I am today because of what's been modeled to me. Aren't you proud?" I matched his steely gaze, my jaw jutted out defiantly.

Father sighed heavily and ignored my question. "I just can't figure out where you put the rest of the wyrmsleep. Do I need to have a handmaiden come to search the rest of your person?"

A tentative knock echoed around the room.

“Enter,” Father boomed. The head servant was back. “What news, Reginald? How’s Harold?”

“We managed to revive him.” He shuffled his feet. “He claims the last thing he remembers was...was kissing your daughter, sire.”

I couldn’t conceal the smug expression on my face. “Oopsies. Was that me?”

“Thank you, Reginald. Tell Lord Morvain and his son that I will see them shortly and offer a personal apology, as will my very penitent daughter.” He said the last few words through gritted teeth.

“Lord Morvain and his son are some of the few allies we have left,” Father said wearily after Reginald left and we were alone again. “Why would you ostracize the few who are still on our side?”

“You ought to be glad I picked him instead of an enemy. At least you know he’ll forgive us. Perhaps instead, you should wonder what foreign diplomacy tactics you’re using that resulted in us having so few allies.”

Father stared at me, and I matched his glare with a challenging one of my own. Finally, he sighed and ran his hand through his silver hair. “Why couldn’t I have had a daughter who enjoyed embroidery? The other kingdoms’ royalty have started calling you the Feral Princess of Rookwyn.”

“Ooh, the Feral Princess? I like it. A fitting name for the Dragon King’s daughter.”

Father’s anger faded as he handed me back my handbag, the corners of his mouth curling upward. “So, tell me, how did you get Harold to take the wyrmsleep?”

I took the handbag and tucked it under my arm. “The benefits of my womanly wiles. Shall I describe my exact actions to you?”

Father closed his eyes. “No. I don’t want to think about that. Just...don’t do it again.”

“I would never.” I held out my arms, and Father eyed me suspiciously. “What, you’re unwilling to hug your only child?”

Slowly, he wrapped his arms around me, but the hug felt perfunctory rather than meaningful.

“You’re impossible, you know that?” he sighed.

“So are you.” I broke away, giving his hands one final squeeze, and headed for the door.

“Rapunzel...” There was warning in Father’s voice.

I rolled my eyes and gave him back his coin purse.

“Now the rest.”

“I don’t have anything else.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

He raised his eyebrows and waited.

“Fine!” I slapped his cloak’s jeweled brooch back into his hand and closed his fingers

around it. “Happy now?”

“Very. You’re worse than any dragon.”

“I know.” I beamed and turned away, discreetly tucking Father’s signet ring into my handbag as I did so.

CHAPTER 3

Most of the guests had already arrived by the time I finally left my room. Father had sent multiple manservants up to pound on my door and relay his messages to not delay any longer. My handmaiden, Beatrix, deserved credit, she waved each manservant off with the sharp retort that if my father hadn't delayed me by lecturing me, I would have been ready on time.

I turned to scrutinize my appearance in the mirror. I'd always been considered pretty enough, but after her administrations, I was no longer simply a thin princess, I was the regal future Queen. The stunningly beautiful woman gazing back at me looked far too innocent and sweet to be suspected of any wrongdoing. Perfect. I leaned closer, examining the way my eyelashes had been darkened to contrast my bright blue eyes and the matching gown.

"You've outdone yourself, Beatrix. Thank you." In the mirror's reflection, I saw her brown eyes crinkle as she smiled fondly from the praise and patted my long blonde hair. She was the closest thing I had to a mother, as my own had passed away during childbirth.

"Do you hope to find love before being forced to marry someone else?" one of the newer servant girls asked. Beatrix hissed and swatted at the lass, who murmured, "Beg pardon, Your Highness, it was not my place."

A thin smile crept to my lips. "No need to apologize. My plan is not too far off from that." If Father wanted me to give attention to men, I would give attention to men, just as he had requested.

Beatrix gave me an all-too-knowing look and shook her head. “There’s not a man alive who can handle the amount of woman you are, princess.”

* * *

Horns blared and the herald announced my entrance as I daintily held my skirts and stepped leisurely down the elegantly sweeping staircase, ensuring every eye was upon me as I descended. I beamed at every man in turn, relishing their gaping mouths and dumbfounded expressions. Father held out his hand to me as I reached the bottom-most steps, and I placed my fingers on top of his, allowing him to guide me down the final stairs.

“Dearest, I would like to introduce you to Prince Ijor, Crown Prince of Coronis. Ijor, this is my daughter, Princess Rapunzel.”

I lowered into a deep curtsy, making sure to tilt forward as I did so. Ijor bowed in return, sweat breaking out on his forehead as he valiantly fought to keep his eyes locked with mine. “Princess, it’s a pleasure.” He spoke with a slight lisp and had a large gap between his two front teeth but was otherwise handsome.

“The pleasure is all mine,” I cooed, extending my hand.

Father faded into the background as Ijor kissed my knuckles. I felt the rough calluses on his hand where he touched me, the unmistakable sign of a skillful warrior. Judging from his tensed shoulders and slightly frantic eyes, he had little experience with women. I smiled expectantly and batted my lashes at him as the orchestra struck up a tune, but he didn’t take the hint.

“Prince Ijor, would you do me the honor of asking me to dance?”

“A princess should never have to request a dance,” a new voice interjected. A

strapping man who looked and sounded very similar to Ijor but lacked the lisp, approached. “Forgive my brother, Your Highness. He is somewhat lacking in the social graces. I’m Prince Ivan.”

Ijor frowned. “She asked me—” he began, but his brother cut him off.

“You may have your turn after I claim the first dance.” At first touch, he flinched, as everyone did when they touched my constantly cold hands. To his credit, he politely ignored my icy fingers and led me onto the dance floor, where many couples spun and dipped their way around the enormous circle.

Ivan had skill at dancing but lacked the rough calluses that his brother had earned on the battlefield. He was well versed in the steps and kept a steady flow of conversation the whole time. Or rather, he talked in a continuous stream that proved to be one-sided and boastful.

“Naturally since my brother is heir to the throne and deals with the logistical side of operating a country our size, I have more time to devote to the high society, which is where I fit in better anyway. Ijor is rather introverted, but you can probably tell by now that I attract people... They just gravitate towards me, isn’t that fascinating? I was recently jousting with Sir Wesley of Elmsbee—you’ve heard of him, I’m sure. The one who battled the dragon of the Shadowed Mountains? Anyway, after I beat him in the joust, we were discussing...”

He went on and on. I tuned his words out but continued to bat my eyelashes and smile as flirtatiously as I could at him. Ivan relished the attention and once our dance was over, offered me his arm for a stroll. “I already promised Sir Gallas a dance when he signed up for the dragon hunt this morning, but please find me later.”

Ivan brushed his lips against the back of my hand. “I won’t forget.”

Gallas, the knight who had been first to volunteer for the dragon mission, darted up to accept the next dance. Even after my first dance, my hands hadn't warmed up, so he, too, flinched at my touch, but he masked it well. Gallas wasn't as conversational as Ivan had been, so I needed to prompt more from him.

"Tell me of your most recent assignment," I coaxed.

"I was sent to investigate a possible poaching situation up north."

An awkward silence stretched as I waited for him to elaborate, but he was too busy watching his feet and making sure he didn't step on mine. "And was it poaching?" I finally asked.

Gallas jumped slightly and hastened to answer, stumbling over his words slightly in his eagerness to respond. "W...well, yes, sort of. It was the dragon again."

"I suppose a dragon would need to eat large game."

"I suppose."

Silence fell again, and I felt obligated to fill it. "This isn't the first report of such an instance, you know. Baron Signey filed a complaint recently about the same issue—the dragon took several of his sheep."

"At least it wasn't a person," Gallas said. "I heard about your ancestor."

Any child who went to school for any period of time in the last hundred years knew the story.

My great-great grandfather, King Tiberion was reportedly one of the only humans ever to sustain, not so much a friendship, but a cordial arrangement with a dragon.

The tale went that during his reign, Rookwyn was so overrun with dragons that our people were starving to death. Tiberion, whether motivated by anger or sheer desperation, sought out a young dragon and drafted an agreement in which the dragon would work for the crown and drive away its fellows in return for half of the kingdom's coffers.

The firedrake, who was reported to be eight times the size of the largest soldier, agreed to the proposal. The eradication of the other dragons took more than two years, but eventually succeeded. When Tiberion gave the dragon his share of the treasure, the beast demanded everything, with the threat that if he was denied the gold he deserved, our land would never be free from dragons.

Tiberion protested, and the dragon had kidnapped my great grandmother and held her for ransom until his demands were met. Terrified that the royal line would die out, Tiberion finally acquiesced and turned over the entire kingdom's treasury to the insatiable dragon. Ever since then, all my ancestors had been consumed with greed, desperate to recover the riches that had been lost.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to remind you," Gallas said awkwardly. "I was just thinking about the dragon hunt next week."

"You already signed up, didn't you?"

"I did."

The knowledge that he would be putting his life on the line deepened my anger toward my father, which drove me to flirt even more with each one of my subsequent dance partners. Each time I lavished a new dance partner with attention, Father's eyebrows contracted from where he watched me.

Delighted that I'd succeeded in arousing his suspicions, I would cheerfully wave at

him each time I caught his eye, then lean a little closer to whichever man I was dancing with to whisper into his ear. Any other girl might have envied my position. The men who flocked to my side were all well-built, well-dressed and groomed, and eager to give me attention. But I couldn't help feeling that their affections were just as false as mine.

Frankly, it astounded me that each of these men would jump at the chance of marrying a princess as flirtatious as I was acting. Did it not concern them that their future monarch was throwing herself at every man in the vicinity? Perhaps they simply didn't care what I did as long as they had the opportunity to gain power and position.

Father wasn't as easily fooled. Throughout the evening, his eyes became narrower and narrower until they were barely more than slits on his face. Finally, he cut in between my partner and me in the middle of a dance.

"What are you doing?!" Father hissed out of the corner of his mouth as he claimed the dance. He moved stiffly, as if by doing so his displeasure would go undetected by the surrounding crowd.

My eyes widened to show my innocence. "Have you not been encouraging me to greet each man very personally? What good, obedient daughter would reject her father's wise counsel?"

"We both know full well that this is a ruse," Father spat in an undertone. "I want to know why."

"I don't know what you are talking about. But I certainly have garnered a great deal of interest. After all, marrying me would come with an entire kingdom, even if it is one currently plagued by a dragon's presence."

“This is just to get out of the dragon-slaying offer,” snarled Father. “Isn’t it? Are you hoping to become engaged so my offer today is useless?”

A coy smile toyed around my mouth that was at odds with the innocence of my eyes. “But Father dearest, what do you mean? You arranged this ball, not I.”

“ Before I made the offer about the dragon!”

“And who am I to refuse the fortunate timing? Would you rather I rebuff all the advances of the gentlemen here? Perhaps some will be more willing to consider such a dangerous quest now that they know I’m so interested in them.”

Father glared as he spun me under his arm and raised his eyes to glance around. Several of the men I had flirted with were casting sideways expressions my way, waiting to swoop in and claim the next dance. “I don’t know what your game is,” he hissed into my ear when we cut through the dance floor again, speaking so low that only I heard, “but if you botch this proposition for me, I swear I will marry you off to a peasant. I want you to...to sit out of the dancing for a few minutes.”

I laughed aloud, which only incensed Father further. “Are you treating me like a misbehaving child?”

“Why not? You’re acting like one,” he retorted, then raised his voice so it carried to everyone nearby. “Of course you can get off your feet, Rapunzel dear. I’m sure you’re exhausted. Come along.”

He steered me to a chair next to a chess table. “Here. You like chess. Sit. Play with...with him.” Father snatched at the arm of a passing man, who turned out to be Prince Ijor, the prince with the lisp. Ijor sat down heavily in the chair, looking somewhat confused as to how his attempt at getting to the refreshment table had landed him across the chess board from me.

“Princess, ah...it’s nice to see you again,” he said, somewhat startled.

“And you as well. It seems we’ve been told to play chess.”

“I’ve heard you are very talented,” Ijor told me politely, hastily setting up the pieces.

I raised one shoulder. “Oh, I play a little.”

Ijor offered me the white pieces, but I shook my head. “I favor black, if you don’t mind.” I caught Father’s eye as he watched us. “I like a challenge.”

As expected, Ijor moved his e pawn up two squares for the traditional opening, and I countered by advancing my own pawn the same number of squares on the same file. His f pawn soon followed, and I brought out my d pawn. I flicked my eyes up to meet his, but his gaze was fixed on the board.

A curious knot of onlookers trickled in as Ijor and I played, growing with each move we made. Oftentimes, when one of us would execute a particularly brilliant move, people would gasp or groan, depending on who they were rooting for.

Ijor played well. It was obvious his military knowledge was not limited to how to swing a sword. Chess was a compulsory unit of study for all knights as it provided the foundation upon which all military tactics were derived. But for as well as he played, my tactics were superior, and he knew it too. I could see the anxiety in his face as the end drew near, and I remained several points up while I forced trades for the remainder of his pieces.

Finally, he shook his head and moved his king a few final times with a resigned air before I delivered checkmate. I reached across the board and shook his hand. “Good game.”

He grinned back at me good-naturedly. “It was a good game! You’re a very skillful player.”

After Ijor rose from his seat, Ivan took it, determined to prove that whatever his brother could do, he could do better.

He was worse.

It only took eight moves for me to checkmate him with a variation on a simple scholar’s mate, a humbling experience for the brawny man. After Ivan’s quick defeat, many of the men I had danced with formed a line, each eager to match their wit against mine.

They all went down in rapid succession. My chess prowess was a skill I prided myself on, having studied for hours each time Father confined me to my room for some trick I played on him or his friends. There were a great deal of men laughing at each other as they all failed to best me. As my cockiness grew, Ijor brought a young man close to my same age over, a squire by the looks of him, and shoved him to sit opposite of me. “Here. Griffin is an excellent player. He’s my squire.”

I gestured for him to set up his pieces and analyzed him, still feeling much too arrogant for my own good. I had soundly defeated many princes and knights already; a lowly squire would be no problem at all. Griffin had a soft-spoken voice and an average build but exuded an air of quiet confidence. As he touched each of his chess pieces prior to beginning, I knew he would present a good challenge for me. Competent players habitually centered all the pieces on their respective squares at the onset of each game, as if familiarizing themselves with old friends.

Within six moves, my heart was pumping much harder than with any of my former opponents. Griffin barely even glanced at the board through the entire opening and set up an impenetrable barrier around his king. My aggressive strategies were useless

against such a strong defense. I began taking more and more time to deliberate over each move. Griffin proved to be just as talented a player as I and had either studied longer or else was a shade more intelligent and able to see more moves ahead than I could. I therefore began poring over the board for such long periods of time that the girls who were more interested in attracting a suitor than in chess wandered off. The rest of the defeated chess players still clustered close to us, breathing down our necks as I tried to weasel my way out of each fork, pin, and skewer Griffin set up for me.

Then suddenly, I saw it. There was the gleam of triumph in the squire's eyes that could only mean one thing—an impending checkmate. I scoured the board, but the attack I had planned out seemed fool-proof. Two moves later, I saw what Griffin had anticipated all along. His knight was going to triple fork my king, queen, and rook. I would lose my queen and consequently the game... and it was unstoppable. How could I have overlooked it? I sagged back in my chair, horrified that I had missed such a pivotal point in the game. It seemed that none of the onlookers could map out moves as far ahead as Griffin or I, so they hadn't realized that the game was essentially over.

I locked eyes with Griffin over the chess board. He had me and he knew it. My stomach soured as the anticipation of my impending humiliation loomed large. There was nothing I could do to prevent his victory. I glumly moved my queen diagonally three squares and waited for my ultimate demise.

It never came.

Rather than using his knight to capture my queen, which would lead to a checkmate, he instead moved his only remaining rook to threaten my black-squared bishop, a major blunder. I stared at the board, uncomprehending, then up at Griffin, who gave a tiny smile and nodded down at the game.

I captured his rook and took the remainder of his pieces, then delivered checkmate

soon after. He shook my hand, thanked me for the opportunity to play, and rose.

“What happened to three steps ahead , Griffin?” a knight called aggressively. “Isn’t that your motto?”

“Yeah, I thought you were a competent player!” Other voices joined in, all heckling the quiet squire as he silently wound his way through the jeering crowd.

My gown felt nailed to my seat as I watched him walk away as calmly and sedately as if he were strolling on a beach. He had thrown the match... but why? A mere squire who could best one of the most competitive chess players in all of Rookwyn would gain immense popularity. Women would fawn over his intelligence, men would admire his achievement, and he could have publicly punctured my own ego, which I knew was grossly over-inflated... so why hadn’t he?

Hands rained down to pat my back and words of congratulations swirled around me, but I didn’t hear any of them. I shoved aside my stool and stalked after Griffin as he left the ballroom, catching him as he stepped out of the castle into the rose garden.

“What’s your game, squire?”

He pulled a face of mock concentration, not in an unkind way, but in light teasing. “We were just playing chess, were we not?”

I glared. “You saw the checkmate and lost on purpose. Why didn’t you take it?”

Griffin looked taken aback. “I would never embarrass a lady in front of her guests at her own party. The knowledge that I could have won was good enough for me. After all, life is nothing more than a giant game of chess. One must know when to make a sacrifice, and I would gladly sacrifice for you.”

I was torn between annoyance and pleasant surprise. It was rare to meet a man who didn't boast, and even rarer to find one who had skills worthy of boasting and still refrained from doing so. Griffin was so different from all the other men who had danced or played chess with me, each bragging to win my favor. I stood, dumbfounded, and scrambled for something to say, but all words fled.

"That's all a gambit is, anyway," he went on softly. "It's a worthy sacrifice, even if it's a risk." He bowed his head. "Begging your pardon, Your Highness, but I'm expected in the stables. It was an honor to meet you and a privilege to play such a gifted opponent. Please know that I'm always at your disposal."

"It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance." I curtsied. As I watched him fade into the surrounding darkness, I realized that of all the men I had met that evening, he was the only one I could honestly say intrigued me.

What madness was I thinking? A squire, even one as handsome and intelligent as Griffin, had no place in the thoughts of the Crown Princess of Rookwyn. I shook my head and put him from my mind. I had no intention of being sidetracked from that evening's goal by a mere squire. I had a mission to accomplish. I pivoted and reentered the ballroom.

CHAPTER 4

The rest of the ball passed in a whirlwind of dancing, but my original plan to flirt shamelessly with every man remotely close to my age in order to embarrass Father suddenly seemed pointless and unappealing. I couldn't stop thinking about Griffin throwing the chess match. Squires were no doubt privy to the servants' gossip that royalty didn't hear. Would he know about the many men I'd kissed over the recent years?

The tube of lip stain with wyrmsleep mixed into the liquid suddenly felt heavy in my purse, as did the antidote-coated mints. Griffin was likely clever enough to figure out my methods, and shame made my cheeks darken. Would he be put off by my past antics? My "kissing bandit" days had seemed harmless enough at the time, but now the slightest twinge of remorse was mingled in.

Not that it should matter, of course. No squire would ever be allowed to court a princess. But if I ever met a prince or knight like Griffin, he might care that his future wife had kissed more men than a dragon had stolen sheep. Still distracted, I ran my thumb across my bottom lip. Would I care if the tables were turned and I found out that my future husband had kissed innumerable women?

"Rapunzel? Rapunzel!"

I snapped out of my stupor. The ballroom was nearly deserted, and Father was calling me.

"What?"

He tilted his head. “I asked if you wished the squire were nobility so he could challenge the dragon.”

I stiffened. Had I been that obvious?

“No,” I said, much too quickly. I wasn’t going to subject someone who was actually halfway decent to being roasted alive.

“He certainly seemed to catch your attention.”

“Why would you say that?”

“He unsettled you.” Father’s sly look was much too knowing. “I think you like your men like you like your chess games—a little challenging.”

“I don’t need to listen to this,” I told him haughtily. “I’m going to bed.”

“Sleep well,” Father called after me. “The first group of dragon hunters will be setting out within the week. You could be married by the month’s end, so if you want to request someone join the hunt, I suggest you do it now, bearing in mind they do need to be nobility. We can’t have a commoner taking the throne.”

Married by the month’s end? Dread crept into my stomach. I knew what awaited me once I took the throne. Father was pelted with enough tomatoes that it wouldn’t take a genius to figure out that my future would be a messy fusion of irate citizens, dragons poaching livestock, and marriage to a man I would undoubtedly despise. Unless it was a man like Griffin, anyway.

I waved away Beatrix, telling her I would prepare for bed myself and to go enjoy an evening off, then leaned on the balcony railing. I glared at the innocently twinkling stars. The massive dragon swooped overhead, belching a column of flame into the

sky as its wings beat the air. How I longed for complete solitude. Dragons had it easy. They didn't have to answer questions about trade tariffs, export negotiations, and water restrictions. They didn't have to adhere to etiquette.

Silhouetted against the moon, the dragon dove into one of our pastures and rose moments later with a sheep clutched in its taloned feet. I rested my chin in my hand and stared as it flew back toward the mountains. Why couldn't we just turn a blind eye to the dragon like the citizens did? It was a menace and stole livestock, but there were also diseases that would wipe out whole herds. Losing some animals was expected and as far as I knew, the dragon never harmed humans. If Father were less stingy, he could have offered to replace whatever animals had been stolen, but I also sympathized with Father. His wealthy friends were ever lamenting about how frequently the dragon visited their herds and depleted their possessions. My father was just the same, only looking out for himself and viewing every person and interaction as a way to bolster his own standing. Was that all I was to Father? Just another possession to be used as a bargaining chip?

Ugh. I wouldn't mind having a break from being treated like a disposable pawn on the giant chessboard of life. Maybe if I offered myself up to the dragon, I could get it to agree not to kill whomever came to challenge it. Perhaps I could strike a deal with it, just as my great-great-grandfather had done. Or...perhaps the dragon would simply eat me. Either way, I would be free of a father who no longer cared for me and free from a loveless marriage to a stranger who saw me as nothing more than a greedy Dragon Princess.

If only a dragon would kidnap me the way it had my great grandmother. That would be far more exciting than sitting around wondering which knight would succeed on their quest and which would end up roasted alive. But no dragon would ever be able to know the best time to snatch a princess and carry her away. If only I could kidnap myself.

If only I could kidnap myself...

A wicked smile curled my lips. I was done being used. If I was to be portrayed as a villain regardless of what I did, I may as well wholeheartedly embrace the role and enjoy some of the spoils of war while I was at it.

Perhaps my future wasn't so bleak after all.

CHAPTER 5

Escaping took meticulous planning, but each step came with the immense satisfaction of knowing that my father would never be able to marry me off. I would be liberated.

“I have a bad feeling about tonight,” I fretted to the water maid on duty the following evening, furrowing my brow and fidgeting with my sleeve seams. “I can’t sleep.”

“Concerned about the upcoming dragon hunt, Your Highness?” she asked sympathetically, pouring me a drink and handing the cup over in the almost pitch blackness of the corridor.

“Yes.” I ran my finger over the rim of the large water barrel, discreetly slipping in the powdered wyrm sleep as I did so that the maid wouldn’t see. This had to work—it used the rest of my secret stash and I had none left. I idly picked up the ladle and dipped it into the water, lifting it and watching the liquid pour back down, churning up the water inside. After the ladle was empty, I gave the water a slow stir. “I don’t know of any way dragons can be killed.” I handed her back the ladle. “Do you?”

“I don’t know of what methods they use, but I know that dragon hunters have succeeded in the past,” she assured me, smiling as she bent to begin filling all the water skins for the guards on duty. “You’ll be safe.”

“I hope so,” I said with a smile, watching as she continued to unknowingly fill the water skins with the drugged liquid. “Do you have a lot to do tonight?”

“Just delivering water to everyone on duty,” she answered, still diligently filling each vessel and loading it onto her cart. “Same as every night.”

“I shan’t keep you, then,” I told her pleasantly. “Thank you for talking to me. It’s good to know dragon hunters will keep our kingdom safe.”

“I hope you can rest tonight,” she called.

“I’m sure I shall,” I responded.

Once safely locked in my room for the night, I stepped onto the balcony and daubed a message on the wall with letters two feet tall each.

I stood back to admire my disguised handwriting, glad my room had the highest balcony in the castle. Crimson paint dripped down the stone from the haunting words, large enough that one might assume the dragon had written them himself with the tip of one of his talons. Was the dragon even a he ? Perhaps it was a she . Ah, well. The message was clear enough. I scrubbed the brush I’d used to paint it to remove all evidence but left a healthy amount of paint splatters on the balcony. A dragon wouldn’t be concerned about being tidy.

There was no shortage of stories of dragons who could easily read and write; they certainly were shrewd and clever enough. I attempted to gouge marks into the stone to show talon marks, but found that the force required would have created a racket that would bring every servant running in alarm, and I doubted I was strong enough for such a task anyway. If I couldn’t show talon marks, scorch marks would have to suffice. I pulled a burned stick from the cold fireplace in my room and set about letting the blackened end leave traces of ash on the balcony door and furniture outside. To complete the effect, I knocked the stick against the ground so ash crumbled and smeared underfoot, leaving black streaks of soot, then scattered my small collection of dragon scales on the balcony. Thank goodness I’d had a

fascination with dragon scales in my youth and collected them at every opportunity. My former nursemaid had teased that I was truly a dragon king's daughter, complete with my own miniature hoard. After some thought, I ground some of the fireplace's white ash into a fine powder and tucked it into a drawstring bag that I strapped to my waist.

I tore one of my nightgowns and left the shreds of pieces strewn about, imagining as I did so the staff's reactions when they found it the following morning. Beatrix would be devastated, but Father might very well be glad I was gone. I studied the scene, using the moon's glow to appraise my handiwork.

It still wasn't enough.

As quietly as possible, I tipped over the chairs on my balcony, arranging them so it looked like there had been a struggle. I left the balcony doors open, gently swaying in the breeze. Did it look as though I'd been dragged away? If I was truly being stolen away by a dragon, what would I have done?

Would they hear if I shattered some of the glass panes? Had the wyrmsleep kicked in yet? Cautiously, I tiptoed across my room and pressed my ear against the door leading to the corridor beyond, listening hard. After several long moments, a tremendous snore thundered and my heart gave a jolt.

Giddy with excitement, I went back to my balcony door, wrapped my torn nightdress around the windowpane's interior and exterior closest to the door handle, and hit it with one of my shoes. The muffled shattering sent a cascade of glass fragments tinkling to the ground, and I shook my nightdress over the balcony to scatter the rest.

There. I was finished.

Satisfied with the chaos, I took a lantern and the small pouch of white, powdered ash,

then left everything else as it was. It was with a small amount of regret that I left all my possessions behind and tiptoed past the dozing guards. Wyrmsleep only lasted a few hours at best, and it would be severely diluted, so my time was very limited.

To add to my anxiety, not all the guards had drunk from the water the maid gave them, and there were a few muttered curses about lazy guards as they worked on rousing the men who had been drugged. Each time I saw a denseness to the shadows ahead, I shrank against the wall, silently moving along the hallways until I came to the entrance to the secret escape tunnel one of my ancestors had built in behind the throne room.

Each of my nerves felt electrified as I silently lifted the trapdoor and slipped inside, replacing it above me without so much as breathing. Once inside and crouched on the platform, I lit my lantern and held the handle in my teeth, looking nervously over the edge at the ladder that extended beyond the lantern's dim light. It had been many years since Father told me about the tunnel, and I'd never used it before. I fastened the small pouch of powdered ash to my belt, and each time I descended another ladder rung, I gently sprinkled a dusting onto the rung to replace the dust my hands and feet had displaced. It was a slow, laborious task that had my arms trembling by the time I finally reached the bottom.

The tunnel gaped ahead of me, the damp earth's scent ripe in my nostrils as I carefully treaded along the compacted dirt passageway, grateful for the scurrying rats that disturbed the dirt enough to prevent the dust from settling. Even so, I let my cloak trail behind me to cover the footsteps that I made.

It seemed that I walked for an age, wending my way under the castle and the courtyards before the tunnel finally spit me out in the ancient ruins beyond the village. Dust and rubble had settled over the trapdoor, so it took several minutes of pushing before I was able to shove it open and clamber out, taking care to replace the trapdoor and heap many more stones over the top once I was done.

I sighed in relief and looked around as stars twinkled down at me. I had done it!

Now, I would have to make it farther than anyone would ever expect a princess to get on foot. If my fake kidnapping display wasn't believed, I had to be out of range of where they would search. At least I didn't have anything to carry. I might regret my decision not to stop for any supplies once the adrenaline faded and hunger and thirst set in, but I was also certain that I would regret stopping for supplies if I was recognized and reported. Better to go without than have my plot discovered.

For hours, I walked.

Even when my feet ached and my legs grew sore, I persisted in taking step after step, heading for the craggy mountain where the dragon was rumored to live and where I had seen it fly to so many times. In my mind, I rehearsed everything I would say once I met the dragon, from the benefits to teaming up to the ways in which I could be of use to the dragon, and how I had knowledge of the dangers that awaited it. What was the proper etiquette when greeting a dragon and pitching a proposition as diabolical as the one I had in mind? All I knew of dragons had been gleaned from the tales passed down from generation to generation.

The sky was just beginning to lighten, shifting from the inky black to a deep velvety blue, when a loud thrumming came from the trees ahead that lined the base of the mountain. I froze, listening hard. Something much larger than any bear was moving beyond what I could see, and chills exploded all up and down my body. I had expected to walk for days to reach the dragon's cave, not stumble across it so soon.

The noise was like a cat's purring but amplified a thousand times by powerful lungs and combined with a rumble of thunder so that the final sound made every part of my body tremble. Vibrations rippled through my chest as if the thrumming had palpable weight that pressed on me and made it difficult to breathe.

My feet refused to take another step as the shadows ahead of me shifted, forming a shape twice as large as I had imagined—and I had imagined a very large dragon indeed.

While I had seen the beast flying in the distance on a number of occasions, its sheer size directly in front of me paralyzed me, rooting me to the spot and stealing my voice.

The thrumming grew louder, and as the sky lightened to an azure color streaked with pink, a spiked, ferocious-looking dragon head snaked its way through the trees to stare at me. All the bravery I'd envisioned myself having—of confidently proposing an alliance and forging my own future—vanished now that I was face to face with the beast. What insanity had possessed me to go looking for a dragon? I was even more foolhardy than the knights who volunteered to challenge it clad in armor and carrying weapons. My heart raced and my palms turned to ice.

“A visitor,” the dragon rumbled, and a truly terrifying noise escaped its mouth, like the sawing from a hundred lumberjacks. “How amusing.”

The dragon blew a puff of smoke at me that smelled strongly of sulfur and brimstone. I coughed, eyes streaming as I fought to keep my gaze fixed on the creature. I'd never truly recognized how small and fragile humans were in comparison to dragons. It could end me with one bite or a single swipe of its ferocious claws.

I nearly leapt out of my skin as something went slithering through the trees to my left—a massive, spiked tail. The dragon's entire body soon emerged, lumbering into view, and I was struck with awe so all-consuming that I was rendered speechless.

“Do you speak, human?” The dragon's grating voice vibrated my chest once more.

My bold, rehearsed lines shriveled and evaporated. The only sound I managed to

force out was a small squeak. Could I run and survive?

But the mental image of living my life in a cage, bound to a man I didn't love, hardened my resolve. A steely fortitude lifted my chin and gave me voice, despite being more terrified than I'd ever been at any other point in my life.

"I come—" My voice trembled and I cleared my throat before trying again, forcing an air of confidence that I didn't feel. "I come with a proposition, Master Dragon."

Grey spirals of smoke furled from the dragon's nostrils, and a hissing noise made goosebumps erupt all up and down my arms as scalding saliva dripped down from the creature's fanged jaw and puddled at its clawed feet.

Ought I have said Mistress Dragon? What was the correct way to address the beast? If I said Mistress and it was male, would it be more offended than if I called a female a Master ?

The dragon cocked its head at me, considering my words. A deep voice rumbled up from the depths of its chest. "Usually, I would not bother with the plea of a human, but I'm feeling indulgent today. Amuse me."

I set my jaw. "You seek treasure, and I can help you increase your riches."

The dragon tapped one of its talons in an angry beat against a flat stone on the forest floor as its tail thrashed back and forth. "What makes you think I care only for treasure?" The dragon's black pupils were narrow like a cat's, but its eyeballs were a yellow color that shifted in hue the longer I looked at him.

My mouth went dry. I had assumed that all dragons coveted gold, but what if that wasn't what the dragon desired most? Father complained that the dragon stole sheep and oxen, not gold and jewels. I must have heard stories...were they true? Should I

have offered to help it gain a more stable food supply?

“I...I...” This conversation was nothing like what I’d imagined. “What do you want instead of treasure?”

The dragon’s forked tongue flicked through its teeth and more smoke furled from its nostrils. “I never said I didn’t care about it. I was simply curious why you are making assumptions about me.”

I took a deep, steadying breath. “I wish to form an alliance with you.”

The dragon opened its maw, and the sawing noise once again grated at my ears. It was laughing at me. “What could a human girl do?”

I curled and flexed my toes within my flat, slipper-like shoes, still determined to give no outward sign of fear. “I’m no mere girl. I’m Rapunzel, the Crown Princess of Rookwyn. Perhaps I’m not the only one here making assumptions.”

The dragon’s crafty black eyes gleamed with greed. “And what is your proposal? If your intention is to lure me into security then slaughter me in my sleep, I can assure you that you will be sorely disappointed. Dragons are difficult to kill.”

Its tail whipped from side to side again, uprooting several bushes. I refused to allow my gaze to stray from the dragon’s face and went on, “My father promised my hand in marriage to anyone who can slay you, and I came to warn you.”

“Is that all?”

“No.” I swallowed back the fear clogging my throat as I stared back. “I want to swindle other royalty out of their wealth.”

“Why?”

“To...” I kept getting distracted by the smoke gently furling from between his fangs, wondering how long it would take him to eject flame. How much warning would I have? Would I be able to dodge in time? “To give it back to my kingdom’s subjects who are struggling, since neither my father nor any of the other royalty will assist them. I plan for this to be a punishment for their abuse of power.”

“And you wish to use me to help you enact your revenge?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it using you, but...essentially yes. In return, I’m offering a pact. If you and I help each other, you could amass riches beyond your wildest imagination.”

The dragon’s wings opened and beat a few times, sending a wave of leaves and small sticks flying through the air in a flurry of dust. My dress blew back, and I shielded my eyes but held my ground. It was difficult to determine the dragon’s feelings by its facial expression, so different from a human’s, but the silence stretching after my statement was filled with intrigue.

“You would give your portion of your riches back to your people?”

“That’s right.” I quickly added, “Only my portion. None of yours. You can keep all of yours.”

“What sort of partnership do you propose? How exactly would this work?”

“Imagine a dragon who holds a princess hostage. I am sure there would be no end of wealthy princes and noblemen willing to rush to her aid if it meant that they would be rewarded with becoming the king of Rookwyn. What a shame it would be if said dragon captured them and claimed ransom for each one. They say a prince is worth

his weight in gold.”

“Why should I trust you?”

Why should he trust me? I was the one putting my life on the line by approaching a dragon. My silence must have stretched too long, because the dragon clarified, “What do you have to gain by this proposal? Surely, you’re not lacking for wealth as crown princess, which begs the question—what do you seek by abandoning your crown to become an outlaw?”

I lifted my chin defiantly. “I don’t think my position as a princess would allow me to help my subjects the way I could teamed up with you. My father refuses to intervene, and the people are struggling.”

The dragon shifted its wings, eyes gleaming with a new interest. “Fascinating. And you believe you can accomplish this by robbing your fellow royalty blind?”

I nodded decisively. “I’d rather be seen as a threat than a means to an end.”

The dragon tilted its head to the side. “I would be willing to consider a trial period teamed up with a rogue princess. If it doesn’t work out, I could always eat you instead.”

“If you eat me, you will be missing the best opportunity to find treasure you’ve ever had,” I retorted.

The dragon snorted, and a shower of sparks rained down, singeing tiny holes in my dress. “You’re entertaining as far as humans go. Very well, I claim you as part of my hoard.”

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CHAPTER 6

I bristled. “You can’t claim me. I don’t belong to anyone. I’m offering myself as a partner, not as a possession.”

His eyes flamed a bright orange. “You have spirit. But I stand by what I said. If you were satisfied being a part of your father’s hoard, you would not have come to me.”

“Then...then you’re part of my hoard, Master Dragon,” I told him, then immediately cringed at my childish comeback.

The split between his upper and lower jaw broadened until each of his razor-sharp teeth were visible. “My name is Pollox. Glad we can be part of each other’s hoard. Now we have business to tend to. Firstly, won’t your servants realize you ran away?”

I grinned wickedly. “No. I made it look as though you kidnapped me.”

Pollox stared at me for so long that unease crept in.

“I did,” I assured him. “I shattered glass and overturned furniture and wrote a message on my balcony wall. They should be finding it any minute now. I walked all night to get here.”

“Yes,” he answered, sarcasm dripping like venom. “Because dragons always leave courtesy notes when they commit crimes. Surely, no one would notice the absence of a massive, fire-breathing dragon descending upon your castle in the dead of night to steal away a hysterical princess.”

“It’s not like I could write you a letter and ask you to come kidnap me,” I protested. “And I drugged the staff so they wouldn’t even remember what happened.”

“Ah, but you’re here now,” he told me, eyes flaming bright orange. “And you’ll learn that dragons like leaving more than notes. We leave impressions.”

“What are you—” I began, but with blinding speed, Pollox lunged forward.

Using his front claw like a hand, he snatched me up and lifted his gaze upward.

I didn’t even have time to draw breath. Pollox’s wings unfurled and beat down, propelling him into the heavens. A wild lurch catapulted me higher as the entire world surged away and my body felt as though it had been left behind. I wouldn’t have been able to lift my head if I tried. It was as though the dragon had sat on my chest instead of flown me into the air as we rocketed upward.

My vision blurred as Pollox’s wings beat the air, sending powerful gusts of wind across my face that grew increasingly colder the higher we went. Breathing became difficult, and I clutched at the talons holding me aloft, my ears popping painfully as we gained altitude. The ground below us shrank rapidly, so it became easy to see not only all of Rookwyn, but also the bordering kingdoms, the fields of crops, and even the ocean in the far distance that led to Termarth.

The pressure against my chest lessened as Pollox stopped his steep ascent and glided on the air current, but my stomach still twisted, every fiber of my being screaming to put my feet back on solid ground again. The cold wind slapped at my face and whipped my hair wildly out behind me. I’d never felt more vulnerable as my fragile mortality stared me in the face. Every beat of Pollox’s wings reminded me that I was entirely at his mercy.

And yet...

Once we were soaring above the mountains and my stomach had settled slightly, a thrilling, heady rush made my heart race. Pollox's claw was fastened securely around me and I clutched at his talons, elated and frightened in equal measure.

Despite being terrified, feeling powerless, and experiencing a cold deeper than I could ever recall, I also felt alive in a way unlike any other. This was what true freedom felt like. Life on the ground suddenly looked so small. Up here, I saw all. Up here, I was powerful.

"Let's make sure all of Rookwyn knows you belong to me now," Pollox growled. "Get ready to scream."

He folded his wings into his body and dove straight down.

All thoughts about how being in the sky was freeing and making me feel alive vanished. Pollox didn't need to coax anything out of me—my scream was ripped from my body, echoing long and loud as we dropped like a rock. My stomach had been left up in the clouds as we plunged toward the ground, heading straight for the castle. I could barely recognize it as my home from a bird's-eye view.

At the last moment, Pollox spread his wings and soared in a tight circle around the castle's perimeter.

"I have your princess," he gloated into the early dawn, his booming voice carrying so that I knew it would reverberate through every hallway. Alarm bells clanged and soldiers rushed to their positions, but all seemed lost as to how to fight a dragon. "She belongs to me now."

With that, he let out a blast of fire that shot over the top of the castle, igniting our kingdom's flag. Shouts and cries came from both the castle and the village surrounding it. Pollox's tight spin around the castle was making me nauseated, and I

shrieked again.

“It’s Rapunzel!” someone below cried out. “The dragon has her!”

With that, Pollox turned and soared away, back toward the mountains.

* * *

When Pollox finally landed outside his cave and released me, I needed no mirror to know that I probably looked like I’d been struck by lightning. My hair was so windswept and tangled that it would take hours to comb out...if I even had a comb. Looking down, I saw the sorry remains of what had once been a nice gown but was now dirty and tattered, having been snagged far too many times on Pollox’s sharp talons in the air.

“Did you enjoy your first flight?”

I shuddered, then turned and retched into the bushes. “Is it that obvious I’ve never flown before?” I asked, slowly picking out an insect that had become tangled in my hair.

Pollox let out his sawing laugh again. “It seems I owe you a new dress. Since you’re a part of my hoard, you can use what I already have.”

I stubbornly stuck out my jaw and ignored my stomach that still felt as though it was writhing with live snakes. “Yes, it’s so lucky that you have so many dresses in my size to choose from. Besides, I told you: I’m not a part of your hoard. I’m your partner.”

“That’s too bad. I would expect a partner to pay for their own wants and needs, but I take pride in caring for my hoard.” He lumbered into his cave and I followed.

“Oh really? What does caring for your hoard entail, exactly?”

Pollox’s eyes sparkled mischievously and he let out a blast of fire. The flame ignited coals in a long stone shelf set into the perimeter of the cave, so the entire chamber was suddenly illuminated with a dancing, flickering light. “That depends. Are you a part of my hoard, or are you not?”

I looked around the cavern, which was mostly empty other than a hot mineral spring, an unassuming wardrobe, and a simple wooden table. “I’ll be part of your hoard only as long as you promise that you’ll be part of mine,” I told him, still unsure of exactly what I was agreeing to. It seemed only fair that he be bound by whatever conditions he placed on me.

“I can agree to those terms. Shall I show you to your room, then?”

Wondering what sort of room a dragon would be able to provide a human guest, I nodded. Several passageways led out of the cavernous main room; perhaps a furnished human-sized room was hiding in the back.

“Open the wardrobe,” he ordered, inclining his massive head toward a wardrobe with shabby paint standing near the back of the cave, wedged between two large stalagmites next to the mineral spring. The hot spring looked more inviting than the wardrobe. If I could soak in the spring, I might have a fraction of time in which my extremities weren’t freezing.

“Is my room the wardrobe? If so, I may need to rescind my agreement to be a part of your hoard. You can’t just keep me in a cabinet like some lucky charm.” At least I’d gotten over the immediate shock of meeting a dragon for the first time.

“Just open the door.”

Obediently, I pulled on one of the large wardrobe's door handles. It was entirely empty. Sure he was having me on, I rolled my eyes at Pollox. "Looks a little small for a bedroom. Am I supposed to sleep standing up?"

"Get in."

I stepped inside to show how cramped it was. The wardrobe was large enough for me to stand in without crouching, but by extending my arms, I was still able to touch both sides at once. "I don't think this will work, Pollox," I told him. "Just because I'm part of your hoard doesn't mean you can?—"

Pollox whipped his tail so the wardrobe door closed on my face.

"Hey!" I protested. Before I could open the door again, an unpleasant sensation tugged at my abdomen and I shouted in alarm. It felt as though my insides had been plunged into an ice bath, churned around, then run over by a carriage before being shoved back where they belonged. A brief but intense stab of pain followed that made me throw myself against the door, gasping for breath, and shoved until it spilled me out.

Instead of falling on the cold cavern ground, I landed on a plush rug in a brightly lit and well-furnished room, complete with a large four-poster bed, vanity, bookcases, and a wide balcony. I pressed my hands against my body, ensuring that every part of me was still there and that I wasn't dreaming.

"What?" I said to myself, staring back at the innocent-looking wardrobe. One of the drawers at the bottom opened slightly and closed again, almost like the furniture was mocking me. Other than the unsettling feeling from when I'd been transported here, there was nothing that led me to believe I'd been harmed in any way.

"Pollox?" I called, first into the wardrobe, then to the room at large. Crossing to the

balcony, I stared out at the landscape beyond.

Forests covered the hills, and if I squinted, I could just make out the castle, a tiny speck in the distance. Mountains rose to the side halfway between here and the castle, and in the sky, Pollox was soaring toward me from the mountain, giant wings beating the air.

I walked along the balcony, which wrapped all the way around the circular tower. Looking down made me slightly dizzy when I was at such a great height, so I went back inside, searching for the stairs to descend. There was a trapdoor leading to the roof, but no matter where I looked, it was impossible to find a way down to the ground level. It was as though this was the only level, suspended forty feet in the air.

“If the only way out is through you, I’ll be highly displeased,” I told the silent wardrobe, which waved one of its doors at me. “Oh, you think that’s funny, do you?”

Still aware of the vertigo that would befall me if I went outside, I turned my attention to the room’s interior. My fingers met rich velvet as they skimmed the bed’s heavy comforter, just as luxurious as anything I’d left back at the palace, possibly even grander. Translucent curtains were fastened to the four bed posts with golden ropes, and the pillows proved to be plump and full of swan’s down. A gossamer rope ladder descended from a trapdoor leading to the roof, and I swung on it for a few moments, marveling at how beautiful everything was, not at all what I imagined a dragon would have. There wasn’t a speck of dust anywhere. It was this last observation that tugged at my curiosity most. There was no possible way that a massive dragon would manage to keep an abandoned tower room in such neat condition. He wasn’t even able to enter, let alone clean. The open air of the balcony would undoubtedly let in dust and dirt, yet this bedroom was cleaner than anything back home.

The rugs that covered the stone floor were spongy and soft, and I stripped off my shoes and stockings to allow my toes to dig into the depths of the carpets, all a rich

scarlet color. I hopped from one rug to the other, marveling that my feet wouldn't have to touch the floor. I knew from extensive experience that any stone floor was icy cold against my feet, even in the summertime. My body would instantly drain of all warmth every time my bare skin touched the hard floor at home, which was why I had always insisted on wearing multiple layers of stockings, a fact that my maids found wildly amusing. But these rugs felt like they'd been out in the sun on a balmy summer day, soaking up heat. It was a boon to rest my feet on those instead of the bare stone.

A rhythmic whooshing was heard as the wind picked up and swirled loose papers around the room, followed by the dreadful scraping of claws against stone. The entire tower shuddered as Pollox landed on the roof, and I clutched at one of the bed's posters to steady myself. Bits of dust and loose mortar rained down, and a dark shadow fell over the window.

"Rapunzel? Are you there?" Pollox's deep, thunderous voice vibrated my chest. His tail swung past the window, like some giant, spiked metronome, and I dared not step foot out where the tail might inadvertently knock me over the edge of the balcony.

"You could have warned me about that little magic disappearing act," I called up to him, still watching the tail swing hypnotically past.

"You wouldn't have gotten in if I had." Pollox's entire body was far too large and bulky to fit in the room, but he extended his head through the open balcony doors, his long neck looking like an unusually thick python as he watched me explore the room. His head generated that delicious heat that I craved so much, warming me up so it felt like I was curled up in front of a roaring fire. "Do you like it?"

I studied the room intently. "Yes, I do," I decided. "Other than the wardrobe, that is."

Pollox's sawing laugh echoed around the room and the wardrobe opened and shut

one of its drawers in annoyance. “Would you rather ride dragonback next time?”

I put my hand on my hips. “I would at least like to be given the choice. If you are part of my hoard, that is one of my rules. Always give me choices.”

“Very well. Next time, do you want to ride dragonback, or use the wardrobe?”

“I’ll ride next time. That wardrobe is out to get me.”

“But a vicious, man-eating dragon is not?”

“Nope. I much prefer you to that hunk of wood.”

“Did you look inside of it?”

“That’s how I got here, genius.”

“Look again.”

I pursed my lips and turned my attention back to the wardrobe, which looked very different from the shabby one with peeling paint back at the cave. A dragon’s ferocious, engraved face encompassed the entire front of this wardrobe door, split in half where the panels opened. Golden handles jutted out above the painted dragon eyes, looking very much like the scaly protrusions that encircled the upper part of Pollox’s eyes, and the wardrobe’s wood seemed to tingle with some hidden, secret magic. As I wrapped my hand around one of the gleaming handles, I felt a rush sweep through my body, as if the wardrobe was inspecting me rather than I it.

Feeling Pollox’s eyes on the back of my head, I tugged on the handle. I wasn’t sure what I had expected, probably to see the same empty box that had transported me here. But I was wrong. The door swung open on well-oiled hinges, and a closet full of

the most beautifully tailored gowns I had ever seen, all my size and style, met my eyes. I gaped as I examined each dress. Some boasted thick layers of rich brocade ideal for winter, with velvet-lined sleeves that reached down to my fingertips and were paired with matching cloaks and fur-lined boots. Others hung thin and silky on their hangers with feather-light layers of gauzy, sheer material that was perfect for evening wear, complete with matching slippers at the bottom of the obliging wardrobe.

I tugged the other door open, expecting to see more gowns, but instead found drawers full of jewelry, hairpins, slippers, undergarments, and gloves. Lying atop the shelf directly in the middle of that side of the wardrobe was a gem-encrusted, silver-toothed comb. I had never seen the likes of it and picked it up. This comb, too, tingled with that secret magic I couldn't place or explain.

After a stunned moment, I murmured aloud, but not loud enough for Pollox to hear, "Of course a dragon would have a magic wardrobe." The door I had just opened waggled slightly at me, its hinges squeaking in smug agreement.

"It does whatever I want it to," Pollox said, pride edging his voice. "As long as I'm healthy, it will never run out of magic. I'll tell it to obey you if you wish."

"Yes, I would like that," I answered, running my hand along the shelves. "Can you enchant anything?"

Pollox rested his head on the bed, his neck still stretched out from the tower's exterior, and I couldn't get over how bizarre it looked to have a seemingly decapitated dragon head on my bed. "Each dragon has the ability to enchant certain items, but some materials respond better than others. Wood always works best for me. Other dragons can enchant a variety of materials. I even had an ancestor able to enchant human bloodlines."

Experimentally, I ran the comb through my blonde locks. They instantly detangled and lengthened as I pulled the comb lower, extending and strengthening each strand of my blonde hair. A gasp of surprise escaped me as I repeated the action, combing my hair until it cascaded down to my knees. I stared up in wonder at Pollox. The dragon's facial expressions still proved difficult to read, but if I had to wager a guess, I would have said that Pollox was smiling.

"I thought you might like that," he said.

"It's remarkable," I answered, wonder tinging my words. Why did our kingdom fear dragons if they could produce such incredible things? I had a sneaking suspicion that the wardrobe had instantly created all those outfits for me specifically.

My own gown—torn, tattered, and dirty—suddenly seemed woefully inadequate. I replaced the comb and inspected the gowns more closely. There was no one to impress here; I could wear whatever I wanted without having to consider what events and meetings I needed to attend. I selected a pale-blue gown trimmed with golden embellishments that looked especially soft and comfortable.

I pulled it from the wardrobe and caught sight of Pollox, who was still watching me with bright-eyed interest. "Don't look while I change!" I ordered.

He lifted his head. "Don't flatter yourself; I want nothing of the sort. All humans are ugly, yourself included." He withdrew from the room and I heard his claws readjusting his grip on the roof overhead.

I should have been offended, but his statement was oddly relieving. No matter what I wore or did, Pollox would assess me based on my knowledge and value, not my appearance. Father was right. I did enjoy a challenge. With Pollox, I had a partner in crime, someone who could match my devious nature and return it in equal measure. It was perfect.

CHAPTER 7

Riding a dragon was a completely foreign sensation and I still wasn't sure if I liked it or not. Perched on Pollox's snake-like neck, bracing my feet against his shoulder joints and holding onto his horns for support failed to provide the security I needed while swooping through the skies at breakneck speeds. With every twist and turn, my stomach plummeted with a sickening sensation, but then it would soar again when Pollox climbed to breathtaking heights as he returned to his cave.

I expected that Pollox's wings would cause me to rise and fall several feet every time they beat, but it wasn't so. The anterior, boned edge of his wings cut smoothly through the rushing wind that screamed in my ears, then propelled the dragon forward with even greater swiftness.

Other than the breathtaking speed and fear of sliding off, flying was exhilarating. The adrenaline rush was better than kissing any man, better even than outwitting the greatest scholars in chess. The wind howled as the cottages below shrank to the size of dollhouses, and the people became mere dots scurrying about like a disturbed anthill. When they saw Pollox winding his way through the skies, they gaped and pointed. Small children often waved before darting inside, as if the straw-thatched roofs would shield them from the fire-breathing, winged monster overhead.

Finally, Pollox slowed and came to a stop in front of his cave. I meant to slide gracefully off his neck, but my dress's hem caught on one of his shoulder spikes so I was flipped upside down and a second later, found myself sprawled across a shrub and staring up at the sky. So much for trying to convince my new partner in crime that I was well-coordinated.

“I know humans eat several times a day, so come on,” Pollox said. “If you liked the wardrobe, you’ll love this.”

Grateful for his foresight, I followed him inside. Once again, I was struck by how bare and empty it was. The lone table and chair were located near the hot spring, not far from the wardrobe I’d stepped into before. I examined the wardrobe more closely. It didn’t match the red-and-gold one in my new bedroom, so did that mean there was simply a passageway between them, rather than the wardrobe itself changed location? Then how could that be, if I had been inside?

“Did you hear me?” Pollox asked.

I pulled my mind out of my musings. “Sorry, no.”

“I asked if you’re hungry.” Pollox inclined his head to the table, and my mouth fell open.

The table that had been bare seconds before was now groaning under dishes upon dishes of my favorite foods, which all smelled delicious. “Wow, you really do take care of your hoard, don’t you?”

“I told you I would.”

Everything was perfect. Each food stayed at the ideal temperature and texture, the flavors were flawless, and I almost swooned as I dug in. I’d never had such a good meal. After a few minutes, I looked up to see Pollox watching me. “I’m so sorry, do you want some?”

Pollox snorted in disgust and I leapt out of my seat to avoid the descending sparks. “No. Human food comes in much too small of quantities for me, and dragons don’t have taste buds anyway, so your finest delicacy and raw meat would all taste the

same to me. But if you can spare a moment in between bites, I would like to discuss a few things before we make this a full partnership.”

“Of course,” I said, inspecting my seat to make sure it was free of any embers before I gingerly sat back down again. Even though I’d only known Pollox for less than a day, I already felt comfortable with him. Did all humans feel this way around dragons?

“If I’m to work with you, I’d like to see an example of your skill set,” Pollox told me. “Do you have an idea of how you plan to procure these riches you boasted about?”

“Would I have come here if I didn’t?”

Pollox rustled his wings. Unable to determine if that was a good sign or not, I waited patiently. “You’re human,” he finally said. “Some humans are very stupid.”

“Some dragons are too, I’m sure.”

“No, we’re not. We’re very intelligent.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Really? You’ve never met a single other dragon that you found obnoxiously dense?”

Pollox’s upper lip curled back to reveal his fang-like teeth. “I suppose I have a time or two. But you’ve evaded the question. What’s your plan?”

I straightened and set down my knife and fork, hoping he liked my plan and didn’t find me to be one of the stupid humans. “I’m going to act like I escaped and tell them you’re coming after me. I’ll tell them that you have a weakness?—”

“I don’t have any weaknesses.”

“I will lie and give them a fake weakness,” I resolutely went on. “Then we’ll see if they believe my story. I’ll tell them you’re vulnerable at your wing joint or whatever you want.”

Pollox flicked the end of his tail, listening intently.

“Then,” I continued, “you come swooping down and do some huge, dramatic battle, pretend to get injured, but grab me and fly away. That way, everyone will think that you’re wounded and will start sending knights and all sorts of people to rescue me. My father already offered my hand in marriage to anyone who can slay you, so there will be many men coming to try.”

“I fail to see how such a plan will gain me any riches.”

“The riches come later. This trial is to prove we can trust each other, and it will make it so princes and knights and any others will come flocking to rescue me more quickly, assuming you are weakened.”

“You want me to pretend to be weak enough for a human to kill me?” The disgust was evident in his voice.

“We have to do something to make sure my rescuers know where I am. Which do you care more about, your pride or amassing more wealth?”

“My pride.”

“Well, swallow your pride then. We’ll be filthy rich this way.”

“I’m already filthy rich, as were you, before you ran away.”

I frowned, annoyed. “If you don’t care about riches, why would you agree to my

proposal in the first place? You could have said no.”

Pollox tapped one of his talons on the cave’s stone floor so a soft tink tink echoed through the cavern. “I have my reasons. I get to bring you back here to stay after I pretend to be wounded?”

“Naturally. I live here now, remember?”

His forked tongue shot out like a lizard’s. “Then I’m willing to try it.”

A wave of relief relaxed my shoulders. If he had refused, I wasn’t sure how else I could persuade Pollox to keep me around. Was he simply lonely and wanted company?

“Aren’t you worried about the knights?” I asked. “They’ll start coming soon. Do we need to think of a defense strategy?”

Pollox threw his head back in laughter. “It never fails to entertain me that humans assume they can best a dragon when it takes them days to travel a distance that I can traverse within an hour and their arrows and spears bounce off my hide, so no, I’m not at all worried. Would you fear for your life around an ant?”

“What, so humans are like ants to you?”

“No...more like pets that occasionally amuse me.”

“That feels offensive.”

“Good. It was intended to be.”

Once again, I wasn’t sure if it was his sense of humor or a threat. Deciding that a

sense of humor was the safer option, I laughed and stood from the table, full to bursting. Instantly, everything at the table vanished, leaving it perfectly clean once more.

“Shall we do this trial swindle tonight, then?” I asked.

Pollox cast a critical eye over me. “You need to look like you escaped.” With that, he blew out a blast of air so hot that the ends of my hair began to curl up, singed beyond repair.

“Hey!” I protested, darting away. “I don’t actually want to be roasted alive, you giant, fire-breathing lizard!” I pulled my hair over my shoulder to examine the scorched ends. “See what you did!” I scolded.

“The comb in your wardrobe can fix it,” Pollox said, wholly unconcerned that he’d nearly torched my head.

I sighed in resignation. He was right. If I was going to sell the story that I’d escaped from a dragon, I needed to look the part. “All right then, roast me a little more, but not my face, okay? You might need to shred my dress a little too.”

For the next fifteen minutes, Pollox took great delight in destroying my gown, sometimes charring it and other times using his razor-sharp talons to rip the fabric, but never once scratching me.

“As admirable as your precision is, shouldn’t I be bleeding?” I asked, inspecting the damage in the full-length mirror.

“Dragons don’t maim their prey.”

“What would you do to prey, then?”

He grinned wickedly. “Swallow them whole. Don’t you think it would be fun to feel your food wriggle all the way down your throat to your stomach? It makes up for the lack of taste buds.”

I gagged. “That’s disgusting.”

Pollox’s grating laughter rang through the cavern. “Just think of it as a massage from the inside.”

“Bleh. You’re joking.”

“I am not.”

I shuddered. “Well, I need to believe you are joking, otherwise I’ll be disturbed. I’ll get nightmares.”

“What’s that?”

“You know, a bad dream.” Did dragons never have nightmares? Then again, what would they have to fear?

His head cocked to the side, and his tongue flicked out like a snake tasting the air.

“What do humans dream about?”

“Well, a lot of things. Like escaping or falling sometimes. I get chased in my dreams, but some dreams are good.”

“Describe one.”

“Uh...” I hadn’t expected to describe my most secret dreams to a dragon within a few hours of meeting one. A vision of Griffin sweeping me into his arms burst to mind,

but I wasn't eager to share that private of a thought with Pollox, not yet anyway.
“It's...a-a?—”

“Got an ox in your throat?” Pollox quipped.

I burst out laughing, relieved I didn't have to continue. “The phrase is got a frog in your throat? ”

“An ox sounds better.”

“Maybe to a dragon.”

Pollox stared down at his body and let his lower jaw drop so his razor-sharp fangs were all exposed, but this time, the effect was comical. “Look at that. I'm a dragon.”

I couldn't hide my smile. “You're funny. I like you.”

Pollox let out a snort of sparks. “And I suppose I can tolerate you. Now let's go stage an escape.”

CHAPTER 8

“Help! Someone please help me!” I screamed, tearing into the town and throwing open the door of the tavern. I panted, looking around in terror, then clutched at the nearest man, who slopped half his drink down his front in surprise.

“The dragon, please, you have to help me!”

“Calm down, lass,” the barkeep said. “What are you talking about?”

My eyes darted around frantically and I took short, panicked breaths. “The dragon...I only just got away. Please... He might come back.”

There was a gasp from one of the barmaids. “She’s the stolen princess!”

Immediately, every eye turned to her. Rather pleased with the attention, the barmaid straightened and addressed me. “Are you Princess Rapunzel? Did the dragon take you?”

Tears trickled down my face as I nodded, lip trembling. There was an instant rush as men stood, some offering their chairs, others hurrying to get me a blanket or food and drink.

“How did you escape?” the tavern owner asked kindly, pressing a meat pie into my hand.

“I waited until he was sleeping—he got injured when he took me, so he needed to

rest, and I only just got away.”

“What injury?” A soldier leaned forward, his hand on the dagger at his side.

“He was shot near the base of his left wing joint by a poisoned arrow,” I told them.

“He made me pull it out.”

“An injured dragon,” he murmured in wonder.

Several other men began eagerly conversing among themselves. “Do you know how much a dragon heart would sell for? Just imagine—the ability to never be defeated in battle! We’d be rich as kings!”

“Forget the heart, do you know how much a single scale would sell for? Harder than diamonds, they are. And dragon blood can?—”

“You’re sure about this?” the barkeep asked me. “It was the dragon’s left wing joint where it connects to his body?”

I nodded timidly. “But...first can you send a message to my father? The dragon kept me in a cave today, but he said he was going to put me into a tower in the forest that no one can escape from. I got away as soon as I could; Father will be very worried.”

“Of course, of course! We can send a message right now. Would you like to have an escort back to the capital? We could leave within minutes. There are some soldiers stationed here, but they will want to join the hunt. A dragon heart...” He stared off dreamily, undoubtedly thinking about the wealth he would gain from butchering a dragon.

“Give her a moment,” an elderly man said, patting my shoulder in a fatherly way. “She’s been through an ordeal, she has. Let her have the night to rest.”

“Or she might want to get as far away as soon as possible,” the barkeep retorted.
“Lass, which would you prefer?”

“I...I don’t know. Am I safe here? Does the dragon ever attack the village?”

“Never. Some of the children are actually quite fond of seeing it. The only thing I’ve heard of is that it will feed on the lord’s sheep from time to time. It’s never troubled humans, Princess.”

“Not until it stole her away,” the barmaid contradicted.

“Princess Rapunzel?” I overheard one of the off-duty men-at-arms say to his companion. “Isn’t that the girl that Griffin said he fancies?”

“Shhh,” his friend hissed. “I want to listen, not gossip.”

I clutched the blanket around me a little tighter and fought not to react to the offhand comment. Did he mean the same Griffin I’d met? Had he talked about me to others? It was a shame he wasn’t nobility; I wouldn’t be upset about the idea of him rescuing me.

“May I stay the night? I haven’t slept since...since I don’t even know when. It seems like forever ago that I was taken.”

“Gladly. We’ll send word to the king and alert the soldiers so you can have a proper escort home in the morning. I’ll send someone now.”

My eyes brimmed with tears again. “Thank you. I don’t know how to repay you for your kindness.”

The barkeep gave a friendly smile. “You could always ask the king to lower our tax

rates. Times are hard.”

“I’ll make it my top priority when I return,” I promised.

The barkeep assigned a wiry man with iron-gray hair to deliver the message then shooed the rest of his customers out the door. None protested. They were all still talking animatedly about the night’s events, and pondering what part of a dragon would be most valuable when sold, and expressing that this was a story to tell their children the next day. Once the room had emptied, the tavern owner showed me to a small room, apologizing that it wasn’t suitable for royalty.

“I don’t look like royalty right now,” I said with a small laugh, gesturing at my burned hair and torn gown.

“You can get all cleaned up,” he told me, gesturing at the washtub in the room. “I’ll send one of the maids up with some warm water.”

“Perhaps in the morning. I’d like to just rest now.”

I let out a sigh of relief when the door finally closed. It had been some time since I’d made myself cry on command and force hyperventilation. Father never believed me anymore, so I’d abandoned that trick more than two years ago.

The bed wasn’t nearly as inviting as the one in Pollox’s tower, but at least it didn’t appear to have fleas. I sank onto the bed, staring out at the night sky.

Pollox hadn’t given an exact time of when he would come for me; he’d simply said early the next morning. What if he forgot? What if he went to the wrong village? They probably all looked the same from a bird’s-eye view...or dragon’s-eye view. What if the soldiers arrived before Pollox did? Would they force me to return before Pollox took me back to his cave?

Even though my body ached for sleep, I tossed and turned for most of the night. What if Pollox had never actually wanted to team up with me at all and was simply waiting for a way to ditch me? I really didn't have much to offer him. Was he wondering if I was trustworthy just as much as I'd wondered how trustworthy he was? Finally, I managed to doze off, and once I did, my dreams were filled with knights doing battle against fearsome dragons.

* * *

"Where is she?" Pollox's deep voice shook the entire room and I snapped awake with a scream, hands clasped over my ears.

Shouts came from beyond the window, and flames licked the dawn sky as Pollox belched a column of fire up to the heavens.

"The princess!" he bellowed, and the bed I was lying on vibrated from the noise. "Where is she?"

Not even bothering to put on my shoes, I ran down the stairs and out into the cool yard. All around, the townsfolk were cowering behind a line of soldiers who appeared to have just arrived. They brandished lances and spears as their horses pranced backward in fear.

Pollox looked even more enormous than I remembered. When standing next to a mountain, he seemed a reasonable size. But here, neck extended far above the tallest building, he looked too large to be allowed anywhere. One sweep of his spiked tail would topple houses.

"I'm here!" I called, running forward to stand in front of Pollox and shield the people. "Leave these people alone; they haven't done anything!"

“Princess, no!” a woman called.

I put on a brave face. “Everyone here has suffered in the past because of my father’s unjust laws. If sacrificing myself will spare them any suffering, I’ll do it.”

Pollox’s orange eyes glowed in the night’s lingering darkness.

“You can’t have her!” A knight came forward, holding his sword out and stepping in front of me. “Begone!”

Pollox let out a roar that sent shivers running down my arms. He was a little too good at acting. To the knight’s credit, he didn’t back down but jabbed his sword at Pollox, swiping the air between them.

“She belongs to me now,” Pollox growled, spreading his wings so wide that the early dawn rays were blocked out. The knight put his arm out to chivvy me backwards, and I was pushed into the crowd of men.

“Aim for the left wing joint,” the tavern owner told the soldiers in an undertone. All around me, they were taking aim, directing their heavy crossbows at Pollox’s supposed injury.

My gut clenched. I certainly hoped that Pollox had been right not to fear the arrows.

“Fire!”

Arrows zipped through the air, all clattering against Pollox’s left wing in various spots. He reared up, ejecting another long blast of fire that shot upward in a spiral as Pollox thrashed his head. His massive, clawed feet trampled about in feigned pain, and each step sent shockwaves through the ground so I nearly fell over. Women screamed and fled their homes, clutching their children.

It didn't feel like acting anymore. People could get hurt. Real fear crept into the pit of my stomach. What had I done when I'd teamed up with this dragon?

"The princess is mine, " Pollox howled. "And I'll keep her where she'll never escape!"

Pollox's tail whipped through the crowd of knights and wrapped around my torso, then he took off into the sunrise. I closed my eyes against the cold wind that bit at my face and clung to one of Pollox's tail spikes. As long as I didn't look down, I could pretend we were a few feet off the ground. But even so, the sensation of my legs dangling over the vast nothingness below me churned my stomach. Would I ever get used to this?

* * *

Pollox landed with a clatter on the tower's roof, claws clinging to the ridges as he gently deposited me on the balcony. I collapsed onto the plush rug that covered the stone floor, eternally grateful for the feeling of solid ground beneath me once more.

"How did I do?" There was a definite note of pride in Pollox's voice.

"You terrified everyone," I answered truthfully.

"Without any casualties or damage either," Pollox gloated, rustling his wings. His tone had reverted to being calm and pleasant, a massive change from before. "You did well too. Running to stand in front of the people will make them love you."

I gave a hollow laugh. "I'm not sure any sacrifice would make them care about me. My family isn't the sort of royalty that commoners want ruling them."

"Then you just did something to help change that perception. You're showing them

that they should be a part of your hoard. If you are willing to sacrifice yourself in order to protect them, many will be willing to try to rescue you. We'll be very rich, indeed."

A twinge of guilt panged in my chest. Was I just as twisted and corrupt as my father?

CHAPTER 9

The first knight arrived early the next morning. His shouting roused me from a deep sleep, nestled between the warm, downy quilts. For several moments, in the disoriented state between sleeping and waking, I couldn't remember where I was.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, are you there?" the voice called.

Adrenaline surged through my body and I leapt out of bed. I hadn't expected someone to come so early; he must have traveled the entire night through. I hurried to the balcony and peered down into the meadow below. The height made me dizzy just looking, and I ended up kneeling while wrapping my arms around the balcony supports, too nervous to lean over.

"I'm here, but there's no way down!" I called. "Thank goodness you found me!"

The knight looked unfamiliar, but from this height, I couldn't be sure. His squire held the reins for both their horses near the forest, and I squinted, hoping against hope that it was Griffin, but was disappointed. The squire appeared to only be fifteen years old or so, with a shock of flaming red hair that didn't look at all like the quiet chess champion I hoped to see.

"Is the dragon nearby?"

"It left to hunt," I invented wildly, hoping I would have time to take the wardrobe passage to warn Pollox. How was I supposed to alert him that a knight had come while still acting like some damsel in distress desperate for escape?

“Then we must act quickly. Can you climb down?”

“No, the only way up here is by dragonback,” I shouted back down, hoping my words weren’t being lost to the wind.

The knight circled the tower several times, searching for some method of entry, and I scanned the skies, desperately searching until?—

“Look out!” I screamed. “It’s coming back!”

Pollox’s flight was too fast for the man to escape, especially as he was laden down by absurdly heavy metal armor. The clanking was loud enough that it was easily audible from my lofty perch.

The shadow passing over made the knight’s horses rear in fright. One broke free of the squire’s grip and galloped away, but the squire clung tight to the second, backing up and looking just as terrified as I’d felt when I first met Pollox.

“What’s this?” Pollox rumbled in a voice so loud that the tower trembled. “A human come to claim my princess for his own hoard?”

The knight drew his sword and held it at the ready. Pollox landed directly in front of him with a heavy thud that shook the ground.

“I’ve come to rescue the Princess Rapunzel,” the knight challenged.

Pollox’s face twisted into an expression that I recognized as a smile. “Very well, do your worst.”

The knight attacked with a war cry, jabbing the sword at Pollox’s hide repeatedly and with all the force he could muster. Pollox watched him, interested, as the man

exhausted himself by wielding the massive broadsword while inflicting no damage whatsoever to the dragon.

“Your...your mind tricks won’t work on me,” the knight panted, trying again to drive the blade into the dragon hide and watching in dismay as it bounced harmlessly off once again. Finally, the man stopped his assault, too weary to continue.

“My turn,” Pollox chuckled. With that, he let his tail whip across the man’s helmet so a ringing clang echoed up to me.

I squeaked in alarm, fearing that it had been a killing blow as the knight’s knees buckled. He face planted, helmet and all, into the grass mere inches from Pollox’s talons. Was I responsible for a death?

“Now,” Pollox snarled, turning to the quivering squire. “You will return from whence you came. If your king sends fifty gold pieces by dawn tomorrow, he may have his knight back. Otherwise, I’ll drop him off wherever I see fit.” Pollox cast an eye over the motionless knight, limp in his metal armor. “He looks like a swimmer. Perhaps over an ocean. Do you understand?”

The squire, trembling from head to foot, nodded frantically but remained rooted to the spot, eyes wide in panic.

“Dawn tomorrow,” Pollox repeated. “Fifty gold pieces.”

The squire still didn’t move. He would likely pass out from fright if Pollox scared him anymore.

“Go on then,” Pollox said, and blew a tiny fireball at him.

That did it.

The horse reared back in terror so that the reins tangled around the squire's hand. As his mount bolted, the squire was dragged along, desperately trying to mount the terrified horse. The galloping hooves soon faded away.

"Is he dead?" I called anxiously, eyes still fixed on the motionless knight as my insides writhed like snakes.

Pollox flapped into the air and landed a moment later, clinging to the side of the tower so he could extend his head and easily talk to me. "No, but he'll wake soon, and we can't let him escape."

I looked at my luxurious bedroom. "If this were less comfortable, I'd be able to convince him that I'm being held prisoner, but I think he would have a hard time believing that with all this here."

Pollox's eyes narrowed so he looked almost snake-like. "Excellent idea. Stay on the balcony for a moment."

I did so, backing up so I was close to the railing, and squatted down. The wind still made me feel as though I would likely get blown off at any moment.

"Watch." Pollox directed his gaze into the room, and it began to shift and change. The four-poster bed became a jail cell with iron bars, the sofa vanished and was replaced by hard slats with thin, hole-riddled blankets. The plush rugs transformed into straw littering the stone floor, and the paintings shifted to become manacles dangling in intervals with a large key hung on the opposite wall.

My jaw hung slack. It was the perfect prison cell.

"Hurry, get him up here and I'll chain him to the wall," I said eagerly. While Pollox flapped off to collect the knight, I ran to the wardrobe, which now looked thoroughly

shabby and rotten. "I need something a prisoner would wear," I told it. "Quick."

At first, the wardrobe didn't seem to understand and presented me with more luxurious dresses, but after articulating my desire again, it acquiesced and offered up a selection of threadbare, dirty frocks that might have once been beautiful gowns. Instead of the cosmetics and hair combs, a pot of dirt stood on a shelf. I rushed to transform my own appearance, scrubbing dirt onto my hands and face and tugging on a dress that could have passed for the one I wore the day before when Pollox took me away from the villagers.

As I mussed my hair, Pollox came back to deposit the knight on the balcony. He was still out cold. Could I trust that he was truly unconscious, or was he acting? Deciding to play it safe, I motioned for Pollox to shove the knight farther into the room. While Pollox used his tail to scoot the knight across the floor, I took the key from the far wall and tested it on the manacles. The cuffs sprang apart, and I secured it around the knight's wrist. Then, with a sly wink at Pollox, I snapped the other cuff on my own arm.

The ridges over Pollox's eyes contracted as he watched me. With a coy smile, I held a finger to my lips, then slipped the key into my pocket and sat propped against the wall next to the knight.

"What a well-behaved prisoner you are," Pollox chuckled. "I'm a very lucky dragon indeed."

The knight stirred, and Pollox snaked his head inside so he could stare at the captive. The man blearily opened his eyes, then yelped as he found himself nose-to-nose with the dragon.

"Please, have mercy," I cried, trying to throw myself between the knight and Pollox, pressing one hand against the knight's breastplate and the other held out defensively

toward Pollox. "Spare him, I beg of you!"

"Only until dawn tomorrow," Pollox hissed, menace in every syllable. He withdrew his head, and the ceiling shuddered as we heard Pollox curl up around the turret's spire.

"How are you feeling?" I asked the knight anxiously, pressing my hand against his forehead.

"I've been better," he groaned. As he slowly sat up, he stared around at the barren walls. "Princess, is this where the dragon's been keeping you?"

"It hasn't been long; it doesn't matter," I told him with a long-suffering smile. "Were you injured?"

"Not much." He seemed to come to himself. "My squire, where is he? What happened?"

"The dragon's holding you ransom for fifty gold pieces. Your squire went to get the funds."

"He wasn't hurt, was he? By George, I shouldn't have endangered him. I should have taken that other squire up on his offer."

"What other squire?"

"His name's Griffin. He heard I was heading out to rescue you and tried to convince me to take him instead of my regular squire."

My heart beat faster. "Oh. I didn't realize squires trade places."

“They don’t normally. My squire knows me and the horses, but Griffin was quite insistent. But that doesn’t matter right now. We need to find a way to escape.” He threw a fearful glance toward the open balcony doors. “Can the dragon hear us?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t had anyone to talk to until now, and as you can see”—I pulled against the manacle so that the chain driven deep into the stone wall clanged—“my last escape attempt got me in a worse mess than before. He said I’ll be chained for two days as punishment for my escape.”

“We’ll figure it out, don’t worry,” he answered automatically, pulling at his own restraint and patting down his armor, searching for any hidden weapons. I copied him, also pulling at the heavy chains while knowing it was futile. “My name is Winston, by the way.”

“I’m Rapunzel,” I told him. “Sorry about all this.”

“It’s not your fault,” he told me kindly. “You didn’t ask to be kidnapped.”

“Have you heard any news from my father?” I asked. “What’s happening?”

Winston gave a final jerk to his chain, then seemed to decide his energy was being wasted. “Your father sent couriers to all the nearby kingdoms to alert them of the issue, and many are planning to come to your aid.”

“What if the dragon kills them?” I whispered, allowing tears to fill my eyes. “I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

He clutched at my hands. “You mustn’t sacrifice yourself in the process,” he said. “Now, let’s see if there is a way out of here.”

For hours, Winston tried everything he could think of to escape, to no avail. At first,

he broke one of the clasps off his armor and tried to use it to pick the lock, then wriggled off one of his metal leg plates to use it as leverage to break the chain from the wall.

I pretended to make myself useful by searching the wall for any cracks in the mortar or chinks in the stone, then ripped a swath of fabric off my hem to wrap around my hand, trying to create a thin barrier that would allow me to slip my hand out of the manacle.

We continued to attempt escape all that day and into the night, only stopping when Pollox appeared and shoved a slightly charred loaf of bread to us, skewed on the end of one of his tail spikes.

Winston instantly broke the loaf in half and offered me the slightly smaller portion. I took it but barely nibbled at the stale bread, trying to appear hungry but still disliking the chalky texture. If Griffin had been here instead of Winston, he would have offered me the larger portion, if not the entire loaf, I was sure. Then of course, if Winston wasn't here at all, I could have had another grand feast from the magic table in Pollox's cave.

After his initial talkativeness, Winston lapsed into silence, still studying the chain and manacle to figure out how to break free. I dozed off around midnight, the key secure in my pocket, as Winston continued to tug at the chain.

I awoke around daybreak to the sound of trumpets echoing around the tower. Winston looked terrible. He had disassembled the majority of his suit of armor trying to break the manacle apart, and there were small areas of hair missing from his beard and scalp where he'd pulled on it in frustration.

Voices came from the meadow below, and Pollox answered, still coiled up on the tower's roof. "Show me the gold."

More voices floated up in a low rumble, and dust showered down as Pollox took off. A shadow passed over the window and a gust of wind swirled in to stir up the dirt as Pollox soared past, his mighty wings beating.

“They must’ve come for you,” I told him, a sad smile on his face. “Tell my father I’m thinking of him.”

“This isn’t over. You’ll get rescued.”

“Tell everyone where I am,” I begged. “Please.”

“I shall.”

Pollox stuck his head in. “You’re free to go, human,” he said to Winston, then snapped down on the chain, fangs instantly breaking the metal that the knight had worked all night to break free of. Winston tried to grab my hand, but Pollox snarled, “The girl stays. A princess is worth far more than a paltry fifty coins.”

Pollox’s tail snuck over to grab Winston by the ankle and pull him into the air. Once Winston had been removed, I calmly withdrew the key, unlocked the manacle, and waited for Pollox to finish the ransom exchange. It was more than half an hour before Pollox finally returned.

“They’re gone,” he informed me. “Are you ready to go? I’m sure you’d like a meal that isn’t a crust of bread. Sorry it was so bad.”

“Don’t be sorry. It was a good image. Are they able to see us through the trees if I go back with you? We can’t have anyone suspect if I’m supposed to be chained here.”

“The tree cover is thick, and you are small enough that you won’t be spotted on my back from the ground.”

Pollox scooped me up and took off, depositing me onto his back once we were flying back to his cave. My skirts whipped up to my thighs as I straddled the base of Pollox's neck, and my hair blew out behind me like a banner. "Today seemed to be a success," I called over the roar of the wind. "What do you think?"

"Fifty gold pieces is a good start," Pollox agreed. "What will you do with your half?"

"Keep it until I know how to disperse it best, I suppose. It's not like I can waltz into town and buy supplies when I'm supposed to be locked in a tower."

Pollox landed, and I slid off more gracefully than the first time I had tried. "We will need to set up some kind of alarm or something to let us know if someone is coming to rescue me," I told Pollox, entering the cave and sitting at the table, which instantly loaded itself with food. "We don't want to risk someone being there and you don't come to capture them."

"That's a simple enough charm," Pollox told me. "I'll set it up tomorrow morning."

"Shall we toast to our success?" I asked Pollox, pouring a glass of wine and holding it aloft. "To the most unexpected yet unstoppable duo ever to grace this realm?—"

"A shrewd princess with wits sharp as any blade," Pollox cut in.

"And a dragon with a fiery sense of enterprise," I finished, downing my glass and throwing the bottle into Pollox's mouth. The crunching of glass made me grit my teeth.

"Would you like to see my hoard?" Pollox asked without warning.

"Yes, I would." Burning curiosity pulled me to my feet. What other human had ever had the honor of seeing a dragon's hoard?

“It’s separated into different rooms,” he said, lumbering down the wide passageway. “And they will only open for me.” Large wooden doors barred each chamber, and it was only when Pollox pressed his snout against the wood that they creaked open.

If I had ever thought that the treasury back home was special, I was wrong on all accounts. This cavern was lined with shelving, and gemstones of every color winked down at me from where they lay on their velvet-lined cushions. They were organized by size, ranging from tiny diamonds barely larger than a grain of sand to enormous geodes larger than I was, studded with violet amethysts.

“This is my gemstones room,” Pollox said unnecessarily. “Dragons can smell gemstones within mountains, you know.”

“I didn’t know that,” I breathed. Fifty gold pieces was nothing to Pollox. It was a mere drop amid the ocean of his treasure.

“And this room,” he went on, leading me to the next chamber, “is for the man-made objects.” It was filled with exquisite jewelry, ancient weapons, and ceremonial artifacts. The entire room was illuminated by a crystal chandelier overhead, where everlasting candles were lit and cast a dancing, sparkling light over the entire hoard.

We came to a third door. “Here’s where I keep the gold,” Pollox said, pressing his snout against the wood panel. Treasure chest after treasure chest, all neatly organized, were lined up in rows, each one heaped with coins. Gently, Pollox emptied the new bag of coins into a chest on the far right that was only partially full. This dragon didn’t need me or my schemes at all. There was enough here to keep my entire kingdom running for generations.

“Where did all this come from?” I asked in wonder, gazing around at everything.

“Hoards pass down from dragon to dragon. This used to be my mother’s, and her

father's before her, and so on."

Centuries worth of dragon wealth, all before my eyes. It was overwhelming. Father only had a fraction of this and I knew how much good he would be able to do if he used it to help people rather than hoard it for himself. There were more riches here than any kingdom could ever spend in ten lifetimes. Resolve hardened in the pit of my stomach. One way or another, I would help my people get the aid they so desperately needed. Seeing Pollox's hoard reinforced to me that I had teamed up with the perfect partner in crime.

"That's the tour," Pollox said, prodding me along the corridor with his tail.

"What about that door?" I pointed to the last door at the far end of the passageway.

"That one has my most treasured possessions," Pollox answered shortly.

"May I see it?"

"No."

My interest grew. What could be more fabulous than the treasure he already showed me? Did it contain powerful magic? Enchanted objects like the wardrobe and table? Or was it some dark secret he didn't want me to know about?

"Would you like to take the wardrobe back to your room, or shall I take you?" Pollox asked.

"I'd prefer that you take me," I told him. "I don't like the way the wardrobe feels, and no one will see me in the dark."

"Very well," Pollox said, lowering his neck so I could climb on. "Tomorrow, our

swindles can begin in earnest.”

As I climbed into bed that night, I struggled to fall asleep. Our first swindle had succeeded, but what if the knight had been killed? I would be just like my father—responsible for the deaths of brave men who thought they were being chivalrous and saving an endangered woman. They were putting their lives at risk for me; would it be worth it? How would I find a way to redistribute the wealth that Pollox and I accrued?

Unanswered questions swirled around the back of my head as I did all I could to suppress my qualms. All the lying and deceit was necessary, I told myself. There was no other way to help those in need. My last comforting thought as I finally drifted off to sleep was that as long as Pollox didn’t kill anyone, there was no harm to what we were doing.

CHAPTER 10

Weeks passed.

Many men came to rescue me, sometimes alone but more often in large groups as time passed and word spread of how difficult Pollox was to defeat. But no matter what weapons they used, Pollox proved to be impossible to overpower. Frequently, the forest was so overrun with princes and knights that despite Pollox's assurances, I didn't trust that I wouldn't be spotted flying on Pollox's back and would remain in the tower, awaiting the next arrival.

Each time a man was held for ransom, I would hear snippets of what was going on in the world beyond. Other than my father continually increasing the size of the reward for my return, nothing much seemed to be happening. Occasionally, men would speak about how news of my capture had traveled to even more kingdoms, but other times, they would be so fixated on trying—and failing—to find an escape that they barely said three words to me.

Pollox began accruing wealth faster than any of his ancestors, a fact which pleased him immensely. The princes always brought in the best ransoms, but also the most arrogance at the onset followed by the most humility when they failed. Two of the princes were ones I'd kissed in the past as a way to get back at my father, and on both occasions, it made for some awkward silences as we shared the prison cell until their ransoms were paid.

The initial surge of potential rescuers dwindled about two months after my supposed kidnapping, and the treasure we had amassed from our ransom swindles made it so

Pollox's hoard was full to bursting.

"The kingdoms won't have any treasure left at this rate, you know," I told Pollox one evening. He'd brought me back to his cave for dinner and to stash our latest haul. "And the rescue attempts have really slowed down recently. The last one was a whole week ago."

Pollox blew a fireball to ignite the ledge of coals that ran around his cave. "Was that the one who tried to smuggle in acid to burn through the chains?"

"Then spilled it on the straw and nearly started a fire? Yes," I told him, shaking my head at the memory. "I think if no one is successful, word will spread that it's impossible, and they might stop trying."

"Do you want to leave?" Pollox's voice, normally so deep and gravelly, became more brittle and clipped.

"I want them to think it's possible to rescue me so they don't give up. With the next person who comes along, be a little slower to come chase them off, and I'll let myself be rescued. I'll open the manacles while he's sleeping and tell him I picked it with my hairpin or something. We would be sure to stop in Donover. Then after I get some information, you swoop down and steal me back."

"And they will be encouraged at the taste of victory." He nodded. "Very clever."

I gave a dramatic, fake gasp. "A dragon praising the cleverness of a human? What madness is this?"

"It's madness that will never happen again if you harp on about it. Just make sure you remember that you belong?"

“You belong to my hoard,” I cut in before he could act all possessive again. “And don’t you forget it, you overgrown newt.”

Pollox choked back a fireball. “Are you mocking a dragon?”

I beamed. “You heard me right, Snagglesfang.”

“Two legs.”

“Come on, Lizard Breath, you need to improve your name-calling skills if we’re going to be friends.”

“All right then, you...you sizzle snack.”

“Flame face.”

“Petite feast.”

“Charcoal maker.”

“That one was weak,” he told me, tapping his claw on the ground. “But I can’t think of any better ones.”

“We’ll have to come up with more in the future.” I yawned and covered my mouth. “I need to get to bed, and hopefully there will be a real ‘rescue’ tomorrow.” I threw a mistrusting look at the wardrobe, which opened its door invitingly. “Can you fly me back?”

“Always.”

* * *

Pollox flung a particularly stocky knight into the tower next to me. His armor clanged as he skidded across the floor, and I hurriedly moved my legs out of the way as he bounced slightly, the jarring metal-on-stone sound clanging loudly enough to give me an instant headache.

Pollox chuckled as he watched the knight roll to a stop. “You thought I wouldn’t notice the rear attack you planned as your backup? Think again, human.” He launched himself into the air, off to deal with whatever threat he’d seen.

The knight scrambled to his feet, throwing his helmet to the ground and revealing a shock of long, dark brown hair and a scruffy beard that didn’t hide his rather weak chin. I estimated him to be about eight to ten years older than I was.

“Hurry, we don’t have much time,” he told me, beginning to unfasten all of his armor clasps and strip down.

“Time for what?” I asked, eyeing him undressing skeptically and wondering if I would need to call for Pollox.

In response, he began pulling rope out from under the overly large armor. “I can’t climb down with all this on, and it was just to hide the rope while the dragon is distracted by the rear diversion. They’re planning to lure him in the opposite direction, and there is a horse waiting for us in the forest. Here, help me.”

“Everyone else who brought rope had it all coiled up on their shoulder when they got here, and the dragon always burned it. It was very ingenious to hide it under armor to sneak it in,” I told him, sincerely impressed with the stratagem.

“Yes, that is what they all said during our meeting when we planned it. Everyone needs to know when to make a sacrifice,” he said. The words rang a bell in my mind, but I couldn’t think of why as I helped the knight shed his armor. He certainly was

muscular beneath his thin shirt. “You hold onto my back,” he instructed, finally extricating the last bit of rope and pulling on heavy gloves.

My apprehension grew. That didn’t seem at all safe and the idea of actually escaping by climbing a rope down the immensely tall tower had my palms sweating and legs shaking before I even looked over the side.

“Unless you think you can climb down yourself,” the knight went on. I didn’t even know his name, and I was supposed to blindly trust him to muscle his way down forty feet of thin rope with a fully grown woman clinging to his back?

“I’m not sure about this,” I said hesitantly.

“Look, if you’re too scared, I’ll knock you out and strap you to my back if I need to, but it would be easier for both of us if you just hold on. We have to move now before the dragon comes back.” His brusque tone left me with no doubt that he would carry out his threat. If it had been Griffin here instead of this chauvinistic pig, I couldn’t imagine that he would ever speak to me so.

“You’re absolutely positive you can manage?” I asked, fear shredding my insides. Pollox wouldn’t be there to save me if we fell.

“Positive. Now get on, but don’t hold too tight around my throat.”

I’m going to die. I’m going to die, I’m going to die, I’m going to die, I repeated to myself as I clung like a parasite to the knight’s back and scrunched my eyes closed. This was the worst idea I’d ever had, worse even than seeking out a dragon to propose a pact of villainy.

My stomach lurched each time the rope swayed, and I kept my face buried into the knight’s back, refusing to look down or even open my eyes.

“Halfway there,” he grunted. True to his word, he was managing to keep us both aloft, but images of us falling to our deaths on the ground below kept assaulting my mind and proved impossible to ward off.

There was an ominous creaking noise above us when we were about two thirds of the way down. Unable to resist, I looked up. The rope was fraying under our weight.

The knight barely had time to mutter, “Oh no” before it snapped, sending us plummeting the remaining distance. Fortunately, a flowered hedge broke our fall, but unfortunately, it had thorns that scratched my arms and legs. Even worse, the knight landed on top of me a second later, crunching me even further into the bush. The branches snagged at my back, and I no longer appreciated this knight’s muscular physique. He was heavy.

“Ow,” I croaked, desperate for air.

Men were far more dangerous, and far more stupid, than dragons.

“Sorry about that,” the knight said, struggling to get off me. He turned and held out his hand, but the wind had been knocked out of me so that I couldn’t even lift my arms or inhale properly. I was stuck like some absurd, bug-eyed turtle on its back—arms and legs pointed up to the sky while my backside had sunk down nearly to brush the ground. Far above me, I could see the frayed end of the snapped rope swaying innocently in the breeze.

“Hurry up,” the knight snapped, sounding rather irritated as he yanked me out of the hedge. “Your hands are really cold, you know that?”

Any insult I might have hurled back required air in my lungs. I ended up being dragged along behind him as he ran toward the forest, my arm nearly wrenched from its socket as I gasped for breath. Was this what every woman felt like when she was

rescued? If it was, I'd much rather remain a prisoner.

Pollox was still a speck in the distance, far past the tower, continually circling and plunging amid the trees as he battled whatever distraction the knight had concocted. The knight untied the horse tethered to a tree and boosted me up to haphazardly sit side-saddle, still spluttering for air, before he climbed up and called, "Hyah!"

The horse took off, going much too fast on the winding forest trail to be safe, and as we passed a dry riverbed, some medium-sized animal darted across the path. The horse reared back in fright, and my precarious, ladylike perch sent me sprawling off my mount, through the brambles, and down the embankment. I rolled head over heels into the dried-up riverbed, where the earth was parched and cracked, lungs devoid of air once more. Particles of dirt were still swirling in the air as the knight called at me to climb back up.

I really hated staring up at the sky from this angle.

Any woman who dreamed of a muscular man coming to rescue her from an evil dragon clearly hadn't thought through the logistics of such an occurrence. Even Father, with all his faults, couldn't expect me to wed someone who treated me so carelessly. I'd rather be consumed by an erupting volcano than marry someone like that.

"What are you waiting for?" the knight called irritably. "Hurry up!"

Fighting for breath, I beat at the air to clear the dust cloud that had settled over me, rolled over with a groan, and tried to find a way to scale the slanted embankment. I didn't need to tumble down and add another layer of dirt to my already filthy self. I veered left; the right side had what looked like a cave where the long-gone river had eaten away at the dirt beneath an overhang so it was like a tiny room completely hidden from the view above. The left had several rocks and small shrubs growing that

I could use as handholds. Nothing could have prepared me for the aches and pains that were cropping up over my entire body.

The moment I ascended, the knight leaned over from where he was still mounted and yanked me up by my collar to sit in front of him, kicking his horse to run once more. I'd barely recovered from having the wind knocked out of me for the second time that day and attempted to draw a deep breath when an insect flew directly into my open mouth and lodged itself in the back of my throat.

I spluttered and choked, eyes streaming, and the knight thumped me on the back as we rode at a full gallop along the forest trail. No amount of gagging was able to regurgitate whatever unsuspecting fly had found its way back to stick to my uvula, and as the horse leapt over a fallen log, I ended up swallowing the bug.

This had to be the worst rescue in history.

CHAPTER 11

Donover's castle had just come into view when I heard the telltale whoosh of dragon wings above me. Ahead, the guards began to lower the drawbridge and were shouting for us to hurry, pointing at Pollox soaring overhead and urging us on. With a thud, Pollox landed between us and the castle.

The horse reared off in fright, sending both me and the knight tumbling to the ground. This time, I landed on top of him, elbow digging into his side. He shoved me off and scrambled to his feet, unarmed, and faced the dragon. For a moment, both he and I stared at Pollox, whose eyes were aflame with fury.

"You stole from me," he snarled at the knight, who squeaked in fear, then bolted, trying to dodge past the dragon to get to the castle's safety. Pollox's serpentine neck followed, and with a flash, Pollox pounced on him like a cat onto a mouse, trapping him beneath his taloned foot. The knight wriggled and shouted, and a hailstorm of arrows sailed toward him.

Pollox spread his wings wide, intercepting any arrows that might have accidentally come my way.

"This way, hurry!" a man's voice came from the battlements, and from between Pollox's legs, I saw a man gesturing me into the keep.

Pollox lowered his head to stare at the knight pinned between his talons, intentionally not looking my direction, and his tail flicked ever so slightly toward the castle.

I held my skirts above my knees in a most undignified manner as I dashed across the drawbridge and headed for the keep at top speed. “Help!” I screamed, gesturing frantically at the guards stationed by the portcullis’s winching mechanism to hurry up. “Let me in!”

“It’s Princess Rapunzel; raise the portcullis!” The two men continued to heave on the bars protruding from the circular wheel where the portcullis’s chain was attached, which looked like a ship’s helm fashioned out of metal and heavy oak.

The portcullis groaned as it finished raising. I waited until it was nearly all the way up before I ran under. Ever since I’d seen a guard slip and let the portcullis fall when I was young, I’d harbored the fear that one day, while I crossed under the heavy metal grille, it would fall and impale me with the lethal spikes that jutted from the bottom. It would be just my luck to have it fall on me after everything else that had happened that day.

The guards locked the portcullis in place and rushed to my side, where I had stopped, hands on my knees as I gasped dramatically for breath. “The dragon...” I choked, scanning the skies. “The dragon...”

“You’re safe now, don’t worry.” The guard speaking had a fatherly air about him, and he patted my back.

There was an unearthly screech as Pollox flapped his way into the air again, the knight dangling from his claw and squealing like a stuck pig. “I’ll get the girl back!” Pollox roared.

The soldiers fired a catapult in return, which would have hit Pollox if he hadn’t given a tremendous beat of his wings and rocketed upward. The knight’s high-pitched scream faded away, lost to the wind.

“You’re safe,” the guard who held me repeated. “We’ll send a carrier pigeon to your father and let him know you’re safe.”

I nodded, still pulling air into my lungs in great gulps. The fatherly guard stayed by my side and began walking slowly with me across the courtyard, up to the keep. All I had to do now was glean information and wait for Pollox to come take me back. We passed maids carrying buckets of water, knights practicing their swordsmanship, and a knot of gossiping squires.

“Princess Rapunzel?” The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it until one of the squires broke away from his group of friends and approached me. “Is that you?”

I caught my breath. “Griffin? What...why are you here?”

He looked just as handsome as I remembered from our chess match two months earlier, perhaps even more so since I’d grown accustomed to having only a dragon for company. His white linen tunic stretched tight across his chest, a fact that I worked hard not to notice.

“The knight I serve came here for a tournament just yesterday.” He looked just as surprised as I did at finding me here and couldn’t stop staring. It got to where I nearly blushed. He was a squire, I reminded myself. Princesses weren’t allowed to keep company with servants, even if they wanted to.

The guard cleared his throat. “As you two seem to know each other, perhaps he can escort you to the keep?”

“Oh... yes.” I had momentarily forgotten my mission. “I must relay a message to my father.”

“Allow me,” Griffin said, awkwardly offering me his arm. He clearly didn’t escort

women often. He held his elbow out far from his body and kept it rigidly stiff. Any man who routinely entertained women would be more practiced, but the knowledge that he hadn't been flirting with many other women felt strangely endearing. I looped my hand into the crook of his elbow and allowed him to guide me up to the keep.

The walk was a short one. Along the way, Griffin seemed to remember his manners and dug into his pocket for some hardened deer venison jerky and stale traveler's bread, which he offered to me. I politely declined, insisting that I really must send a carrier pigeon to my father as soon as possible, and that I would venture down to the dining hall afterward. I nearly let out an audible sigh of relief when he accepted my excuse without question. Whether it was because I was too high maintenance or had become spoiled with all the gourmet food Pollox provided with his enchanted table, I would have to be an inch from death to eat the sort of military rations that squires toted around in their lint-filled pockets.

The room with carrier pigeons, all labeled with the destinations on their cages, was tiny, with only a narrow window that allowed a thin beam of light to stream into the room. Straw covered the floor, and if I hadn't been so wholly distracted by Griffin, I might have wrinkled my nose at the smell in the room. But Griffin didn't drop his arm, and I didn't move my hand. I hadn't realized I was so starved for human touch. On the pretext of getting a better view out of the small, open window, I moved slightly to press my side against Griffin's arm. Scales, that felt good, too. I should feign concern for the knight that had rescued me, but I also had no intention of letting Griffin assume I was thinking of other men.

"Princess," he began.

"You can just call me Rapunzel," I interrupted.

"Rapunzel," he repeated, testing how my name sounded on his tongue without the accompanying title. Chills ran up and down my spine, and my nails began to turn

purple as the temperature of my hands plummeted. Griffin turned to look at me. His eyes were a rich coffee color that reminded me of Pollox when he was calm.

The pigeon loft really was much too small to keep an appropriate distance from each other, and Griffin didn't seem too bothered by it. On the contrary, his eyes were skating across my face. I suddenly wondered what I looked like in that moment. When was the last time I'd spent time preening in front of a mirror when I only had Pollox to impress, and he considered all humans ugly, no matter what they looked like? I'd intended to look like a princess who had only narrowly escaped a dragon, but after the fall from the tower, being scratched in the hedge and brambles, rolling in the dirt of that dry riverbed, then galloping through the forest and swallowing the bug, I must look like a disaster. With Griffin paying such close attention to me, I wished I looked my best.

"You have a little ash on your neck," Griffin murmured, raising his hand to stroke the side of my throat, and I closed my eyes at his touch. It felt cold since I was so used to Pollox's blazing heat, but his hands weren't nearly as icy as my own. His fingers slowly wrapped around the back of my head, leaving his thumb where I could feel my heartbeat pounding against it. Flames alive, I'd almost forgotten what it was like to be held by a man. Either I couldn't recall just how good it felt, or this time was even better than any other. Moments trickled by as I waited, eyes still closed, for Griffin to make a move.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty. I forgot myself."

I opened my eyes. Griffin, looking shame-faced and wrong-footed, had dropped his hand and stepped away. A pox upon Griffin's infernal sense of propriety! I was going to do something rash and poorly planned out if I didn't get some affection soon. It wasn't like I could get a proper hug from a fire-breathing dragon many times my size. But then I remembered—our station difference would never allow a match.

“Of...of course. I was at fault as well.”

Griffin shook his head. “No. You’ve been through a traumatic experience and you’re not to blame. You focus on feeling safe.”

Just as I was about to respond, the door flew open and a footman came panting in to deliver the message that Donover’s steward was making arrangements for my quarters. A rush of gratitude that Griffin had stepped away swept through my body. As interesting as Griffin was, I wouldn’t risk my plans being ruined by a fleeting, girlish fancy and the ensuing scandalous rumors that would inevitably follow.

“Did you find all the supplies?” the footman asked courteously, pointing me to the cabinet bearing writing slips, ink, and the leather straps to tie messages onto pigeon legs. “And I can fetch you anything else you need.”

“This is perfect, thank you,” I told him. The footman bowed in response and left as I quickly scrawled a message to my father, informing him that I’d escaped from the dragon and was waiting in Donover castle. What would his response be? Did he actually care that I was gone? Or was Father’s offer of a grand reward for my return yet another publicity stunt?

With each word I penned, I felt Griffin’s eyes on the back of my head. Once I was finished, Griffin took the paper from me, his fingers pausing as they brushed against mine.

“I can send that for you so you don’t get your hands dirty,” he murmured, rolling the paper tightly and slipping it into a tube. What nonsense. I was a walking mud pile. If anything, he should be worried that my touch would soil the parchment. He searched the cages until he found one labeled Rookwyn Castle and fastened the tube to the bird’s leg.

“Thank you,” I said, watching as he carried the bird to the window and let it flutter out.

“Do you...do you want to get something to eat?” he asked awkwardly. “Together?”

“I’d rather get cleaned up first.” I’d never felt more self-conscious about my appearance. What I wouldn’t give for the enchanted wardrobe right now. Would Griffin have duties to attend to, or would I be able to find a way to keep him to myself for just a little while longer?

His shoulders slumped. “Of course. I’ll call for some maids to help and I’ll go?—”

“No, I meant to ask...have...have you played any chess recently?” I couldn’t let him go, not yet.

“No, not really since I saw you last at your ball. Have you?” The moment he said it, he began stumbling all over his words. “Of course not since you’ve been with...unless dragons could...but they can’t move pieces because, you know...claws. I shouldn’t have asked; that was a foolish question. How have you been lately?” I had to smile as he paled again. “Another bad question,” he lamented. “You don’t have to talk about your captivity—what an uncomfortable topic. I mean...we can talk about...”

“Let’s start with a game of chess after I change,” I told him. “We can talk then.”

CHAPTER 12

O h scales, why was he making this so difficult?

If only I could think of Griffin as my next target or as a pampered royal in need of a lesson. In the time it took me to get bathed and changed then get down to the chess table in the gardens, Griffin had shaved and changed into a clean uniform. His gaze was fixed on the board between us, but from time to time, our eyes would briefly meet, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to remain focused on the board.

In contrast to our last match, we were relatively secluded, and other than the occasional passing gardener, we were left entirely alone. No crowd gathered to watch us play and rather surprisingly, no one came to check on me.

“I told them you would want some peace and quiet,” Griffin admitted when I voiced my observation, then looked stricken. “But I’m glad to get you anything you want, or?—”

“No, I’m fine here.” More than fine , I added in my mind.

This time, Griffin delivered checkmate without hesitation.

“Good game,” I told him, automatically reaching my hand out to shake his. He took it, not flinching at all from my cold fingers, and didn’t let go. The seconds stretched longer and longer, but neither of us broke contact. Normally, it was easy to think of things to say when it came to conversing with men, but with Griffin, I found myself tongue-tied.

His gaze dropped to study my hands, and he shifted his grip so he was able to examine my hands, then swallowed so hard that I saw his throat convulse. “Your...your nails are very nice,” he told me, tracing his finger along the manicured edges. “They’re very strong. That must come in very handy when you need to...to pick out a wrong stitch or...or scratch an itch or something.”

Oh, the sweet man. He had absolutely no idea how to woo women, but I left my hand in his grasp all the same.

“I’m glad you didn’t let me win this time,” I said quietly. The only sounds were of the fountain’s trickling water and birds chirping merrily to each other as they fluttered about in the gardens.

“I always appreciate a worthy opponent. I’m sure you’ll get me next time.”

Next time. He wanted to see me again. What if I told Father that Griffin was responsible for my rescue? By Father’s own decree, if Griffin was a nobleman, he would have been given my hand in marriage. What would happen if someone who wasn’t of noble birth rescued me? Unease knotted behind my sternum. I found Griffin attractive and I admired his prowess in chess, and I’d allowed myself a few harmless daydreams, but that didn’t mean I actually wanted to marry him. I barely knew him. If Father’s decree was to be followed, Griffin would have to kill Pollox, and I didn’t want that to happen either. If Father had me marry anyone, it would probably be the obnoxious knight who’d rescued me.

Guilt nudged me. I hadn’t really thought about the knight once since seeing Griffin, and he was still captured. Quite selfishly, after how I’d been treated, I didn’t care if the knight was comfortable at all. Let him fret. Pollox would be coming back soon, demanding a ransom. How long did I have with Griffin before that happened?

A gardener walked past, and Griffin hastily released my hand. “I need to ask you if

the dragon has any weaknesses I should know about,” he said.

“No,” I answered quickly. I didn’t want anyone to hurt Pollox. I didn’t even know if he could be hurt. “There’s nothing.”

“In the village you escaped to the day after you were taken, you told them that he had an injured wing.”

“It got better.”

Griffin chewed on his lip and thought before brightening again. “What about something he really likes? If there were a way to lure him into a trap...”

“He likes treasure, but everyone already knows that. His hoard is massive and he’s very clever. I don’t think he would fall for a trap.”

“Every dragon has a weakness. It doesn’t have to be an item, it could even be a...”
His voice tailed away.

“A what?”

He drew a deep breath. “It could be a person. Does the dragon ever act possessive of you?”

Ice flooded my veins. “I’m not sure,” I lied. “I don’t...I don’t talk to him much.”

“He’s never tried to claim you for his hoard or anything? It would be unusual dragon behavior if he didn’t. If he’s keeping you locked up...”

“What if a dragon did claim a person for their hoard?” I asked. “Hypothetically, of course.”

Griffin looked very serious. “Then I would recommend that the person get away as far and as fast as they can. Dragons cannot be trusted, no matter how friendly they sometimes seem.” He took my hand. “I want you to be safe.”

Another gardener passed, and Griffin released me once more. If only Pollox had captured Griffin so he and I could be alone together to talk.

“The pigeon should be delivering the message to your father about now,” Griffin breathed. “You’ll be back home before you know it.”

“That’s wonderful,” I said, unable to inject much enthusiasm into my voice. If I stayed, I would be rushed back to where I was a mere pawn to my father, back to being one of the royals that my subjects all hated. The prospect held no joy for me. Life with Pollox was so much simpler and enjoyable—swindle the rich who refused to help others and avoid having rotten tomatoes thrown at me. All I needed to do now was find a way to redistribute what I’d taken without being recognized.

“It’s getting late,” Griffin said, glancing up at the setting sun. “The dinner bell will ring soon and I’m expected in a council meeting. It’s about the dragon situation, so they may call you to give testimony and to debrief you.”

“Oh.”

“We’ll find a way to kill the dragon so it never troubles you again,” Griffin told me, smiling reassuringly. “And we can do so much good with the dragon parts. Did you know a dragon heart will make someone invincible? And a dragon’s blood, when applied to a wound?—”

I lost track of what he was saying as my loyalty to Pollox reared its head, but what was I to do? I couldn’t very well beg them to not go forward with the plan, but if Griffin was right and Pollox was dangerous and possessive, I had to do something.

What if he had claimed a different girl who wasn't able to handle a dragon the way I could? Should I talk to Pollox about it? I certainly didn't want to think about him being killed and picked apart for anyone's personal gain.

The evening meal flashed by. Just as Griffin had predicted, I was quickly whisked off to a debriefing meeting right after eating.

"My apologies if this seems calloused to ask so soon after you got here, Princess," the captain of the guard said, "but we must know everything you can tell us about the dragon. Based on previous experience, I assume he'll be back tomorrow to demand a ransom for Drake, and we need to be prepared. Anything you can tell us will help."

My declaration that Pollox belonged to my hoard floated back to me, echoing in the back of my mind. A dragon protects their hoard. Pollox was part of my hoard.

"His cave is almost impossible to get to for humans," I told them, "but he keeps his prisoners in the forest tower, where I was held hostage. The knight who came for me?—"

"Drake," the captain supplied.

"Drake, then, will probably be held there. He was the only one able to find a successful escape. He smuggled rope under his armor and carried me down."

"Good idea, Griffin," the captain said, nodding at the squire to commend him. "Your plan worked. Well done."

Griffin shrugged modestly and didn't say anything, but I lost track of what I'd planned to say next. Griffin was the one who'd come up with that plan? Why hadn't he told me when we were playing chess? And why hadn't he been the one to come for me if it was his plan? Drake's comment about sacrifice rang in my ears. He had

been merely parroting Griffin's words.

"So...what defenses does the dragon have?" the captain asked me. "Traps? Terrain advantages? Enchantments?"

"He's a dragon. He doesn't need any defenses besides his hide, and I was being held prisoner most of the time, so it wasn't like I could scope out the landscape."

"How often does he leave his lair? Is there a specific time of day or night, or is there a pattern?"

I chewed my tongue, hoping that I looked as though I was trying to remember, rather than thinking how to phrase things so it was believable without endangering Pollox.

"I never picked up on a pattern. There were times when he would stay close for days, then he would disappear for hours, but it could have been any time of the day or night."

One of the knights let out an oath, and Griffin elbowed him in the ribs and hissed, "Language! There's a lady here," under his breath.

"Describe the interior of the tower where you were held. Was there an exit? Trapdoors? Any structural weaknesses?"

The questioning lasted for what felt like hours as they had me list out everything I could about the tower turret inside and out, then grilled me about Pollox's habits, personality, mannerisms, weaknesses, and strengths, as well as any information passed to me by past rescuers, and about a hundred other things. By the end of the interrogation, my brain felt like a wrung sponge. Any information I could divulge to appear helpful I did so, all while withholding the crucial details and still gleaning tidbits about their plans to pass to Pollox once I went back to him.

It was well after nightfall by the time we finished, and even after I was dismissed, the others stayed later to attend to the mundane matters of duty rotations and annual training.

“I’ll walk you to your quarters,” Griffin offered without hesitation. Another squire chuckled softly and shot him a not-so-discreet wink that made heat rise to my cheeks.

“Come back quickly,” the captain ordered, waving his hand to allow Griffin to leave.

“Sorry about all that,” Griffin said as he walked me along the dark corridors. “I told them you wouldn’t want to be interrogated.”

“It was necessary,” I told him, distracted by how Griffin’s arm felt beneath my fingers. “The dragon has been a problem for a few years and needs to be dealt with.”

“I’m just glad it hasn’t killed more people than it already has,” he answered dejectedly.

Once again, my heart froze. “What deaths? I hadn’t heard of any.” If I had, I never would have sought out Pollox in the first place.

Griffin appeared surprised. “Not in Rookwyn, but the dragon killed several villagers in Brookshire last year, that town on the other side of Coronis’s border. Did they not send word?”

“If they did, Father and his advisors didn’t inform me.” How could I have missed such crucial information?

“That’s why we’re so concerned. I worried that the dragon might have...I worried that you might not survive. I’m glad you’re safe.”

“He never tried to hurt me,” I said, slightly defensively. “And I never saw him hurt anyone else, not seriously, anyway.”

He was quiet as we walked past a few guards, all stationed near windows and staring out at the starry sky. “Princess Rapunzel?” Griffin began cautiously.

“Just Rapunzel is fine.”

He hesitated. “Rapunzel, may I ask you a question?”

“If I can ask you one in return.”

The corner of his mouth tugged upward. “That’s fair. I wanted to ask once more if you are sure the dragon has never tried to stake a claim on you. Dragons don’t harm their hoard, and if he considers you part of that, he wouldn’t have tried to injure you, but...”

“He...he may have said something at one point. It’s hard to remember,” I answered evasively. “But I’m here now, so it doesn’t matter if he did try to claim me, right?”

Griffin’s jaw locked.

“Right?” I probed.

“I wish I could say that was true. I don’t mean to alarm you, but dragons never relinquish their holds on what they have claimed as their own. He will come for you, and he may try to kill anyone who attempts to stop him from taking you.”

My and Pollox’s scheme to swindle riches from royalty suddenly felt much more dangerous than I was prepared to handle. What had I gotten myself into?

We reached the door to my chamber, but I didn't release Griffin's arm.

"You said you had a question for me, too?" Griffin asked, placing his hand over mine where I held onto his arm.

I pulled my thoughts away from the mental image of Pollox incinerating villages. I didn't even know if that had been him. It might have been some other dragon. It took me a moment to remember what I'd intended to ask Griffin. "During the debrief, they said that you were the one who came up with the plan to have the rope underneath the armor. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you come for me if you were the one who came up with the plan?"

He ducked his head and shuffled his feet. "I'd rather not say. It's embarrassing."

Did he not care for me the way I thought he did? Wasn't he motivated by the reward of marrying me? But of course...he wasn't nobility. Father wouldn't allow such a marriage.

"I answered your question," I reminded him.

A faint blush colored his cheeks. "Well, to tell you the truth...I wasn't sure if I was strong enough to carry you down, and I didn't want the mission to fail because I was too weak. I didn't know if you would be able to climb down yourself, and I wanted to send the person most likely to succeed. Drake is the strongest climber I know. I want you to be safe, even if I couldn't be the one to rescue you. I would have liked to be, but I wouldn't have been able to carry you for that long"—he slapped himself on the forehead—"I'm not trying to say that you're heavy! Just in case you wondered I thought you're....uh, this isn't coming out the way I meant...I'm just..." He gestured

at his arms. He wasn't nearly as muscular as Drake was, but he was a far cry from a scholar's spindly physique.

I placed a hand on his chest. "I understand what you meant. I would have liked for it to be you, but Drake barely managed to get me down as it was. We ended up falling into a bush."

Griffin let out a soft chuckle.

"Then I swallowed a bug on the way here."

His gaze fell to rest on my mouth. "That couldn't have tasted good."

"I'll admit it wasn't my favorite meal."

"And it wasn't my favorite idea to let some other man rescue you, either, but I couldn't think of any other way."

The seconds stretched longer and longer, but neither of us made any attempt to break the silence or look away. Was he going to kiss me? How long had it been since I'd kissed anyone? Not since I drugged Harold with my wyrmsleep-laced lipstick, and that had been an extraordinarily unsatisfactory kiss. But a kiss with Griffin wouldn't just be some ploy or prank. It would mean something. It would be real.

"Griffin!" someone called from down the hall. Instantly, Griffin and I sprang apart. Another squire jogged up. "The captain wants you back in the meeting. He said it's urgent."

"I'm coming," Griffin told him before he turned and bowed to me. "Have a good night, Princess."

“Good night.” I watched him walk back down the hallway, listening to his friend chattering away about what he had missed in the meeting, saying he should have stayed because now Griffin got the worst shifts that no one else had claimed.

I would miss him when I went back to Pollox.

CHAPTER 13

I couldn't stop myself from checking the sky every few minutes the next morning. When would Pollox come? The captain of the guard had called for me and was waiting in the courtyard with several bleary-eyed knights and squires, each looking more somber than the last. Griffin wouldn't look at me at all.

"We have a proposition," the captain told me in a tone that suggested that whatever he was about to say was an order rather than a suggestion. "The dragon is due to arrive and demand payment any time now."

"Right." Surreptitiously, I looked around, keeping an eye out for catapults or steel netting. What did they have in mind?

"We need you to go back with the dragon."

I blinked, shocked that they would suggest such a thing.

"I know what you must be thinking," the captain went on in a hurry. "But we have reason to believe that the dragon won't harm you, and we need an insider for the mission we have in mind."

Still, Griffin wouldn't look at me. Had he told them all how Pollox had claimed me for his hoard? Griffin told me that dragons didn't harm what they took possession of, but if there had been deaths, was he really willing to gamble my safety?

"We are working to secure some dragonsbane," the captain continued. "It's a drug

that weakens dragons, but it has to be in very close proximity to work. The plan is that you will deliver Drake's ransom to the dragon, who will, unfortunately, probably take you into his possession once more. Once we have secured the dragonsbane, Griffin here has volunteered to deliver it to you. When you get it, you simply put it where you know the dragon will inhale it or somehow get it into or onto him, and it will weaken him enough that he can be killed."

"How long does it weaken him? Forever?"

"No, a few hours at best, depending on how much is inhaled or how long it is in contact with his hide," Griffin said, speaking to my shoes. "It's very rare, so not much is known about it."

"When will it come?"

"We don't know yet," the captain answered. "As soon as possible, but it could be a few days to a few weeks. I'm sorry to put this on you, Princess, but we couldn't think of any other way to kill the dragon."

I put on a brave face. "I'll do it."

It was just as well. I had questions for Pollox, many of them. For whatever Griffin had said, I hadn't ever seen Pollox behave cruelly, and I'd certainly never seen him kill a person, even if he joked about eating them occasionally. But were they just jokes? Was Pollox the monster Griffin claimed, or was he the friend I trusted? If he was trustworthy then he wouldn't harm me, and if he was the possessive dragon Griffin described, he still wouldn't harm a part of his hoard. I was safe either way, right?

The alarm gong sounded, and a cry came up from the soldiers standing watch. "The dragon! The dragon is coming!"

“This is it,” Griffin said. Even though there were people watching, he reached for my hand, then after hesitating for a fraction of a second, crushed me into a tight hug. “Stay safe.”

A shadow briefly passed over us as Pollox came soaring out of the sky, with Drake squealing beneath him, trapped within the confines of his claws. Pollox circled the castle then plummeted straight down toward us. With a cry, Griffin threw his body in front of mine, trying to protect me, but Pollox’s wings flapped open at the last moment so he landed just beyond the moat.

“Bring me the princess,” Pollox bellowed. His voice vibrated the very stone. “I know you have her. And fetch the ransom if you want this piglet back.”

Two servants came into view, tugging a heavy treasure chest on a small cart as the captain took me by the upper arm and led me over the drawbridge. A small crowd of people all clustered close behind us, including Griffin, who kept his hand on the small of my back. The moment I came into view, Pollox’s orange eyes fixed onto my blue ones.

“Give her to me. Now,” Pollox snarled, smoke furling from both his nostrils.

“Send the knight over,” the captain called. “We have your ransom.”

“I’ll take the ransom and the girl before I release him.” Pollox’s tail curled around Drake’s middle and turned him upside down so he turned purple in the face. “I assure you I have no interest in keeping a prisoner as obnoxious as this one, and if you don’t send the ransom, I’ll let you have him back as soon as I’m in the air again. How good are you at catching?”

“Send her over!” Drake spluttered. “Hurry!”

“My hero,” I grumbled before stepping forward.

Pollox swiftly dumped Drake onto the grass, wrapped his tail around me, snatched at the treasure chest, and launched himself into the air, all within a few seconds. I closed my eyes as we rocketed upward. The takeoff was always the most unpleasant part, and I had to endure the few moments of nausea while my stomach took time to remember it hadn’t been left behind.

From far below, I heard Griffin call out, “Rapunzel!” but his voice was soon lost to the roaring wind.

Pollox’s powerful wings beat the air, rushing us away from the castle. As soon as it was out of view, Pollox deposited me onto his back, where a rope encircled his neck like a large necklace. I wrapped my hands around the rope and straddled the spot where his neck curved into his back, reveling in how my skirts flapped back in the wind, pushed up so that the brisk air around us chilled the outermost part of my thigh while Pollox’s heated body warmed my inner legs. Glancing down, I saw the treasure chest still clutched in his claws.

“You got it!” I called.

Pollox let out his sawing laugh. “We’ll have to open it first to make sure they didn’t fill it with rocks instead of gold, but odds are in our favor. Having human hostages is the best idea I ever had. I don’t even need to pick many arrows out of my scales now. They are too scared to do anything that might hurt whoever I’m holding.”

“Getting you a human hostage was the best idea I ever had,” I corrected him. “I was the one who came to you, remember?”

“Ah yes. That entitles you to what, one tenth of the treasure?”

“Try to cheat me and find out what happens! I’m not afraid to put you in your place.” Even as I teased him, I couldn’t help remembering Griffin’s warnings.

“Cave or tower?” Pollox asked, turning smoothly to catch a different air current.

“Cave first,” I decided. “I’m hungry.”

* * *

The meal was much more sumptuous than anything I’d had at the castle. “You’re very quiet,” Pollox commented. “Did any of the humans bother you? I can eat them for you if you’d like.”

My stomach lurched, and my pudding looked much less appetizing. “No, nothing like that.”

“Then what is it?”

“Have you actually eaten people?” The question sprang from my mouth. “Truly?”

Pollox fixed me with a beady stare. “No. There’s too much fabric on people. Then the metal plating on knights would get stuck in my teeth, and dragon-sized toothpicks are hard to come by.”

I studied my plate. “Have you killed any humans, then?” I felt sick even asking.

“Why do you ask?”

My stomach convulsed. “Someone told me that you had.”

“And you trust their answer over mine? I thought we were friends.”

“You haven’t given me an answer,” I pointed out. “You only said you hadn’t eaten any.”

“Would it matter if I had?”

“Yes! It matters a great deal to me.”

Pollox looked at me a long time. “No,” he finally responded. “I’ve never killed any humans.”

Far from making me feel better, the sinking feeling in my stomach grew. Either Pollox or Griffin was lying, or else Griffin had been misinformed. Who was right? And how was I supposed to tell the difference?

“I don’t kill humans,” Pollox told me, as gently as possible.

“Have other dragons?”

“Yes.”

A tiny flame of hope held out. Griffin could have heard about another dragon and assumed it was Pollox. Pollox had never lied to me before that I knew of, but neither had Griffin.

“This troubles you?”

“Of course. I don’t want humans to be killed.”

“Humans have killed dragons before. Should I believe the worst of you because of what other humans have done?”

I pressed my hands against the sides of my head. It was exhausting to try to work out who was right and who was wrong. But then again, who was I to judge when I was swindling everyone I met?

“Want to come with me to put the ransom away?”

“All right.” I followed Pollox, arms crossed tightly across my chest. Pollox placed the ransom into the treasure room and I stared around at everything. No matter how many ransoms we were paid, the hoard never overfilled.

“Where is that necklace with pink gemstones?” I asked suddenly. “I don’t see it.” In one of the previous sacks of treasure, I’d found a set of jewelry I particularly liked, but now, it seemed to have vanished.

“I moved it.”

“To where?”

“To my collection.”

“You mean it’s in the room you won’t show anyone?”

“Sort of.”

“What do you mean, sort of ?”

Pollox’s tail twitched, flicking from side to side like a cat. “Do you consider me part of your hoard?”

“Yes. Just as I’m part of yours.”

“So I can trust you with my secrets?”

I hesitated. What sort of secrets was he talking about? “Yes, you can. We’re friends, aren’t we? Friends tell each other everything. I was interrogated when I was at the castle, but I made sure to protect you and not to divulge anything important.”

“Then follow me. I think you’ve proven yourself worthy to know.”

About to burst with curiosity, I followed. At the very end of the hall, Pollox pressed his muzzle against the last door. The moment it swung open, I looked inside, prepared to see fabulous treasures beyond my imagination. Instead, the room was dim and filled not with gold or gemstones, but with an odd assortment of everyday items—a farmer’s hat, a pair of shoes, some worn books, and a crocheted blanket.

“I don’t understand.”

“You said you considered giving away part of your treasure to the people in need, correct?” he asked.

“Right. I just don’t know how to do that while pretending that I’m imprisoned.”

“I do something similar. I will occasionally give things to those I deem most in need, and that is what I did with the necklace.”

“Wouldn’t people be scared of you when they see you?”

“They don’t know it’s from me, and I go at night. Most people have wishing altars in their gardens. They place a small offering on it when they are in need. I take whatever they have to give and leave something in its place. I’ve been seen a few times, but who would believe them if they said a dragon was parting with its hoard?”

My heart warmed. “You’re giving away your treasure?”

“Sometimes. Other times it’s livestock. I didn’t realize that you had such a strong attachment to the necklace or I wouldn’t have given it away. I got this for it instead.” Pollox nudged a homemade doll. “I gave the necklace to a young girl and she offered it as a trade.”

I picked up the doll and stroked the coiled hair. “I’m glad you did.”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t give away any of your things.”

“Please do next time. I’ll even come with you.”

“What?”

“A dragon protects its hoard,” I told Pollox. “And I’m still the crown princess. It’s my duty to take care of them, and this is a way I can.”

I laid my head against his warm side. Griffin, however well-intentioned, must have been misinformed. Pollox wasn’t a monster at all.

CHAPTER 14

My tower room had never felt as lonely as it did that night. Moonlight streamed through the open window to illuminate the twinkling gemstones set into the wardrobe, but at that moment, it appeared cold and empty. I'd never appreciated the company of others until it had been stripped away. The time I'd spent with Griffin before Pollox took me back had made me hungry for more companionship. Now that it was gone, I craved it more than ever.

For several minutes, I let my mind construct images of talking and laughing with a friend, even allowing it to plaster Griffin's face onto the daydreams, but such pale imitations of a genuine relationship still fell far short of what I needed. I could even forgo having a romantic relationship if I could just have some physical contact. I would wither away and die otherwise. Someone simply being in the same room with me would go a long way.

I stared at the wardrobe, which cracked its door open to imitate a wave. A wardrobe, even if an enchanted one, wasn't alive enough to fulfill my need for conversation and friendship. But it did house a way to get to Pollox.

I debated. Whatever Griffin said, I'd never seen Pollox injure anyone either, and he had proved that he cared for his hoard. He also claimed that I was part of that hoard. Did his care extend to being emotionally available to me? Or did he only mean that he would provide the necessities of life? If only Griffin or a handmaiden or someone were here with me. I would even have accepted a conversation with my father. All alone at night, I couldn't help but feel like there was no one who would care or even notice if I disappeared.

My feet swung out of bed and I was halfway to the wardrobe before I realized what I was doing. I paused with my fingers on the wardrobe's handle. Was it worth the discomfort and pain of going through the portal to see Pollox for a few minutes then returning? What would I even say to him? Would he laugh at me for making up some excuse to have a conversation?

I decided I didn't care. With a deep breath, I shoved the dresses aside and stepped into the wardrobe, shutting the door firmly behind myself. "To the cave, please," I told the wardrobe, then scrunched my eyes closed.

The unsettling feeling wasn't quite as bad as I remembered, but it was very close. My stomach still knotted and I felt like I'd been plunged into an ice bath then stabbed, but almost as soon as it started, the sensation faded. The dresses around me had vanished, and I pushed out into the cave.

Pollox lifted his head from where he'd been lying curled up like some massive, scaly cat. He'd clearly been sleeping. Would he be angry that I woke him?

"What, do you need another scheming session? I thought our next plan was already laid out. Or is there a knight I need to come drive away from the tower and I missed the enchantment's alarm?"

I swallowed, trying to find the right words but everything I planned to say sounded stupid in my head.

Pollox tilted his large, horned head to the side. "You hate using that wardrobe. Why did you do it? Are you injured?"

I was tempted to lie. I wanted to have a valid reason for disturbing a sleeping dragon and hated the feeling that I was like a child running to a parent after a nightmare. But now that I was here, I didn't want to lie. I wanted someone I could be honest with.

“No, it’s nothing like that. I just...I just want a friend right now,” I told Pollox, staring at a point over his ridged back so I didn’t have to make eye contact. Would he laugh at my human need for companionship?

“You’re lonely?”

“You could say that.”

A full minute of silence passed. When Pollox spoke again, his voice was surprisingly soft and gentle. “I’m glad to be a friend for you anytime you wish. Are you cold?”

“Always,” I answered with a laugh, feeling as though the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders.

“Come.” Pollox lifted one of his wings.

“You won’t eat me, will you?” I teased.

“No, I told you: Humans wear clothing, and that would taste terrible.”

“I thought you don’t have taste buds.”

“I don’t. But I still don’t want scraps of fabric to get stuck between my teeth. Then you’d be in charge of picking it out and if I remember right, you told me I have sulfur breath.”

I laughed quietly and eased myself down to sit on the hard ground and lean against Pollox’s furnace-like side.

“That can’t be comfortable.” Pollox’s tail prodded me back to standing. “Climb up.”

“Onto you?”

“I thought you said you were cold.”

“I am.”

“Then climb onto me. You’ll be warmer.”

After a second’s hesitation, I stepped onto the bend in Pollox’s leg and hoisted myself up to sit on his side, which gently rose and fell as he inhaled and exhaled.

His wing draped around me like a massive, leathery blanket. “Better?”

I relaxed against his side, warm as any hot spring, and closed my eyes, basking in the smoky scent of the cave. The blessed heat seeped through my dress and drove away not only the chill I always felt, but also the loneliness that had been so pervasive.

Pollox shifted, looping his tail back around his body. I traced my fingers along the scales that supported me, marveling at how they were simultaneously harder than refined iron and yet more comfortable than the softest lamb’s skin.

“Good haul today,” I said casually to Pollox. He turned his sharp head to stare at me. The eyes that had once struck fear into my heart now caused my lips to twitch into a smile. I unearthed a silver coin from my pocket and flicked it at him. It bounced harmlessly off his snout, tingling away across the stone floor until it stopped at the base of a mound of our golden loot. I watched it spiral to a stop then added, “We have quite the racket going on.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “It seems that fortune smiled upon us both when it brought us together.”

“Fate had nothing to do with that. I was the one who suggested this scheme, don’t you remember?”

“Vividly.” Pollox curled up so that I felt like I was lying on top of an enormous cat, his head resting next to mine. I reached over to scratch at the base of one of the horns on his head, and Pollox closed his eyes lazily. It was wonderfully comfortable, much better than lying in the fancy beds back home with several warming pans filled with coals beneath my sheets.

“The way that Drake went running back across the drawbridge today...” I chuckled. “If he had been a dog, his tail would’ve been between his legs.”

“One would think that these kingdoms want their men back with the prices they are willing to pay, but judging by his behavior, I’m not sure why anyone would want someone like that back.” He set his head back on the floor. “You have a good temperature. You can sleep with me anytime you feel lonely.” Pollox yawned hugely so I saw every one of his pointed teeth, then went on sleepily, “I’m sure your kingdom will want you back too. Your father will think I stole from his hoard.”

“I voluntarily left. I’m still a person with free agency and I can leave any hoard anytime I want, right?”

Pollox had already closed his eyes and didn’t answer, and I didn’t press my question. The heavy weight of his wing pressing against me gave me just enough comfort that I was able to convince myself that if he had been awake, he would have agreed with me.

CHAPTER 15

“You’re sure about this?” Pollox asked me the following evening. It was just beginning to get dark, and he and I had spent the greater part of the day debating which of the treasure we could part with.

“Positive. If you can part with some of your hoard, I can too,” I answered, closing the lid to the heavy chest and securing it. “Besides, it’s not like I’m even giving it away.”

“Is that so?”

“Well, if the kingdom is like my hoard, then I’m simply relocating my treasure to a different part of my hoard. I haven’t lost it at all.”

He laughed. “Spoken like a true dragon.”

“There.” I gave the trunk a final pat and climbed up to straddle Pollox’s back. “That should hold.” My wardrobe had provided me with black leggings and a simple black tunic, perfect for our task, and I had my hair braided tightly around my head so I was able to pull the hood up to hide my blonde curls. The outfit even had a black mask so I could conceal my face.

So this must be what bandits felt like—secretive and powerful.

The moonless night was perfect for the reverse robbing we had in mind. Pollox would soar through the air almost as silently as an owl, and close to whichever home he had in mind, then point me in the right direction. It was my task to sneak over, collect

whatever was on their offering altar, and leave something else in its place.

It was a rush each time I crept toward a darkened house, squinting around in the starlight to ensure I would remain hidden. Even if I was spotted, the black of my clothing and my face being concealed would hide my identity. Each time I dropped a pouch of gold coins on an altar, I was struck again by the irony that I was doing more for my people as a supposedly imprisoned outcast than I ever had done for them as a princess.

One of the roads Pollox landed near looked strangely familiar, but at first, I couldn't remember why. I stared at the dilapidated building ahead, barely visible in the inky sky. The moon's presence wouldn't have made any difference; the heavy clouds smothered the stars. Pollox could have flown directly overhead and no one would be any the wiser in the suffocating darkness.

With a sudden flash, I recalled the scene, which looked so different in the darkness and absent of the hollowed faces of the children staring out at me as the royal carriage had trundled past the day Father made the unilateral decision to give me to whomever would kill Pollox. If any establishment was in need of gold, it was this one. Pollox had wandered off to deposit more treasure somewhere else, and creeping up on the orphanage was much easier than putting on a show for the knights and princes who flocked to the tower, disheartening though it was.

The shabby shutters swung sadly in the breeze, and from somewhere within the orphanage, an infant let out a wail. I crouched beside empty crates stacked beside the kitchen door, staying low enough to the ground that I would blend in with the shadows and clutching the leather pouch of coins in my gloved hand. I stared in through the cracked window, where a woman with dark circles under her eyes entered a room then emerged a few moments later, rocking a baby back and forth in her arms. In a voice hoarse from years of use, the matron began crooning a soft lullaby for the baby. The tune wove through the night, sweet but also heavy from exhaustion.

Even though the darkness ought to hide me completely, I still found myself shrinking into the tiny space between the empty crates and the orphanage wall, willing myself not to be discovered.

“Don’t worry,” the matron cooed to the infant once she finished her lullaby. “You’ll be okay.”

“Is it Freddy again?” came another woman’s voice, just loudly enough that I could hear her words through the hole in the kitchen door’s small window.

“Yes. But most of them are struggling to stay asleep.”

“Of course. They’re all hungry.” There was no mistaking the bitterness in the second woman’s voice.

“We’re doing the best we can,” the older woman answered.

“No thanks to the Dragon King,” the other sneered. “When was the last time we had one of the stipends we were promised?”

“Years,” the matron groaned. There was a creak of wood as she sat down. “We’re fortunate that there are so many generous benefactors nearby.”

“Not generous enough. We still need new thatching on the roof before winter, and the clothing is more patch than—” She broke off as the infant began fussing again.

“A problem to discuss in the morning,” the matron said wearily. “We’ll manage. We always do. But I need to get this one back down.”

They lapsed into silence, but their words stuck with me, combining with a faint echo of Father’s past words, “Charity weakens a kingdom’s spine” until my blood boiled.

Father was refusing to send payments to support orphans and had spent who knew how much gold to host lavish parties when his citizens were starving and in dire need.

This was the result—hungry children and desperate civilians, all while Father turned a blind eye to their needs. Anytime I had voiced my concerns, he had always claimed that things would improve. And until this very moment, I hadn't known how dire a situation people were in. I'd never been so glad to have left.

Abandoning my original plan to leave a few coins, I placed the entire pouch of coins on the back step, where the matron was sure to see it the following morning when she went to fetch water from the well. There was another creak from inside the orphanage, and I froze, terrified of being discovered. The faint candlelight in the window was snuffed out, and footsteps faded down the hall. Perhaps the matron was finally putting the infant back to bed. I managed to breathe again.

It was all Father's fault.

No, I was partially to blame for not doing more to help them. I could have fought harder to have my voice heard. I had some power, even if not all of it. I simply hadn't known how bad the situation was.

I crept back toward the cover of the forest, hating how apathetic I'd been toward my people for the majority of my life.

"So that's where you are."

I nearly leapt out of my skin as Pollox's deep voice rumbled through the darkness.

"By George, Pollox!" I yelped.

His mouth fell open. "There's no need for language like that," he scolded me.

“Shhh, we’ll be caught.” I pressed a hand against my chest to calm my frantically beating heart. “We need to get out of here.”

We took off into the night. Pollox flew toward the tower, but I tugged the reins to veer him to the left. “Can I stay with you again tonight?” I couldn’t be alone again.

“Of course.” He instantly turned and soared back to the cave. I lapsed into silence, unable to tear my mind away from the orphanage.

“You’ve been very quiet,” Pollox told me when we landed. “Are you upset with me for scaring you? It was unintentional.”

I slid off his back and entered the cave, unsure of what to do with myself. I crossed and uncrossed my arms and shifted my weight from side to side, trying to find a good spot to look at so I didn’t have to make eye contact. “I don’t know how you were able to be so quiet when you were creeping up on me, but no, I’m not upset with you.”

“Then what is it? Did you think I would be upset about you giving away your treasure? It’s yours. That’s the nature of having a hoard; you get to do whatever you want with it.”

Griffin’s warning rang in my ears. If Pollox said I could do whatever I wanted with my hoard, that was all well and fine, but what would happen if Pollox wanted to do whatever he wanted with me? What would happen if I displeased him or he got bored of me?

“You said you wanted to be here with me, but you don’t want to confide in me?” There was a thin veil of pain in his voice.

“I don’t want you to laugh at me.”

“I won’t. Why don’t you start by telling me what you were doing?”

“I was giving money to an orphanage.” Once I started talking, I couldn’t stop. “My father was supposed to be sending money to help them, but he hasn’t been, and now there are children going hungry and he doesn’t even care! If he doesn’t even care about that, what else has he been neglecting that I don’t even know about? He’s probably glad that I’m gone, now that I’m not there to challenge him, but if I’m not there, how are things ever going to improve for anyone? Maybe he was right and I should get married. Eventually the kingdom would pass to me and Father would be done with damaging it.”

I drew a deep, shuddering breath. “There are people who are suffering, and the best I can do is give them gold I’ve swindled from other royalty who are just as stingy and cold-hearted as my father. What if I’m just like him?” The weight of the question pressed on my chest as heavily as if Pollox had sat on it. “What if I’m just as tyrannical as my father?”

“Do you want me to listen, or do you want me to answer?” Pollox’s head lowered so he was almost eye to eye with me.

I slumped to the ground. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I want.” What if Pollox answered that he thought I was, indeed, just like my father? I didn’t think I could stand the shame of it.

“You giving your treasure to an orphanage shows that you are kind,” Pollox told me, and I turned to him, desperate for any kind of validation, even if it came from the very dragon who had been plaguing my own kingdom. “You aren’t a tyrant, and you aren’t a monster. You want what is best for your people, and I admire you for it.”

I stared at him, hoping his words were true.

“You’ve been a good friend to me,” Pollox went on. “Even though you’re but a paltry human.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “You need to work on your compliments.”

“Dragons don’t need compliments.”

“Humans do. I thought you said you take care of your hoard.”

“I do.”

“Then if I’m part of your hoard, you should be mindful of my feelings.”

Pollox curled up in his usual spot and opened his wing invitingly so I could lie against him. “Very well, I will do my best to ensure that you feel better.”

I stretched out under Pollox’s wing but found it impossible to bask in the warmth like usual. What about the children in the orphanage? Were they warm enough? Would they be cared for?

CHAPTER 16

“I have a feeling that someone will come today,” Pollox told me the following morning as he took me to the tower room. “You need to be ready.”

Griffin’s promise of coming to bring me dragonsbane floated to the forefront of my mind. “How do you know? Did you expand the enchantment to sense people from farther away?”

“No.” He flexed his wings and beat them on the air but still clung to the tower so that a shingle was pried loose and fell to the ground far below.

“Do you have somewhere you need to be?”

Pollox’s talons scraped against the stone. “Yes, actually.”

“Where?”

“I don’t want to tell you. Not yet, anyway. You have your secrets, and I have mine.”

Considering that I had just poured my heart out to Pollox the night before, this seemed rather unfair.

“You have everything you need?” he asked, already shifting his weight, preparing to take off.

“I guess so. Good luck with your mystery job.” For all I knew, he was off to meet up

with another dragon, or ransack some village, or capture another princess who was less needy than I was.

My chin sank to rest on my hand as I watched Pollox soar away. It had been a long time since he'd gone to hunt. Most likely he was off to get something to eat and didn't want me to watch. Come to think of it, I'd never seen him eat. I was grateful for it, too. I had no interest in watching some poor animal get dismembered and devoured. With a shudder, I pulled my head back in and sought a way to occupy myself.

With each stay, my time in the tower felt more and more lonely. Pollox's magic made it so that the bookcases instantly filled with new stories, and there was no end of sewing and art supplies, but none held my interest. I hoped Pollox was right and someone was coming to try to rescue me. I could use the company.

Hours passed. When I tried to sleep, my mind wouldn't shut down. If I watched for Pollox to return or for a rescuer to enter the meadow below the tower, time only passed more slowly. I changed my clothing and tried restyling my hair half a dozen times, but without anyone but the wardrobe to show off to, it quickly lost its appeal. The only remotely attractive option was to plan out our next swindle. At least that way, I felt like I was doing something that might later benefit people like the ones at the orphanage. If royalty were going to hoard their gold more fiercely than even Pollox did, they ought to have it taken away and redistributed to those who needed it.

It was late in the afternoon before I heard my name being called. I abandoned my sketched map and dashed to the window. Far below, two men stared up at me. I blinked away the dizziness that always came from looking down from such a great height and squinted.

My heart gave a leap. It was Prince Ivan, and trailing several paces behind him, laden down with the heavy armor and shield, was Griffin.

“I’m up here!” I wailed, waving from the tower’s top.

“Princess!”

“Help me!”

Ivan looked truly baffled as he stared up into the sky. I could see his brain working to conjure a plan of how to ascend the tower. He circled the base of the tower multiple times, searching for a door or window through which to enter. Finding none, he scratched his head and kicked experimentally at the stone tower’s bottom. Clearly, problem-solving was not one of his strong suits.

Griffin was the one who came to the rescue. Dropping his load, he approached the prince with a rope over his shoulder and handed it off. He began to speak, but Ivan waved him off impatiently. I watched the two men curiously. Brawny or not, no one would ever be able to throw rope as high as this tower top, even if they were aided by a grappling hook. The laws of physics wouldn’t support it. Ivan was certainly mystified at the predicament as well but refused to let Griffin put in a single word, shooing him away each time he tried to help.

I sank onto the marble bench near the edge of the balcony and folded my arms on the railing. At least I had good entertainment while I waited for Pollox to return from his mystery trip. Griffin, patient as ever, waited while Ivan tried and failed multiple times to throw the rope high enough to either have me catch it or to loop an end around one of the merlons. I wasn’t sure which he intended.

Frustration set in for Ivan, and he kicked the wall again. I sank my chin against my fist, bored with his lack of creativity. Griffin must have shared my sentiment, because behind Ivan’s back, he strung his bow and withdrew a small ball of twine from one of the saddlebags. I perked up as I watched him.

Griffin unraveled the entire ball of twine, whipped knots around the arrow's shaft, then caught my eye and gestured for me to move out of the way. My last fleeting glimpse of the meadow below was of Griffin angling his bow high while Ivan tried unsuccessfully yet again to fling the uncoiled rope in a chaotic tangle up the tower wall.

I pressed myself against the interior wall of one of the merlons, eager not to have an arrow puncture me during a rescue attempt. Within seconds, I heard a clatter. An arrow skittered across the stone floor of the tower top, trailing the thin twine. It skidded to a halt, then began to be pulled backward as the weight of the twine tugged the arrow.

“Grab it, Princess!” I recognized Griffin's voice and snatched up the arrow before it fell back down, then popped my head up above the merlon again. Ivan and Griffin were busily knotting the other end of the twine to the rope, then they waved at me to begin pulling.

Once again, I marveled at Griffin's cleverness. Ivan, who acted as though it was all his idea, called up, “Heave to, Rapunzel! Heave!”

I smiled as I realized that this was the first time in my life that I had ever heard anyone ask a princess to “heave to.” It felt like I was a pirate hoisting the mainsails and entertained myself for a few moments imagining what it would be like to sail across the Seven Realms. I continued to thread the twine through one hand while I used the other to pull up a few feet of twine at a time, but as the majority of the weight I was tugging on became rope instead of twine, my arms protested.

Instead of pulling the rope up, I wound my hands around the twine, turned to loop the string over my shoulder, and trudged to the opposite end of the tower while leaning my weight against gravity's oppositional pull on the heavy rope.

After sweat broke out on my forehead, I decided that sailing the high seas as a pirate was a life I would never want. Eventually, I managed to hoist up the rope and fasten it securely around the merlon. They didn't intend for me to climb down, did they? I could barely look over the edge without feeling light-headed.

Thankfully, that wasn't their intent. Ivan gripped the rope and gave an experimental tug.

After ensuring the rope would hold, he began to climb. I couldn't help but be impressed. He had stripped off his heavy metal armor, but his flexible leather armor and sword still remained, and the tower was incredibly high. But as impressive as it was, my admiration was tainted with regret that it wasn't Griffin scaling the tower instead of Ivan.

Griffin stayed on the ground, calling up encouragement, but about a third of the way up, Ivan shook his head and began sliding back down. I couldn't hear their exact conversation, but Griffin's tone shifted from encouraging to berating as he pointed up angrily and jabbed a finger into Ivan's chest once he returned to the ground. Ivan also gesticulated upward, and I caught words like "impossible" and "fall to my death."

Griffin held out his hand and Ivan placed a small pouch into it. As soon as Griffin had tucked the small pouch into his vest pocket, he turned and took a leap at the rope. My heart pounded. As far as I knew, they only needed to give me the dragonsbane. They could have tied it to the end of the twine and had me draw it up. Did Griffin simply want to see me? Or did they have another plan in mind?

Whereas Ivan had tried to muscle his way up the rope, Griffin cleverly wrapped his foot around the rope, then used the trapped rope as a base for his other foot. It wasn't nearly as impressive-looking, but it was more energy-efficient and clearly worked. My palms began sweating as I held on to the top of the rope, hoping against hope that I wasn't about to see Griffin plummet to his death. He had claimed he wasn't a strong

climber, but his cleverness made up for what he lacked in sheer muscle.

It felt like an eternity before Griffin finally clambered over the merlon, gasping for breath, and dropped to the ground.

“You made it,” I said, dropping to kneel next to him. Behind me, I saw that the room had reverted to the dank prison cell during Griffin’s climb. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I’ll be...fine,” he panted, grasping for my hand even as he stayed on his back, wheezing. “Take...take it.” From his vest pocket, he withdrew a small drawstring bag and pushed it at me.

“It can wait,” I assured him, placing my hand on his chest where his heart was beating wildly.

“No, it can’t,” he groaned, rolling onto his side to push himself up to standing, hands on his knees as he recovered. “Not after the orphanage this morning.”

My blood turned to ice. “What do you mean?”

Griffin slowly shook his head. “The dragon laid claim to a nearby orphanage. He says it’s part of his hoard now.”

It was impossible to breathe. Pollox wouldn’t do something like that. There must be a mistake. Pollox was kind. He wouldn’t do anything to hurt someone, least of all children.

“Was anyone hurt?”

“I don’t know. When I saw what was happening, I told Ivan we needed to get you

immediately. I have this for you. Take it.” He straightened and once again pushed the pouch at me.

Carefully, I tugged it open. Inside, there was a fine purple powder, completely odorless. “Dragonsbane?” I asked, cinching it back up and tucking it into my bodice.

He nodded confirmation. “It was difficult, but we managed to procure some. Keep it safe until the reinforcements come, then throw it on the dragon to weaken him and we’ll be able to kill him.”

I winced slightly, but Griffin didn’t seem to notice. He had looked over the edge of the tower, then quickly retreated back to where I was standing. “This is a lot higher than it looked from the ground.”

“You can’t climb down this soon after climbing up. Your arms must be burning.”

“Not as much as they will be if the dragon finds me here. I don’t know how long he’ll be occupied at the orphanage.”

I shook my head. Did Pollox think me lamenting about the state of my father’s rule was a request for him to take over everything?

“I’ve been worried about you,” Griffin said quietly. His hand lifted to graze across my throat again, pressing along the side of my neck.

Oh scales, how desperately I hoped that Pollox wouldn’t be back for some time. “Can Ivan see us?” I whispered, brushing my hand over Griffin’s chest. His heartbeat had slowed since climbing the rope but was still elevated.

“I don’t think so. But even if he could,” he added defensively, “I’m the one who climbed the tower.”

“Ah,” I teased. “You climbed the tower, so you won the fair maiden? You’re no squire; you’re a knight in shining armor.”

“I wouldn’t say no to earning a kiss from said fair maiden,” Griffin told me, staring steadily at me.

Unprepared for his boldness, I couldn’t resist the smile that spread across my face. “I would like that, too.”

Griffin’s hand crept around to cradle my neck and head while his other arm snuck around to press against the small of my back. I melted against him. How desperately I needed this. “I’m glad you’re here,” I whispered, closing my eyes and waiting for him to kiss me.

“I am, too.” I felt the warmth of his face as he drew nearer.

The kiss never came.

A sudden, powerful burst of air nearly knocked me off my feet, and I dropped to my hands and knees, Griffin falling beside me, as all four of Pollox’s taloned feet hit the tower at the same time, his wings still expanded to their full, and terrifying, size. The normal reddish-brown sheen of his hide had intensified to a deep shade of scarlet, and the heat pouring off him was overwhelming, even for me.

Griffin had no sword, nothing to defend himself against the dragon. The flames in Pollox’s eyes were alive with fury. Even though I knew it was supposed to be an act, a ripple of fear coursed through me. His anger felt real. Steely talons crushed the stone merlon into a fine powder as Pollox advanced, fangs bared and flames licking out of his mouth. Griffin reached for where I’d tucked the dragonsbane out of sight, but before he could lay a hand on it, Pollox attacked. Like a striking serpent, his neck extended and drove his head between me and Griffin, forcing us apart.

“Don’t. Touch. Her.” The grating rasp of Pollox’s voice was amplified to ten times the usual amount, and I found myself trembling with fright as Pollox’s mad eyes drew closer, staring down Griffin. As the dragon loomed over us, his wings nearly blocked out the sun, throwing his form into shadow, lit only by his fiery eyes. Pollox’s tail whipped behind me and gripped Griffin around the middle.

“No! Stop!” I shrieked, but Pollox didn’t appear to have heard me.

With a shout of alarm, Griffin was pulled off his feet and raised to eye level with the dragon. He threw up his hands in a vain attempt to block Pollox’s scorching breath. Pollox shook the squire and hissed, “If you touch her again, it will be the last thing you ever do.” Sparks literally flew from his mouth, and Griffin yelped as the fire singed his hair.

An arrow bounced harmlessly off Pollox’s neck, and I searched for its source. Far below, Prince Ivan had his bow out, valiantly trying to help his squire by loosing arrow after arrow, all of which clattered against the tough dragon hide with no effect. Pollox took off, soaring around the tower as Ivan drew his sword. But it was all for naught. It took Pollox less than a second to shatter the sword with a snap from his massive jaws before he snatched up Ivan as well and flew off over the forest to collect the next ransom, exhaling a long burst of flame as he left.

I ran my fingers over the crushed stone that showed scorch marks from where Pollox had landed in his blaze of anger as a smoky smell filled the air. He had never been so in character before; I still shook from the terror of seeing him as everyone else did.

I pulled the dragonsbane out of my bodice and ran a finger over the bag’s stitching. I’d heard of this substance, but it was extremely expensive and very difficult to come by. I didn’t need it, of course. Pollox would never hurt me. But even so, the image of Pollox’s eyes flaming orange when he snarled at Griffin to keep his hands off me couldn’t be warded off. I had originally thought that it was sweet Griffin was

concerned for me, but maybe he was right—having backup security wouldn't hurt. I stashed it away again, glad of the extra weight that felt like an added protection to me. Even if Pollox did ever try to injure me, at least now I had a way to weaken him.

CHAPTER 17

My unease slowly wore off as the room reverted back to my normal quarters and I wiled away the rest of the afternoon, waiting for Pollox to return. Maybe Griffin hadn't understood what he had seen and Pollox was helping the orphanage. To anyone who didn't know Pollox like I did, he could certainly appear frightening and intimidating. If only I'd had more time to question Griffin about what he'd seen.

Any time Pollox took a new ransom, he always placed it in his hoard, not at the tower. Without a second thought, I entered the wardrobe, closed my eyes against the unpleasant sensation, and stepped out into the cave.

It was empty.

I paced the floor, occasionally running my finger over my lips as I wished that Pollox had arrived later, and simultaneously wishing that Pollox would hurry up and get back soon so I could question him about the orphanage.

When Pollox did finally show up, it was well after sunset.

"Where have you been?" I demanded.

He flexed his wings, looking as proud as any preening peacock. "You don't need to worry about the orphanage anymore."

"Why not?"

“I took care of them.”

“How?”

Pollox sat, reminding me of a dog returning to its master, eager for praise. “You shared some of your treasure with them, as did I.”

“Pollox, did you claim them for your hoard?”

He tilted his head. “Of course.”

“But—”

“I care for my hoard, and I thought you wanted the orphans taken care of.”

“I do.”

“Then there’s no problem, right?”

“You can’t just claim people for your hoard!”

“I claimed you, and you claimed me. Isn’t it rather hypocritical of you to criticize me for something you’ve done?”

I ran my fingers through my hair, unsure of how to answer, so instead I asked very carefully, “What do you think it means to be claimed for a hoard? What does that entail, exactly?”

“When you claim something for your hoard, you promise to take care of them,” he answered simply. “I gave them gold and set up enchantments so they will live more comfortably. I also set up a charm so that if anyone tries to break in, I’ll be alerted.

It's the same one that I have around your tower so I know when someone is trying to come take you away. Now they will be safe, and no one will be able to take the treasure I left for their use."

"Oh." Clearly, Griffin had misunderstood whatever he had seen. "The squire who came today seemed worried about it, and you...you..."

"What?"

"To be completely honest, you scared me today with how you acted toward him. I thought you were about to bite his head off."

Tendrils of steam curled up from Pollox's nostrils, and his scales glowed the same deep red color of a live coal. "Was he the one up on the balcony today?"

"Yes, that's Griffin."

"He's untrustworthy."

"Why do you say that?"

"Didn't you notice where he was reaching? I was protecting you."

Clearly, Griffin had misunderstood what Pollox was doing, and I certainly wasn't about to tell Pollox that Griffin had been trying to retrieve a hidden drug that I'd been given to weaken him. "I've met him before. He's very nice."

A deep thrumming emanated from Pollox and the temperature of the cave increased slightly. "So what does this squire do that's so impressive? Fetch swords and polish armor?"

I frowned. “He’s very good at chess and he’s kind to me.”

“You think he could handle the sort of trouble you get yourself into? Not everyone can keep up with that.”

“I’m sure he would do just fine. He made it up to the balcony, didn’t he?”

“And screamed most of the way back to the castle,” Pollox sulked.

“You’re being ridiculous,” I told him. “Even if I wanted to be with Griffin, I’m a princess and he’s a squire. Nothing can ever happen between us. It’s just as likely that I’d marry you as Griffin.”

Pollox let out a snort of sparks and took a very long time putting away the sack of treasure he’d received as a ransom for Ivan and Griffin. I warmed my hands over the fire that licked the coals laid in the stone ledge that ran the perimeter of the cave.

“Do you wish to be held?” Pollox had emerged from the corridor leading to his hoard.

“What?” I distractedly pulled my thoughts away from the orphanage. “What are you talking about?”

The wing-like extensions at the end of his tail fanned out slightly. “Humans often want to be comforted physically.” It wasn’t a question. “Is that what you were seeking today with the squire?”

I shrugged indifferently. “Every girl likes to feel some muscle every now and again. I’m pretending to be a captive, but I’m not dead. I know all humans are ugly to you, but Griffin is very handsome to human girls.”

Pollox flicked his tail back and forth, as he always did when he was irritated. I

grinned. “Are you feeling jealous? Do you wish that you had a lovely dragoness to snuggle with?”

“Certainly not.”

I walked my fingers up the leathery hide on his front leg and sighed dramatically, “Yes, you are. Just think—you could glide across the skies with her at your side, holding tails, romantically setting fire to all villages you see, but no amount of heat from the flames you belched forth would ever come close to matching the passion that you have for each other.” I batted my eyelashes and feigned swooning.

With lightning-like reflexes, Pollox lifted his leg and trapped me beneath his claws faster than he had shattered Prince Ivan’s sword that day, still taking care not to injure me. I squealed as I was flipped onto my back, then chuckled as I gripped the two talons beside my neck, the underside of his paw holding me to the ground.

“Do you really find it wise to tease a dragon?” His pupils flamed.

“Maybe not wise, but it’s fun. Would your lady friend glow ruby red to match your heart that aches for her? Do you pine in her absence?”

Pollox’s neck snaked around until his large head was right next to mine, and he blew a scorching heat wave into my face. I laughed and covered my eyes. “Just like I thought, you’re nothing but a big bag of hot air!” I coughed and waved a hand in front of my face. “And you have sulfur breath.”

“I think if you hadn’t run away, you would’ve been banished,” Pollox said as he withdrew his claws from where they were caging me in and turned around three times, preparing to go to sleep. “You’re a nuisance.”

“A beautiful nuisance.” I rose and brushed my dress clean.

Pollox exhaled sharply, several sparks showering from his snout. “Humans aren’t beautiful to dragons.”

“I bet you would consider a lady dragon beaut?—”

“I would not.” After Pollox was finished settling down, I climbed into my usual spot on his side and pulled his wing over me for a blanket, reveling in the warmth he provided.

Pollox rested his head on the stone floor, close enough to my hand that I reached out and stroked his head, tracing my fingers along the ridges over his eyes and along his snout. He lazily closed his eyes at my touch. I scratched the spot beneath his horns that he liked so much, then inclined my head to the hole that served in place of his ear.

In a whisper, I said, “If you go to sleep now, you can dream about wooing your drag?—”

“You’d best stop talking before I decide to eat you in your sleep.” He didn’t even open his eyes as he snapped back, but I could hear the amusement in his voice.

I laughed quietly and snuggled into the comfort of the heavy wing draped over me. “Whatever you need to tell yourself. But it would be disappointing if you lost half of our chaotic duo. We make a good team.”

The flames burning in the recessed ledge grew dimmer as we stopped talking. Just before I dozed off, Pollox spoke up again, in a much softer voice than normal. “If you wanted to go back with one of those men one day, I would understand.”

Relief that Pollox didn’t consider me a possession seeped in. “And leave my friend to keep all this glorious gold for himself? No way. I earned that treasure fair and square,

and I am keeping my half to do with what I want.”

“You think we’re friends?” His gravelly voice barely registered with how drowsy I had become. Odd, how much he focused on that part.

I yawned. “Yes. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. Now shut up and go to sleep.”

“I didn’t mean to frighten you today,” Pollox murmured, then I heard his jaw crack from yawning so widely.

“Well then, you failed miserably.” I rubbed my cheek against the dragon’s hide, still marveling at how soft it was despite repelling several arrows that day. Pollox’s snout nuzzled at my arm, and I wrapped it around one of the horns above his ear hole.

Several minutes passed in silence. I had nearly drifted off to sleep when Pollox spoke. “Can you at least express your appreciation at your fake rescues to those men without kissing any of them?”

“Why?” I murmured, barely processing his words. “It works.”

A tremor ran through his wing. “It just seemed superfluous. I don’t want you to be taken advantage of.”

I chuckled. “I’m the one taking advantage of them.”

“I still don’t like it. Those men...they don’t appreciate you. But rest assured that I won’t ever hurt you,” the dragon promised. “And I won’t allow you to ever get hurt either.”

As I drifted off to sleep, I felt at peace. Funny how, even after Griffin’s warnings, I didn’t doubt Pollox’s sincerity. Who could have ever guessed that I would feel safest

around my kingdom's greatest threat? He would never allow me to get hurt, and I would never stand for letting anyone kill Pollox and sell his parts to the highest bidder.

Griffin was wrong. I would never need the dragonsbane he'd given me.

CHAPTER 18

Pollox and I laid low in the cave for a few days, sure that there would be a lapse in attempted rescues after Griffin's failure, and sure enough, Pollox's enchantments didn't alert him to anything at the tower. We invented a new game in which I would fill a goblet of water from the pool at the back of the cavern and fling it into the air. It then became Pollox's duty to vaporize all the water before any hit the ground.

Each time he succeeded, he would lift his head proudly and look in my direction, waiting for admiration, almost like a faithful, house-sized dog.

"I haven't singed you once, either," he noted. "You're always safe with me."

"I've noticed. You're right; you do take excellent care of your hoard."

His taloned feet scraped against the cave floor. "And I always will. Can that squire say the same?"

"Considering that squires rarely have any sort of hoard to speak of, I think that question is moot. It isn't like they are paid well unless they become knights, and slim few come from wealthy families."

Pollox used one of the spikes on his tail to flip over a live coal in the fire, then moodily lumbered down the hall to one of the treasure rooms.

I followed. "Are you feeling jealous? Do you wish to be held, Pollox?" I teased, using his same words from a few nights before as I entered the room filled with gold coins.

“I don’t think you’re capable of holding me.”

I flung my arms around his snout, placing my eyes on level with his. He raised his head so that my feet left the ground. I clung tighter to him, a bubble of laughter escaping as he gently swayed his neck back and forth.

“Don’t you dare let me fall. You may ruin all of this neat organization if I go crashing to the ground.”

Pollox gently set me back down again, but I kept my hand on his snout to absorb the warmth that always radiated from him.

“I need to visit the orphanage again soon,” he noted.

I lay back against his side and stared up at the many shelves filled with chests and sacks of gold. “Are they low on money already?”

“No. I simply want to check on how things are going. I enchanted their table to be like ours—it will fill with food anytime they want it. They have a wardrobe like yours too, except that it won’t transport them here. It just provides clothing. I also have a toy chest that fills with different toys each day. Most will be dragon-themed.”

I snuggled against his tucked-up wing. “You’re the most altruistic dragon I know.”

“And you’re the most diabolical princess I know.”

“A perfect team, then.”

We sat in companionable silence for a time, staring around at our hoard.

“We don’t need ransoms for those men anymore,” Pollox announced suddenly.

I rolled my head around to look at him. “Why not? It’s still working.”

“I don’t like you getting physical with them.”

“It doesn’t mean anything. They are all just after my dowry and the power that comes from marrying my title. Money and power, that’s all they want.” Not Griffin, of course, but all the others.

Pollox’s sawing laugh rumbled around the cavern and echoed down the stone passageway. “That seems rather hypocritical for you to say, as you came to me looking for a share of treasure and protection during your heists.”

I prodded his side. “Hey! That was a purely platonic proposal. I didn’t ever pretend to be in love with you like I’ve done with them. At least there’s that.”

“That’s true,” conceded Pollox. “You’ve never expressed that sort of interest in me.”

“I’d much rather marry you than one of those shallow princes any day.” The casual statement rolled off my tongue even before it registered how absurd it sounded, and a humorous image played in my mind of me walking sedately down the aisle in a long white dress, clutching a bouquet of red and yellow fire lilies, with a gargantuan dragon waiting for me beside the minister with his long, spiked tail curled around the audience sitting in chairs. I smiled to myself and idly began stacking up gold coins from a nearby stack.

“Do you promise?”

I grinned at our new inside joke. “I promise.”

“Do you truly think your father would rather see you unhappily married than happily teamed up with a dragon?”

My small golden tower toppled, and a tinkle of coins rolling across the stone floor jingled through the air. “I actually don’t know,” I confessed quietly, a heavy solemnness pressing on my heart. “Since he began ruling, my father never paid attention to me unless I was misbehaving.”

“Why do you say that?”

I dug my hands into the pile of golden coins, feeling the cold weight press against my skin as I worked my jaw back and forth. “We used to have a lot of fun when I was young. We would tell each other jokes and play games. But once he took the throne, he changed. He started ignoring me. I tried to be good at first. I really did. I knew he would be busier with managing a kingdom, so I would do my lessons and perform my best with my harp and everything to try and earn his praise and attention. But it seemed that the more I tried, the less interest he took in me and the more time he spent drinking with his friends—nobility who were odious at best. No matter what I did, he didn’t care.”

Pollox listened intently, studying me with his unblinking eyes.

“One day, I was practicing my harp in one of the lower rooms and saw a trapdoor built into the ceiling above me. It had a rope attached to it that was hooked onto the wall.” I smiled wistfully. “I was curious, and I pulled it just as Father and one of his friends were walking on the floor above.”

Pollox let out a snort that shot a shower of sparks from his nostrils across the cave, settling on some of the treasure so that it looked alive in all its glittering glory. “I take it your Father assumed you planned it on purpose?”

“He did.” The memory of the duke’s frantically pedaling legs descending through the trapdoor as he let out a high-pitched squeal of terror would always be one of the most amusing of my life, and it never failed to bring a smile to my face. “The funny thing

is that even though his friend was livid, Father almost seemed proud of me then. For days afterward, he asked me over and over how I had planned the timing so perfectly. It was easier to lie than to tell him the truth—that it had been an accident. He was so impressed with my supposed brilliance, he even told his advisors that I would have a great future as a military strategist. So I began planning a real prank and after I pulled it off, I just never stopped. I keep hoping that somewhere under his cold greed, the man I used to know is still there.”

I found that it was much, much easier to stare at the gold than to face Pollox. I felt the heat of his wing drape over me and come to rest around my shoulders. Closing my eyes to keep the tears at bay, I managed to say, “I suppose that’s why I was so hesitant to marry any of the men my father recommended. Even though I want to make him proud, I don’t trust his judgement anymore, and I don’t think he cares for me at all now. You’ll notice he’s never once showed up here to see if I’m all right. It’s been months. I know he’s busy, but...I’m still his daughter.”

Finding it much easier to keep my voice from shaking, I focused on throwing coins to land in a sack a short distance away. “Pathetic, isn’t it? Knowing how much I still crave my father’s attention when I know he makes poor choices and he doesn’t love me in return. It’s no wonder our people hate him.” I picked up a fat coin and stared at the engraved coat of arms pressed into it, as if determined to memorize the pattern. “I shouldn’t care if he’s proud of me or not. I’m not proud of him. I’m ashamed of what he’s become.”

Pollox’s giant snout gently grazed my cheek. “For what it’s worth,” he rumbled, “I’m proud of you. You are one of the few humans I can actually tolerate, and that is a feat worth celebrating. I’m glad you felt safe confiding in me.”

The steady drip of water falling from the stalactite’s point into the pool at the rear of the chamber was the only sound for several minutes as I sat, drawing comfort from Pollox’s presence. I’d never spoken of the true motives for my chaotic behavior to

anyone before, and having done so felt like a tether hooking my soul to Pollox's, binding them together. The vulnerability felt foreign, but in a reassuring, consoling way. How ironic that the one I trusted the most had been deemed the least trustworthy creature in all the kingdom?

"Have you shared such things with any of the men who've been to the tower before?" Pollox asked, his hot breath swirling around me and warming my constantly cold fingers.

I let out a short bark of laughter. "Never. I can't let them know I actually have a conscience. Heaven forbid one of them try to use it to manipulate me."

"Would that be so bad? Do you want to be alone your whole life?" Pollox shifted his weight, curling tighter into a ball just like a cat. I nestled into a comfortable spot behind his wing joint.

"I suppose not. But I can't imagine a future with them." If only Griffin were higher-ranking.

"How will you find a match if you push everyone away and refuse to let them see you for who you are? They would like you if they got to know you; I do."

"Yes, but the difference is that I actually like being around you." Again, Griffin's face resurfaced, and this time, I let that vision hover in my mind's eye. He wasn't a prince or a knight, but he was humble and honorable, was intelligent and still treated me with respect even though I knew the servants talked and would have passed multiple horror stories about me to him. I just needed to find someone like him to marry.

Pollox's wing around me just as good as any hug. "I like being around you too. You're the most treasured part of my hoard. Don't be so scared of commitment. One

day, you'll want to get married."

I closed my eyes. "Not any time soon. It's easier to be feared than liked, and besides, I just promised to marry you one day."

A few sparks danced up to the ceiling as Pollox let out a chuckle. "Spoken like a truly feral princess, ready to wed a dragon."

"Lucky you."

"It is lucky me." He curled his tail around my waist. "I don't intend on ever letting you escape."

"Well, that sounds possessive and creepy."

"I'm a dragon; what do you expect?"

I swatted lightly at the tail binding me to Pollox's side. "That you allow me to make my own choices. If I want to leave, I can."

Smoke furred from Pollox's nostrils and he lazily closed his eyes. "If you say so."

CHAPTER 19

I jerked awake when Pollox rose suddenly, head raised and alert. “Wake up,” he told me. “There’s someone at the tower. Quick, into the wardrobe. I’ll give you some extra time; try to get some information about how your people are doing when you escape this time.” He nudged me with his snout. “I’ll make sure they don’t take you too far.”

Still bleary-eyed, I stumbled out of our treasure room and wrenched open the wardrobe door. One stomach-dropping moment later, I hopped out in my tower room and ran to the balcony, where I heard a familiar voice shouting my name in the weak morning light.

“Griffin!” He had come alone this time, with a great deal of rope looped around his shoulder. He tried to call up to me, but the whistling wind carried his voice away so his words were lost. I threw my hands out to signal my confusion, and he mimed for me to move back. I did so and just like the previous time, he shot an arrow with a thin, strong twine attached.

It took him four tries before I was able to step on the arrow quickly enough to prevent the weight of the twine pulling it back off the balcony.

“Pull!”

I began to tug on the twine, and partway down, a small note was attached. I wrapped the twine securely around my hand and took a moment to unfurl and read the note.

Ingenious. Much safer than clinging like some leech to the back of a knight I hoped was strong enough to support us both. I pulled up the rope. It was difficult at first, but as I let the rope fall back to the ground, the counterweight made it progressively easier. Down below, Griffin waited with outstretched arms for the rope's return. He caught hold of it and began pulling so that I didn't have to do anything but wait for the harness and make sure to catch it so it didn't slither back down like the rest of the rope.

But no, Griffin had thought of everything. He had bound a thick, cross-shaped stick to the end that acted like a grappling hook to stop the rope when the harness reached the top. I inspected the harness. Even there, Griffin had labeled each loop with things like Insert right leg here and wrap this around your waist and fasten above your left leg.

Who needed rippling muscles when wit and ingenuity were so much more seductive? A mind as sharp as his could cut through barriers no blade ever could. This was a man who truly was a match for a dragon.

After strapping myself into the harness, I looked over the edge and felt dizzy from fear. My desire to trust Griffin quailed as the long drop stared back at me and the rope attached to the harness suddenly felt very loose indeed.

I looked at Griffin, who had secured the rope's other end to the horse's saddle horn.

"You can do it!" he called encouragingly.

"I'm scared!" I shouted back, waving the rope to show the line's slack. What if when I dropped from the balcony, the rope broke or the knot attaching it to the horse came loose? At least with Pollox, I knew he could remain airborne.

Griffin backed the horse up so I felt the rope go taut. I ignored how sweaty my palms

had become and swung my legs over the balcony's railing. It was a very long way down. After quadruple-checking that the rope was still securely fastened around the railings so I wouldn't plummet to my death, I gripped the sides and gently lowered myself until I was supported by only my hands. The rope still did not feel secure enough.

Down below, Griffin called, "Rapunzel, trust me!"

Could I trust Griffin? Would he keep me safe?

I let go.

My squeak of fear was cut short as the rope caught and held fast a few feet below the balcony's railing. Relief coursed through me. I felt just as secure as when Pollox flew me around. Griffin coaxed his horse to slowly step closer to the tower so that I was gently lowered. I managed to push off the tower's wall with my feet, avoiding hitting my back or head against the stone.

"You're doing great!" Griffin called up to me. "Almost there!"

Soon, I felt his hands slide up my sides, one arm wrapping around my waist while the other tucked under my knees while his horse stood at attention, ears pricked forward and waiting for the next command.

I draped my arm around his shoulders, slightly crowded by the quiver of arrows strapped to his back. At least this time, I didn't look as though I'd crawled through all of Rookwyn's underbrush like I had after Drake's "rescue."

"You did it," Griffin breathed into my ear, holding me close to his chest. "How are you feeling?"

“I’m...great. You thought of everything.”

“That’s my chess motto—three steps ahead.” His eyes flicked down once to my mouth then with a start, he set me down and began helping me unfasten the harness straps. “We need to hurry. I don’t know how long we have before the dragon comes back.”

My brain seemed to have jammed. “Right. We should get back.”

He rolled the rope and harness and shoved it into a saddlebag before lifting me up to sit on the saddle and swinging up behind me. His horse set off, cantering along the path back to Donover.

“I sent away for an amulet that’s supposed to make someone temporarily weightless,” Griffin called loudly as we wound our way through the forest. “I intended to use that to help you, but I also didn’t want to wait.”

“The harness was a smart idea,” I called back. “I’m glad you thought of it.”

The path shrank so it was barely visible beneath the vegetation, and Griffin slowed his horse to a trot. “Did you use the dragonsbane?”

I felt where I always kept his gift in my pocket and withdrew it to show him before replacing it. “No. I didn’t think it would do any good to weaken the dragon if I had no means to kill him.”

“Smart plan. It isn’t something that should be squandered, and if we have it with us, we might be able to kill the dragon today if he comes after you.”

My stomach lurched unpleasantly. Should I have told Pollox about it?

“Your father sent out a proclamation expanding his original offer,” Griffin went on, his lips close to my ear. “Anyone who rescues you, regardless of station, would get your hand in marriage.” I felt acutely aware of my back pressing against his chest as we sat on the horse together. Pollox had been right to question my motives—I did want to be held.

“So that means...”

“If we make it back safely and you’ll have me, we could get married. Hopefully a married woman is less appealing to a dragon.”

“Oh.” Of course I’d fantasized about Griffin from time to time, but the prospect of actually marrying a man I barely knew had me balking.

“I even wrote up a letter we can send. Here, take the reins.” Griffin shifted the reins to me and leaned over to dig in a saddle pocket. “It states that you’re safe and that I rescued you. Prince Ijor had plans to come this afternoon, and I didn’t want him to send a carrier pigeon ahead to claim that he was the one who saved you. I don’t think my word will hold up against a prince and I know your father would prefer him, but...quite selfishly, I want to marry you.”

I wished I could see his face as he said those words. “I would prefer you over Prince Ijor as well,” I admitted quietly, keeping my gaze fixed forward.

Griffin’s arms reached back around me to reclaim the reins and he handed me a paper. I stared at it. He had drafted a very eloquent letter saying that he had succeeded in rescuing me and had pre-signed his name at the bottom, next to an empty space that was meant for my signature.

Was I ready for such a commitment? He clearly was. I held the paper in front of me, pretending to read it, but my gaze drifted. There was the dry riverbed where I’d been

thrown off the horse more than a month ago, and there that log where I'd swallowed a fly on accident. This rescue was much more successful, so why did I feel so empty?

Griffin pulled the horse to a standstill just as Donover's castle became barely visible through the tree line.

"You've been very quiet," he ventured, his hand gently grazing my side from behind. "I wasn't trying to pressure you before, I hope you know that."

"I know," I said, pivoting so I could face him better. "It's just sudden, and even though I know the goal is to rescue me, I don't like feeling like I'm owed to whatever man?—"

Griffin paled and began stammering. "O-o-of course not! No, no, I didn't mean to...to give you that impression at all! I'm so sorry. I just..." Color returned to his cheeks as he blushed. "I overheard someone talking about how it would be easy to...hold on, I need to phrase that better. Some men think it's impossible to rescue you." He raised his eyebrows meaningfully, but I was lost.

"I don't understand."

He sighed heavily. "I don't want to frighten you, but a few knights were talking and said that if you died during a rescue attempt, it would be easy to persuade your father to give the kingdom to the prince they serve, who in turn had promised them financial favors, and I don't want that to happen to you."

Chills exploded all over my body. Of course they would be getting frustrated with the lack of success and want to solve the issue. My captivity had dragged out for months. And as I was the only heir to the throne, without me there, Father would be likely to sign a treaty to join our small kingdom with a larger, wealthier one. I was no longer a means to more power; I was an obstacle, and I was expendable.

“You don’t have to marry me if you don’t want to,” Griffin hurried on. “The signature is just to show that it was me who rescued you and not someone else. I can’t bear the thought of someone trying to...you know.”

“Of course I’ll sign. Do you have a quill or something?” Here was the main difference between Griffin and Pollox. Pollox sometimes got jealous and possessive and didn’t want me to leave his hoard. Griffin, however, appreciated my independence as a person and left the decision up to me. I signed and stared, unsettled, at my name on the paper. It wasn’t finalized; I still had the option not to marry Griffin if I decided I didn’t want to.

“I want you to be safe,” Griffin told me, carefully rolling the parchment back up and tucking it back into his sack. “Ready to go on?”

“Yes.”

The horse walked forward into the vast meadow between the forest and the drawbridge, and my mind was so filled with thoughts about what a future with Griffin would look like that I didn’t register the sounds coming from above until an alarm gong rang out at Donover castle.

“The dragon! It’s coming!” one of the guards shouted.

I whirled around and stared up. Pollox was circling the castle, long neck stretched out as he searched for me.

“The dragonsbane! Give it to me!” Griffin ordered. His gentleness had evaporated, replaced by a crisp, decisive tone that was perfect for battle.

I hesitated. What was he planning to do with it? Pollox was my best friend. Even if he was a little overprotective of me sometimes, I certainly didn’t ever want to see him

harmed.

Griffin didn't wait. He ripped it from my pocket and wrenched an arrow from his quiver. In the brief moment before he plunged the arrow's tip into the pouch of dragonsbane, I noticed that the arrowhead was strangely shaped, almost like it was partially hollowed out, perfect to pour a lethal powder into. With a motion like one would use when stirring a drink, Griffin nocked the arrow and pointed it upward. Panic for Pollox set in. How dangerous was it to a dragon? If he was weakened here, there was an entire army within Donover's walls. Pollox would be killed.

"Stop!" I pulled on Griffin's arm as he released the arrow, causing it to fly astray. Instead of hitting Pollox, it simply got his attention, and he dove down to land just as Griffin swilled another arrow into the pouch of dragonsbane.

"Stay back, Rapunzel!" Griffin shouted, shrugging me off and taking aim again.

I wrenched the dragonsbane away from him and threw it into the forest. "Don't hurt him!"

Pollox's tail shot out to wrap around my waist. "She is mine," he growled at Griffin, and took off. As we soared upward, I heard a mighty twang and a moment later, Pollox let out a scream of agony.

CHAPTER 20

Pollox thrashed around in the air, wings still beating, but I was whipped from side to side. His body temperature skyrocketed so he felt uncomfortably hot, but I couldn't let go of my precarious grasp on him for fear of falling. He let out another bellow and continued to flap away from the castle, but lost height until our feet were skimming the treetops. Behind us, bugles and gongs rang out. The dragon hunt had begun.

Pollox continued to twist in pain as he fought to put as much distance as he could between himself and the castle. Miles whisked by beneath us, but it wasn't enough to get us back to safety. Finally, he crashed down in a shady grove halfway between the castle and the tower.

During the final descent, Pollox flipped over and wrapped his wings protectively around me, cradling me against his soft underbelly as his back took the full impact of his fall.

"Pollox!" I shouted the moment we skidded to a stop. I scrambled to see where the arrow had hit him. There it was, protruding from the muscled area above one of his legs.

The dragon's entire body shuddered. "Get it out," he rumbled, body temperature continuing to rise.

The whine of panic in my head was going to deafen me. "Hold still." I braced my feet and heaved. As I wrenched the arrow free, Pollox let out a blast of fire that instantly withered several nearby bushes.

“Get back!” Pollox groaned, twisting in agony once again. “Don’t...don’t watch.”

I couldn’t obey. I couldn’t simply turn a blind eye to his pain. I clutched at my face, nails digging into my cheeks as I stared on helplessly. He was thrashing about, writhing from side to side, and there was nothing I could do to help.

His entire body shimmered with the same magical glow that always occurred inside the wardrobe, his shape morphing and shifting, wings twisting inward so that he was balled up in pain. Was he...shrinking? I closed my eyes tightly and reopened them, certain that my fear was causing my mind to play tricks on me.

But no, he was noticeably smaller and changing shape. His four legs transformed into two arms and two legs, and his neck shrank rapidly. He was becoming...human. He sprouted hair the same shade that his dark horns had been, his reddish-brown scales became the clothing suitable for a rogue highwayman or thief, and his face transformed into a human one.

Finally, he stopped thrashing about and lay perfectly still, eyes closed. For a solid minute, I stared at the man lying face-down on the shriveled grass.

“What in the blithering blue blazes was that?!” I said aloud, still in too much shock to do anything other than stare with my mouth hanging agape. “I just...what?” I repeated, floundering for any semblance of a rational thought.

He groaned and sat up, and I backed up several paces, fighting the urge to run. My mouth hung so low that I was in danger of swallowing another fly. Still facing away from me, he put a hand up to his shoulder and gently massaged where the arrow had penetrated.

I felt rooted to the spot, unable to speak or move at all. Hesitantly, he turned to look at me.

“So that’s what you look like through human eyes,” he said, smiling through his pain. “No wonder that squire wants to have you all to himself.”

Still, all I could do was stare. His eyes were a rich brown color, but there were still hints of flame sparking deep within his pupils. This all felt too sensational to be any sort of dream my own brain could have cooked up. No one would ever mistake this man for some innocent squire, and he still appeared almost as dangerous as he had as a dragon. He looked like the sort of man that fathers always warn their daughters to avoid.

“Pollox?” I asked nervously.

“You don’t have to act so surprised. Are you all right?”

I put my fists on my hips. “Of course I’m not! How was I supposed to know dragons could transform into humans? I think I’m entitled to a moment or two of freaking out, so let me process here.”

It looked like Pollox was about to shoot back a retort, but he winced and grabbed at his shoulder again. Still dumbfounded but more concerned about his well-being, I tentatively crossed the clearing and knelt at his side, gently pressing my palm to his forehead. He was no longer the inferno he’d been moments before, but his normal dragon temperature.

“Where does it hurt the most?” I asked, anxiously searching for any additional injuries.

“My pride.” He rolled his arm experimentally, looking much too calm for a dragon who had just fallen out of the sky and shifted into a human. “Don’t fuss.”

I stared at his shoulder, where a spot of blood was slowly seeping through the fabric.

“But you’re hurt!”

“I did just get shot with a poisoned arrow.” Pollox’s voice, now coming from a much smaller chest, was just as deep but didn’t carry the soul-crushing weight of his dragon voice.

I made to tear open his shirt, but he flinched away. “Hey, don’t ruin my scales! What, did that fall turn you into a madwoman?”

I ripped a swatch off my own dress instead, head still reeling from the knowledge that Pollox had suddenly become human. “You’re the most impossible dragon ever! I’m trying to bind up your wound, so hold still.” I knotted the fabric tightly around his shoulder, then ripped off a second strip from my dress for another layer. “So...you’re human now? Did you ever plan on telling me dragons can become human?”

“Not really. It’s rather embarrassing, you see.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, so embarrassing to be like me. How humiliating. There”—I gave the second layer a final knot—“that should hold until we get back to the tower.”

“It is embarrassing,” Pollox insisted. “As a dragon, I’m very handsome, but this?” He gestured at his face to finish his thought. I took a long time to examine his new features. He had a strong, chiseled jawline, heavy eyebrows and light stubble across his lower face. I gently brushed my fingers against it, still marveling at the transformation.

“There’s nothing wrong with how you look. I think it’s a very handsome face.” My fingers rose to flick a strand of hair off his forehead. “You would be considered very attractive to humans, even if you think I’m ugly.”

“You’re not,” he murmured.

I poked his chest. “You said that when we first met, remember? You said that all humans are ugly, myself included.”

He took several moments to study my face, then inched closer. “A dragon’s vision is based on heat and shapes, so nothing is particularly beautiful. It’s all just various shades of yellow and orange and red. But right now, I have human eyes.” His fingers traced up my arm then stroked my face. “You’re just as beautiful as I imagined.”

My skin eagerly sucked in his heat as he touched me, and though I had long since become accustomed to feeling cold, a new, foreign sensation assailed me. Anytime Pollox touched me, it was as though flames had kissed that spot.

Oh scales, I was getting overheated, and yet I didn’t mind in the slightest. I was going to get into serious trouble if he kept looking at me that way. I could have been a dragon myself for the bonfire that had suddenly lit up inside me. I had just signed a letter saying that I was open to the possibility of marrying Griffin, even if it wasn’t official. Why couldn’t Pollox have just stayed a dragon? This was going to complicate everything. Pollox was my friend, I reminded myself. My best friend. He wasn’t supposed to be stirring up such feelings in me.

“You still haven’t explained how you got this way, and you’re acting much too calm considering you were just shot. I feel like I ought to be commended for not completely freaking out when I found out you’re actually human.”

Pollox’s jaw dropped so his mouth formed a perfect O. “That’s very offensive.”

I smiled wickedly. “Good. It was meant to be. Now start talking.”

“I’m not a human; I’m a dragon . We just happen to have the ability to shift when we want to...or if we are forced. I’m guessing that arrow was tipped with dragonsbane.”

The phantom weight of where the rest of the powder had hung in my pocket felt like a lead ball. I was grateful I'd flung it away.

Pollox went on, "Once it hit me, the only way to get rid of the poison was to boil it out before it kills me in my dragon form, but in order to do that, I had to get hot enough to shift, and even then, traces will remain for hours, possibly a whole day. It's a good thing you got the poisoned arrow out so quickly. Thank you."

"You can shift anytime you want?"

"I could if I wanted to, and assuming I'm not dosed with poison."

A distant shouting came, along with the clatter of weapons. If the soldiers found out that Pollox was vulnerable and very killable right now, it would be the end for him. How many people knew that dragons could shift? I'd never heard of such a phenomenon before.

"We need to move," I told Pollox, dragging him to his feet. "Come on, can you walk?"

"Well, I certainly can't fly."

I rolled my eyes and began running with Pollox following, trying to keep our sounds as muffled as possible while still putting distance between us and the soldiers.

"How many people know that you can look like this?" I gestured at Pollox's human form as we ran.

"None that I'm aware of." He grimaced and placed a hand up to his shoulder again. The seeping blood from his wound was trickling down his arm; we couldn't keep running with him injured, even if he claimed it was nothing. He pumped his arms

awkwardly and ran with a strange gait; he would never be able to outpace soldiers at that speed.

“You run a little weird,” I informed him as we dodged under a tree limb. “Want me to give you tips?”

He shot me an annoyed expression. “I bet you’d fly weird. Should I give you tips?”

On a narrow part of the trail, he lost his footing and slipped down an embankment into the dry riverbed below. Frantically looking around to see if the soldiers were close enough to see the dust that flew up, I scrambled down the hill after him.

“Are you here to tell me that I fall weird too?” Pollox puffed, gritting his teeth and putting pressure on his wound.

“No, but I think we need a place to hide. I—” I broke off, looking around. “I know this place!” The memory of being thrown from Drake’s horse and seeing the small dugout burst back into my mind’s eye. “Follow me.”

I dragged Pollox along to the spot, shoving him into the tiny underground burrow and ignoring his splutters of “I’m a dragon , I won’t hide in a hole like some rabbit!”

“Unless you want to be a dead dragon, you better become a rabbit, Sulfur Breath!” I snapped, shoving on his back so he was forced in. The sounds of the search party grew louder. I threw a last panicked glance at the riverbed we’d left behind. At least the dust had settled where Pollox had fallen.

My heart pounded frantically in my chest as we crawled to the very back of our hiding spot and I tried to quiet my breathing, still ragged from running. We both pressed against the earthen wall at the back of the hollow, so close I was practically sitting in his lap.

Pollox tucked all the torn fabric trailing from my dress under his legs, trying to keep every inch of us concealed from the sunshine streaming dangerously close to our temporary sanctuary. Once all the cloth was hidden away, he wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me away from the daylight and against the back wall of the knoll's hidden cavity.

Noises from our pursuers rang out, loud and angry, as they continued to search the area for us. My lungs threatened to explode as I tried to quiet my breathing, ears strained to catch the sound of every broken twig, every muffled order.

I tightened my hold around Pollox's shoulders and held my breath as the sounds stopped directly overhead. The shadows of several men lengthened over the dry riverbed, just visible from where Pollox and I were closeted, motionless and silent. The shadows of the soldiers paused, looking left and right. I glanced at the roof of the hollow. Clods of dirt sprinkled down on us as the soldiers overhead paced back and forth.

"They couldn't have gone far," one voice growled. "Where can a dragon that size hide?"

"Maybe it flew away and we couldn't see it through the trees?"

"Nah, remember it was hurt? It shouldn't be able to fly for at least a few hours," a throaty chuckle rasped. "Turns out that dragon hunter was right; we can injure dragons after all. They aren't as all-powerful as we were led to believe."

I felt Pollox tense and clung tighter to him, my vision spotted from the strain of holding my breath so long. I wanted to check on his injury, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the shadows of our pursuers standing on the grassy knoll. One wrong move from them, and they would drop down into the riverbed, where we would be fully exposed if they so much as turned around.

“Shame about the princess being taken, though,” a nasally voice piped up. “She’s been held prisoner for months now.”

“At least we know that the dragon hasn’t eaten her yet. That’s something. The king said the reward has doubled for her return, and anyone can marry her if they get her back, regardless of station.”

I couldn’t keep my breath contained any longer. As quietly as I could, I exhaled in a silent stream. Pollox copied me, and I felt his scorching hot breath swirl around my neck. Both of us never wavered in staring at the shadows rippling across the rocks and sand. Dead grass hanging down from the hideout’s opening cut off the top part of the shadows, but the men were obviously growing tired of the little game of hide-and-seek and were debating where to search next.

Still trying to remain undetected, I inhaled in shallow, short breaths that left me lightheaded and not at all able to think clearly.

After a few more tense minutes, they wandered off. It took several more minutes for the tension to drain out of my body, and my heart still hammered from the chase. When I finally relaxed, I gained awareness of Pollox’s hands wrapped around me and realized I was still clutching him so tightly that our torsos were close to being fused.

Finally, I pulled my gaze away from the riverbed and looked at Pollox. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the dimness of the underground hollow, but when they did, I saw Pollox returning my gaze with a softness to his expression that had never appeared on his dragon face. My heart began to pump even faster than before.

Once again, I was struck by how handsome Pollox was, in a dashing, roguish kind of way. His strong jaw jutted out confidently on his tanned face, and the dancing orange flames deep in his eyes were so vivid that they nearly glowed in the half-darkness. Hesitantly, I lifted my hand to brush some of his dark auburn curls away from his

sweaty forehead.

Pollox didn't move as I touched him, but his fingers tensed at my sides, and the softness in his gaze became tinged with desire. Even though the wind whipping into our hiding spot was chilly, the combination of being so close to Pollox, the way he was looking at me, and the sudden thoughts parading through my mind caused my body to heat up almost as fast as Pollox's had when he transformed.

"Maybe there are benefits to having a human form after all," Pollox murmured, his gaze roving all over my face.

"I told you so."

What would it be like to kiss Pollox? Could a dragon in human form experience emotions anything like the ones causing every fiber of my being to tingle with some secret, unknown magic?

Kissing Pollox would be disastrous. Not only would it introduce a complicated dynamic to the successful thieving scheme we had going on, but secretly, I feared that if I kissed him, I would want to do so again and again, and perhaps never stop.

The thought was intimidating enough that I began to pull away, but Pollox's hold on me redoubled. "Stay," he said, his voice low enough that it was barely audible. "This is...I don't know how to describe it."

"Like you want to be held?" I offered, gently brushing my fingers against the stubble on his jaw again.

"Yes, just like that. I can see why you craved it before."

Words failed me as one of Pollox's hands roamed up and down my back while the

other moved along my leg, leaving a trail of intense heat in its wake. My own fingers acted of their own accord, tracing Pollox's neck and around his ears.

Every touch heightened my senses, and the desire to kiss him was becoming unbearable. I could try to play it off as a harmless experiment, but I held myself at bay. I couldn't do that to my only real friend. Risking our friendship and the success of our scheme for a few stolen kisses was a terrible plan. Pollox wouldn't want his virtue sullied by a girl who had kissed more men than she could remember. He should find a dragon lady who had saved her lips exclusively for him. He was new to having a human form, and if I wanted to be a good friend, I wouldn't take advantage of him so readily.

Regretfully, I forced my hands to stop their exploration of Pollox's human face. "We need to get back to the tower soon. I'd rather not be in the middle of the forest at night."

He caught my hand. "Why not?"

"Because I'm useless in a fight and I think you'd have a much harder time defending us against bears and wolves while you're in this form, that's why."

His touch lingered on me as long as possible before he finally released me. "Good idea. I'd be a poor excuse for a dragon if I couldn't protect my hoard."

CHAPTER 21

“T here are shifters in other countries, too,” Pollox informed me as the tower slowly came into view. “Pyren has phoenix shifters and Termarth has sea serpent shifters.”

“That’s on the other side of the world, though,” I pointed out. “We barely hear anything from them.”

“I’ve been to Pyren once,” he told me, then shot me a wicked expression that made him look even more devilishly mischievous. “It’s a long flight. One day I’ll take you there.”

“I’d like that.” I stared up at the tower balcony high above us. “So...can you shift back now? Otherwise it will be hard to get up there.”

“I think so. Stand back; it gets hot.”

I retreated while Pollox transformed back into his usual, enormous self.

“Are you hungry?” Pollox asked.

“Very. We could go back to the cave instead. I’m craving some of that pudding the table makes, and I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be alone right now. You might have some of that poison still left in your blood. I might need to help you.”

Pollox beat his tail against the ground a few times before he simply said, “I think that’s a good idea.”

“You could try the food if you shift back to a human, you know,” I told him on the way back. Would he know that I wanted more time examining his human face? “And if you keep shifting back and forth, wouldn’t that help burn the poison out?”

“It takes a lot of energy to shift, and the poison is already out, or else I wouldn’t have been able to shift back.”

“You could still try the food. It’s good.”

“I know.”

We landed at the cave, and I slid off his back, much more gracefully than the first time I’d attempted it. “How do you know? I’ve never seen you eat anything.”

“What, you think I would enchant a table and not use it? I don’t exactly have many human guests to entertain.”

“You have me.”

“So I do.”

“It would be poor manners not to join me for dinner.”

“I’ve been with you during dinner many times.”

“But I’m the only one eating. I wouldn’t mind a human-looking companion, even if you’re still a dragon on the inside.”

“It takes a lot of effort to shift,” Pollox grumbled, but he transformed back into the man I’d seen before and joined me at the table.

The table, which had previously supplied me with all my favorite foods, added several more dishes, including an exotic one that smelled so spicy my eyes watered.

“That one is my favorite,” Pollox said, spooning it onto his plate. “It’s native to Pyren. They’re known for their fire peppers.”

“How fitting for a dragon,” I said, portioning out some of the milder foods for myself and keeping an eye on Pollox. After his poor coordination with running, I’d expected that using cutlery would be just as awkward, and yet he managed with no trouble. “I assumed that you just flew off to eat sheep when I was in the tower or something.”

Pollox paused in chewing the peppers. “Can you promise to keep a secret?”

I nodded.

“I don’t like eating live animals. I almost always use this table.”

“But...but the sheep! The lords have seen you steal oxen and sheep and things. I saw it myself.”

He tsked quietly. “Stealing is such a crass way to describe what I do. I claim things; I don’t steal them. But I usually just take them and drop them at farmhouses where I know there is a need. I don’t want to watch anyone starve, not when I can stop it. If the lords aren’t taking care of their hoards, I’ll claim them as my own and care for them.”

“So when you need to eat as a dragon, do you just tell the table to give you hundreds of pounds of meat?”

“No. I don’t like the bones crunching. As long as no one is around, I just shift to human and dine like normal. It’s sort of hard to explain, but as long as I’m full when

I'm human, I'll stay full when I shift back to a dragon. It's like the food multiplies just like my size and weight does. But this way, it takes less time, is much less messy, and human foods have a wider variety of flavors than just endless pounds of raw, unseasoned meat. It gets rather dull to eat the same thing over and over."

I couldn't help laughing. "You've been sneaking off to eat as a human?"

"It's hardly sneaking if it's in my own cave. I can do whatever I want, Your Snack-sized Majesty."

"Oooh, Snack-sized Majesty, I like that one. Now, your royal lizardness, why didn't you tell me about all this before? I thought we were friends."

"Is that all we are?"

My heart leapt into my throat and obstructed my ability to breathe normally. "What else could we be if you refused to tell me such a big secret?"

Pollox ran his finger around the rim of his goblet. "Staying in dragon form is much less complicated. You sought me out as a dragon, so it can be deduced that you wanted a dragon companion, not a human one."

"But don't you see? This opens up a whole new set of possibilities."

Pollox's head snapped around faster than he could dive out of the skies. "What do you mean?"

I began ticking off on my fingers. "We can pretend you saved me from the oh-so-fearsome dragon or you could pose as a guard and..."

"Oh." Pollox turned away, shoulders hunched.

I caught his hand. “There are all sorts of things we can do now that I know.”

“I have no interest in staying human when our same arrangement was all you wanted,” Pollox snapped. “I need to organize some of the treasure while I still have hands instead of claws.” He stood abruptly and stomped off down the hall.

Oh scales, he wanted to be significantly more than friends. I stared at his abandoned plate of food. Did I want that from Pollox? He was my best friend, and he knew more about me than anyone else, even Father. He certainly was attractive and had never once been afraid of me or intimidated by my antics. I always enjoyed snuggling up with him at night, at least as a dragon. He had a witty sense of humor, but...

Griffin’s face swam into my mind, fuzzier and less memorable than before. He had been nothing but sweet and honorable. He risked his life to rescue me. A flame of resentment licked at my chest as I remember that it was he who had shot Pollox. But also, he was doing so to protect me, not knowing that Pollox would never harm me. I couldn’t fault him for that. Nevertheless, I regretted my hasty signing of his letter. I didn’t want to give him any false hope. Between the two, I wasn’t sure who I would choose.

Could I be happy with a life on the run with Pollox? At least with him, I wouldn’t be pelted with overripe fruit as Father was, hated for ruling and blamed for every wrongdoing. I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes. Why couldn’t life be simpler?

Pollox didn’t return to the table, and I eventually left through the wardrobe. If Pollox didn’t want to talk to me, there was no reason to stay. If he genuinely wanted a relationship with me, he wouldn’t sulk in his treasure room. That was dragon behavior, and a dragon and a princess would never work out together.

* * *

It was mid-morning before Pollox turned up the following day. I hated how long I'd stayed up the night before, unable to sleep while hoping that Pollox would come to apologize. Then after I'd finally given up hope and gone to bed, I found it impossible to sleep and tossed and turned all night, plotting out snarky retorts for if Pollox did ever show up to address his childishness. Because I didn't want to think about the dragon, I tried to revive my early fantasies about Griffin, but I discovered that it was impossible to focus on his face; it was always replaced with Pollox's, no matter how hard I tried to forget his features.

Stupid dragon. How could he expect me to rush into some sort of romantic relationship with him when I'd just barely found out he could shift? He could have at least extended me the courtesy of talking about things before he left to sulk, but at the same time, I was grateful for the solitude. I didn't know what I wanted anymore. If I were to choose someone to be in a relationship with, there was no comparison. Pollox cared for me, he cared for the orphanage, he was willing to be painted as a villain if it meant helping those in need.

Most men I'd met would eagerly seek praise for their accomplishments, but Pollox didn't. He always did what he thought was right, no matter what anyone else said, and I admired him for it.

A knock from the inside of the wardrobe startled me out of my reverie.

"Rapunzel?" Pollox's human voice called, slightly muffled by the wardrobe.

"Come in."

He stepped out onto the rug and held a bouquet of roses out to me. "I wanted to say that I'm sorry for my behavior last night."

I took them, surprised that he would know that giving flowers was a traditional

human custom during an apology. “Thank you. I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m just still adjusting to the notion of a dragon shifter. It’s a new concept for me and I’m trying to process it.”

He nodded. “That’s understandable. I’m afraid that human emotions are very complex and confusing for me.”

“What exactly is so confusing?”

Pollox stared intently at me, and my heart raced. The smoldering look he gave me was going to cause me to burst into flames at any moment, I was convinced.

“Do you want the truth, or a simple answer?”

“The truth.”

Pollox’s jaw clenched. “The simple answer would have been that being a soft, highly edible human is a complete waste of time for me, but the truth is...I care about you. I wasn’t lying when I said you are the most valuable part of my hoard, and I treasure every moment with you. But then, I see you with that squire and I can’t”—he clenched his fists—“I can’t handle it. The idea that you would pick him over me is terrifying and infuriating, and it’s easier to stay a dragon all the time. It’s why I didn’t want you to know that I can shift, but now that you know, I want my feelings to be plain.”

I turned to busy myself with arranging the roses in the vase beside my bed, unprepared for such blunt honesty. It was a slight shock, but also relieving in many ways. Without him employing the same subtle social cues that most humans used, it removed a great deal of the stress of trying to dissect the true meaning behind hidden words and vague statements. “Jealousy is a normal human emotion, you know.”

“I don’t want to be jealous,” Pollox whispered. “I just want you. But I’m afraid that if I ask you to choose between us, you won’t pick me, and I can’t stand the thought.”

Oh, scales. Earlier that morning, I had spent so much time and energy being angry with Pollox’s pouting, but his openness managed to melt away all my planned frosty comebacks. If he was willing to be completely honest, I could be too. I swallowed and turned back to face him. “I don’t like cold silences like what you did last night.”

“In my defense, I’m very new to being a human.” Pollox reached out and traced his finger along my arm. Veins ran from his shoulder to wrist, standing out noticeably on his biceps and forearms. The temptation to run my fingers along those veins grew with every second he was near me.

“You seem to have the apologizing bit down fairly well, all considered. Quite frankly, I’m impressed that you knew about the flowers and everything.”

“Ah. Well, I can’t take full credit for that. One of the things a farmer left on his offering table some time ago was a book that I read last night. That helped a lot.”

“What book?” I asked curiously.

He blushed slightly. “Umm, I think it was only intended for male farmers to read. It’s not really your type of book.”

“Now I have to know.”

He ran his tongue over his teeth. “The title was How to Harvest a Wife: The Art of Wooing Women. ”

I burst out laughing, all my former anger forgotten.

“Ah, yes, making a woman laugh was part of the prescribed method,” he told me, unable to suppress his smile. “That was in the chapter titled ‘Fertile Field Flirting Tips.’”

“Oh, are you flirting with me?”

“I’m doing my best. Is it working?”

“Yes, it is. I must say that I’m udder-ly speechless. What else did it tell you to do?”

He guided my hand onto his torso and ran his fingers up the side of my gown. “Let’s see...flowers, making her laugh, I’m also supposed to write you a love letter that doesn’t look like chicken scratch, but I didn’t do that yet.”

I adored how Pollox was always so warm to the touch. “It sounds like this book has a great deal of wisdom. Anything else?”

“I need to not smell like a barn.”

I inhaled. “Congratulations, you succeeded.”

“And I’m also supposed to only pick a woman I get along with.”

“Ooh, I’m not so sure about that. I’m downright unreasonable sometimes.” Whatever magic that book had taught him was working on me. I found myself sinking into Pollox’s arms.

His hand supported my low back, drawing me closer so the space between us slowly disappeared. “I already knew that. It’s one of the things I like most about you. I’m not saying you have to choose between us. I’m saying that I’d like a chance to prove myself.”

“You’ve already been a friend, a partner in crime, my confidant...what else do you have to prove?”

“I can prove to you,” he whispered, dragging his gaze up my neck to fix on my mouth, “that I always take care of my hoard. I can prove that I can make you happy.”

How could a dragon make me feel this way? Any more of this longing would become painful. Kissing other men in the past had always felt like a job or some sort of chore. While I had enjoyed their kisses from time to time, being here with Pollox felt vastly different. A kiss from him would actually be significant. Did I deserve it?

I leaned into his hold on me and ran my hands slowly up his chest, savoring the feel of solid muscle under my palms, then snaked my arms up to his shoulders, inviting him to close the tantalizing distance between our mouths.

“I’ve never kissed a human before,” Pollox confessed, almost inaudibly.

“And I’ve never kissed a dragon before.” I hesitated, then went boldly on, “But I want to, whether a book tells me to or not.”

Time ground to a halt between us. His gaze never left my face, and flames danced in his eyes, alive with eager anticipation. I could feel the heat of his scorching breath between us and wanted it even closer. If Pollox waited any longer, my heart was going to beat right out of my chest, or else I would fly into a thousand pieces.

I clutched at the front of his tunic, pulling with just enough pressure to convey my willingness. That was all it took. Pollox leaned in the rest of the way and pressed his lips against mine. It felt as though fire blazed through me with an electrifying charge. Delicious flames were consuming me, and I didn’t want them to stop.

My arms crept around his neck as I stood on tiptoe, the better to reach him, and my

body pressed against his as I eagerly kissed him back, returning his enthusiasm. It was impossible to resist curling my fingers into his hair, wanting to extend this kiss forever. This time, the passion didn't dwindle and die as it had with other men. It grew with every second, and I swooned as I lost myself to the moment.

His grasp around my waist tightened until I was nearly lifted off my feet. His kisses became more aggressive, as if he was desperate to experience the fullness of the sensation that humans so often raved about. One of his hands lifted to cradle the back of my head, holding me close enough to keep our lips pressed firmly together.

Pollox pulled back first, releasing me enough that I could catch my breath. His eyes were wide. "Is this what it's always like?"

"Typically, there isn't this much heat."

"Is that bad?"

"No, this is a very good thing." I pulled him back toward me again and repeated in a quieter tone, "Very good." My thought from after first meeting Pollox, about how flying was better than kissing, had been completely wrong.

The cool breeze blowing in from the open window to our sides made the furnace that was Pollox bearable to hold. Judging by the impatience with which Pollox returned to kissing me, perhaps he didn't think that every human practice was useless after all. There was no comparison. Griffin was sweet, but Pollox, impossible, snarky dragon that he was, had an iron grip on my heart.

"Rapunzel! Rapunzel, are you there?" Griffin's shout echoed up to where Pollox and I were still locked in an embrace.

Pollox froze, his lips pressed against the curve of my neck. "Can I please just eat

him?”

I swatted at his chest. “No jealousy, remember? Who was I just kissing, him or you?”

He sighed heavily and pressed his forehead against mine. “Fine. I’ll come back in a few minutes to get rid of him.”

“No eating him,” I called softly after Pollox as he clambered back into the wardrobe. Once the door closed, I crossed to the balcony. “Griffin?”

“Rapunzel!” Griffin didn’t have his usual ropes with him, and I breathed a sigh of relief that I wouldn’t have to rappel down a tower again. “I’m coming up!” He reached into the satchel slung over his shoulder and pulled out an object, too small to be seen from this height. But the moment he touched it, he began rising into the air, without any ropes to support him.

I turned and looked at the room. “Quick!” I hissed at it. “Look like the prison from before!”

The room hurriedly rearranged, and not a moment too soon. Just as the final chain clinked into place, Griffin came level with the balcony and stepped beside me. “Is the dragon close?”

“I don’t think so; he’s off hunting.” Off hunting for more flirting tips in his book, no doubt. “How did you get up here?”

Griffin held out a small purple crystal ball. “I sent away for this as soon as I heard you were in a tower, and it just barely arrived. It’s a levitation crystal. There aren’t many.”

I really ought to figure out a way to repay Griffin. Who knew how much he had spent

or what he had sold to purchase the dragonsbane and the levitation crystal?

I inspected the crystal. “That’s incredible. So it makes anyone float?”

“Anyone. And you can control the speed and direction simply by thinking about it. But we need to hurry, before the dragon comes back.”

“Right.” I cast an eye back at the tower room, rather tired of the same routine over and over. What was Pollox’s plan for the future? We wouldn’t be able to repeat the same swindle endlessly. How could I put an end to these rescues when I didn’t want to be rescued anymore?

“My deepest condolences about your father,” Griffin said solemnly.

Time froze and I forgot about everything else. What had he said? What did he mean, his deepest condolences? Father couldn’t be...

“I—is—is he... sick?” I finally stuttered.

The squire’s eyebrows rose as a slightly baffled expression crossed his face, replaced soon after by deep pity. “No, he...he passed away recently.”

“No.” My head moved from side to side as if in a stupor. My mind went numb, stupefied from the shock of the news. Fuzzy squiggles swam across my vision, and I collapsed onto my knees, my chest suddenly tight and constricted as I fought for air.

Griffin knelt beside me and patted my back, telling me that he was sorry to be the bearer of bad news. My ears weren’t working properly. His words washed over me, as garbled and unintelligible as if I were underwater. All I wanted was for this little charade to end so I could discuss everything with Pollox. A pox upon that dragon, why hadn’t he shown up yet?

“You...you’re lying!” The accusation burst from me. It couldn’t be true! Father was in perfect health—he had the best physicians in Rookwyn at his disposal. He couldn’t just keel over and die, just like that. Who was Griffin, acting like some supposed rescuer, rushing in to “save” me then throwing heavy information around like that before we were even on the ground? He must be the sort of pathetic man who reveled in causing others pain, the sadistic, self-centered... I threw an ugly look at Griffin, then felt my denial begin to trickle away. His face was contorted in anguish, just as mine was.

“I’m so sorry, Princess, truly I am.”

As much as I wanted to be angry and rage, my hostility slipped away like water in cupped hands. What reason did a lowly squire have to lie to me? He had simply been trying to express his sincere condolences. I was the one who should be apologizing for hurling accusations when he had merely been trying to give sympathy.

“I’m sorry—” I began in a cracked voice, but he cut me off immediately.

“You have no need to apologize. My father also died unexpectedly many years ago; I know how you feel.”

Now guilt was piled onto the complicated mess of emotions all battling for predominance in my mind.

“How did it happen? How did my father die? He was in good health.”

He bit his lip, clearly unwilling to divulge more information when his earlier statement was causing me so much grief. “That doesn’t matter right now. We need to go.”

“Tell me .”

From his hesitation, I already knew. His words only confirmed what I feared. “There was an uprising after he refused to give out rations, and...and...”

“The people killed him?”

He bowed his head in acknowledgment. The air was evaporating from around me. I was falling...falling into a black abyss...

“Princess? Princess! Princess Rapunzel—” Griffin’s voice echoed in and out of focus as I struggled for breath. I tried to pay attention to what he was saying but could barely manage to stay conscious.

“Wha— what?”

“I am sorry to do this to you right now, but we really do need to get going before the dragon comes back. There will be time to grieve later.”

I nodded mutely, barely registering what I was agreeing to. Griffin wrapped his arms securely around me and took out the levitation ball. After so long of wishing that Griffin would hold me, the action no longer held any allure. I wanted Pollox.

Once on the ground, Griffin grabbed my hand and led me over to the horse tethered at the edge of the field. I obeyed the pressure without thought. The rest of the familiar scenario played out almost exactly as it always did, but it was as though I were watching it from someone else’s perspective. Pollox arrived in a blaze of glory, terrifying the horse and causing it to bolt before anyone could mount it.

I couldn’t even work up the energy to do my usual part in this acting. Pollox must have noticed that I wasn’t myself, because in between emitting a jet of flame that caused Griffin to run, yelping, back into the forest and flying off to pursue the terrified squire, he paused to nudge me gently with his snout. I stared off into space

and placed a hand on Pollox's scaly side, wishing more than anything that he and I could be alone so I could give in to the grief that was threatening to swallow me whole.

Pollox chased Griffin away, then came back to find me huddled on the ground, unable to do so much as move independently. What would happen to the kingdom if I didn't return? Would Lord Morvain seize control? Would it be absorbed by a larger kingdom? I had been so selfishly concerned with my own future that I'd neglected the entire kingdom. What did it matter that Pollox and I snuck out at nights to give gold to those in need? A kingdom needed a ruler in order to function correctly.

"Rapunzel?" Pollox scooped me up, flew into the air, and gently deposited me on the balcony. "Rapunzel, what's wrong?"

I let out a ragged sob. A tear dripped down my nose, hot and salty, as it cut a track through the grime coating my face. I drew in a shaky breath, trying to control my emotions. Pollox, still in his dragon form, lumbered about on the stone roof of the turret, checking all around for any signs of additional visitors. Once he was satisfied that we were done for the day, he turned his attention to me.

"Rapunzel, what is it?"

Another ragged breath. Pollox was right—human emotions were too painful. My shoulders shook as shuddering sobs began to wrack my body. I didn't want to do anything but wallow in my misery.

A blaze of heat washed over me as Pollox transformed into a man. The moment he crouched next to me, I threw my arms around his neck and squeezed my eyes shut as I choked out the news. He returned my gesture, wrapping his powerful arms securely around my waist to hold me as I cried, head tucked under his chin.

An icy hand had gripped my heart, and I couldn't understand it. My father and I hadn't been close for years. I had despised the way he ran our kingdom, so why did the news of his death hurt so badly? I had already accepted that he would never be the man he used to be, but perhaps that was the pain of it—it was like he had died twice.

My surroundings swam in and out of my water-logged vision. For the last several months, I had been conning other kingdoms out of treasure with no communication from Father. Had he genuinely hoped I would return, or was it all for show? What would he have said to me if I had come back? I had left without so much as a farewell letter, and now, I had no way of knowing how my disappearance had affected him. Had he thought of me in his last moments?

I clung to Pollox, my tears pouring down my face and soaking his chest as my sobs deepened. The grief engulfing my body was all-consuming, and if Pollox hadn't supported the majority of my weight as he kept his arms firmly wrapped around my waist, I would have collapsed. He didn't say a word, just continued to hold me and rub my back.

Eventually, we sank down to huddle on the stone floor of the balcony, my head resting on Pollox's chest. My emotional bank was depleted, but the extended crying seemed to have purged my mind of the immediate shock, leaving a residual sorrow in its wake.

"What do you want to do?" Pollox asked after I'd cried out all my tears.

"I don't know. I can't leave the kingdom without a ruler. They need me."

Pollox continued to hold me. "I think it's time you escaped for good."

"I don't want to leave you."

He cupped my face in his hands. I'd never been so grateful for the comforting heat that soaked into my skin from where he touched me, bolstering my confidence. "You're still a part of my hoard, even if you go somewhere else. This isn't goodbye. But if what you need is to go back, I'll do everything in my power to make that happen."

I sank against him with a sigh. Already, the weight of ruling a kingdom was settling back onto my shoulders. For all the dislike that poured in on me and my father, I still cared. I would be able to implement new policies that would help the citizens, not hurt them. I could be like Pollox, always caring for my hoard to the best of my ability.

"I'll take you back to where we first met," Pollox told me. "You can go back and reclaim your throne."

"You don't want to talk me out of it? It could be dangerous."

"A dragon would never abandon its hoard. I think it is the right thing to do to go back and care for them. Now that your father passed away, his hoard belongs to you."

"They usually call it a kingdom, not a hoard. What about you? What will you do?"

He shifted his position, arms still wrapped around me. "I'll come by in a few days. Maybe I'll pass myself off as a dragon tamer and say that I tamed the mighty Pollox and that now, he only does my bidding."

I let out a choked laugh. "That would be very handy to have a dragon readily available. I just don't know how I'm going to turn the kingdom around. Father did a lot of damage with his greed."

Pollox paused. "May I ask you something?"

“Always.”

“Were your father’s parents greedy as well?”

“Yes. I suppose it’s a learned behavior when people are in power. It seems that every ruler nearby is affected by it now.”

“By George,” Pollox swore quietly. “He was telling the truth.”

“Who was?”

He let out a long sigh. “I told you I had an ancestor who was able to curse human bloodlines. There is a story that was passed down through the generations about my great grandfather, who fell in love with a human. She rejected his feelings, and he cursed her bloodline that any ruler would have a dragon’s greed until the bloodline died out or until reparations were made.”

The story of the long-ago princess’s kidnapping came rushing back. “What was her name?”

“I can’t recall. Something like Sariah or...”

“Sabra?”

“Yes, that’s the one. Do you know the story?”

Not even Pollox’s warmth could combat the chill that overtook me. “I hadn’t heard it exactly like that before, but yes. Sabra was my great-grandmother. We were told the dragon kidnapped her.”

Pollox let out a noise similar to his thrumming when he was a dragon, but it sounded

far less frightening when issuing from human-sized lungs. “No, she pretended to have feelings for Falkor and promised that if he helped her, she would marry him. Once he gave his help, she rejected him and married a man. For a time, I wondered if you would do the same thing to me. Did your father seem different before he took the throne?”

“Yes,” I breathed. “He used to care so much more, but that means”—I buried my face in my hands—“that means I’ll be affected by the same greed that my father had now that the kingdom is passing to me. My ancestors married royalty from other kingdoms; no wonder all the rulers have become progressively more greedy, and it’s all the people who are suffering.” I assessed my emotions. Was it already taking place? Had I already become uncaring and selfish now that Father had died? When had it happened?

Pollox gently pulled my hands down. “You are not affected the same because you’ve made the reparations. You treated me as an equal, as a friend. And now, I hold that oath fulfilled. You and your descendants won’t be plagued by that greed any longer.”

“You can do that?”

“Yes. Now, you can go back and be the kind of protector that your hoard needs.”

I touched his face. “You really need to start learning the human words for things.”

“You already use dragon terms. You claimed me for your hoard, too. As such, anything I have is at your disposal. I’ll get some things in order then come for you.” He stroked my hair. “We can make this work. You’ll be a wonderful queen.”

I closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around Pollox’s neck. “You’re the best.”

Pollox returned the pressure. “I’ll never actually let you go.”

CHAPTER 22

Pollox and I could barely look at each other the following morning as I bade him farewell and began the trek away from the forest where we'd met. Each step felt like I was pulling half of my heart away from the other, but I continued on, pack slung over my shoulder. Why did it feel so final? Pollox said he would be coming for me soon, and he'd never given me reason to think he would lie to me.

I reached the outskirts of the village closest to the castle just before midday and stopped in a grove of trees, glad for Pollox's suggestion of having the table prepare travel foods so I didn't have to stop and talk to anyone. I didn't want to answer any questions about my supposed captivity, and I feared what would be done to me if the citizens had killed my father. Would they do the same when they discovered who I was? If Pollox and I had discovered the connection between our ancestors and lifted the curse earlier, could it have saved my father's life? I never had a chance to reconnect with the father I'd known and loved.

I kept to the shadows, hoping to be almost as discreet when sneaking back to the castle as I had been when I'd left. But as I drew closer, a blast of trumpets let me know I'd been spotted.

"It's Princess Rapunzel! She's back! Open the gate!"

The drawbridge lowered and the portcullis raised. I lifted my chin and crossed, prepared to give a speech to the servants and soldiers to explain my sudden arrival.

"Rapunzel! Thank goodness you're home!"

All of my rehearsed formal, somber words vanished as I saw Father, alive and well, running toward me with his arms outstretched. My bag dropped to the ground as he flung his arms around me, nearly knocking me over from the force of it.

“What?” Shock, even greater than when I’d seen Pollox transform for the first time, nearly made me black out. “You...you’re alive!”

“And so are you, thank the stars. I’ve been worried sick!”

“But...” Pollox may as well have been sitting on my brain. “But...”

“I told you she would come.” Griffin followed close behind Father and smiled at me. I looked wildly between the two. “Good afternoon, Princess.”

“Ah yes, Griffin!” Father flung his arm around the squire and jiggled his shoulder. “If it weren’t for him, who knows how long you’d still be trapped. Ingenious, how he planned for a decoy to ride with him into town so the dragon wouldn’t know that you were following after. And here you are, safe!” He released Griffin and hugged me again. “Now we can plan your official wedding.”

This time, I did stagger backward. Griffin leapt to my side to stop me from falling. His hand closed around my wrist, and I felt colder than I ever had before in my life. “Wha—what did you say? My what?”

“Wedding,” Father answered patiently, tugging at my elbow to coax me into the castle’s interior. “I did offer your hand in marriage to whomever rescued you. Besides, I hear he’s quite the chess champion. You have lots in common with him, and I saw the letter you sent, agreeing. Don’t worry; his station won’t be a problem.”

Ice flooded through my veins. They expected me to marry Griffin? The letter I’d signed before I realized Pollox could shift...

“No, I can’t.” I looked at Griffin. “I’m sorry if I misled you, but you said...”

“We made promises, Rapunzel,” Father said, his brow furrowing in confusion. “It’s fortunate that Griffin here comes from a long line of dragon hunters. He knew things about dragons even our scholars didn’t.”

“This isn’t your future,” I shot back in clipped tones. “You have no right to tell me who I can and can’t marry.”

“Do you mind giving us a few minutes alone?” Griffin asked Father. “I’d love to discuss this privately with my wife.”

“I’m not your wife!”

Father and the guards retreated, and Griffin began to lead me to an empty chamber, but I whipped my arm out of his grasp, refusing to touch him. “I know this must be a shock to you,” he began in a placating tone.

“You lied to me!”

“As you did to me. So we’re even.”

“I never told you that your father was dead! Why would you do that?”

A cold expression hardened Griffin’s otherwise handsome face. “I promised your father I would get you back here, and I succeeded. I knew you’d come back with the right incentive.”

“What are you talking about? I escaped on my own.”

The look in Griffin’s eye was much too shrewd. “You really want to stick to that

story that you were a poor, mistreated prisoner? Or would you like to tell the truth for once?"

"How dare you? You've seen where the dragon kept me. You know what I've been through."

Griffin never broke eye contact. "I told you my father died years ago, and that was true. Want to know how he died?"

I backed away. "No."

His smile broadened as he advanced. "He was a dragon hunter, but his mission went rather wrong. I've hated dragons ever since. I knew I would need to find a way to gain more power and have access to more resources if I wanted to eradicate dragons. Now, do you remember the first chess match we played?"

"Yes," I answered warily.

"That game was a gambit."

"Neither of us used a gambit. I remember."

"I'm not talking about a chess opening. You already know that a gambit is a risky move made to gain an advantage, by sacrificing something small early on in order to achieve something grander in the end. I sacrificed one chess match in order to win your interest, and by doing so, you lowered your guard. You began making mistakes, many of them."

My eyes widened and my stomach soured. What was he talking about? Ought I call for a guard?

Griffin sniggered softly. “You think you’re so clever. You are so ready to mock everyone you meet for being easy to manipulate and you think that you can make any man fall for you, and yet you fell into the same exact trap. You’re used to strong, brash men, and I knew something different would catch your eye. What do you think? Did my shyness and humility draw your attention?”

Just as he had done in that tiny carrier pigeon room, he placed his hand around the back of my neck, his thumb pressing against the vein throbbing on the side of my throat. I slapped his hand away.

“Glare all you want,” he chuckled. “That day when I took you up to send the pigeon, if you truly had been locked up with prison rations, you never would have rejected the food I offered. Starving people aren’t picky. And another thing—women are so quick to believe that any man who touches them is merely after physical affection. But did you know that this is the perfect position for checking someone’s pulse?”

I froze, processing what he was saying as he went on, “You were too calm when you and I talked back then. If your life had truly been in danger and you were genuinely escaping from a dragon, your heart would have been pounding much harder and faster.”

His words fell like physical blows to my gut. That time... It hadn’t been romantic at all. He was testing me, and I had failed. I cursed my own naivety. He had played me like a fiddle. All these years, I considered myself a master at manipulating everyone’s emotions, but no, I had been the gullible fool this time. My feelings were painted clear as day on my face.

Griffin smirked. “Remember: three steps ahead. You and the dragon were quite the con artists, but I’m a dragon hunter, and my father left me quite a bit of equipment I intend to use against your co-conspiring dragon.”

“Guards!” I shouted, backing away from Griffin. “Guards!” Within seconds, the guards and Father came running. “Arrest him,” I said, pointing a shaking finger at Griffin.

Father patted my hand. “Now, now, darling, you mustn’t fuss. Let’s get you up to the infirmary.”

“I’m not ill! He’s...he’s...” What was I supposed to accuse him of? That he’d discovered my plot? Was he going to tell?

“It’s just as I suspected,” Griffin said sadly, shaking his head. “She has dragon fever. I’ve seen it before. She will be out of her mind until she recovers.”

“I’m not sick!” I insisted, looking wildly around at the guards. “It’s him! He...he’s threatening me.”

“You were right,” Father said, nodding solemnly at Griffin. “Moments of lucidity interspersed with delusion, particularly when it relates to the dragon or her memories from her captivity.”

Everyone had adopted the same sympathetic expression that was on Father’s and Griffin’s faces, looking at me like I was some child with a dreadful illness but was too fragile to handle the severity of my supposed condition.

“Your delusions will fade over time,” Griffin told me with that same maddeningly concerned facial expression.

“You’re the delusional one!”

“If you say so,” Griffin answered, calm as ever.

“My daughter needs time to rest and recover with her new husband,” Father informed the guards. “Help escort her to her rooms.”

“We’re not married !” I shouted. “What are you talking about?” I hadn’t lost my mind; everyone else had.

Father was already preparing to leave, but a glimmer of the same paternal warmth I’d once known shone again in his eyes. “Rapunzel, I have a meeting with Lord Morvain, but I’ll come see you in a few hours, as soon as I can.”

“No!” I screamed, dragging my feet as I was forcefully escorted back to my chambers. My ineptitude at self-defense had never been more glaringly obvious, but what was I to do against nearly a dozen men? What did it matter if Pollox had lifted my father’s greed if he believed me to be insane? Kindly locking me in my room until I recovered from a fake illness would still result in me being shut away from everyone, unable to contact Pollox.

The guards deposited me into my room, and Griffin entered, locking the door behind him. I immediately snatched up an empty vase and hurled it at him.

He smirked as it shattered on the wall beside him. “You missed.”

I threw another, which he dodged. “You know, you’re only solidifying to everyone that you’ve gone insane. Thanks for the additional evidence.”

Angry as I was, I slowly set down the porcelain wash bowl I’d been preparing to throw next. “Congratulations, then,” I spat. “You’ve successfully convinced everyone that I’m crazy, but I’m never marrying you.”

“You already have. The ceremony is only a formality. Legally, you are my wife now.”

“I am not.”

“Yes, you are. The letter you signed was already given over and agreed with your father that upon your safe return, we would be legally married. The documents were signed and sealed two days ago. Naturally we can’t have someone who has temporarily lost her mind to dragon fever make her own choices, and your father understands that the kingdom needs a sane person in line to inherit the throne.”

“I’ll run away.” All I needed was for Pollox to come. I had been wrong to want to come back. Pollox and I had done so much more for the people in my kingdom than Father ever had.

He shrugged. “Go ahead and run. So long as I’m next in line, it doesn’t matter to me what you do.”

I crossed my arms, seething.

“It was a clever idea to team up with a dragon, I’ll give you that,” Griffin told me. “A very lucrative venture, and I haven’t told anyone else what you did. You ought to thank me.”

If only I could shoot fire from my eyes the way Pollox could from his mouth. “How long did you know?”

“I suspected from the beginning,” he told me. “You did a good job with staging your own kidnapping, but there were signs that it was fake.”

“Like what?” I snarled.

He began ticking on his fingers. “If a dragon had smashed his tail against your balcony door, more than one window pane would have shattered, and the glass would

have gone into your room, not back toward the attacking dragon. That was the only night the entire night staff fell asleep, and they all exhibited symptoms identical to when you drugged men with wyrmsleep. You really need to vary your drug of choice. No dragon could sneak into a castle and drug the water supply, but you could do it from the inside. And finally, dragons only shed scales once every five years, and as they are more vulnerable during that time, they rarely go out, and if they do, they would have shed many more than the four scales we found.”

My mouth hung so low it felt like it should have been dragging on the floor. I couldn’t think of any response.

“And then ,” Griffin continued, “you must have used the old escape tunnel, because although you did a good job of covering your tracks when you first entered the tunnel, you let in fresh dust and rocks when you exited.”

“How did you know about the tunnel?”

He smirked wickedly. “My ancestors dug it. My father often showed me the trapdoor in the ruins. But besides all that, your dress changed too often for your dragon not to be lavishing you with gifts, you didn’t have sores on your wrists even though the other knights claimed you had been in manacles, and I knew you had a well-rounded diet. Your nails would have turned flaky and brittle with the burned-bread diet that the other knights claimed was your only food, yet when I pointed out how strong they were, you still didn’t realize I’d found you out. You aren’t unintelligent,” Griffin went on, with the air of bestowing the greatest compliment gifted to mankind. “I knew from the beginning that if you had wanted to escape, you could have.”

“Why didn’t you tell everyone, then?” I asked.

“And give up my advantage? I told you: one must always be three steps ahead. If anyone wants to kill a dragon, they must first determine its weakness.”

“He doesn’t have one.”

Griffin gave me a withering stare. “Oh, really? I predict that right now, your precious dragon is planning to come here and help you mourn the loss of your so recently departed father, not expecting us to be ready. I have enough dragonsbane to kill an army of dragons. You are his greatest weakness.”

Oh scales. This was a grand trap, and I was the bait.

“No!” I screamed. “You can’t!” I threw myself at Griffin, prepared to claw, kick, bite, anything to stop him from harming Pollox.

He laughed as he restrained me, finally succeeding in locking my arms around me then whispered into my ear from behind, “I had hoped that sowing the seed of doubt about the dragon’s intentions would’ve had you confiding in me earlier, but when that didn’t work, all I had to do was convince you that people were plotting your demise, and you signed your future right over. Now, your kingdom will belong to me.”

I headbutted him with the back of my skull and felt a satisfying crack as his nose broke.

“Guards!” This time, Griffin called for them, and they came and wrestled me back.

“No! Let me go!”

“Be gentle. She isn’t thinking right,” he crooned, hand up to his bloody nose. “The beast has addled her brains, but we’ll be ready for it when it comes.”

Tears of anger gushed out as I pulled against the guards, desperate to fly at Griffin, to punish him for what he had done.

“It’s like I told you all before,” Griffin said, the kind, patient tone back to his voice. “My wife needs time to recover from such a traumatic event. She isn’t to be blamed for her actions...the dragon is, and we will make him pay. Make sure the door is locked until she improves so she doesn’t hurt herself or anyone else.”

This match was no longer being played out on a chess board. I was the future queen, and I was trapped.

CHAPTER 23

T rue to his word, Father came to visit me only a few hours later. I heard him speaking in a low, concerned tone to the guard before a hesitant knock came at the door. “Rapunzel?” he called softly. “Are you awake?”

“I am. You may come in.”

He did so, nervously peering around with a hand up to shield his face as he did so. Word must have spread about Griffin’s nose.

“I’m not going to attack you,” I told him as calmly as possible. “But I would like to talk.”

“As would I. I meant to come earlier, but I had some meetings to?—”

“I understand. You have a lot of duties.”

“And yet I’ve failed as a father.”

Startled by his unexpected confession, I stared at him. I hadn’t heard him admit fault for years. “Have you?”

“I’m afraid I have,” he went on, crossing to sit beside me and pat my knee. “I’ve had a change of heart in the recent weeks. It’s why I amended my original proposal and allowed anyone, regardless of rank, to rescue and marry you. I thought you and Griffin had a connection.”

“I thought we did too, but I was wrong.”

“I see that now, but also...”

“Also what?”

He heaved a deep sigh. “Griffin has worked the hardest to rescue you and has proved time and again that he cares about you and about the kingdom.”

“But I don’t love him. He’s using me.”

“We can get your marriage annulled if you wish it?—”

“Yes, I want that. You never should have signed a marriage license on my behalf.”

“But...”

“There’s no but!”

“Rapunzel, please listen to me.” Father was so calm and kind that it unsettled me. Where was the calloused, ruthless man I’d become accustomed to? “You don’t need to marry him. But, as much as I love you, I need to put my fatherly feelings aside and do what is best for the kingdom.”

“What are you saying? You’re stripping me of my title?”

“No, darling. But until I have proof that you have overcome your dragon fever?—”

“I don’t—” I stopped short of shouting and inhaled deeply, determined to prove my sanity. “I don’t have dragon fever. I’ve never even heard of it. If this is something Griffin told you about, doesn’t it seem rather self-serving that he is the only one

benefiting?”

“It does, and I’ve considered that,” Father acknowledged. “But there are other factors as well.”

“Like what?”

“Like the fact that you have made international diplomacy remarkably difficult. You have proven time and again that your desire to humiliate me in public is greater than your desire to care for the kingdom. Now, I’m not making any excuses for my own deplorable behavior in the past, and I’m not sure why it took me so long to see it in myself, but now that I have, I will need to see proof that you can conduct yourself in a manner befitting a queen, not just as a hotheaded princess.”

Beatrix came in with freshly laundered clothes but gave no indication she was listening.

“I can explain! I’ve been giving to the people in need. Pollox—the dragon—was helping me. There was an orphanage we helped, and...and there was a dragon that cursed our bloodline a hundred years ago. It affects the greed of the ruler and now I’ve made amends with Pollox, so that is why you’re like this again...what?”

Father was shaking his head, the overly sympathetic expression back on his face again. “It’s the dragon fever talking, dearest. It’s all right. We’ll get you through it.”

“I don’t have dragon fever!” I looked around in panic at Beatrix, who had always seen through my schemes and plotting and loved me all the same. “Beatrix! Tell him I’m not crazy.”

She kept her gaze lowered. “Can I get you anything, Princess?”

“Get me out of here! I’m not... Father, I ran away to be with the dragon these past months. I was never a hostage and I’m not confused. Griffin is wrong.”

“He’s very knowledgeable about dragons.”

“But he hasn’t lived with one for the last few months. I have. You think that keeping me locked in a tower after I’ve supposedly been locked in a tower for months will make things better?”

Father twisted his signet ring around on his forefinger, considering my point. “I will need to ask Griffin.”

“Why is it all about what Griffin wants? Did you really legalize a marriage between him and me?”

This time, Father at least had the grace to look embarrassed. “It was necessary at the time. What if you were killed and there was no successor in line? You signed your agreement, and Griffin had eyewitnesses that he had rescued you before the dragon stole you back. I promised in my decree that whoever rescued you...”

I massaged my temples in small circles, then addressed my father in a calm voice. “What would it take to prove I don’t have dragon fever?”

Beatrix curtsied and left with a quiet “Let me know if I can get you anything.”

“I don’t know,” Father admitted. “But I promise that I’ll make things right. I haven’t been the most attentive parent since taking the throne, but it will be different moving forward. No matter what, I’ll be more available to you now, even when you’re ill.”

“I’m not,” I whispered. “I’m not sick.”

“We’ll talk tomorrow, Rapunzel,” he told me with a smile. “We can figure this out.”

* * *

The following morning, both Griffin and Father came to visit me. All of my rehearsed statements when I saw Griffin walk through the door seemed inadequate to express my loathing. My only consolation was that his nose was crooked and still swollen, and I’d never felt more viciously satisfied by any other sight.

“How are you feeling today?” Griffin asked, his voice loaded with concern.

“Go jump off a cliff,” I spat.

“Rapunzel!” Father scolded, then turned to Griffin. “My deepest apologies.”

“It’s fine.” Griffin gave a painful, long-suffering smile. “Dragon fever does strange things to people.”

I really was in danger of flying into a rage. If I hadn’t been insane before, he would make me go crazy soon enough.

“I’m curious,” I said to Father with a smile. “Did Griffin tell you that he told me you died?”

His eyebrows knotted together and he chanced a glance at the squire. “No.”

Griffin shook his head. “No, dearest, remember? I said it was like he had died of grief when you disappeared.”

“No! You said the people killed him after he didn’t give them their rations.”

Griffin reached for my hand, but I slapped him away. “Maybe you’re confused.” He turned to father. “Sometimes with dragon fever, the victim will project their own circumstances onto others. So, if the dragon denied her rations, she will assume it happened to others.”

“That’s not true! Ask the dragon! He’ll tell you. He’ll...” I didn’t need to look at Father to know he wouldn’t believe me. Who would, after we’d been selling the story that I was his hostage for months? “I want our marriage annulled,” I shot at Griffin.

“We can do that once you are recovered,” he said graciously. “But remember when I first came to the tower? You said you’d always love me. I’m holding out hope that the woman who said that is still in there somewhere.”

“I never said that!” My blood pressure rose so high that I began to see spots. “I don’t love you and I never did.”

Griffin turned to address Father, who looked conflicted and aggrieved. “I’ve loved your daughter ever since I first met her playing chess. From the very first move, she captivated me, and I’d sacrifice anything for her. If I need to wait a hundred years for her to recover from her illness, I’ll do it, because she is worth waiting for.”

“He’s manipulating you!” I shouted. “He doesn’t love me. He’s just saying that so he can gain power.”

“I don’t need power,” Griffin countered. “All I want is to avenge you. Your Majesty, grant me the resources to kill the dragon who did this to your daughter. Once the beast is slain, her illness will disappear, and if she no longer wants to be my wife, I will abide by her wishes.”

“No,” I choked out. “Don’t kill him.”

“Rapunzel,” Father began in a placating tone, “we must?—”

“No! He hasn’t done anything to you. He’s wonderful. He’s...he’s...” My voice died. They would never believe me.

“We’ll have a trap set up if he tries to come for you again,” Griffin told me.

“Speak to me again, and I’ll break your nose a second time!” I took a step toward him, but he didn’t even flinch.

Father stepped in front of Griffin. “We’ll make sure you’re safe, dear. We are even working on clearing a path between here and the tower. It would only take a few hours on horseback to get there now; if he ever tries to take you again, I’ll send the whole army.”

“No.” My vision swam. Pollox was in danger, and I had no way to warn him.

CHAPTER 24

I paced my bedroom in a frenzy. How was I supposed to escape? How could I notify Pollox in time? If he came flying in, he would be shot without a second thought. I wouldn't be there to help remove the arrow, and he would be just as vulnerable as any man, but without the coordination of someone who had spent all their time on two legs.

Would he be recognized as a man? He had joked about coming in disguised as a dragon tamer. Would he actually carry it out? If only we had a way to communicate.

"Your Highness?" It was my handmaiden Beatrix, who was speaking so quietly I didn't hear her at first. She was making a spectacle of setting out my meal, arranging the tiny vase of flowers and ensuring that the utensils were perfectly parallel. "Can you hear me?" she breathed, barely audible as her gaze flicked toward the guard at the door.

I nodded, wondering why she had suddenly become so secretive.

"Did the dragon really help that orphanage?" She locked eyes with me.

"He did." I kept my voice at her same, low volume.

"Do you trust him?"

"Yes."

Beatrix raised her voice. “Do you need help changing for your midday meal, Princess?” Her eyebrows jumped up and she inclined her head ever so slightly toward the guard again. Understanding clicked into place.

“Yes,” I answered more loudly. “I really want to wear my red gown. You know, that one with the full corset and all those tiny gold buttons up the back.”

“Close the door, Jaxxon; the princess will be changing,” Beatrix called.

The guard obeyed, snapping the door closed with a gruff “Make it quick.”

“My sister works at an orphanage near the border,” Beatrix said in a rush, helping me get changed just as quickly as she spoke. “She told me that ever since the dragon took charge, things have been better for the children. They have food and clothing and even toys. They are saying that the dragon wants to lay claim to the entire kingdom.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t harm?—”

For the first time in my memory, Beatrix interrupted me. “You misunderstand me. At this point, the people prefer keeping the dragon to your father.”

I stared at her reflection in the mirror. Was she being serious? Or was this another of Griffin’s tests?

“What do you mean, exactly?”

She cinched my corset and began fastening the multitude of buttons that ran up my back. “Meaning that that dragon has done more for the people of Rookwyn than King Harrigan ever has. Even with his recent change of heart, it is too little too late. If you are willing to rule without threatening the dragon, you will have a great deal more support from the people. Some people say he was holding you captive, but...” She

shot me a shrewd look. “I think you stayed on purpose. Rumors have been spreading.”

“Why would you say that?”

Beatrix smoothed out my skirt and stood. “I’ve been caring for you since you were too young to remember. I know you well, princess, and I think you have a soft spot for that dragon. Based on what my sister told me, he has a sweet spot for you as well.” She smiled at me. “I always did say that no man could handle you. But a dragon may have a chance.”

“Can you contact your sister and have her pass the message to Pollox that I’m being kept here? They won’t let me out.”

“I already did. Word travels fast.”

“And tell him that they have more dragonsbane.”

“I don’t know if I can get a message to him in time, but I can?—”

A rapping came from the door and Beatrix broke off her sentence. “Are you finished yet?” the guard called out.

“Yes, we just finished,” She called back, crossing to leave then turning back. “Enjoy your meal, princess.” She added in a whisper, “I’ll try to get the message to him, but I’m not sure how long it will take.”

* * *

When Beatrix came late that night, she didn’t linger. She only said, “Enjoy your pudding,” and left promptly, without a single word of information about Pollox or her

sister at the orphanage or anything. I glared at the creamy pudding, topped with glazed strawberries and a chocolate drizzle. What, was I supposed to sit here and eat sweets while everyone assumed I was a madwoman?

I picked up the pudding, tempted to throw it off my balcony, but spotted a small folded paper beneath the dainty bowl.

I instantly felt lighter. Pollox was coming for me! But just as quickly as it had risen, my heart dropped. Griffin said he had dragonsbane. Would he have the time to get it and shoot Pollox before he rescued me? He had succeeded once before; he very well could deal a fatal shot this time. Had Beatrix been able to warn Pollox in time?

For the following hours, I stayed rooted to the balcony, staring up at the sky as stars emerged and twinkled down on me. I had so many questions that were unanswered. How would I ever be able to stop Father before he truly was assassinated? Would Griffin take the throne no matter what? What would Pollox say when he discovered that Griffin and I were legally married? Once Griffin was made king, would he have any reason to keep me alive? If Pollox were shot, could he make it back to the forest before he transformed, or would his secret be revealed? If he failed to get to me the first time, would he try again?

It felt like a year before a dark shape rose up from near the village and soared toward the castle. Almost immediately, the alarm was raised and soldiers shouted warnings. I waved the torch, hoping Pollox would be attracted to the heat and light.

It worked. My heart leapt with joy as he plummeted out of the sky, gripped me securely in his claws, and pumped the air again to bear me heavenward.

“They have dragonsbane arrows!” I shouted. “Be careful!”

“Hold on, then,” he called back, going into a dizzying barrel roll that set my stomach

to churning.

There were several twang s as the soldiers released arrows, all of which zipped past us as Pollox zigzagged through the air, spiraling his way away from the castle.

“We did it,” Pollox gloated. “We?—”

Thwack . From somewhere on the battlements, there was the ugly sound of a catapult launching its payload into the air.

Smack. A thick, glutinous paste splattered against Pollox’s wing.

“What was that?” I called, wishing dawn would hurry up so I could see better. The faint streaks of light in the distance were painfully slow at brightening the sky.

“It felt like a cannonball’s worth of jam,” Pollox laughed, winging his way over the forest. “How childish.” Two thirds of the way to the tower, he began hissing and increasing in temperature, just as he’d done before the first time he transformed.

“What’s wrong?”

His flight pattern became more erratic, as did his breathing. “I think whatever they hit me with was laced with dragonsbane. It feels like it’s burning away at my wing.”

“Land, then! We need to get you cleaned up.”

“No, we’re nearly there. We’ll be safer at the tower. It’s closer than the cave.”

I stared up ahead at the turret looming closer. Each time Pollox groaned and twisted, we would drop several feet. I nearly cricked my neck trying to look around to examine his wing, but couldn’t see anything from my position.

Pollox barely made it to the tower and scrabbled at the roof, trying to hold on while gently lowering me to the balcony and simultaneously roaring in agony.

“Show me your wing,” I ordered the moment I was steady.

It wasn’t pretty. The violently purple gel-like substance plastered against his wing was slowly eating away at the flesh. I used my skirts to wipe off what I could, but each time I touched him, he bellowed in pain again.

“Transform! Burn it out,” I told him, panicking at how much gel was on his wing. Would it kill him?

“A roof really isn’t the best place to transform,” he grumbled, but began to shimmer all the same, twisting in upon himself and shifting. But halfway through his transformation, he gave a shout of pain and slipped.

“No!” I screamed, trying to grab at him as he fell.

I was too slow. Pollox plunged to the ground—with only half-sprouted wings open to slow his descent—and landed in the very same bramble bush that Drake and I had fallen into.

“Pollox!” I screamed, staring over the edge. He had finished transforming but was lying spread-eagled in the bush. My heart attempted to break through my ribs as I watched him. Oh, scales, was he dead? “Pollox!”

He slowly raised a hand and dropped it again. Was that a good sign? Or a bad one? I stared at him, trying to determine if his chest was rising and falling at an appropriate rate, but from this height, I couldn’t tell.

Griffin must know that he had a limited window of time to arrive and kill Pollox. I

had to get down and help him. If he was unable to fly me down, I would need to tie together bed sheets or something. But to my dismay, when I turned around, I saw the room's luxurious interior slowly dissolving, shimmering until it finally faded from view.

"No," I whispered, staring at the desolate chamber. Only a few random things remained—a couple books, a solitary shoe on the floor, and the gauzy ladder hanging from the trapdoor, much too short to get me all the way down the tower.

A thin, threadbare rug lay musty and dirty on the stone floor beside the empty fireplace. The wardrobe still stood in place, but the air was stale with neglect and wood rot, and it gave the impression of a once beautiful piece of furniture that had fallen into disrepair. No paintings adorned the walls, and all of the windows were so filthy that it was impossible to look out of them.

I pulled open the door to the wardrobe, and a tiny tingle rang through my body, a ghost of the magic that I had felt my first time opening the doors. I flung the doors wide and found...nothing. No beautiful dresses were hung, no shoes littered the floor of the wardrobe. I wrenched open drawer after drawer, desperate for anything that would help me. The only thing to see were cobwebs and dead cockroaches, their legs shriveled up and stuck into the air. If the room's magic was fading along with Pollox, it couldn't provide me the rope I needed, couldn't make blankets appear that I would be able to tear into strips and braid into rope to descend.

Finally, in the last drawer, my hand brushed against something other than dust. The fine-toothed comb inlaid with jewels felt icy under my freezing fingers. I pulled it out and sank to the floor, staring at it. How long would it last before it faded too, just like the final vestiges of Pollox's life? There was nothing I could do, no way to get down the tower without Pollox to help me.

Idly, I pulled the comb through the hair that spilled into my lap and watched as the

strands lengthened. Something in the back of my mind niggled at my thoughts, trying to tell me something...but what? The comb dug into my hair again, and once again, my hair extended nearly a foot.

When the realization hit me, I jumped into the air and began digging the comb into my hair over and over. My blonde hair piled up around my feet, and I had several yards before I began twisting it into a long rope. It was a long way down, I kept reminding myself as I tugged the enchanted comb through my hair repeatedly. Frequently, I had to pause and twist my hair, tying knots where I could to help the strands stay together and strengthen each other. If this didn't work... I didn't want to think about the alternative.

After I had a haystack size of twisted and knotted hair, I dragged the pile to the window. Hair weighed a lot more than I expected, and I had to struggle to get it to move at all. My head felt weighed down just by the hair that stretched from my scalp to the floor, never mind the piles dragging through the dust and dirt.

Just as I prepared to shove my hair over, I paused. As intelligent as I considered myself to be, I lacked in the area of depth perception. With all the coiled hair, I had no way to measure if this much hair would be adequate or not, and the mass weighed several times what I did. If I shoved it over, I would be taken down with it. Or if I had gauged the distance correctly, the weight of my hair would be far more than what I would be able to hold up, especially with only my head. My neck would be snapped faster than Pollox could gobble up an ox.

Frustrated, I sat on the mound of golden hair, which felt far softer than any haystack, but which I sank into, my posterior dropping right down to the floor with my feet and arms still stuck up in the air and my nose jammed into my knees.

With difficulty, I extricated myself, squirming until I wiggled out of the hairy prison. I sat on the ground and studied the hair. It wasn't enough to simply extend my hair

the length of the tower. I could tie the end of my hair to the balcony railing and lower myself down, but what would happen if I had miscalculated and ran out of hair halfway down? Griffin had accurately predicted how much rope to use, curse him.

Anxiously, I brought up the comb several more times and twisted more hair. Preventing an untimely death was reason enough to ensure that I had ample amounts of my makeshift rope. Once the balcony was entirely full, I glanced over the side again. Pollox was still down below, but it seemed that he had at least rolled off the bush and was lying on the grass. How much time had passed? Well over an hour since he fell, I was sure.

I wound the end of my hair around the balcony railing, quadruply looping it around to ensure my safety, then heaving on the hair to make sure it would hold. I approached the edge. The towering height still made my head spin when I looked down, and I crouched back down, breathing deeply to slow my heart rate. There was no knight to hang onto, and no harness like before. I was entirely on my own.

After spending several minutes lecturing myself that getting scared would get me nowhere, I held tightly to the hair closest to the balcony, where it was tied. But still, my fear of falling to my death held me at bay. The short fall with Drake near the bottom had been bad enough; I could only imagine how much pain Pollox was in. He had likely broken many bones. I ground my teeth, frustrated at my cowardice. Every time I tried to build up my courage and begin my descent, my feet and hands refused to obey my instructions, and my stomach lurched back toward the room as if desperate to get me as far away from the balcony edge as possible.

In the distance, two horses with riders went galloping across the narrow stretch of dried riverbed, only momentarily visible before they vanished from view again. Had Father sent soldiers? Dragon hunters? They must know that Pollox was injured after his erratic flying. What if it was Griffin?

Anger clouded my vision. If it was Griffin, I would make him pay dearly for what he did.

Using his climbing technique as inspiration, I wrapped my left foot around the hair rope and stepped on it with my right shoe, creating a makeshift foothold so that I didn't have to hold up the entirety of my body weight with my thin arms.

I lowered myself hand over hand as I periodically released the pressure on the hair wound around my foot and let the hair rope slide up. At least going down was much easier than ascending the rope.

How long did I have before the riders arrived? If only I'd paid more attention during my astronomy classes when the instructor had taught about tracking time based on the sun's arc across the sky. As quickly as I could without feeling like I was in imminent danger of falling to my death, I made my way down to Pollox. The weight of the comb in my pocket reassured me. If I had miscalculated, I could always use it to continue to lengthen my hair.

Such a fear was unwarranted. My hair wasn't quite long enough, but I had descended close enough to Pollox that I was able to release my hold on the hair and drop the last few feet to the ground. "Pollox, can you hear me?"

"Yeah," he grunted, blearily opening his eyes, then furrowing his brow in confusion as he stared at the hair still connected to the tower. "Oh, scales."

An odd sensation tugged at my scalp, and I looked aloft. The rest of my hair had begun to fall, slowly at first, but faster and faster as it went slithering through where I looped it through the balcony's railing and came raining down upon me and Pollox.

I hadn't planned for this part. The hair hit me with the force of an avalanche, knocking me to the ground alongside Pollox and covering us both with a blonde

cascade.

“What the—” Pollox groaned. I felt him try to push the hair away.

“Sorry, I couldn’t get down otherwise,” I told him, also fighting to free us. “How are you?”

“You keep asking me that question at terrible times. I was just hit with a catapult’s poisoned projectile and fell off a tower. I’ve had better days.” He managed to claw his way up to pop his head out of the hair, and I quickly copied him. “If you wait, I can transform back and burn away all this hair.”

I looked toward the forest. No one had appeared, but it was only a matter of time. “Well, not to rush you or anything, but there are people headed this way who could be here any minute.”

He stared at me from across the puddle of golden, knotted tresses. “Well, this certainly turned into a hairy situation.”

“With all the near-death experiences we’ve had today, I don’t think this is the time for jokes.” Despite all my fear for Pollox, I couldn’t resist smiling. “So don’t tangle with me. Is anything broken?”

“Dragon bones don’t break.” He struggled to his feet, wincing from time to time. “I hadn’t finished transforming by the time I hit the ground. I have a wallop headache though. The dragonsbane didn’t get to my bloodstream, so I should be able to shift soon, but not quite yet.”

“Rapunzel!” Father’s voice called out. Looking around, I saw him and another rider emerging from the forest across the meadow.

“Quick,” I hissed to Pollox. “You can enchant wood, right? Enchant the comb to be sharper so I can cut this off. I’d rather not have a hundred-foot hair train following me.” I handed him the comb from my pocket, and Pollox stared at it, focusing intently as it began to shimmer.

“It’s more difficult when I look human,” Pollox grumbled, still watching as the comb’s edge began to sharpen and elongate.

“I like when you look human,” I told him, watching as Father and his helmeted companion came closer. “It makes kissing much easier, so I won’t complain.”

Finally finished with the comb, Pollox smiled and returned it to me. “There is that benefit.”

I used the sharpened edge to hack through my hair just above elbow-length, and the last bit fell to the ground as the two riders came and dismounted.

“Rapunzel, thank goodness we found you,” Father said, eyeing Pollox.

“Father, this is Pollox,” I said, hesitantly introducing them. Would he remember his name from when I’d blurted it out before? “Pollox, this is my father, King Harrigan, and...”

“Griffin.” The other man had removed his helmet to reveal the face I loathed more than any other. “And that’s my wife.”

I automatically moved toward Pollox for protection, who wrapped his arm around my waist without hesitation. I’d expected that Pollox would take a step back after Griffin’s claim, but he did nothing of the sort.

“I’m not your wife,” I spat at him.

“Now, now Rapunzel,” Father began in a placating tone. “The rest of the troop is coming right behind us as backup in case the dragon returns. We’ve been through this, remember? You’re confused.”

“I’m not! You’re the one who signed a marriage license on my behalf without my consent.” My muscles were all tensing. In his human form, Pollox was completely untrained in battle and couldn’t even run correctly, and I was equally useless in combat and had nothing other than a small, sharpened comb for protection. If it came down to a match between Pollox and me against Griffin and my father, both of whom were competent fighters, we didn’t stand a chance.

“It’s the dragon fever,” Griffin said, eyeing Pollox up and down and taking a step forward.

Pollox calmly pulled me back, placing himself between me and Griffin. “There’s no such thing,” he said. “And I advise that you stay away from her.”

Griffin narrowed his eyes. “Are you an expert on dragons?”

“As a matter of fact, I am. I’m a dragon hunter, and this woman promised that she would marry me more than a month ago.” Pollox spoke so confidently that both Father and Griffin paused. “I’ve come to collect on her promise. Whatever you recently signed would be invalidated as this woman obviously didn’t give her consent to you, but I have a claim on her, as she does on me.”

Understanding blazed in Griffin’s eyes as he drew his sword. “You!”

“Me,” Pollox answered calmly. “And if you try to steal from my hoard, I won’t hesitate to protect it. Now back away. I won’t ask again.”

Griffin stared around at Father. “Don’t you see?! He’s the dragon! If we kill him and

take his heart, we'll both be invincible!"

"No!" I screamed at them. "I forbid you from harming this man."

Pollox smiled wickedly, looking more like a roguish highwayman than ever. "I'm no man. I'm a dragon."

Both Griffin and Father drew their swords, and Pollox shunted me backward to keep himself between me and the weapons.

"Papa!" I screamed at my father, using my childhood name for him. "If you ever loved me at all, at any point in your life, listen to me!"

Father paused, and I saw a flicker of the man I used to know.

"I refuse to marry Griffin. I ran away before, and I'll do it again. I need you to listen."

"Don't pay attention to her!" Griffin shouted in rage. "Just think, Your Majesty, we will have everything we ever dreamed of if we kill the dragon."

"I was never kidnapped," I told Father. "I escaped so I wouldn't have to marry someone I didn't choose, and I found Pollox. I love him."

Father's sword lowered slightly, a pained expression crossing his face. "You ran away from me? You'd rather stay with a dragon than your own father?"

"Pollox helps those in need, as I've wanted to do. All the ransoms we've collected? We've been redistributing it to the people who need it most."

"It's true," Pollox added. "We've been leaving gold on the offering altars around the kingdom."

“Dragons don’t share their hoards,” Father said, doubt in every syllable.

“No, dragons protect their hoards,” Pollox corrected. “And if Rapunzel’s hoard includes all of Rookwyn, then I will defend her right to it.”

Father’s sword point dropped to the ground.

“Don’t listen to them!” Griffin bellowed, his grip tensing on the sword. “They’re lying!”

Father fixed him with a glowering stare. “I am still king, and no one orders me around.”

Griffin locked his jaw. “Fine,” he hissed. “Fine. If you don’t want a dragon’s heart, you don’t have to have it. But I won’t give up invincibility.”

I sensed what he was about to do a split second before it happened. Griffin whirled about and thrust his sword at Pollox’s middle.

“No!” I screamed, shoving Pollox out of the way. He fell, but I was left open, completely vulnerable to the descending blade.

I watched, as if in slow motion, as the sword sliced through the air toward me. Father paled and Pollox fought to transform, but there was no time for either to save me. There wasn’t even enough time for me to save myself. I closed my eyes, knowing that my life had reached an end. I wasn’t invincible like dragons were. The enormity of my human frailty struck terror into the very depths of my soul and I scrunched my eyes closed, prepared for what I knew was to come.

A jarring blow crashed against my ribs so I was thrown back several paces, and a scream automatically tore through my throat. I prepared myself for the waves of pain

that would consume me and lead me into death's waiting arms...but they never came. My eyes flew open. Pollox had finished transforming, and I stared down at where my dress was ripped, but the blade hadn't penetrated my skin at all.

"What?" Griffin muttered, drawing the sword back in confusion, but then he leapt as a jet of flame licked at his feet.

"She's invincible. She already earned my heart some time ago." Pollox's eyes flamed bright orange as he placed his massive body between me and Griffin. "But you, squire, are entirely vulnerable."

"And just attempted to murder the heir to the throne," Father added, stepping forward, prepared to intercept any additional attempt the squire might have made to repeat the action. "It's over, Griffin."

A clatter came from across the meadow as Father's backup soldiers came crashing into view, all breathing heavily as they ran, weighed down by their armor.

"The dragon!" they shouted in alarm, all drawing their weapons.

"The dragon is no longer a threat. Apprehend this man immediately," Father boomed, nodding at Griffin, "for high treason and attempted murder."

The men immediately obeyed, casting anxious glances at Pollox as they did so. His tail flicked slightly from side to side, but he gave no sign of aggression.

"Let go of me!" Griffin screamed. "It's them, they're the ones?—"

"He has dragon fever," I said sadly, shaking my head sympathetically. "It's quite unfortunate, really."

“He said that you...” one of the men began hesitantly, never taking his eyes off Pollox.

“A misunderstanding. You see, I’ve tamed this dragon. Watch.” I turned to Pollox. “Sit.”

He fixed me with a glower that could have set the grass beneath me on fire. I’ll make it up to you later, I mouthed to where only he could see. I promise.

Pollox dropped his back haunches to the earth so the ground beneath our feet shuddered.

The men let out a gasp of surprise. Other than shooting me a curious expression, Father did nothing to refute my story.

“Can I pet it?” one of the men asked, edging closer.

A deep growl sounded deep within Pollox’s throat.

“I wouldn’t recommend it if you value your hand,” I answered. “He only allows me to touch him.” To demonstrate, I placed my hand on his leg.

Father, who hadn’t shown any desire to approach the dragon, waved his hand at Griffin, who was seething. “Take that bit of vermin out of here. I want him to stand trial within the week.”

“Shall we stay for your protection, sire?” the captain asked, hand still flexing on his sword’s hilt.

“That isn’t necessary, Captain. I’d like to discuss a few things with my daughter. Privately,” he added. “I have more than a few questions for her and her”—he looked

up at Pollox—“pet.”

CHAPTER 25

Father wearily rubbed his temples, eyes closed as I finished explaining everything. After shifting to his human form and giving his side of the story on the journey back, Pollox had retired to the corner of Father's study and was reading so silently that I'd nearly forgotten he was there as I regaled Father with my tale.

"That's about it," I finished. "You and Griffin arrived at the tower, and you know the rest."

There was a slight chink as Father pulled off his crown and placed it on the table. "You ran away because of what I decreed?"

"I did."

He shook his head. "I was wrong for that. I've been blinded by greed for years, and I'm sorry I wasn't the father you deserved."

"Well, I was hardly an easy-to-manage daughter," I pointed out with a slight smile. "It's all right now."

Father continued shaking his head. "No, it's not all right. I neglected my own daughter and drove you away because of my selfishness. The people in the kingdom have been suffering because of me, and I haven't been the ruler they deserve."

"It's not all your fault," Pollox said from the corner. He stuck a finger into the book to mark his place as he crossed the room. "The blood curse had a powerful hold on

you.” I glanced down at the worn cover to discover that it was the farmer’s guidebook on harvesting a wife that Pollox had told me about before. I bit back a smile.

Father had also noticed the title but wasn’t as successful at hiding his surprise. His eyebrows jumped up to wrinkle his forehead. “You’re...serious about my daughter, are you?” he asked Pollox, eyes darting down to the book.

“I wouldn’t be reading this if I weren’t,” Pollox answered, waving the book in the air without the slightest trace of embarrassment. “This chapter is called ‘Milking the Moment: Knowing When to Hold Her Hand and When to Hold Your Horses.’”

Father let out a noise of disgust and closed his eyes. “I don’t want to know.”

Pollox quirked his eyebrow. “Aren’t you single? You should want to know how to woo a woman. I could let you borrow?—”

“I’d rather not know the specifics of what you are doing to...woo my daughter,” Father interrupted, trying valiantly to muster every ounce of dignity he could. “That’s something that should be kept just between you two.”

“Humans,” Pollox huffed. “They have so many rules about what you can and can’t say to different people.”

“I’ll explain it to you later,” I said with a laugh. “And for what it’s worth, I’ve read many great works of literature, but I think that this book is one of the finest. It’s a true masterpiece that should be treasured.”

“A dragon,” Father sighed. “My daughter is being courted by a dragon.” He looked up at me. “Does he make you happy?”

“Very. The happiest I’ve been in a long time.”

“Then I’m glad for you.” Father smiled at me. There was a warmth to his eyes that I hadn’t seen in years. “I promise to be a better father from now on, and Pollox is welcome here.”

“I’m glad you’re back to being yourself,” I told him, heart bursting with joy. “I’ve missed you. The real you.”

Father hugged me. “I’ve been a dreadful king and an even worse father. But that is changing today. I’m planning to turn the kingdom over to you. You’ll be a better ruler than I ever was. The future of Rookwyn is yours to mold.”

I pulled back. “Are you sure? You’re better now. You could still?—”

“I’m sure. You are just the sort of queen the people need right now.”

Pollox slipped his hand into mine. “Rapunzel excels at caring for her hoard. She will be an exceptional queen.”

“I’ll begin the paperwork,” Father told me. “It will take some time, but we will turn this around.” He looked at where Pollox held my hand. “Are you planning to tell the people about your shifting?”

Pollox’s fingers tensed around mine. “No,” he said firmly. “It isn’t just my own identity at stake. I won’t compromise our race’s secrets by revealing myself to an entire kingdom’s population.”

“So you’re planning to remain human from now on?”

“Also no,” Pollox answered without hesitation. “If I couldn’t fly again, it would kill me. We can put out word that the mighty Princess Rapunzel tamed the dragon and he now does her bidding.”

“But we can’t have you fly to the castle grounds then vanish,” Father pointed out. “Everyone would figure it out.”

“We could set up the wardrobe to have a passage between the cave and here,” I told Pollox. “That way you could fly back to the cave as a dragon then transport here in your human form without anyone knowing.”

“And we announce that you are being courted by...?” Father asked.

“A sorcerer,” Pollox supplied immediately. “Anytime I’m in this form, I can accompany Rapunzel and enchant things for those in need, or else fly here as a dragon and accompany her that way.”

“If that’s what you want...” Father said hesitantly.

“It’s what I want,” Pollox stated.

“And if it’s all right with my daughter.”

I could have glowed with happiness. “It’s perfect.”

“Then that is what we’ll do. Go on, then, I’ll begin the process.”

Pollox and I walked down the hallway, hand in hand. Pollox held my cool hand against his cheek. “You’re just the right temperature for me. Fire and ice balance each other perfectly.” He allowed our hands to drop and swing back and forth between us as we walked. “Thank you for agreeing to protect my secret,” he said. “I know it’s less convenient for you this way.”

“Hey, you’re part of my hoard. I’ll always protect you and what matters to you.”

“As I will for you. You’ve claimed the kingdom, and I’ve claimed you, so we can protect the kingdom together.” His eyes flamed orange, but I didn’t see the greed of a hoarder, but the devotion of a guardian. This was a man—a dragon—who would do everything in his power to protect me and my kingdom. “Rookwyn will thrive,” he said, his voice steady. “Not as a prize, but as part of the legacy we will build together. I will defend it against any who dare threaten its peace. Not because I covet it, but because I care for what you care for. I love you, Rapunzel. You’re the prize jewel in my hoard.”

“And I love you, you fire-breathing menace.” I wrapped my arms around his neck. “I’m glad to be a part of your hoard.”

“And you have my heart forever.” Pollox swept me into a kiss so heated that it wrapped around me, not scorching, not searing—just consuming, and his kiss felt like an inferno I never wanted to escape.

EPILOGUE

There wasn't a single rotten tomato in sight as Father and I stood in front of our kingdom's subjects two months later for my coronation ceremony. There were no sunken eyes or hollowed cheeks and for the first time in my memory, people cheered as we arrived and took our places on the raised dais.

Griffin, who had been found guilty of all charges, was sent to a prison work camp for the rest of his life. It had been Pollox's idea to send him, and he had even volunteered to take him, as long as I came along and we could exchange flirtatious conversation ...while Griffin was forced to listen, suspended in a wire cage dangling from Pollox's claws.

After Griffin's trial had concluded, Father had lowered the taxes, I renegotiated trade agreements with surrounding nations, and Pollox had taken it upon himself to enchant innumerable tables to ensure everyone was well-fed. He took me on regular flights around the kingdom to assess the needs, but never shifted in front of anyone else so that the people were convinced I truly had tamed the dragon but was engaged to the roguish looking sorcerer that sometimes accompanied me to events.

Father, smiling broadly, raised his hands to the crowd to quiet the cheering. "It has been two months since my daughter tamed the dragon," he announced. "And now that she is engaged, it is time for her coronation."

Applause broke out again, sounding a hundred times louder in the wide courtyard where sunshine caught the dragon statues' eyes and cast beams of red and orange light over the crowd. Many in the crowd stared at Pollox, who was sitting behind us.

Father waited until the clapping had subsided before continuing in a somber tone. "I was not the king I had hoped to be, and it isn't enough to simply apologize. My daughter and her fiancé have done more for Rookwyn in these last months than I ever have during my reign as king, and it seems only fitting that I pass the kingdom onto them. Bring the bishop forward!"

Bishop Aldric stepped up, draped in flowing gold vestments, his aged hands steady as he lifted a small vial of anointing oil. His voice echoed across the silent crowd, "In the name of the sovereign lineage of Rookwyn, we anoint thee, Rapunzel, as rightful ruler and protector of this land."

The oil was cool as it touched my forehead, and I closed my eyes, absorbing the weight of the moment. My heart pounded beneath the heavy velvet of my coronation robes—a deep, vivid blue embroidered with gold thread.

The bishop turned to the assembled nobles and lords, his voice rising with solemn authority. "Who here bears the crown of Rookwyn?"

The chamberlain stepped forward, bearing the golden circlet on a silk cushion. The crown gleamed in the bright sunlight, its many gemstones winking like a thousand tiny stars. Hushed whispers broke out among the crowd, all eagerly awaiting the final moments of the ceremony.

I lifted my chin as Bishop Aldric took the crown in both hands. He studied me, as if weighing my soul, then raised the crown high for all to see. "Let it be known that this day, before the eyes of all this kingdom's subjects, Rapunzel is crowned Queen of Rookwyn."

With steady hands, he lowered the crown onto my head. The weight of it pressed down like a promise, like a privileged responsibility. I rose to my feet, spine straight, my heart a steady drumbeat in my chest. I turned to face my people—lords and ladies, knights and courtiers, all watching me with expectation.

For a breath, no one spoke. Then, a single voice rang out from the crowd.

"All hail the Dragon-Taming Queen!" Their cheers rang through the air, but I heard only the quiet thunder of my own heart. My subjects all looked at me, yet my gaze was only for Pollox, who smiled proudly. My father may have once claimed the title of Dragon King, but Pollox was the true dragon king—not because of a crown, but because of the way he watched over me, over all of them, with a quiet, protective devotion. They would never know they had already been claimed, not as conquered subjects, but as treasures in his hoard—his to guard and care for. And I, above all, was his most beloved prize.

Our hoard's future was bright.