



Ties of Death (Tethered Hearts)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: A cursed king. A stolen bride. A desperate quest.

Emana hasn't seen her best friend Daenn since she left their gryphon rider clan for an arranged marriage eight years ago. She doesn't believe the rumors that he's become a ruthless tyrant since ascending the throne... not until the warm, kind boy she once knew hunts her down, kills her husband, and steals her back to the clan.

This new Daenn is cold, driven, and harder than the steel he wields with bloody efficiency, yet he claims to need her. Or at least, he needs her magic to temper his own chaotic, deadly power—through the shackles of marriage. But when Emana tampers with the new bond between them, their magic begins lashing out on its own, striking down innocents in alarming numbers.

Now, to save her clan and free herself from Daenn, Emana must journey deep into the heart of the jungle with him in search of a way to destroy his magic for good. But the more they are together, the more she sees echoes of warmth beneath his icy exterior that hint that maybe he hasn't changed as much as she thought. Except the search to sever their bond is filled with horrors, and destroying Daenn's magic might require a heavy cost—his very life.

Ties of Death is book 5 in Tethered Hearts, a multi-author series of no spice fantasy romances. Each standalone story features a magical bond that forces the couple to discover how much they're willing to sacrifice for the sake of love.

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A Stranger to Me

Come morning, I will have had three names in my life. First, the name I was born with. Second, the name I took when I married my husband. And third, apparently, the name of the man who just murdered my husband.

But not if I have anything to say about it.

“No,” I say, steel in my voice. Steel I force there so that tears won’t overtake me. I’m not sure what they are—tears of betrayal? Tears of relief?

Either way, they’re all wrong, so I blink them back and keep my eyes pinned to the man standing over my husband’s body.

He’s tall, broad shouldered, and once I would have said he was even more familiar to me than my husband. But the boy I used to know is clearly gone.

I continue once I’m sure my voice isn’t going to tremble. “I will not go with you, and I certainly won’t marry you.”

Daenn’s hand tightens on the hilt of his sword. It’s the only physical reaction he shows to my words. “I’m not asking, Eman. You can either go pack a few things with an escort, or I can throw you on a gryphon right now. But you are coming with me. There is no one else here to stop me from taking you.”

Unbidden, my gaze drops to the body at his feet .

Tolomon was a big man, and he loved fighting, but it doesn't surprise me that he fell to Daenn's blade. He is—no, was—rash, hot-blooded, and even if he wasn't, I never saw anyone beat Daenn in a fight.

Tears threaten to choke me as I linger on the limp way he lies there in the dirt, lifeless eyes staring in my direction but not looking at me.

These tears are easy to identify: they're traitorous tears, because they're not grief.

No. I don't grieve Tolomon's death. All I feel is deep, soul-searing relief—and guilt worming through it all. Despite all his faults, the man was my husband. I shouldn't be happy that he's gone.

I try to force myself to reach for anguish as I study the dark red watering the ground beneath him. Too much—it's too much for him to be healed from. Far, far too much.

I rip my gaze away, clenching my teeth against the sobbing laugh that wants to rise out of me, and take in the rest of the scene before me.

Daenn didn't come alone, and I recognize every warrior he's brought to do his bidding. Some I only know by sight, but others...others I know almost as well as I once knew Daenn. They shift uncomfortably or drop their gazes when I turn mine toward them.

They know how shameful, how horrific Daenn's actions are. As much as I wanted to be free of Tolomon, as much as I don't regret his death, I can think of no reason Daenn could give that would justify the unwarranted murder of a man. And killing him just so Daenn can claim me as his own wife?

Indefensible.

The betrayal rears its head again, drowning out the relief. How long have I wished that Daenn would come rescue me? Save me from the greatest mistake of my life—my marriage to a cruel, possessive man?

And now he has... but it seems he's no better than Tolomon, for he claims me, treats me as flippantly as Tolomon ever did. If anything, he's worse. Tolomon never killed a man.

And not one of Daenn's men have chosen to stop him. None of them lower their weapons from where they hold Tolomon's personal guards captive. My dead husband's men are outnumbered, and even if they weren't, they are outmatched.

My clan are some of the best warriors on the continent, and the years I've spent away will never be enough to make me forget that.

I hate how powerless I feel in this moment. I have never wished for some sort of active, offensive magic so much in my life. I have an abundance of magic, but it's not something I've ever been able to control—more of an aura that envelops those around me, as is usual for gryphon clan magic. And even if I could direct it, its only purpose is to bring people peace and calm. I want to bring them—him—pain like the storm drowning me.

I tilt my chin up. "Fine. I'll go pack. Who would like to assist me?" I rake my gaze over the traitors. "Lars? No? How about Kettil, then."

Lars can't even meet my eyes, but Kettil does. His mouth twists down, his expression resting somewhere between regret and defiance.

"Eskil," Daenn says, "she has ten minutes."

Ah, yes. Eskil. Daenn's closest friend after me when we were children. My closest friend after Daenn. Clearly Daenn trusts Eskil's loyalties lie with him.

Eskil meets my eyes, his own gaze a touch enigmatic. Maybe there's some lingering loyalty to me somewhere in him. It's a faint hope, but it can't hurt to nurture it. I'm already being kidnapped.

Kidnapped by the man I always wanted to rescue me. Betrayal twists its knife a little deeper in my heart.

"Come along." I flick my fingers at Eskil and turn on my heel with all the grace and airs I learned as the wife of a lowland nobleman.

I sweep into the manor as if Eskil is my minion, as if all is right with the world and my husband wasn't just murdered at the very steps of his domain. As if I'm not wearing my nightgown to stare down a legion of gryphon warriors.

The halls of the manor are dim, as is natural for the middle of the night. A few servants hover here and there, clutching candles or plain oil lamps.

But none of them meet my gaze. None of them will stand for me against a warrior, especially not one so hulking as Eskil.

They were loyal to Tolomon, but I have no doubt that Tolomon's fate has already spread through the manor. Without that link, they hold no true loyalty to me.

I've always been an outsider in my husband's domain. I will find no help here.

Eskil doesn't try to speak to me as we traverse the halls.

I break the silence once we're well out of earshot of any of the servants. "How can

you support him in this?”

“How can you not?” His response is measured, unlike his words, which he doesn’t even try to hold back on. “Your filthy excuse for a husband deserved more than Daenn gave him.”

I clench my teeth. I can’t defend Tolomon; I don’t know what he said or did to Daenn, but I know how he could be. Eskil would see right through any excuses I make up for him; he always was perceptive .

We reach my rooms, and I slip inside, ignoring the way Eskil follows and posts himself where he can see my every movement.

A pang of muddled grief stabs me; how can the world shift so sharply in mere moments? If any man tried to enter my room while Tolomon lived, they forfeited their position, probably earning a good beating before doing so. I hated his possessiveness, but it was familiar. I’m on untrod ground now, with men whom I used to know but have changed at their very cores.

I ignore the way my neck prickles at Eskil’s presence and move to my wardrobe, my hand skimming over my many colorful dresses, straying to the black mourning dresses that still hang to one side from the death of my mother.

My mouth curves up in a bitter smile. Daenn wants me to marry him, does he? I won’t let him forget for a moment how he’s just as wicked as—possibly even more than—the man he saved me from.

I tug a small bag from the foot of the wardrobe and begin pulling dresses and folding them, casually positioning myself to block Eskil’s sight as I do so—just in case he has anything to say about my choice of attire.

When the bag is full to bursting, I shut it, and then I half turn to Eskil. “Am I allowed to change? Or do you insist on dragging me from my home in nothing but my nightclothes?”

Eskil is unmoved. The lighthearted nature I remember from him is nowhere to be found, but I suppose there’s nothing light about tonight’s events. “Be quick about it.”

I pull one last dress from the wardrobe and cross to the dressing screen, stepping behind it.

I slip off my gown and don the stays and underthings that already waited behind the screen, finishing it off with a black mourning gown, one of the simpler ones I own, in a plain wool. A riding gown, but I hadn’t anticipated using it for riding gryphons.

Gown in place, I glance around one last time. Besides clothes that fit me, there isn’t really anything I need or want. I am wearing my ring, the one Tolomon gave me at our wedding according to Verkslish custom. I’m tempted to keep it, to antagonize Daenn with it, but suddenly I can’t bear to wear it any longer. I’ve grown to despise it, wearing it only as a way of pleasing my husband.

I tug it off and leave it on the dressing table.

I feel lighter without it. Free in a way even seeing my husband dead on the ground didn’t elicit.

I smooth the front of my gown and grab one last item before I leave the cover of the screen. A letter opener, barely sharp enough to slice paper, but the best I can hope for in a weapon. I tuck it into my pack and cradle the bag as I return to Eskil, my grip tight in case he tries to take it from me. He only sweeps a hand silently, gesturing for me to go ahead.

The servants have gathered in one large cluster near the front of the manor, not quite outside, but close enough they can peer through one of the glass windows. I slow my steps as I near them, but there isn't really anything to say. In a way, my disappearing after Tolomon's death simplifies things. Since I bore Tolomon no children, Tolomon's title and lands will fall to his brother. With Tolomon gone, there's no place for me here, and his family and I aren't exactly close.

In the end, I pass the servants without a word, though I nod slightly to Tolomon's steward, Bernard. He returns the gesture with a slight bow, a hint of regret mingled with fear. The learned cowardice from serving Tolomon is in full force even as his blood cools on the ground outside .

I grip my bag tighter and leave the manor house behind.

Daenn and his men have not been idle in my absence. Tolomon's guards have all been stripped of their weapons and herded to one side. A few stable boys were permitted near Tolomon, and they've rolled their lord over, closed his eyes, and crossed his arms in a position of repose.

Daenn faces away, speaking with his men, and I study his profile as I approach, my steps slowing.

He'd already begun growing into a man when I left the clan for my marriage at sixteen, but now, eight years later, he's shed all vestiges of boyhood. His dark hair, so like mine and everyone else's in our clan, is tousled from his flight and fight. Muscles clad in black leathers fit him even better than I remember. His jawline is far more striking than it was eight years ago. My best friend has turned into a breathtakingly attractive man.

But it's more than that. Yes, he's handsome—tall and muscled and deadly—but I expected all of that, given how hard he trained even before my departure.

He glances over and meets my eyes. I drop my gaze, my skin heating with my hurt-fueled anger.

I hoped the rumors of the king of the gryphon clans trickling to me over the years, as few as they've been, were false. They whisper that he's like a demon, quick to strike down any who defy him, holding himself apart from even his allies. But it seems that every single one of them is horribly true.

There's an air to him, one that's like staring down a savage monster. It's not only that he can kill with hardly any thought, but that I have no doubt he wouldn't hesitate to. Maybe even that he wants to. My Daenn never would have, but this man is a stranger to me. A stranger who has no qualms about murdering lords and stealing a woman to be his bride. No qualms about trampling on my heart and marring the memory of what our friendship used to be.

Daenn Henriken was my best friend, but sometime in the past eight years, this man killed him.

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Steels My Resolve

Rattling jerks me awake. I bolt upright from my bed, thoroughly disoriented for a moment.

I'm in bed in a small cavern room, like the ones I spent my entire childhood in. Somehow, I must have fallen asleep on the flight back, which means someone carried me to this room, laid me in this bed.

My mind offers up vague recollections at the conclusion—low murmurs, strong arms holding me against a solid chest, a smooth gait until my back met the mattress I now lie on.

Was it Daenn who carried me? That he would dare touch me after how he upended my life and betrayed me—my stomach churns at the thought.

Now the door is opening, and I tense, half panicking as if my thoughts might have summoned this new, heartless version of my old friend.

But it's only a woman, hardly more than a girl. She looks vaguely familiar, but it takes my mind a moment to click the details into place. Last time I saw her, she had pigtails flying behind her as she ran with the other children of the clan .

Even though I place her face, I don't know her name. As I stare at her, wordless, she cautiously ventures farther into the room with a hesitant smile.

“Good morning, I’ve come with some breakfast and your—your dress.”

My gaze snaps to her hands. In one, she does hold a bowl of something steaming, and despite her distance, I can almost smell the spicy porridge I grew up eating and missed desperately in my years away.

I never could convince the cooks at Tolomon’s manor to make it for me, and Tolomon believed that the best way to combat homesickness was to ignore it entirely. He was my new home now, he’d always said. I didn’t need to drag in vestiges of my old life to muddy the waters. It seemed sweet at first.

Then it just made me want to scream.

I almost reach for the porridge, but then I register the green dress in her other hand.

“Is that a wedding dress?” My words are deceptively calm.

The girl nods. “Yes. I’m to take you to the ceremony hall as soon as you’re finished eating and dressed.”

I swing my feet off the bed and cross the room to her, taking the offered bowl of porridge. Now that I’m near enough, I can actually smell it, and it’s even better than I remember. Sweet and spicy, with a hint of tang that probably comes from the rosenberries mixed in.

I move to the rug near the firepit and settle myself on it with far less ease than I used to as a girl. I’m out of practice from living in the lowlands with their high chairs. “This will be all I need. Thank you.” I pour as much dismissiveness into my tone as I can manage, a haughtiness I learned from the Verkslish noble ladies who used it on me when I first came to their court.

It's somewhat ruined when I take a large bite of porridge, shoving it in my mouth with far less delicacy than is becoming of a lady. But as the flavors hit my tongue, I have to withhold a moan. I desperately missed this.

The girl blinks and sways back and forth a moment, unsure what to do with the dress she holds. "Oh, I just thought—since it's a bit fancy and all, you might need help dressing. Shall I put it on the bed for you, then?"

I swallow the last of my bite and shake my head. "No. Take it back with you. I don't need it. I'll wear what I have on now."

That pulls her up short. Her eyes go wide, and she gapes at me. "You can't... that is... you're wearing black!"

I tilt my chin up. "I am. And I won't be wearing anything else to my wedding to that snake."

She flinches back. "Miss—I mean, my lady—you shouldn't... you'll make the king very angry"—her voice drops to a whisper on these words—"if you defy him like that."

Even the clan is afraid of Daenn now. The realization only steels my resolve.

"Let him be angry. Maybe he'll stab me through the heart like he did my husband."

The girl blanches and flees, the door banging behind her.

I return to my porridge. No doubt she's running to tattle to some higher-up. Perhaps even Daenn himself, if I'm lucky. I want to savor my porridge in peace before said irate higher-up returns.

I finish my food, regretful when I can't manage to scrape any more out of the bowl, and then I rise to examine the room.

My bag leans off to the side of one of the shelves that has been carved into the rock wall. The shelves are mostly empty. If this were actually my room, or occupied by someone else, they would be filled with folded clothes.

Next to it is another set of shelves. These are slightly smaller, meant for personal belongings. These are also mostly empty, but I do spy a comb and other toiletries, all in the slightly more unpolished style I associate with my clan. The workmanship is still very fine, but the gryphon clans don't lacquer or paint everything like the lowlanders. Instead, we carve designs into the handles and edges of our tools: swirling clouds, stylized gryphons, birds, trees, and mountains. This comb is simpler, the work less detailed with simple cloud swirls and vague winged creatures.

I eye the comb longingly. I am in desperate need of untangling the knots in my hair from the flight... But first I kneel by my pack, digging through until I find the letter opener. I'm surprised they didn't search my bag and take it. Or maybe they did, and they just deemed it not enough of a threat to bother.

I consider for a moment, then I reach around to my back and slip it through my buttons, wedging it between the dress bodice and my stays.

I'm about to test how easy it is to draw when a curt knock comes from the hall. I whirl to face the door, dropping my hands to my sides as it swings open. The young woman has returned, and with her an older woman, one I recognize instantly.

She's short and plump, and cheerily pretty, though none of her regular cheer lines her face now. Grey streaks her brunette hair. She hasn't aged much since I last saw her, but that was only a year ago, when she came to give me the news of my mother's death—when I had all of these black dresses in my bag made.

Sigrid .

Sigrid sweeps into the room with her usual no-nonsense bustling stride.

Her eyes soften on me for a brief moment, but then she stops before me, all business. “What tantrum are you throwing, love?”

Her voice nearly breaks me.

“Calling it a tantrum won’t change my mind, Sigrid.”

Her brows draw together. “You really intend to marry the king in that? Must I go fetch Daenn to order you to change himself?”

I raise my chin. “Oh, do. It will be even more satisfying to tell him no to his face.”

“Your friendship, at least—your history with him—should count for something in your mind.”

Why should I care about our shared history when he didn’t? Did he have our friendship in mind when he claimed me as his bride like some barbaric war chief?

“It would if he hadn’t killed my husband in cold blood.”

Sigrid draws back at this. She didn’t know—but why would she? Why would Daenn announce his darkest deeds to the clan upon his return?

I sigh. “It’s good to see you, Sigrid, but I won’t change my mind on this.”

She stares at me for a long, long moment. “No, I can see that you won’t,” she agrees, her frown still in place. “But you will at least let me do your hair.”

She waves off the girl who fetched her. The girl scurries out, dress in hand.

Tears try to choke me, and I give a quick nod. “Thank you, Sigrid.”

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Break Tradition

Daenn came for me soon after, as I expected: it was custom in our clan for the man to escort his new bride to the ceremony.

Sigrid stayed with me even after she finished my hair. I think she decided that I'm liable to run without supervision. It's like she knows me, despite the years we spent apart.

Now she opens the door for Daenn and presses her fist to her heart as she bows her head, the customary gryphon clan sign of respect.

Daenn acknowledges her with a quiet greeting, but his eyes stray immediately to me.

"It's time," he says, not bothering to greet me as he did Sigrid, which is just as well. I would have ignored it.

He lingers in the hall as Sigrid adjusts a strand of my hair one last time. "I'll see you in the ceremony hall."

I only nod. Of course she's attending; that's no surprise—but I wish we could break tradition and I could walk there with her instead of Daenn.

Sigrid leaves first, stopping to murmur something to Daenn before hurrying down the hall.

I drag my feet as I near Daenn. I steel myself, lift my chin, and meet his eyes .

His gaze flicks down my dress, but he betrays no thoughts on that stoic mask he wears now.

In an effort to draw him out, I speak. “Since you chose to break tradition in how you went about acquiring my hand, I’ve decided to break it as well.”

“I won’t argue with you wearing black when you’re marrying me.” He turns away. “It’s fitting, really.”

I blink. Does he regret killing Tolomon? But no, there’s no repentance clinging to him. And while I’m angry with what followed, I can’t bring myself to regret him doing it, though the thought is a stab of guilt for such disloyalty toward the husband I should have respected, even if I could never bring myself to love him.

Maybe Daenn’s referring to his reputation? I am marrying death itself, if the rumors are to be believed.

He gestures me to his side. I move and brace myself for him to take my hand, according to wedding custom, but he only starts down the hallway, his strides long but measured to not outpace me.

I follow, not bothering to hide my confusion. I’ve made no efforts to conceal my feelings of him, but the bridal escort is steeped in tradition, and beyond that, Daenn—the Daenn I remembered from before, at least—has never been one to shy away from physical contact, even just between friends. He was quick to hug, to loop his arm over my shoulders, to hold my hand. Not only me—though certainly me more often given how close we were—but anyone. Pats on the back, hugs, casual friendly gestures of all kinds.

That he avoids something as simple as holding my hand merely serves to remind me that he is not my Daenn. King Daenn has no need for physical affection, not when he can just make people cower in his wake with this new deadly, soulless persona of his.

The change is too stark. I can't stand it. I can't stand seeing this man wearing the face of the boy I knew and loved.

My makeshift weapon presses against my back with each step I take. Now is the perfect time to use it; we're alone. I'll never outmatch him in skill, but I have the element of surprise. I don't want to kill him, but maybe I could use the opportunity to flee, steal a gryphon and fly away.

Slowly, I reach for it, ensuring I have a good grip before I lunge for him, aiming for his shoulder.

He reacts instantly, so fast I don't even realize what he's done—but next I know, my back is pressed to the cold stone wall, and he's pinned my wrists with his iron strength. He's wearing gloves, I notice distantly. Yet another small detail that marks him as changed from my memories of him.

I hold my breath, brace for cold fury. Maybe goading him into killing me was my real plan; I know better than anyone how well trained he is; I didn't really think such an attack would work, element of surprise or no.

His cold gaze studies the letter opener I still hold but can't use, and his brows draw down in a heavy glare with an edge of incredulity. He glances back to my face. I tilt up my chin defiantly as I glare back.

But his next words, while full of censure, aren't the ones I expect. "What happened to the dagger I gave you?"

I blink.

Daenn gifted me that dagger before I left to marry Tolomon. It was beautiful, one of my most treasured possessions.

“Tolomon took it,” I admit. A noblewoman shouldn’t have a barbaric dagger strapped to her hip, he claimed, but looking back, I suspect he just didn’t like me carrying a gift from another man. I didn’t realize how jealous he was until later. He stored it in his personal armory for me, though I couldn’t find it when I went looking once. It had made me furious—it still did—but at that point I knew that confronting Tolomon would gain me nothing. “He said I didn’t need a weapon because he’d always protect me.”

Daenn’s jaw twitches, something dark flashing through his eyes. “How is that working out for you?”

I hiss, a surge of hot violence spreading through me. I jerk my wrists in his grip, and he releases me, but he plucks the letter opener from me in the process. “Stop trying to kill me, Emi. You don’t want that kind of blood on your soul.”

The weary note to his voice pulls me from my fury; it’s not at all what I expect from a heartless tyrant.

“Why?” The word leaves me in a whisper. I need to know. I need to understand. I don’t want to marry him regardless, not after what he’s done, not with who he’s become, but I can’t marry him without understanding this.

He’s turning away, but my whisper ensnares him. He stops moving, but he doesn’t look at me. “Why what?”

“What happened to you? Why did you murder my husband?” My voice rises as my

passion returns. “What did he do to deserve that?” Any number of likely options had spun through my mind, all things I could easily see Tolomon doing, but it was all conjecture.

“He—”

I can’t be stopped now. I’ve opened the floodgates, and I need to know so much more than just Tolomon. “And we used to be friends, Daenn. How could you destroy my life like this? Why would you show up and claim me like—like—” I have no words for how sharp and painful his demand feels in my gut whenever I think about it. How it twisted my secret hopes into jagged betrayal. “What happened to you? What happened to the boy I used to know?”

He gives me a long look, a familiar look, one he’s given me countless times before when I rambled without giving him a chance to get a word in.

The familiarity, the glimpse of my long-gone friend, strikes me silent. I clench my teeth, sucking a breath in through them.

When he’s certain I’m done, he speaks, his voice measured and entirely at odds with his words. “Because I am killing my clan. And you are the only one who can stop me.”

He turns and leaves me standing in the hallway.

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4

Belonged to Tolomon

Eight Years Prior

I couldn't sleep.

I tucked my feet in closer under me and tightened my grip on the blanket around my shoulders. I sat in the center of a bed that could easily sleep five people, and I'd never so keenly felt the absence of companionship.

Tomorrow was my wedding, and tonight was the first night I was spending in this strange lowland house; my betrothed had called it a manor. He had many fancy names for simple things that we didn't bother with in my clan.

Not that this house was in any way simple. It was huge and empty. It could have housed most, if not all, of my clan. The only ones who lived here were Tolomon, his family, and their servants. It seemed like a waste of space to me. Too empty.

That emptiness was pressing on me now. Taunting me. It had been less than a day and I already missed my home.

My old home, I corrected myself. I was marrying Tolomon Becker in exchange for strengthening trade and peace between the gryphon clans and Verksland—to show the Allied Gryphon Clans weren't interested in conquering our lowland neighbors—which meant that this big empty manor was my new home .

But in the dark quiet of this room, I let myself miss my old home. The close, cool caves with their calming heavy silence, silence that was frequently broken by the members of my clan. The meals around a firepit, where no one cared if I didn't know why there were two forks.

I missed my mother. I missed Sigrid. And most of all, I missed Daenn. We had been constant companions since we were little, since Mama had taken up the role of caretaker to Daenn when his mother died. Yes, he was the future king, but Daenn and I hadn't cared about that. We'd been friends. We'd played together, sat through boring lessons together, told each other every secret.

A quiet part of me had even hoped that maybe one day we would marry. Not that I was madly in love with him; I simply couldn't have imagined a life with anyone else, and I couldn't imagine a life where another woman butted into our friendship, claiming Daenn's attention and time for herself.

Fine. In this quiet room, now that he was entirely beyond my reach, I could admit it: I was a little in love with Daenn Henriken. Who wouldn't be? He was funny and handsome and kind. He was my best friend. I'd never had any illusions that he might feel the same way about me, of course, which was why I always shoved that feeling down. I wasn't going to jeopardize my friendship with gushy feelings.

I couldn't shove it down in this great empty darkness, though. It unfurled through me, sharp at its edges and cutting at my heart. Now that I was promised to another, it was impossible to ignore how much I wished my future husband were Daenn instead.

But when the lowlanders had wanted a daughter of the clan, the highest-ranking one we had, I was the closest thing Daenn's father could find. In ways, I was practically his daughter, with how I was raised up beside his son, and even without that, my family held a high status in the clan, thanks to my father having been the king's foremost warrior before he'd died.

So, here I was, on the eve of marrying Tolomon Becker, son and heir of the Earl of Eastern Verksland. He lacked Daenn's warm, easy manner. His smiles seemed far more calculated and controlled than Daenn's. But he seemed to like me. His eyes followed me when we were in the same room, he flirted with me, and he didn't seem like too much of an idiot. It would take time to get to know him the way I knew Daenn, that was all. To try to view him the way I viewed Daenn.

A commotion in the hall tore me from my thoughts, and I tensed. It had seemed silly to me when they'd said they were posting guards at my door. What use was there for guards? I was proficient enough with a dagger and a few other weapons, though a dagger was all I had. Daenn had gifted it to me before I'd left—with a teasing order to use it on my betrothed should he turn out to be unsuitable—but I loved it. I couldn't imagine having another possession I prized more, because this one was like an echo of Daenn, his strength and support. It sent his familiar voice whispering encouragement through my mind.

I could handle myself should anyone try anything.

I crawled off my bed and grabbed the dagger now. It was a thing of beauty; the blade was wickedly sharp, and Daenn had carved intricate gryphons over the hilt. I could only imagine how long it had taken him to make it, since we used to spend every waking moment together.

I left the blanket behind on the bed and, wielding my dagger, crossed the room to the door. I eased it open, making sure to keep the dagger out of sight .

Tolomon stood beyond, his hands fisted in my guard's leather jerkin, his face screwed up in a snarl. At the sight of me, he dropped the man and a smile immediately smoothed his features. That could have been my magic curling out from me, though. Not by any intentional choice on my part; it simply reacted to high emotions—especially negative ones—around me and automatically reached out its

tendrils to soothe them. I could sense it happening, but I had no sway over it.

“Lady Emana.” He swaggered toward me, his eyes too bright, his cheeks ruddy in a familiar way. Exactly how much drink had he had? “Just the woman I was looking for. We didn’t get much time together today since your arrival.” His words slurred slightly, and behind him, the guard scowled, disgusted at his master’s behavior. “I was hoping we could get to know each other more... intimately tonight.”

My shoulders tensed, my mind torn between shock and horror that he would proposition me before we even married. I swallowed and tried to be flattered. Since learning of the king’s order, I had worried that my husband would be old, worried that he would hate me or not care. But Tolomon was young, he was handsome, and obviously he cared a great deal.

Daenn never would have done something like this to his betrothed the night before their wedding, though.

I reeled my dismay in, attempted a small smile. I didn’t want to alienate Tolomon before we’d even had a chance to get to know each other. “That’s very improper, Lord Tolomon.”

“I only want to talk,” he protested, but the way his eyes glittered, the way they dropped down to the slip I used as nightwear, lingering far longer than was appropriate, made it clear how much of a lie that was .

Heat flushed up my neck. “We can talk ”—I stressed the word so he would know I knew what he really meant—“as long as you want tomorrow after our wedding.”

Even if the idea of doing anything beyond true talking with a man I barely knew scared me more than I would ever admit.

He sighed in a beleaguered sort of way. “Such a tease. Then I suppose I’ll bid you good night, Emana.” He drew my name out, guttural in his lowland accent, as he raised a heavy hand to brush over my cheek, trailing it down my neck and over my shoulder.

The guard started to step forward. “My lord, I think that’s—”

“Don’t touch me,” Tolomon snarled, whirling to grip the guard’s jerkin again and raising a fist as if to hit him.

I lurched forward even as my magic did and I grabbed his raised fist with my free hand. “Tolomon, my lord,” I said, keeping my voice calm. “He’s just doing his duty. Protecting my honor. He should be celebrated for that, not punished.”

Slowly, I tugged Tolomon’s fist down.

It was another moment before Tolomon released the guard, shoving him back into the wall as he did so.

“You’re right, of course,” he said to me, flashing me a smile. “I look forward to seeing you”—his gaze trailed down my body, and my grip tightened on my dagger—“tomorrow. Good night, Lady Emana.”

“Good night, Lord Tolomon,” I murmured, dipping my head slightly and watching as my soon-to-be husband staggered away.

Disloyal as it was to my clan and my duty and my soon-to-be-husband, I wished Daenn would come and take me back home with him.

But he wasn’t coming. I belonged to Tolomon now.

Dark and Dangerous

Daenn doesn't say another word as we traverse the cave system to the ceremony hall. He's angry, I think, but it's hard to tell with this new stranger. I keep my own silence; I don't know what to make of his announcement.

When we reach the ceremony hall, I stop short at the entrance.

I expected us to be a spectacle for the entire clan, but the great echoing cavern, with its painted walls that dance with the flickering firelight from the ornamental braziers, holds only a small handful of people near the front. Sigrid is one. The Clan Priest, Jakob, is another. He's a weathered man who's been the priest since long before I was alive, as well as Sigrid's husband. The last two witnesses are Eskil and Kettil.

I keep my voice low, but of course it carries in the empty cavern. Maybe the others will hear and realize how mad this all is.

"So you do see how shameful your actions are," I say snidely. "Seeing as you're not willing to marry me in front of the whole clan, as you should."

The muscles along Daenn's jaw ripple as he clenches his teeth, but his stride doesn't falter .

Eskil, at the front of the room, crosses his arms. "The lack of a crowd is in case the worst happens and for no other reason."

His tone is cold, far colder than he's ever used on me before, and icy dread trickles down my spine at the statement.

His words compound on Daenn's from the hallway, only making me feel more keenly like I'm missing something—something big and important. My steps falter, and I swallow before hurrying after Daenn, whose long stride has already carried him several paces ahead.

We stop before Jakob in the space I saw countless couples fill in weddings I attended growing up, their hands clasped, their whole bodies radiating joy. There is none of that today. Daenn still keeps his hands firmly at his sides, so I do the same, despite the oddity of it. Custom may dictate a physical connection during the ceremony, but I'm not eager to close the distance between us.

I look at each attendee. Sigrid meets my eyes, her look a touch sad, even as she smiles at me, and there's something else there too—worry, maybe—that only amplifies the dread spreading across me. Kettil drops his gaze when I look at him, but Eskil tilts his chin up in a challenge and glares at me. Not with hatred, but like I'm the biggest fool in the room.

I straighten my shoulders. I'm not the fool here; they are. The whole lot of them. Even Sigrid is going along with Daenn's insanity. I can't blame her; I know her loyalty to our clan. But it hurts all the same.

Jakob gestures for us to stand before him. I mutinously consider running, but Daenn picked his guests well. Kettil used to win every warrior race on festal days when we were younger, and Eskil is surprisingly swift for his size .

And Daenn stands closer than all of them, and he already knows the full extent of my intentions. I'm sure he's ready for me to run or attack him again.

I grit my teeth and step forward beside Daenn, but I'm not giving up yet.

"Are you really going to marry us against my will?" I ask Jakob coldly.

Sigrid looks down, her mouth twisting.

"Better that then let rumors of the king keeping a mistress spread," Jakob says practically. "Which will no doubt happen should he keep you near him without a wedding first." There's a long-suffering about his demeanor that tells me he has had this argument already with Daenn, and, of course, the king got his way.

I whip my head to glare at Daenn. "Better to keep me in the cells. I'll make your life as much of a nightmare as you've made mine, otherwise."

"That's not close enough." Daenn shows no hint of offense at my defiance. If anything, he almost seems... sad. What could a monster possibly have to feel sad about?

I sneer. "What, you need to be able to see on a daily basis how you've shattered me?"

Eskil growls, but Daenn just shakes his head. "You will have more freedom if we're married."

"How? How is being shackled to you through marriage more freedom?"

"Your magic will be directly linked to me then. The magical proximity should allow you some physical distance." Daenn looks back to Jakob. The closure of the subject is clear. "Let's begin."

I have no idea what my magic has to do with this, but I'm not given a chance to ask. Jakob launches into the wedding ceremony with the same practicality he's always

had. He speaks of our sacred vows to each other and our god, Lirev. Out of respect for said god, I don't scoff, but I'm sure my expression is still mutinous. He speaks a blessing over the wedding bands, matching silver bracelets in different sizes, that sit on a table to his right.

He reaches the end of his monologue and looks expectantly at us. "If you would take the marriage bands."

Daenn takes the smaller one meant for me; it's not a perfect circle, but rather a spiral, like a breeze's swirl trapped in silver. He reaches for me, but Jakob clears his throat, pointedly looking at Daenn's gloved hand. Now that I'm not trapped against a wall, I look at them more closely. They're dark leather, but fitted and thin, looking more like a second skin than the riding gloves common amongst the clan's warriors.

Daenn tenses. "No." The word is a sharp growl. "The gloves stay on."

Jakob looks ready to protest, but Daenn's entire demeanor has shifted from tight control to barely restrained danger. Jakob purses his lips before acquiescing. "As you command, my king. Lady Eman, if you would raise your left hand."

I hesitate—not out of the defiance that has been coursing through me, but from the tension in the air now. It's so thick and heavy I could cut it with my letter opener. Daenn feels deadly in this moment, and his tension has leached into the rest of the room. Eskil and Kettill stand stiff, and Sigrid is pale. My magic spools out into the room, but I ignore it. It's not like I can direct it to do anything useful here.

I won't give Daenn the satisfaction of seeing my fear. I swallow it down and turn, raising my hand to chest level. Daenn is as still as a statue for a moment, his gaze softening when he looks down at our hands. Then he moves, so very slowly, and slips the bracelet over my hand. The leather of his gloves brushes my skin, warm and soft, as he pushes my long black dress sleeve out of the way to help the bracelet lie

correctly.

The bracelet glints silver against my wrist, most of it peeking out beneath my sleeve. It's loose now, but I've seen the magic at previous weddings. It won't stay that way.

I never thought I'd resent seeing one of my clan's wedding bands on my wrist, never thought it would feel like a shackle.

Jakob clears his throat. I take the hint and reach for the other spiral band, having to lean into Daenn's space to reach it. He smells of pine and stone, exactly like he used to. It's a knife to my heart that such a comforting scent belongs to someone so cruel now.

I grip the wedding band and wait for Daenn to offer his hand.

He makes no move to.

I glance up, frowning. This is what he wanted; why is he—

The cold, unbridled fear on his face draws me up short.

His gaze meets mine, and his expression shutters, falling back into that cold mask—but he can't entirely pull the fear from his eyes. That fear scares me more than anything else from him. I've never seen Daenn so afraid before.

My magic reaches for him, and I can almost sense the exact moment it touches him, because he inhales slowly and his shoulders relax infinitesimally. After a moment he even lifts his hand, so I push the bracelet over his fingers and into its place on his wrist. When I move to pull his sleeve out of the way, he jerks his hand away. "I'll do it."

And with quick efficiency, he does, tugging his sleeve and the edge of his glove out of the way until the wedding band rests directly against his skin. The band disappears as he shifts his sleeve back into place.

Jakob speaks the final binding vows. “With these bands, you are tied to each other as the stars and moon and sun are tied to the skies. May you reflect your love, loyalty, and respect for each other until they shine brighter than the noonday sun and help you soar together on the winds of life. So may Lirev bless this bond.”

The bracelet on my wrist contracts like a living thing until it’s snug against my skin—not painful, but neither will it come off without bending it horribly out of shape. With it, a heat flashes through my whole body, searing and sharp and overwhelming my senses for a moment. Even after it’s gone, I can feel the memory of it.

No, that’s not just the memory, but a lingering sensation. It’s still searing through me. It takes a moment for me to register what it is.

Magic.

In that place where I sense my power—the first thing I notice is how tangible it all feels. I mentally brush a touch over my sparkling magic, and it shifts, trailing behind my fingers. For the first time in my life, I think... I think I can actually manipulate my magic. It’s unheard of—gryphon clan magic is never wielded—but I feel it in a way I never have before. It’s disconcerting.

But there’s also something new and heavy and dark twining through my familiar motes of light. I mentally reach for it too but shy away before touching it. It’s dark and dangerous. Deadly.

I stumble back a step with a gasp. “What is this? What are you?”

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6

Like a Trophy

Daenn's jaw tightens at my exclamation.

Eskil's gaze swings back and forth between us, and he growls. "Please tell me you weren't so foolish as to not even warn her?"

Daenn's grimace deepens, and Eskil breaks his intimidating warrior pose to throw up his hands. "You're a gryphon-dragged fool."

My gaze is still pinned to Daenn, and I tense, half worried this new, deadly Daenn will strike out at Eskil for speaking so freely. But Daenn doesn't even look at Eskil. His jaw works as he clenches and unclenches his teeth.

"Everyone out."

Jakob immediately begins to protest; this is apparently too much for him to maintain his stoic practicality. "But the sealing kiss!"

"No," Daenn snarls.

For once we're in full agreement. I have no desire to kiss this beastly man.

Jakob worries his hands together. "Such a break from tradition—it's very irregular—"

Sigrid hushes him. “Let them be, my love; come. ”

Kettil follows the elderly couple at a quick pace, and Eskil at a slower one after pausing and sharing a long look with Daenn. It seems their friendship is still intact, despite how Daenn has changed. This is probably good for Eskil’s health.

The thud of the door echoes through the empty cavern, as if to emphasize how alone we are.

I cross my arms over my stomach and wait. My previous questions still hang in the air, circling and nipping at me as I watch my new husband.

The word makes me ill. It’s been a long time since I’ve associated anything good with it, not since my early days with Tolomon before I recognized his true nature, but whenever I imagined Daenn in the role when we were younger... well, it certainly wasn’t like this.

Daenn stares at the wall. Finally, slowly, he looks to me. His gaze is heavy but otherwise unreadable. But still he is silent.

“Are all the rumors true, then?” I finally say, too impatient to wait for him to break the silence building around us like a tomb. “You killed your father to take his place.” He flinches, but it’s smoothed behind a hard, flat scowl in another breath. I relentlessly continue. “You kill your advisors simply for speaking out of turn. You rule our clan like a tyrant. What happened to you, Daenn? How did you become such a monster?”

The silence pulls between us before he deigns to speak. The words come slowly; either he’s reluctant to speak or he’s choosing his words carefully. Maybe he’s thinking how best to lie to me.

“My magic is an aura of death; anyone around me risks dying at any time. They can be perfectly healthy one day, and the next they never wake up. I did kill my father before I understood this. I took his place. It wasn’t until others started dying that I recognized what was happening, began to connect the sensation I felt when my magic moved with the deaths themselves. The rumors that I murdered him for his throne began soon after. And more recently...” His gloved fist flexes. “The deaths began happening more often, to those near me. To people I touched.”

His words drop into the silence, each one a stone into a deep pond. The image he’s painting is a horrifying one. I can imagine him feeling his magic move without his behest, as I feel mine—but having that end in people dying instead of calming... It casts his every action since coming to the lowlands for me in a different light.

There’s more he’s not saying. I can tell. Or maybe it’s wishful thinking, an aching for the boy I used to know, a weary hope that his actions mean something to him despite how he’s changed.

“What does this all have to do with me?” I ask, his words from the hall ringing in my ears. “How am I the only one who can stop you?” He hurried away, not giving me a chance to ask before, but I’m determined to get my answers now. Too late is better than not at all. “You know as well as I do that’s not how magic works. I can’t use it to do anything; it just is .”

It’s the nature of magic in our clans. There are those who can wield their magics like a tool, like the Elyri who live deeper in the mountain range, amidst the valleys and forests tucked between our peaks. But gryphon clan magic is a byproduct of our close connection with the magical creatures we live alongside: it manifests randomly, viewed as a blessing from our god, Lirev. Those with magic are revered and respected, but our magic isn’t ever something to wield. It varies from person to person, but the one constant is that it’s an aura; it might affect us or the world around us, but only in the same way a contained fire releases heat upon its surroundings by

its very existence. We don't control or direct it. That sort of magic is the domain of other peoples and cultures, and many gryphon clansfolk view that with suspicion. Using magic like a tool is an unnatural practice that usually ends tragically in the legends.

"Since your mother took over my care after my mother"—Daenn pauses, some emotion overtaking him for a moment before he swallows and continues—"circumstance made us playmates and then friends. And up until eight years ago, you were always nearby; we were inseparable." The ghost of a smile clings to the corner of his mouth for barely a moment, and irrationally I want to grab it, trap it, and keep it with me. That hint of the boy from before or, at the very least, the memory of him. It's gone as soon as it came, replaced with a heavy weariness that should belong to a much older man than Daenn. "When you left, the deaths began again. I didn't even know I had magic before, because you were always there. Somehow your magic was neutralizing mine. But once I started paying attention... I can feel it around me, reaching out its poisonous roots like a carnivorous tree. Impossible to stop. All I can do is watch as it feeds off those close to me. Your magic neutralizes mine. I need you."

He speaks with such earnestness, his words almost a plea, and I almost soften to it. It's not hard to understand what he's suggesting: my magic is soothing, peace. Somehow it soothed his magic from acting upon those around him, to the point that he didn't even know about the power until I was gone from his side. I can believe that easily enough, because my magic has acted that way my entire life. Visiting chiefs from other clans commented on it when I was only a child .

It even occasionally affected lowland magic; Tolomon often had wealthy guests who would complain of their magical trinkets not working properly while they stayed at the Chambledon Estate. I never admitted that I was the cause; giving him another reason to suggest I was defective hadn't sounded appealing.

I shake my head of my burgeoning sympathy, instead reminding myself of all the ways this king betrayed everything he used to be to me and letting that fuel my anger. “So, this is just who you are now. You need something and instead of going about it like a sane person, you kill anyone in your way.” Daenn flinches, leaning away from me, and the weaker, softer part of me wins out, but only a little. “Maybe it started with your magic, Daenn, but you embraced it. You killed Tolomon to get to me. You claim me like a trophy. You’re nothing but a cold-blooded killer now.”

It hurts watching the brief moment of soft desperation erase from his face, leaving only the cold unfeeling king behind, but I won’t take back my words. Someone needed to say it. Someone needed to call him on this depravity, and it seems everyone else in the clan has either lost their fool minds along with him, or they’re too scared of him to do so.

So I only tilt my chin and stare him down as he leans back in. He’s angry now, eyes sparking as he closes the distance between us. “If that’s what you want to believe of me, so be it. It doesn’t change that you’re my wife now. You can hate me. I’m not doing this for me. You will stay with the clan— for the clan.”

And then he leaves me standing in the ceremony hall. All alone for the time being, but bound as effectively as if my chains were real, because I’ve just married the infamous tyrant gryphon king.

Instant of Triumph

When I open the door to the ceremony hall, Eskil waits outside with Kettil. Daenn is nowhere to be found.

Good riddance.

“We’re to escort you back to your room,” Eskil says bluntly.

“I don’t want to go back to my room,” I snap back. “I want to leave.”

He arches a single eyebrow. “You’ve decided to lump the whole clan in with your irrational hatred of Daenn, then, I see.”

I want to hiss at him like a cat, maybe claw his eyes out for good measure.

“Irrational? Irrational !? Eskil Achton, you did not just refer to my feelings toward the monster my childhood friend has turned into as ‘irrational.’ He—” My voice breaks, but I’m not ready to admit to either of them what exactly has my heart so bruised, so I reach for the more obvious offense. “He killed my husband.” The word is bitter. I’m doomed for it to be nothing but a curse in my life—first with Tolomon, now with Daenn.

Eskil’s expression softens. “And you act like he took some sort of pleasure in that.”

I shake my head, too weary from the day's events to have this argument. I can believe Daenn didn't take a sadistic pleasure in what he did, but he still ran roughshod over me in his grim determination to fix his problem.

Ketil clears his throat and shifts with the awkwardness that has always been a second skin to him. "Are you ready to go back to your room, Eman?"

I grimace. I don't want to be cooped up right now. "No. Can I visit the eyries?" Ketil and Eskil exchange a look, and I can already see the refusal mounting on their lips. "I'm not going to try to run. I meant the hatchlings' eyries, not the riders' gryphons'."

They share another look. Eskil nods slowly. "There are a few gryphlings, yes. But we need to take you to your room after that."

I bite back a retort. I don't want to go back to my room like a prisoner, but I'm going to get to go to the eyries despite their reservations. I don't want to annoy them into rescinding the agreement.

We make our way through the halls, heading from the more formal occasion caverns toward the common areas. The clan lives in a natural cave system that we adapted for our own uses generations ago. The lower parts of the walls are smoothed, but the ceilings are irregular, smooth only when our ancestors had to make a tunnel taller; the bigger tunnels have ceilings that dip and curve as only unhewn stone can.

The lights are a mixture of torches and, in the deeper areas with less ventilation, luminescent stones, mined from deep in the mountain and left in cycles to soak up sunlight.

People move to and fro with practiced efficiency: clansfolk hurrying through the market for food and supplies, craftsmen delivering their finished tools or artworks. Children skitter underfoot and dart between adults as they play. It's the same bustle I

saw in the lowland cities I visited; it's just mostly conducted in enormous caverns or open-air caves instead of under the open sky. People are people no matter their home.

But here it has the flavor of coziness and simplicity I lived and breathed most of my life. The clothes are familiar, and the way my clan carves every piece of wood they use, the way we favor a mixture of lighter and earthy colors with the splash of deep red or sapphire blue for accents.

The clan is home, and despite the circumstances that brought me here, I can't help but savor it as we move through the market in the direction of eyries.

I don't savor the eyes I draw, though. So many people stop and stare, muttering to each other as they take me in with my gryphon warrior guard detail. Many I recognize.

There's Britta, the master weaver's daughter—though I suppose now she might be the master weaver. The grizzled Ahlstrom twins, still working together to deliver wood throughout the caverns for the fires. So many faces, so many histories I haven't thought about in years.

But none approach me, and really, I have no energy to make awkward I-haven't-seen-you-in-nearly-a-decade chatter, so I avoid eye contact and keep my steps directed toward my goal.

I exhale in relief when we reach the eyries. Eskil steps around me to go first, and I let him without protest; it's been a long time since I've visited the eyries—besides my first night back, but I was asleep for that, so it hardly counts—and it's never wise to intrude on gryphons who don't know and trust you. They'll probably ignore us with him in the lead.

The eyries are an open-air cavern, one with an entrance that is a sheer drop-off the

side of the mountain. The area closest to the entrance is where training and preparations for flights happen, and the rest is a series of smaller nests. The bonded gryphons—those who each have a specific warrior they fly with—have theirs first, then the unbonded adults, the adolescents, and at the very end, in the safest corners of the cavern where there are smaller caves to tuck them away from the noise and hum of the greater cavern, the gryphlings stay with their mothers.

This is where Eskil leads me, but my feet know the way, because this was always my favorite part of the eyries as a child. I'd visit all the time, often with Daenn, but many times alone—this is where I came when he had obligations I wasn't a part of.

There's nothing like cuddling a baby gryphon, and the memory of that comfort is what's driven me here now.

The gryphons generally ignore us as we weave between them. I earn a few brief side-eyes and ruffling of feathers, but mostly I'm beneath their notice, and I'm perfectly fine with that. It's better than the open staring I earned from the clansfolk.

We reach the back of the cavern, and Eskil stops outside one of the hatchling nests. "We'll wait out here."

I eye him, surprised he would leave me to enter alone. He just smirks and saunters over to a spot on the wall, leaning back and pulling out a small block of wood and carving knife. Kettil shrugs when I look at him.

A bud of hope sprouts in me as I take the last few steps toward the entrance. If Eskil trusts that I would be safe entering alone, then that must mean...

That hope erupts into a bouquet of delight when I see the occupants of the cozy little nesting cave.

The gryphon lying curled around three sleeping babies raises her head from her taloned forefeet and stares at me. I would know the sleek black feathers, the dark brown shining coat, and the crooked wing that doesn't quite sit right against her side anywhere.

I have to swallow back the lump as I step forward once and lift my hand. I wait for Zephyr to approach or acknowledge me before I enter any further. "Hello, beautiful," I croon softly. "It's me. I know it's been a while since we've seen each other."

There's a beat of silence, stillness, before she eases herself up, careful to not awaken her sleeping babies, and pads across the distance, resting her beak on my shoulder. The touch makes the years of separation vanish, and my heart swells. A purr rumbles up from her chest, and that's all the encouragement I need to bury my fingers into her feathers behind her beak and scratch, the way I have hundreds of times before. My second hand comes up and strokes her feathers, as smooth and soft as silk and blacker than night.

We stay like this for a long time, until a small mewling cry comes from beyond Zephyr. She turns immediately, resuming her place by her young and nudging the gryphling who'd caught her attention. She eyes me expectantly.

I laugh. "I'm coming. Of course I want to see your beautiful babies."

I close the distance and kneel beside her, vocally admiring each one of her gryphlings; there are three of them, all the size of large house cats. They're predominantly black and silvery grey, but there are some touches of brown and white. Each one of them is impossibly fluffy, with downy feathers on their front halves and puffy fur on the back. I itch to pick one up, but that can wait until they're awake.

Instead I lean into Zephyr's side, content to stay here until my guards drag me away. With everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours, I need the serenity and

safety she exudes .

I missed her. Since I wasn't a warrior, I didn't have a formal bond with a gryphon. I learned to fly like everyone in the clan does, but Zephyr was the only gryphon I ever truly connected with. She broke her wing when she was young, but she was of the best stock in the flock, so she was relegated to breeding, and she took to it like it was destiny. She made for a fierce, nurturing mother. I met her when Daenn first bonded with his gryphon, Storm; they were mates, and when Zephyr wasn't nurturing her babies, she was with him.

Under different circumstances, coming home would have been a joyful event for me. It was strange to think of it as such—I trained myself to refer to the manor with Tolomon as my home, as he so frequently insisted I do. But while the manor never truly was my home, for the last eight years, neither was the clan my home. I missed it desperately, though. I missed my mother. I missed Sigrid and Zephyr, and most of all, I missed Daenn.

But the reality of my homecoming, the circumstances of it, poisons everything, leaving me with only these small moments that haven't turned bitter.

Daenn is a monster now. He killed Tolomon and stole me away from my life—however pitiful it was. He has a whole trail of bodies behind him. He claims they're from his magic, but do I believe him? He's shown how ruthless he is now; it's easy to believe that the blood on his hands might not be restricted to accidental, magic-caused deaths.

For so long he was all I wanted, but I don't want him anymore—not like this. He has my magic like he wants—now that we're married, our magics are linked. It's a well-known side effect of a gryphon clan wedding that the magical auras extend to the other spouse, or in the case of two with magic, they share both magics. I've never heard there being a distance limit on that—but married couples rarely spend more

than a few days or weeks apart.

But the thought of staying here at Daenn's side makes me sick to my stomach. It will kill me slowly to watch the reality of the tyrant king destroy the memories of the Daenn I loved.

He said he needs me, but that isn't true. He needs my magic, but he doesn't need me to stay by him. He needs a wife, yes, but I am hardly the best choice for that role, either—I probably can't even produce him any heirs. The line of succession is everything to any noble house, and especially to a king. Tolomon frequently lamented that I hadn't managed to produce any heirs for him. I often felt quietly relieved, because the man would have been a horrible father, but the idea also brought a heavy dose of shame with it. Could stress keep a woman from bearing children? Or was I really as broken as Tolomon insinuated more than once?

I dread the idea of broaching the topic with Daenn. It will be humiliating, especially if it's not even enough to deter him from wanting to complete our marriage for his own carnal—

I shiver away from the thought and turn back to the more pressing matter. Daenn doesn't need me, and once he realizes I'm most likely defective in the way a wife ought not be, he certainly won't want me for anything but my magic's ability to smother his. If only his magic were gone, he'd probably be happy to release me—

My thoughts stutter and then circle back slowly, bringing that idea into clearer focus.

He just needs his magic gone.

I lick my lips, and my hands still against Zephyr's side until she looks back over her shoulder and gives me a chirr of disapproval. I begin stroking her fur again as I turn my realization over in my head. He doesn't need me. Maybe if I could neutralize his

magic in a more permanent way, I could leave. Our marriage isn't final; our vows aren't complete, not until we... complete them. So if we don't, I could go somewhere to grieve the man Daenn has become and live my life in some sort of quiet peace. No more husbands, no more men to break my heart and spirit over and over.

I don't hesitate or think it through any more than that. I reach for my magic.

It's so strange and different, having it be a tangible thing that I can touch, that I can potentially wield. It's always been present; I could always dive inside myself and see it, but it was like a glittering mist, something I could try to pass through but never touch.

But now, when I try to touch it, it's sparkling strands of fiber, soft and fluffy and grippable.

And Daenn's magic is still there, twined around it in poisonous black veins, even though there's far less of his than of mine.

I mull my options. If mine neutralizes his by proximity, then maybe all I need to do to remove his entirely is to let the light of mine snuff it out.

I gather up my magic, as much of it as I can hold, and I direct it toward his, covering it until I can't even see it through mine. Then I push it into his, smothering the black strands. A tingling pain builds through every nerve of my body as I work, but I ignore it; it feels much like it did when we bonded. Perhaps this is just what wielding magic is always like.

His magic resists, but I keep pushing until, with a snap, my magic floods through his. I have a single instant of triumph before pain resounds through me like a boom, and the magic, now a murky, incandescent grey, swallows me whole.

A Silvery Tattoo

I wake to pain. My arm is hot, a spiral of scorching heat that drowns out my thoughts for a moment. Accompanying it is a knot of crippling worry in my lungs that makes it difficult to breathe.

I force my eyes open. The ceiling is the familiar, warm brownish-grey of the clan caverns' stone.

I ease up to sitting with a small gasp of pain. I lift my arm to study it, to find the source of the strange hot pain. Distantly, an intense relief washes over me, but it's almost lost in the cloud of confusion as I stare at my arm. My sleeve has been cut away, slit up to my elbow. Where before the metal wedding band was a spiral snug against my skin, I now have a silvery tattoo, as if the band sank under my skin and then... grew.

I touch it with my other hand. While it shines like polished silver, the skin is still supple, feeling no different, if somewhat warmer to the touch than usual.

The end of it, though, twists up my arm past where the original wedding band rested, and it disappears under my sleeve. I mentally trace its path where the heat ends, and I straighten further, pulling my tunic down from the top, over my shoulder, just enough to reveal the edges of a silver rune right over my heart —

Dizzying shock plunges through me, and a throat clears from the opposite side of the

bed. I jump, jerking my bodice back into place.

Daenn leans against the wall, arms crossed, fists clenched, and gaze pinned steadily to the floor.

Horror suffuses me. Merciful winds, did he see... but of course he did. Why else would he have chosen that exact moment to make his presence known? Why else would he be staring at the floor as if it's the most fascinating thing in the room?

“What are you doing in...” My hand comes up to gesture to my room, which of course is when my mind chooses to point out the details from the corner of my eye that I haven't registered yet. Unlike the room I was assigned, this room is far larger. And it has... personalizations. The shelves are filled with clothing and weapons, far more weapons than any one person needs. There are books, too, and one particular cover catches my eye. I can't read it from here, but it's red with gold stitching for the title, and I would know it anywhere; I gave it to Daenn for his fourteenth birthday. “...your room?” My voice goes high at the end. Why, in all the winds and mountains, am I in—

“Our room,” Daenn corrects grimly.

I'm going to be sick.

“And I'm here,” he adds, pausing briefly, “to check on you.”

To check on me?

My memories snap into place in bits and pieces. Right.

I was in the nest with Zephyr and I... my memory's hazy, but I did something with my magic. I mentally reach for it now on instinct, but where the white, sparkling

luminescence was with the black strands twined around it, now there's nothing but a solid mass of mottled grey, like storm clouds .

I tentatively brush my mind against it, unsure what I'm seeing. As soon as I touch it, Daenn sucks in a breath.

“Emana, what did you do?”

I snap my attention back to Daenn and bristle. “Why do you assume I did anything? Maybe one of your guards knocked me out.”

The suggestion is ridiculous, especially of Eskil or Kettil doing such a thing, and I know it, but Daenn breezes right past that.

“Because I certainly didn't turn our magic into this.” He waves a hand as if it's between us, visible in the air.

I blink. He can see it too?

Of course he can. It's a bond, after all. It connects us, whether or not I want it to.

“All right, fine. Yes, I did it,” I snap. “I tried to stamp out your magic, but obviously it didn't work.” At least, I don't think it did. But maybe... maybe the new color is simply what mine looks like after destroying his? Maybe it tainted mine somehow as his died? “...Did it?”

“No. Our weddings bands are seared into our very skin by the magic, and...” There's something about the way he trails off that pulls me up short, even with the revelation that he has a matching tattoo to mine floating in the air. Worry flickers through me.

“What happened?”

Worry I can see reflected in his eyes, which only serves to intensify mine.

“Eskil and Kettil were found near you, unconscious. And they won’t wake up.”

9

Hope Vanishes

My blood freezes in my veins. “What? Are they dead?”

No, the reasoning part of my mind insists. He said they were unconscious, but ‘won’t wake up’ doesn’t sound much better than dead.

I swing my legs off the bed and stand. The sudden movement makes my head spin, and I sway.

Daenn is at my side in an instant, a strong, sure grip at my elbow and the small of my back.

The dizziness passes quickly, though, so I step away from his hands, pleased when he makes no move to follow me. I can stand on my own. I don’t need him.

“I want to see them.” I don’t phrase it as a request. This man may have the entire clan bowing and scraping to him, but I will never ask him for anything.

I pause my stride toward the door as a fresh worry hits me. “Zephyr and her babies, are they...?”

“They’re fine. Aside from Zephyr getting worked up when you collapsed, none of them were affected by the magic.”

I nod, relieved. I'm grateful for the update but unwilling to tell him so.

The walk to the infirmary is quiet but not without tension. Daenn walks beside me, not touching me. We pass many people, and they all stop and stare or whisper to their companions. Their attention feels different than it did before. More scowls or drawn brows.

Do they know of Eskil and Kettil?

That's a silly question. Gossip spreads like water through a porous rock in the clan. Slow or fast, it happens, and it's inevitable.

The infirmary, at least, is quiet. Deathly still. One healer moves about the cavern, but she stops when she catches sight of Daenn and me. Her eyes flick over me in recognition, but there's a wariness too.

"Your Majesty." She presses her fist to her heart and she bows her head.

I recognize her, though it takes me a moment to place her. Erika? No... Annika. Daughter to the master healer; occupations often stay in one family in the gryphon clans. Annika and I used to be thrown together sometimes, as my mother would work in the infirmary when she wasn't acting as Daenn's minder. We were never close, despite being close in age. She's cut her light brown hair, wearing it in a severe short style that no doubt keeps it out of her way while she tends patients.

"How are they?" Daenn asks, his eyes already turned to what I'm focused on: the three beds in the center of the room with still forms.

"No change, Your Majesty. And as you can see..." Healer Annika trails off, and out of the corner of my eye I see her gesture hopelessly to the third bed.

“When did she come in?” Daenn’s words sound distant to my ears. I slowly move toward the beds, unable to look away.

Eskil and Kettil—and the woman, someone I don’t even know—lay as if sleeping, though I happen to know from many childhood memories that Eskil doesn’t sleep on his back, but rather his front, all sprawled out. He looks unnatural in repose like this.

As I stare at them, pure horror grows and spirals within me with each breath. What have I done? They’re not dead, no, but something tells me they’re dying. All three of them look pale. Eskil and Kettil more so than the woman, which implies that it progresses the longer they’re under this curse.

I sense a presence at my back. Daenn, as solid as a wall but not quite touching me. As if he knows I need support, offering it in the only way he knows how in the landscape of our new fractured relationship.

“What do we do?” The words spill from me in a whisper as I step back, pressing against Daenn’s chest, needing to ground myself in something as steady as he seems. There’s a distant stab of hope outside of the maelstrom of emotions assaulting me, but I ignore it as I keep babbling. “I only wanted to be free of you. I thought if I could neutralize your magic, I could leave.”

The hope vanishes, replaced by sharp pain, but though my emotions make no sense, Daenn speaks, his voice as steady as ever.

“For now, you need to rest. You’re still weak. I’ll look into it.”

“I want to stay here.” I need to stay here. Need to keep an eye on them. Except, what if...

My hand finds Daenn’s gloved one and squeezes. “Would staying here make them

worse?”

His pause is just long enough to know he's truly considering the idea. “No, they've already been affected. Stay if you must. Don't touch anyone, though.”

I nod, but I know that won't matter. I wasn't touching Eskil and Kettil, and I've never met the woman .

But maybe it raises the chances, if Daenn's experiences with his own magic are anything to go by, even if it's not necessary to trigger whatever horror I've brought upon them. Daenn certainly seems to think so, with how he's always wearing those gloves now.

Daenn guides me to a low bench along one wall and helps me settle. Once I'm there, he straightens and leaves. I watch the sleeping forms, wrapping my arms around myself. I have never felt so alone.

The Decency to Suffer

I spend the next day resting in my—or, rather, Daenn’s room, under strict orders from Sigrid. I don’t have the energy to argue with her—melding Daenn’s and my magic has left me with a bone-deep weariness that means that I spend most of it sleeping, only waking to eat the warm foods Sigrid brings me. I don’t see Daenn again, to my relief. I do keep myself awake for a while after supper—torn between worry for Eskil and the others and wondering if Daenn will appear. This is his room—I refuse to think of it as ours—and even power-hungry kings have to sleep.

If he does return, it must be after I fall asleep for the night. But when I wake the next morning, there’s no sign of him still; even the other side of the bed is pristine.

I choose to hope he left me be.

Sigrid has clearly already come and gone, as there’s a tray with a bowl of warm porridge waiting on the carved stone table by the bed.

I’ve only just finished it when a knock comes at the door and the woman herself strides in, not waiting for me to answer. She must be confident she won’t find Daenn here too; there’s no way she would so brazenly enter if there was even the smallest chance he was.

“Up with you, darling. You are in desperate need of bathing.” She collects my bowl and ushers me to my feet and out the door before I even have a chance to protest.

Not that I want to. I am feeling far better today than I did yesterday, but a hot bath sounds lovely.

“Can we visit the infirmary again?” I ask instead. I have an irrational fear that my victims have passed away in the night.

Sigrid shakes her head, even as her gaze softens. “We don’t have time. But I stopped there first thing this morning, and I promise everyone was doing as well as can be, given...the situation.”

I swallow and nod. Her report will have to be enough.

I can’t help the apprehension that curls through me as Sigrid and I, and two guards who trail behind us, make our way to the hot springs. Bathing customs are different in the lowlands, more private. It’s been a long time since I’ve used a communal bath, and it feels like a strange concept now.

The guards stay outside the entrance to the women’s pool. Sigrid and I enter, and I search the cavern as steam wraps around me. It’s silent, dim.

And empty.

My relief must show. “I made sure you’d have the space to yourself,” Sigrid says. “You don’t need anyone pestering you while you’re still recovering, and we both know some would.” Her words are punctuated with a frown.

“Thank you, Sigrid.” It’s not enough to convey the depth of feeling I have for this woman. She’s both soothing and making my heart ache with her caring. I’ve missed her, how maternal she is. It reminds me of my mother.

She pats my cheek before gesturing around. “Now. Do you remember how this all

works? Do you need help with anything? ”

There are clean towels stacked on a stone shelf carved into the wall, and a basket of soaps and oils sits just on the side of the hot spring, in easy reach from the water.

“Yes, I remember how to bathe,” I say wryly. “They do do that in the lowlands too.”

She tsks at my sassing, but her eyes are bright. “Then you’ll not need help getting out of that infernal dress you insisted on sleeping in, either?”

I bite my lip as I glance down at the black dress. I insisted on sleeping in one of my more informal lowland dresses. No way am I going to be caught in underthings if Daenn returns to his room.

But even the most casual of my dresses from the lowlands requires a maid to assist with them. Dressing yourself is for the peasants, as far as the Verkslish nobility are concerned.

“Yes, please.”

Sigrid helps me without any fuss, though I do hear a small noise from her when my new tattoo comes into view. I pretend I don't, and bless her, she says nothing about it.

I’m already halfway in the water when she speaks again. “Oh, dear, we’ve forgotten a change of clothes for you.”

I groan. How could I have forgotten that?

Because it isn’t something I’ve had to do for myself in years, no doubt.

“Don’t fret, darling. I’ll go pick something suitable for today’s feast.”

I whirl, stomach dropping. Water splashes around me at my sudden movement.
“What? What feast?”

She raises her eyebrow at me. “Did you really think you’d marry our king without the customary welcome feast? ”

That’s exactly what I thought. The wedding had been so private. Why keep everyone out of that and still hold the welcome feast?

“I hoped.”

“No luck. Enjoy your bath, darling. I’ll bring you a change of clothes.” She turns away, sweeping up my lowland dress.

“Sigrid! I want one of my black dresses!” I stand on my tiptoes and lean forward, tempted to run after her—but she’s nearly out the door, and I have no desire to run naked before my guards or anyone else who might be lingering nearby.

“Black is hardly suitable for your welcome feast!” she calls over her shoulder—and then she’s gone.

I sink back into the water, scowling. She sounded far too delighted. She’ll bring me a clan dress, and I wouldn’t put it past her to spirit away the rest of my lowland wardrobe while I’m trapped here in the hot spring.

I’d even wager she intentionally ‘forgot’ a change of clothes precisely to reach this outcome.

Resigned to my fate, I turn to the basket and set about picking out some soap. I’m hit with a strong wave of aching nostalgia as I bring each to my nose. The citrus and floral scents favored by the lowlands were sharp and heady.

Clan soaps are crafted with far more earthy, grounding scents. Things like pine and fir, sage and vetiver. I missed them far more than I realized.

Once I find some I like—pine, with the lightest hint of chamomile—I set about cleaning myself. The heat of the water has soaked into my muscles, and I feel more refreshed and relaxed than I have in... a long time. Longer than I've been here, certainly, but even beyond that. Verksland baths are a different experience from the clan bathing pools .

I'm simply floating in the water, savoring it, when Sigrid returns with a decidedly not-black dress. It's green, in fact. It might even be the same dress they tried to put me in for the wedding.

I slowly rise, pointedly scowling at the offending color.

"No time to fuss at me, darling." She extends a towel toward me with her free hand. "We've got to get you dressed for the feast!"

I reluctantly exit the water and take the towel, drying myself. Sigrid helps me step into fresh underthings, then the dress, but I do the ties at the sides while she sets to work scrubbing my hair dry. The dress is sleeveless, so it must be the one from yesterday after all—clan dresses, like lowland dresses, usually have long sleeves—though the reason is more practicality than fashion, given how cold the mountain or flying can be. The only exception are the wedding dresses, which have either short or no sleeves, to better show off the marriage bracelets. I feel exposed and bare after so many years wearing the long, sometimes gaudy sleeves of lowland dresses.

I have missed being able to dress myself, though. Not that I'll ever breathe that truth to anyone.

She twists and pins my hair up into a snug crown in record time, only stepping back when she's satisfied with her work. The finishing touch is some kohl around my eyes and a shining, red-tinted oil to my lips.

"You look beautiful." She beams at me. "Come. We're going to be late."

I follow her from the hot spring, nervousness already coiling in my belly. The guards fall in behind us again as we make our way to the great hall. I can't help but notice they hang back farther than Kettil and Eskil did. I can't blame them. What if proximity to me causes the magic to lash out again? I didn't do it intentionally before, which means it could happen again.

I should tell Sigrid to leave; if anyone's at risk, she would be the most. But selfishly, I don't. She's the only welcome face, and I'm certain even if I were selfless enough to say something, she'd lecture me thoroughly and then proceed to ignore me.

My nerves only grow the closer we get to the great hall. It's been years since I've interacted with these clansfolk, aside from Daenn and his warriors. I'm not looking forward to having to make polite conversation with any of them. I never truly enjoy shallow niceties—and with the chasm of time that has distanced me from everyone and the pall of guilt weighing heavy over me, it sounds unbearable now.

We slow as we near the great hall. A low swell of voices carries to us, and the sound makes me want to turn and run.

"Where's Daenn?" I ask faintly. If I have to suffer through this because he forced me into a marriage, then he could have the decency to suffer through it with me.

"He's attending to some clan matters that must get done. He'll be here as soon as he can." Sigrid pats my hand, as if I were worried about his absence.

I'm not.

“Are there any clan matters the king's wife needs to attend to? Urgent ones?”

She laughs. “Yes. Attending the welcome feast in her honor.”

I make a face at her.

“You'll be fine, darling.” She gives me a reassuring smile and squeezes my hand, but there's reluctance lingering around her eyes.

“Then why do you look like that? ”

“I need to return to the kitchens.” She looks truly sorry to abandon me.

“Oh.” Of course she does. She's probably already spent far more time with me than I deserve. “Go, then. I'll be fine. Make sure they don't burn anything.”

“You will be fine. And Lars and Bjorn will be with you until Daenn comes; don't worry.” She gives my hand one last pat, kisses my cheek, and then bustles away. She never goes anywhere slowly.

I stare at the entrance to the great hall; I can barely see some of the gathered clan around the corner. I keep my eyes pinned there as I speak. “I don't suppose you'd take me back to my room?”

One of my guards—Lars—answers in a monotone. “We have strict orders to escort you to the welcome feast and stay there with you until the king arrives.”

I sigh. Of course they do. Lars used to be easy to wheedle, though. Maybe I can persuade him if I look pitiful enough.

Probably why Daenn assigned two guards to watch me. Bjorn has always been far less sympathetic to rule-breaking than Lars.

I can't do this. I can't face this crowd alone. For a fleeting moment, I do wish Daenn were here—not for the man himself, but because I'm sure no one would dare approach if he were looming at my side.

I'm working up the nerve to raise my chin and enter the great hall with the regality of the Queen of Verksland when a familiar voice calls from behind me.

“Emana!”

I turn at my name. A man is striding down the hall behind me. He's tall, thin, and sleek. He wears the fitted leathers of the gryphon warriors, and his short black hair is combed straight back. He slows before me, gaze slowly tracking up and down my figure.

Viggo. A distant cousin of Daenn, and currently the next in line to become king. He and Daenn have never been on terribly good terms, perhaps because Viggo used to have a tendency of aggressively flirting with me that Daenn thought disrespectful. Viggo's father was chief to the South Peak Clan, and he was a vicious, warmongering chief, often making unsanctioned raids on lowland farms and villages that Daenn's father had to bring him to task for on occasion. I know Viggo has taken on the chief's mantle since I left the clan, but I don't know if he's like his father.

Hopefully not, since Viggo is still Daenn's heir, at least until Daenn produces an heir.

My chest aches instinctively at the thought, sharp and deep and painful, so I shove the thought of producing heirs right off a mental cliff and return my attention to my new companion.

“Viggo. You look well.” I’m surprised to see him here. When we were children, it was not unusual for him to visit our clan’s mountain, but since he’s clan chief now, I imagine his duties usually keep him in his own mountain.

He gives me a slow, lazy smile. “As do you, Emana.” His face twists into something near sympathy, but it looks a bit too put-on to be believable. “I’ve heard what Daenn did to your husband. It’s a tragedy we have to meet under these circumstances. I’d always hoped that if you were to return and marry back into the clan... well, you are wasted on my cousin. But what else could we expect from him? Dragging you back here and marrying you with only his own lackeys to witness, as if you’re a shameful secret—it’s quite like him.” He tsks as his gaze tracks over me again. “If it had been me—and a few ye ars sooner, of course, as I’m married now—you would have gotten the wedding you deserved.”

I bristle. I said nearly the same thing to Daenn myself regarding the wedding, but hearing it from Viggo, who has always hated Daenn... and having him leer at me while he says it?

I want nothing more than to—

“Viggo.”

I jump at the icy voice behind me. Viggo stiffens and takes a subtle step back. I turn to look at Daenn—he’s approached without a sound, he’s radiating anger, and it’s entirely focused on his cousin.

If Viggo’s words hadn’t made it clear already they aren’t any friendlier than they were, Daenn’s posture certainly would now.

“Why are you on my mountain? And why are you holding my wife back from entering her own feast?”

My stomach tightens at that term of address on his lips.

Viggo holds up his hands defensively. “Is it a crime to greet an old friend? We were just chatting. It’s why I’m here, after all. I heard you’d gotten married and came to congratulate you.”

“You have a clan to manage. A wife due to birth your child soon. Warriors to bring to heel after that recent—”

“My clan is well in hand without you hovering like a mother gryphon.” Viggo’s tone is light, but his smile is strained. “You tend your clan, and I’ll tend mine. Better yet, lavish your extra attention on your wife. You need all the help you can get, if the rumors flying hold any weight.”

Daenn’s fingers curl into a fist, his anger palpable in the air. I’m more than ready to escape this awkward standoff. Pointedly turning back to Viggo, I give him one of the lowland curtsies. “It’s good to see you, Viggo.”

He smirks like he’s won some sort of victory. “Always a pleasure, Eman.”

He strolls past me, past Daenn, giving his king the same smirk.

Daenn’s jaw works as he finally focuses on me.

I speak before he can. “So good of you to show up.”

His gaze softens slightly. “I came as soon as I could.”

Something knots in my chest at his voice. Gentle, familiar, more like my Daenn. I swallow. “Shall we?”

He nods, flicking a hand at my guards. They bow and head back down the hall.

Daenn closes the distance between us and offers me his arm. I almost refuse it, but reluctantly, I take it.

The material of his tunic is smooth and thin under my hand, leaving nothing to the imagination and doing nothing to hide the way his muscles flex at my touch. He is again wearing gloves; they are clearly a permanent fixture of his wardrobe these days.

He guides me into the hall. It truly does look like the entire clan has gathered, and I can't help but grip Daenn's arm tighter at the sight. Everyone stares at us.

There's not as much fear as I expected—yes, there's some, and there are certainly people who look on with disdain or scowls, but far more than I expect look at Daenn with respect.

Some even approach to speak with him. Everyone is undoubtedly reserved—both the clansmen and Daenn himself—but they don't act like they fear him. And he listens to each and every one intently, asking questions and making suggestions about whatever it is they've approached him about. It doesn't fit the picture I've constructed in my head. He's not acting like the heavy-handed tyrant I expected. Like a monster who murders a man to steal his wife.

Their reception of me is more mixed. A few greet me enthusiastically with warm hugs, and one of the kitchen staff takes the time to point out they've made my favorite sweet cakes for my homecoming.

But others are more wary. No one says anything about what I've done with my new unnatural magic, but I can practically hear them all thinking it. I didn't do it intentionally, wield it like an Elyri or a lowlander, but I'm not sure they care.

Given that three people are comatose in the infirmary, I don't blame them. I wouldn't want to be near me either.

As we finally make our way down the hallway after the festivities end, I'm so exhausted I'm almost tempted to curl up right here and go to sleep. Instead, I push my shoulders back and focus on keeping my steps steady. No need to show how weary I am.

"You should have told me you were tired," Daenn says into the silence around us. "You didn't have to stay so late."

I blink. I guess I wasn't hiding it as well as I hoped. "It would have been bad form to sneak away from a feast in our honor." I can still remember how Tolomon snarled at me when I quietly suggested just that at a party his parents threw for us shortly after our marriage. It was the first time he truly lost his temper with me, and it shocked me into silent compliance.

Daenn stops walking and gives me a look. "When have I ever cared about 'form'?"

A smile tugs at my lips before I realize. "You're king now. Kings—" I stumble into silence as I realize what I'm doing.

We aren't friendly. There's no reason to speak to him like we are.

I clear my throat and quicken my pace. A thick disappointment wraps around my rib cage, a feeling I can't even begin to account for.

I absently rub at the silver tattoo branded into my arm. There's phantom residual heat to it. We can never be like we were before. Why can't my heart understand that?

It's a moment before I hear him start walking again, and the silence is much heavier

than it was.

When we reach his room, he opens the door for me. I stride right in, already loosening the side ties on my dress—until I see him, out of the corner of my eye, closing the door behind him.

With him on this side of the door.

Horror curdles my gut.

Daenn is staying here tonight.

11

Bitter Rivals

“What are you doing?”

He looks at me, brows raised. “It’s late. I’m tired. I want to go to bed.”

Panic has frozen me. I’m tired too, but I can’t carelessly undress in front of him. What if he takes that to mean... What if he expects me to...

As if he can read my mind, his gaze softens. “All I want to do is sleep, Emi. Just sleep. I may be the monster you accuse me of being, but I’m not that kind of monster.”

I suppose I believe him, because the panic inside me subsides.

“Can you”—I gesture at him, and then at my dress—“turn around?”

Obligingly, he faces the door.

Quickly, I finish slipping out of my dress, keeping my eyes on him the entire time. Winds bless Sigrid for giving me a clan dress. I don’t know what I would have done if I had been in the lowland dress in this situation.

I hurry to the shelf where my dresses are stacked neatly, and then I hesitate, but the exhausted part of me just wants to trust that Daenn means his words, so I glance over

myself to make sure the chemise I'm wearing covers enough, and then I work on my hair, pulling out the pins Sigrid tucked into it.

"I'm done."

Daenn turns, and his eyes darken as he glances over me. Warmth spreads through me as he rips his gaze away, moving to pull his own shirt off.

I suppress a squeak and whirl around, trying to pretend I didn't see the planes of muscles that rippled as he moved. I can practically feel his faint amusement, even though he doesn't say a thing.

I forgot that Daenn sleeps shirtless. It's a detail that didn't matter when we were children—and it doesn't matter now, I remind myself sternly. Any muscles he may or may not have don't have any bearing on the situation, because right now I hate him.

Having taken care of that stern self-talking-to, I move to the bed, hesitating again when I realize I don't know which side he prefers, and then I force myself to move because it doesn't matter which side he prefers. That would imply I care, which I don't. I peel back the covers and lay down, pulling them up to my chin.

Daenn lingers near the doorway, and I try to ignore his existence. I shut my eyes and I turn over to my side, my back to Daenn, careful to keep the covers in place over me.

I hear him moving about the room, and the light behind my eyelids dims.

The weight on the other side of the bed shifts, and suddenly I am intensely aware of his proximity, so present, close enough to touch if I reach out. It's not a big bed.

"We need to talk." His voice is barely more than a quiet rumble, and I instantly tense, sitting up and looking at him as I clutch the covers to my chest with folded arms .

He's pulled on a new shirt, and he swapped his more formal pants for loose, softer ones. For a moment I'm struck speechless by the sight. It's like I'm fifteen again, and Daenn is the only boy I have ever even thought about marrying. A kind, funny, thoughtful boy. Longing is a punch to my lungs, a nearly unbearable ache for the boy I want to see to be one and the same with the man I do see.

Daenn shifts, hand curling into a fist, and it's enough to shake me out of my reverie.

He's still wearing gloves, I absently notice. They're a quiet reminder he's not the boy I want him to be.

"Talk about what?"

"I found something that we can pursue. A way to get rid of the magic."

His words have my whole attention now. I lean forward.

"There's a legend about a set of bracers designed by Teletha. She begged the wind spirits to create them for her, to use on her lover, to carry away his magic and, she hoped, his madness."

My brow furrows as I think.

I know of Teletha. Who doesn't? She and her lover, Mundil, fill dozens of myths, even in the lowlands. Theirs isn't a happy story.

"I don't remember a pair of bracers," I say—but then, the tales I've been hearing for the past eight years have been the lowland versions of the myths, and Teletha and Mundil aren't star-crossed lovers in those; they are bitter rivals.

"Mundil and Teletha aren't real," I add.

“All myths are rooted in fact. Besides, Jakob is confident that the bracers are real; he said he saw one years ago, when he was on a pilgrimage to various lowland temples.”

“Why haven’t you gone after them before? ”

“I didn’t know about them. My magic is something that’s been spoken of in rumors and conjectures, but I haven’t actually told many people about it. With what you did...”

My stomach lurches with the now-familiar guilt. “It’s not such a secret anymore.”

“No,” he agrees quietly. “It’s not. I didn’t tell Jakob until I brought you back and had to explain why I wanted a sudden, private wedding. Jakob approached me this morning and told me of these bracers as a potential solution, now that the risk has escalated.”

I nibble on my lip as I think about it. “And do you really think they would work? Would this help wake my victims?”

“I honestly don’t know if this will help Eskil and the others.” He says it bluntly, but his understanding gaze softens the words. “But it would stop any others from being struck down. As for the bracers themselves... They are designed to pull the magic from a person.” Somehow, despite his calm tone, his relaxed manner, I sense a hesitation. There’s something he’s worried about, something he’s not telling me. Some reason Jakob didn’t think they were a potential solution until the ‘risk escalated,’ as Daenn put it.

“What are you leaving out?”

His gaze jerks up to mine, and his surprise is palpable. “What?”

“What are you so concerned about that you’re not sharing?” I enunciate the words, almost hurt that he’s surprised that I noticed. I used to be able to read him better than anyone.

No, I mentally correct myself, that’s not something to be surprised about. I used to be able to read my Daenn, which this man is not .

“There’s some risk involved,” he admits slowly. “Many of the legends say instead of stripping him of his magic, the bracers stripped him of his life.”

My chest tightens.

“But unlike Mundil and Teletha, we are linked. It shouldn’t be an issue. It might just take my magic, or it might take both of ours. But between the two of us, there should be enough life and spirit that no one need die.”

I can’t deny that I am a little relieved at that. Unlike Daenn, I’m not a murderer. Maybe he does deserve death for his actions, but I don’t want to be the one who kills him.

I try for a moment to imagine what it would be like to live without my magic. It’s always been there, subtle but present, made it easier to escape social interactions, made people like me even when they didn’t know me. I also suspect it’s the only reason Tolomon was never violent with me . Irate, yes. Condescending and patronizing and critical. But I only ever heard stories of his violent outbursts or saw them directed at others. He never hurt me directly, a blessing in my otherwise unhappy existence with him.

I tried to get rid of Daenn’s magic and failed—horribly. If I truly want to go find a new start somewhere, it would be easier to do with my magic in hand, but I can’t find a new start until this problem is solved, and if this is the only way...

“Very well. Let’s find these bracers.”

He nods, determination settling over him. “Jakob says it’s in an old temple to the south, near the northern edge of the Bompurak Jungle.”

“The Bompurak Jungle?” I say with alarm. The jungle is full of deadly flora and even deadlier monsters.

“We shouldn’t have to enter the jungle,” Daenn assures me. “We can fly over it and reach the temple before dark. ”

I nod reluctantly. I have no interest in encountering even a glimpse of the jungle, but what he’s describing sounds harmless enough.

“We can leave in a few days, after you’ve had the chance to finish recovering.”

“I’m fine,” I say quickly. Now that we have a plan, I’m eager to enact it, jungle or no. The sooner we can fix this, the better. We will protect the clan from our new horrible magic. And I hope somehow using the bracers will help Eskil and the others too. I’m not sure that line of logic works, but I have nothing else. It will at least free our attention so we can focus on finding some other solution for our friends. “After a good night’s rest, I’ll be well enough to travel. Let’s leave tomorrow.”

His mouth sets in a mulish line, and I can tell he’s about to argue.

“Spending hours talking and socializing was more wearying than anything today. Unless you plan on talking my ear off, I don’t think that’s going to be a problem while we travel.”

“Fine,” he relents. “We’ll leave tomorrow.” He rises from the bed. “Get some sleep. I’ll go give the order for preparations to be made.”

He slips out the door without waiting for my response.

Suddenly I'm alone in the dim, quiet room, and I refuse to acknowledge how the emptiness echoes a little louder without him here. We had an entire conversation, a civil one, where he wasn't acting like a heartless tyrant and I wasn't throwing barbs of hatred at him. I lay back down and allow myself to savor that. To wish for what could have been. As I'm drifting off to sleep, it almost feels like that longing expands, going deeper, and echoes back at me.

Stolen by the Wind

I wake to pounding on the door. I am only groggily opening my eyes when I hear Daenn's feet thud on the floor. He's up and across the room in seconds, his hair mussed from sleep, but he's alert, tense, apparently in his role of gryphon clans' king from the moment he opened his eyes.

Lars waits on the other side.

"Your Majesty," he greets Daenn with a fist to his chest. "Healer Annika sent me. Kettil is gone, and two more have fallen into the magic sleep."

And suddenly I'm as awake as Daenn, jolting upright in bed.

"Who?" Daenn asks. The only sign he has feelings about Kettil's passing is the way his knuckles turn white in their grip of the door handle, something Lars can't see but I can.

Lars' gaze slides to the side—slides toward me—before jerking back to Daenn. "Bjorn and Elder Toric."

Bjorn. The other guard who escorted me to the feast yesterday. And Elder Toric... he was one of the men we talked to at the feast. I don't know the man well, but he was memorable because he outright smiled at Daenn, looking at him like a proud grandfather.

Daenn's hand flexes on the door handle again. "Are the preparations for our departure ready?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. The men you requested are saddling the gryphons now."

Daenn is shaking his head before Lars finishes speaking. "Have them saddle mine and Emana's, but not the others. We'll go alone."

Lars' eyes widen. "King Daenn, the jungle..."

"I know, but anyone who lingers near us is at risk, and should any of you fall comatose, you will be unable to fly. I won't strand my people."

"It's our duty—our honor—to take that risk, Your Majesty." Lars leans forward with the intensity of his words. "Don't put yourself in more danger to protect us. That is our role."

But as one who rarely won an argument once Daenn set his jaw the way he has now, I already know what Daenn will say before he speaks.

"And I thank you and the other warriors for being willing to take that risk, but my order remains the same."

Lars' jaw clenches, but he snaps off a nod.

Daenn lowers his voice as he continues. "I need you here. With Eskil and Bjorn both comatose, I wouldn't put it past Viggo to try to seize more than is his by right. I'd order him from the clan if I didn't think he'd just return as soon as I fly out of sight."

Lars' entire expression hardens. "We'll be ready if he tries anything, Your Majesty."

My brows rise. It seems the feud between Daenn and Viggo extended beyond their personal disagreements as they grew older if even Daenn's warriors distrust him so thoroughly. Maybe Viggo is more like his father than I know.

Daenn's only response is a small nod, and then he's shutting the door and turning back to me. He stops when he sees me awake .

"I apologize. I was hoping to answer it before it woke you. You used to be a—" He cuts himself off, but I know what he was about to say. I used to be a heavy sleeper, before I had a husband who would prowl to my room at night when he was drunk. And Daenn knows my former sleeping habits because we used to be close, but I can't focus on that.

"Ketil's dead?" My voice breaks a little. "I killed him."

"No." Daenn says the words with a quiet intensity. "No, I killed him. My magic is deadly. Yours... yours only delayed the inevitable."

I want to believe him. It would be easy to believe him, and yet I can't. Ketil had been with me. I'm the fool who tried snuffing out Daenn's magic and caused our magics to intertwine. Ketil is dead because of me. Daenn too, yes, but I played my role. It's only a matter of time before the same happens to Eskil. Bjorn. Elder Toric. The woman—I wish I had learned her name.

"I'm glad the guards aren't going with us," I say, my voice warbling. It's terrifying going into the jungle with only Daenn, but Daenn is formidable. I can't bear to put more people at risk. I flip the covers off myself and stand. "When do we leave?"

"As soon as you have packed and eaten," Daenn says. "I have a few things to take care of before we go. I'll send Sigrid with your breakfast."

He's pulling on a fresh shirt, so he doesn't see my nod, but I don't bother amending it with words. There are too many knots in my belly at the thought of Sigrid coming anywhere near me again. It's a blessing that she hasn't been taken by this curse already.

Once I've eaten and packed, I go to visit Zephyr before we leave. The gryphon meets me at the entrance to her nest, curling her head around my shoulder and ushering me into the cozy space. She circles a few times, casting a critical eye over me.

"I'm fine, Zephyr," I say, laughing a little. "Truly. The same can't be said for my victims."

Zephyr gives a little squawk before ruffling her feathers and settling down next to her sleeping babies.

"I've come to say goodbye."

Her head jerks back up.

"I'm coming back," I hasten to add. "I did something with my magic the other day." I hesitate on how much to explain to her. She's intelligent enough to understand, but it's convoluted and I only have a moment before Daenn might come find me.

"I'm coming back," I repeat. I wonder if it's true. If I survive the journey to the outskirts of the jungle and we take care of the magic, I will come back, probably, but not for long. There's no reason for me to stay once we've untangled ourselves from each other, sorted Daenn's magic out, and helped Eskil and the others.

Zephyr gently butts her head against my chest, and I wish she could fly, could be the one they chose for me to ride. I kiss the top of her beak and then shift as if to leave, but I can't make my feet go. So we stay like that, her leaning against my torso, my

fingers buried in her feathers, until I hear someone approaching. It's enough to break the trance.

I kiss Zephyr one more time, give her a little scratch, and step away .

It's Sigrid who's come looking for me. She hovers near the entrance to the nest as if worried I won't be able to make it out.

I do have to steady myself with a hand to the wall; Sigrid frowns at the offending action. "You don't have to do this, Emana. The jungle is no place for you. The risk involved... That Daenn would even dare put you in such a position—"

"Daenn isn't putting me anywhere," I say grimly. I don't like how it suggests he controls my fate. "I am choosing to go. It's the only way to stop the magic, Sigrid, and I must. I can't bear to hurt anyone else."

"I agree that searching out the bracers is a good idea, but let Daenn go. You stay here, where it's safe."

I'm shaking my head before she's even finished speaking. "No. What if it doesn't work because I'm too far away? What if—" I cut myself off, not wanting even Sigrid to be privy to some of my worries. What if it kills Daenn because I'm too far away? What if my staying is still putting the clan—her—in danger? These are risks I'm unwilling to take.

"I'm going," I say firmly, lifting my chin.

The lines around her mouth tighten, but she nods in acceptance. "The gryphons are ready, and the king is waiting for you."

There's a crowd gathered in the main section of the eyries when we reach there. Wind

whistles around us from the cave's opening. Beyond the drop-off, the sky is blue and clear, good flying conditions.

Sigrid and I join the crowd. It's made up of Daenn's warriors—and Viggo of all people. There are a few onlookers around the edges, people here solely for the spectacle .

My gaze skips over the faces, searching. I'm not even sure who I'm searching for, but when I reach Daenn, his gaze locks onto mine, halting me. Relief spreads through me.

I shake off the strange feeling and thread my way through the crowd until I stop near Daenn and the two gryphons we'll be using for the journey. I recognize the larger one, Storm—Daenn's gryphon and Zephyr's mate. He's shades of silver and grey, a perfect reflection of the clouds he's named after, and his feathers and fur gleam in the light. He's big, bigger than Zephyr—probably bigger than most of the gryphons in our clan's eyries.

He tilts his head toward me, the only break in his regal manner, but I recognize the tell. He's happy to see me.

I give him a little wave, but I wouldn't dream of ruining his regal facade by daring to pet him in front of all these people. He would ignore me for the entire trip if I did, just out of spite.

The other, smaller gryphon I don't recognize. But she—I think it's a she—is sleek and beautiful with dark blue-grey feathers.

I stop near her head, putting up my hand so she can smell me, and I wait. It's always better to wait for the gryphon to come to you. It's the first thing every clansfolk learns in riding lessons as a child.

Daenn closes the distance between us. He speaks low so that only I will hear him.
“Are you ready to leave?”

I nod, not wanting to startle the gryphon.

“Her name is Raindrop.”

He turns away, letting me introduce myself to Raindrop in peace, and addresses the crowd. I tune him out as Raindrop presses her beak into my hand .

“Hello, there,” I murmur, slowly moving to scratch her behind her beak. “Be patient with me; it’s been a while since I’ve flown alone.”

She huffs at that, but she hasn’t shown any signs of aggression, so I take it as a good sign that at least so far, she likes me.

“It’s time,” Daenn says, hand hovering near my elbow but not quite touching me.
“Do you need help mounting?”

I want to tell him no, but even for a smaller gryphon, Raindrop is huge, and I don’t really fancy falling on my rear in front of the crowd of onlookers.

“Please,” I say instead. We move to Raindrop’s side, and his large hands wrap around my waist, warm even through the layers of my clothes and his gloves.

He lifts me so I can swing my leg over Raindrop’s back with ease, and he’s slow to release, ensuring I’m fully settled before he does so.

“Thank you,” I murmur, my body warming in a way that makes it hard to look at him. The crowd parts once we’re both mounted, clearing our way for flight, and without any more preamble, Storm and Raindrop break into runs and push off right at the

edge of the cliff, snapping their wings out and soaring up. I dig my fingers into the feathers in front of the saddle.

My breath is stolen by the wind, and my heart soars like our gryphons. I've never gotten to fly as much as the warriors, but I love flying, and I let myself savor that feeling as we soar away from the clan mountain.

A Sudden Ache of Longing

I am saddle sore after a day of flying. But, oh, it's so nice being saddle sore from flying with a gryphon versus the mundane horse saddle sore I became familiar with while married to Tolomon.

Regardless, I'm in a wonderful mood, despite how my body aches.

Storm and Raindrop land in a small clearing near a stream. The terrain is familiar. Oak trees, cedars, and a few mesquites with their twisted thorny branches surround us.

We're in the lowlands, although far south of Verksland already. The terrain is familiar, but it's a bit greener, a bit more humid. I can still see the mountain range our clans reside throughout in the distance, but our mountain is long out of sight.

We have one more day in our journey. One more day until we reach the edge of the jungle and the temple.

I'm not the only one in a good mood as we dismount. Daenn offers to help me down, but without a crowd of onlookers, I care less about landing on my rear, so I just jump down and smirk at him.

There's a lightness about him that reminds me of before. Like he left most of the weight of ruling back with the clan and, with it, some of that darkness that's lingered

since he stole me away from Tolomon.

Maybe it's wishful thinking, but as he goes about setting up our camp, he feels more like my Daenn. It makes it easy to fall into step beside him, to work together to erect a tent, collect firewood, haul water, and tend to the gryphons.

He's still brushing down Storm's flanks when I finish with Raindrop, so I start digging into the saddlebags for our rations. I hope they gave us things that don't require complicated cooking... or, ideally, any cooking. Neither of us were ever very good at it when we were younger, and for me, at least, marrying Tolomon didn't exactly give me ample opportunities to practice.

When he notices me pulling food out of the saddlebags, Daenn's brows raise. "What are you doing?"

"I'm getting supper." I don't say 'obviously,' but I know he can hear it in my tone. He shifts closer.

"Did you acquire a new hobby while in the lowlands? Pick up a few new skills?"

I can't help it—my mouth twitches at his questions, at the concern that lurks behind each word.

"I acquired many new skills," I say blithely, meeting his eyes. "Perhaps if you're nice, I'll teach you some of them."

Shock plays over Daenn's face, and a sudden ache of longing snaps through me.

My eyes widen as I realize exactly how that sounded. My entire face heats, and my chest does too, and the silver tattoo tingles. I look down, returning to my task of pulling out food. Dried, pre-prepared soup things—all I need to do is throw them in

our single pot with water. Should be simple enough, right?

Daenn clears his throat, and I'm intensely grateful he pretends like I didn't say what I just said. "What I'm hearing is that you will not be showing me one right now, which means that you should step away from the supper preparations if we want to actually have anything to eat tonight."

I snort. "As if you could do any better. Go back to grooming your gryphon, and leave me to make supper in peace." I pointedly turn away from him.

"No," he draws out the word.

I can hear him coming closer. I scramble to scoop up the waxed bag holding the food and the pot and scurry away, but Daenn is on me before I've gone two steps, reaching around me to grab the food. He plucks it from my hands and retreats as I whirl back around, chasing him to retrieve my stolen goods. He's like a dancer, spinning and weaving out of my reach.

He nears a fallen branch, and I see an opportunity. I lunge.

His eyes widen; he steps back, tripping on the branch. He catches himself from falling from the stumble, but it leaves him no time to react to my assault: I bowl into him, and we both go down. I laugh, grabbing at the supper things—

And then I'm dumped backward. Daenn is scrambling across the ground away from me, chest heaving.

I stare dumbly at him. We'd been playing, I thought. So why is my chest tight? My hip aches slightly from landing on it, and my left arm burns along the tattoo. Why does Daenn look like he's barely dodged a killing blow?

He's on his feet in another instant, and he's pulling his gloves from a pocket and tugging them on with jerky movements. I hadn't realized he wasn't wearing them .

Is that what this is about? Is he so afraid of physical contact?

The gloves, even at night. He slept on the bed while we shared it, but on top of the covers, with a shirt—unlike how he used to. How he doesn't casually touch anyone like he used to.

I can see it lingering in his eyes. It hangs in the air, his fear of contact, of touching others. He equates his own touch with death. I knew he was wary about it. Understandable, given what he told me... but I didn't realize how deeply it's seared into him.

I can't help it; sympathy wells in me. Even with what he's done, living such an existence would be so lonely. No one deserves to feel so cut off from those around them that they fear even the slightest brush of skin.

So I do the only thing I can think of. I close the distance between us and I reach for him. He backpedals, gaze shuttering.

“No,” he growls. “Don't, Emana.”

I halt. “The whole reason you stole me and forced me to marry you is because I'm safe—” He's shaking his head, so I switch directions. “Your magic is already—”

“ No .” The snarl rips the air.

I lean away from the ferocity in his tone. He's never spoken to me like that, not even when I've hurled insults at him recently.

He drags a hand down his face. When he looks at me again, he's regained a modicum of that stoic mask. "Please, Emana. Don't touch me."

My heart aches at those words. So bleak. Resigned.

Is it any wonder how he's changed over the years if he's walled himself off from everyone like this, intentionally drawn back from his own warm nature ?

Instead of responding to his plea, I hold out the pot and bag. "If you're so determined to do all the work, far be it from me to stop you." I say the words lightly, moving to press the food supplies into his gloved hands. I slip past him to pick up the brush he dropped. "I'll finish grooming Storm. It's been far too long since we've gotten to spend time together, anyway."

I greet Storm with scratches under his beak, earning a happy churring noise, before moving back to the side Daenn had been working on.

Daenn's back is just barely visible over Storm's flanks. He stands as still as a statue. I didn't get a chance to study his expression, so I'm not entirely sure what he's feeling, but I can almost imagine the ache echoing through him. It's the same one that echoes through me for the boy I used to know.

I have faint hopes that, somewhere between training as a warrior and stepping into his role as king, Daenn had time to pick up a new hobby and his cooking has greatly improved.

Unfortunately, that is nothing more than a fantasy.

The soup is palatable. Over-salted, but not so much that I feel like I'm murdering my tongue with each bite. Not that I would have done any better, but I make a show of gagging as if it's going to kill me anyway. I need the levity after our encounter

earlier.

Daenn only rolls his eyes. He hasn't spoken more than two words, but the silence has shifted to something almost companionable. As I chew, I consider what he told me before about his parents and compare it to my realization about his touch .

There is more to the story than what he said. I know there is. Right now, I want nothing more than to know the details he didn't tell me before. I'm half afraid to know. What if his curse was the cause of my mother's sudden illness and decline? She was gone so quickly. I didn't even have a chance to travel back to say goodbye before she was gone.

But surely he would have told me if it was.

No, the old Daenn would have. I don't know about this new one.

And, I think, my desire to know also stems from my foolish wish that he be the boy I once knew. And if so, it's silly, and I should let the matter lie. But now that the thoughts have entered my mind, I can't. I set my bowl aside. I've eaten enough to allay my hunger, and the food certainly isn't good enough to eat more than that.

"Daenn," I say softly, and his eyes jerk up to me as if he hadn't expected me to speak to him again, or to use his name, which... that's fair. I haven't been the most amenable companion.

His gaze is focused, his attention entirely on me. It makes me want to squirm, but I don't think he'll answer my question if I don't seem earnest, so I meet him head-on.

"Did... did your curse kill my mother?"

His hands tighten on his bowl, but he shakes his head. "No. She didn't spend much

time near me after you left, and I widened that distance once I realized what was happening. She fell ill and stayed in the infirmary for a few weeks. My curse never affects its victims like that, and I didn't feel my magic move at all during that time. If you don't believe me, you can check with Sigrid when we return."

"I believe you." Something inside me loosens. But I'm not finished. There's more I need to understand. "I want to know why. Why you took your father's throne, why your mother died." I'm careful with my phrasing. I don't think he killed her. "Just... why?"

He goes very still, nothing moving but his eyes, but he seems to sense my earnestness because after a long, tense moment, he speaks.

"My relationship with my father was strained, like..." He trails off, but I know how that sentence would have ended: like always. His father always had high expectations, unreasonably high demands of Daenn. It's part of why he's the best in the clan. The best warrior. The best gryphon rider. His father would accept nothing less.

His voice is heavy as he speaks again. "But I never meant to kill him. I never meant to..." He drops his gaze from mine, but even though he's looked away, I can't. Everything about him is raw right now. I know without a doubt in this moment, at least, this is my Daenn, the one I've longed for.

And suddenly I wish we weren't sitting on opposite sides of the fire.

"I realized I'm probably responsible for my mother's death." The pain in that sentence guts me, but he continues before I can argue such a ridiculous claim. "I've never had any sort of control over my magic. It seems to stem from the amount of time people spend with me, even touch..." His fist flexes, and my heart breaks a little. I wish I hadn't been right in that guess. "I've killed most of my most trusted allies.

My warriors survive because I send them out on missions. I suspect this is the first time Eskil has been home since last summer.”

Horror floods me at that. He managed to protect Eskil from his curse only to have him fall because of me?

Daenn glances back up at me, his brow furrowed. “I’ve killed most of the council that sat for my father. Even a few of the chiefs from the other clans have fallen. I’ve done what I can. I cover my skin. I keep my distance from everyone, but the damage is done. The rumors...” He trails off.

I flinch at the word. I’ve heard those rumors. After what he did to Tolomon, what he did to me, I believed every one of them. Shame twists through me. How easily I swallowed them as truth instead of trusting in my oldest friend.

His mouth twists in a bitter smile, like he knows what I’m thinking, and his gaze turns to the fire. “The rumors have spread. I’m nothing but a warlord. A monster. A tyrant.”

“Why not step down?” I ask the question softly. I don’t want it to come across as accusatory, not when he’s actually opening up to me. “Wouldn’t that best protect the clan?”

He grimaces. “If I had someone I trusted to step in for me, I would step down. But Viggo, unfortunately, has survived the curse, and while he’s alive, my trying to install anyone else would only cause a bloodbath. And he would be far worse than me. Death follows me, but he wants nothing more than to turn our clans into conquerors.”

“Like his father?”

“Like his father. He gives me as much strife as his father gave mine. His clan is

constantly pushing boundaries, raiding villages and claiming they were antagonized into it..." He shakes his head. "No. As much of a curse as I am, Viggo would be worse for our people."

And yet, despite how much trouble Viggo gives him, he would never intentionally kill Viggo in cold blood. He doesn't say it, but I can hear it. I know it, because Daenn's not a monster.

How did I not see that before ?

I'm certain of that after this conversation. But there's still one more thing I need to understand, because there's still one more act that does not fit with the Daenn I knew.

"Why did you kill Tolomon?" Why did he steal me away like an object? I'm not quite brave enough to voice that question. I don't want him to pull away from me.

His face hardens. "It started when you left, Emi. I've been desperate to fix this since it began, and it's only grown worse. The vultures are circling me. Viggo wants my throne, and I refuse to let him have it and bring war down on our people and the lowlands. I needed to do something." Slowly, so slowly, he looks up from the fire and stares at me. "I needed you."

"You could have had my help without killing my husband," I whisper.

He scoffs. "Do you really think Tolomon would have been all right with you returning to the clan, staying near another man? He strikes me as having been the jealous sort."

I can't argue with that. Tolomon was a jealous man. I didn't realize it at first, but it became more and more clear the longer we were married.

Still, I shake my head. “But you shouldn’t have killed him, Daenn. I would have helped you regardless, and I wasn’t yours to take like some sort of possession.”

Daenn’s on his feet then, his jaw clenching, and I can practically feel his anger surge around and through me.

He leans forward, his voice low. “You keep saying that. Let’s set one thing straight: I have never seen you as a possession, Eman. I was not the one who started the fight with Tolomon. I just ended it.”

He stalks away, disappearing into the underbrush at the edge of our clearing. I stare after him, his words echoing in my mind. I want to believe him, but my bruised heart is a tether to reality. His words are exactly what I want to hear, but they don’t change that he did take me and force me into this marriage. His reasons may have been for the clan, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t run roughshod over me in the process. And I don’t know how to reconcile that with what he’s said.

14

Desperately Needed a Friend

Seven Years Prior

I stared out the drawing room window, watching the rain. Hating the rain.

It had been raining for days, trapping me in the house. It was becoming harder and harder not to view my new home as a prison, and Tolomon my jailer.

That was maybe a tad dramatic. He wasn't a monster. He just... had a sharp tongue when he'd decided I'd failed him in some way. And had a temper. And tended to be overly jealous of my spending time with anyone besides him. Not just men, but women too. I'd been struggling to make any sort of friends since moving to the lowlands, and his attitude about it all only made it worse.

There had been a few servants at the very beginning who had seemed friendly, but they had vanished after a few weeks. Tolomon had told me they'd requested to be transferred, or they'd had to leave to get married. At first I'd thought luck wasn't on my side, but I couldn't ignore the signs, and I couldn't stop the resentment at his behavior that bubbled up in me .

Exploring the grounds of Tolomon's estate—our estate; I was still getting accustomed to thinking of it as such, even after a year—had been one of my few comforts. I also spent a decent amount of time with Tolomon when he was free. He always expected me to be available whenever he wanted me and grew irate when I

wasn't easily at his beck and call, claiming he only wanted to spend what little free time he had with me. Running an estate required a great deal of work. Not for me, which had come as a surprise, but lowland customs were different. I'd expected the matrons to help run things like they did in my clan, but the lowlanders had stewards for that.

It left me with too much free time. Free time I should have been using to pick up some sort of hobby. I had considered cooking, but the kitchen staff had been so uncomfortable around me I'd given it up quickly.

I just wanted a friend. In reality, I missed Daenn. There was no way anyone could replace him.

When we first married, I'd hoped to grow that close to Tolomon eventually. But it had been nearly a year, and it was clear to me he would never take that role. He didn't care to hear my every inane thought like Daenn used to. He had no patience for my "turbulent feminine emotions," as he called them. He expected me to entertain him how he wanted to be entertained and to bear him an heir—a duty I had sorely failed him in so far and about which his comments were getting more and more cutting.

I was desperate for companionship beyond my husband. Any companionship would have sufficed to help pass the time, even if it meant I had to talk about inanities .

I almost missed the door creaking over the sound of the rain. I looked up lazily. Perhaps Tolomon had finished his work early for the day, and he was coming to—

But it wasn't Tolomon. A maid, a face I didn't recognize, crossed the room, bearing a tray. She seemed young, around my age, unlike most of the staff here who had been with Tolomon's family for decades and were even stiffer and more reserved with me than they were with him.

The maid curtsied, deftly balancing the tray as she did so. “Your tea things, my lady.” Her voice was sweet and soft.

“Here.” I rose, hands out to grab the tray. “I can take that.”

“Oh, no, my lady.” She sidestepped me and placed it on the table.

“Thank you. What’s your name?”

“Letta, my lady.” She kept her gaze lowered deferentially, creating a distance between us I’d grown accustomed to—and accustomed to hating—since coming to the lowlands.

I smiled, even though she wasn’t looking at me. “You may call me Emana.”

Her gaze shot up to me in surprise. “Oh, no, my lady. I couldn’t.”

“I’m not any older than you are, Letta, if my guess is right, and I’m not any nobler, either. Not by blood.” I suppose I was by dint of having married Tolomon, but my loneliness didn’t care about station. “Are you working in the kitchens?” I gestured to her grey apron. I’d only seen its like in the kitchens. The housemaids all wore white.

“Yes, my lady Emana.” She stumbled slightly over my name. “I just got the position last week.”

“Do you like it so far?” I moved to sit at the end of the settee and poured myself a cup of tea. “And would you like some tea? There’s more than enough here for both of us.”

She took a step back. “Oh, no, thank you. That wouldn’t be appropriate.”

I withheld a sigh. She had used my name, at least. That was a victory I would take. “Do you like it so far?” I asked again.

She gave a small shrug. “I like the money,” she said after a moment, as if unsure about giving such an honest answer.

I grinned. “I hope they pay you well, being the only person under the age of forty on the staff.”

A small smile lurked at the corner of her lips. Another victory.

“Where’d you come from before?” I didn’t recognize her accent.

“A small village near the southern border. We had to come north, for my mother —” She stopped, her cheeks pinking. “You don’t care about family gossip.”

“No.” I leaned toward her, stretching out one hand, before I remembered myself and lowered it. “Please, tell me. I don’t mind.”

She studied me for a moment, lips pursed, but maybe she saw the desperation in me, for she continued after a brief stretch of silence. “My mother is ill, and the only specialist for her particular case lives in Bristhorpe, so here we are. I’m not good at much, but I’m good in the kitchen, so it was fairly easy to get a position with the household.”

“I am sorry about your mother, but I hope they pay you enough to cover her medical fees—and I hope you enjoy working here.”

The smile she gave me was small but genuine. I couldn’t help but smile in return. Maybe here I’d finally found a friend. It didn’t sound like she would be going anywhere anytime soon .

“If you need anything—” I cut myself off as the door swung open.

Letta jumped. Tolomon strode in, stopping at the sight of me and the maid. I tensed.

His expression flickered, but then he focused on me, and a signature winning smile spread over his face. “Hello, darling. I thought I’d come take tea with you.”

“Husband. I hadn’t expected you today.” I stood and closed the distance between us. He tugged me against him, pressing his hand into my waist possessively. He pressed a kiss to my temple. “I was thinking that this afternoon we could...” He trailed off, glancing at Letta. “You may go.” His tone was dismissive, and Letta curtsied, keeping her head bowed and hurrying toward the door.

“Thank you for the tea, Letta,” I called after her, unwilling to let her go without at least common courtesy.

“Of course, my lady.” She bobbed her head to me before vanishing through the doorway.

I focused back on Tolomon, trailing my fingers down his chest to distract him from the maid. “What exactly did you have in mind for this afternoon?”

His gaze lingered on the door where Letta had disappeared, however. “Letta?” he repeated inquiringly.

“She’s a new kitchen maid.” I swallowed my concern at his notice of her and stepped out of his embrace, sliding my hand down to his and tugging him toward the tea set. I pitched my voice lighter. Maybe if he thought my interest was professional, he would leave her be. “I was thinking about stealing her away to be my lady’s maid. One of the housemaids helps me now. But she’s so old, she really struggles with all the buttons on your—” I cut myself off, “—on my dresses. ”

Tolomon hated when I referred to the lowland customs or styles or practices as not my own. He was right, of course. This was my home now, no matter how much I missed the clan. I was just having trouble adjusting. It was so very different from the clan. He didn't catch my slip, though, which I was grateful for.

He was still staring at the door, his brow furrowed.

"She seems smart," I ventured to add.

"Does she have the training for a lady's maid?" he asked, finally, looking back to me.

I handed him a teacup and a biscuit. "I'm sure she can be trained if she doesn't." I knew she didn't from what little she had said, but I didn't want Tolomon shooting down this idea.

I set my own teacup aside and tugged him down on the settee beside me.

I leaned into him, nuzzling his jaw. "What did you have in mind for this afternoon?" I asked again, hoping to distract him from talk of lady's maids. Physical activities usually worked wonders in drawing his mind off other things, and I didn't like how focused he was on her. If she became my lady's maid, we could be friends—and I desperately needed a friend.

I went to the kitchen a few days later, my tea tray in hand. Usually, a maid came to clean it up for me, but I was hoping to see Letta.

I'd seen her the day after we'd met, and we'd chatted a bit more. She had three brothers, all younger than her. One had found a position as an apprentice with a fletcher in the city.

But a different maid had brought the tea today. Besides, around this time every day,

the steward, Bernard, took his own tea in the kitchen. I wanted to speak to him about transferring Letta to being my lady's maid.

The kitchen fell silent at my arrival, and I gave a small, reserved smile, looking around at all the wrinkled faces.

I didn't see Letta, but that was all right. Bernard was here and I would be able to pull him aside to talk to him in private.

"My lady." The housekeeper bustled forward, scooping the tray out of my hands. "It's not your place to bring dishes to the kitchen like a regular servant. You should have rung the bell." Her tone was respectful but thoroughly chiding. If I weren't on a mission, I would have been rather cowed. Instead, I homed in on where the steward sat at the table.

"Master Bernard, might I speak with you?"

"Of course, my lady."

He rose, brushing his fingers on a napkin, and followed me from the kitchen. I stopped a little ways down the hall, where the voices that had resumed in the kitchen were indistinct.

"I wanted to speak with you about one of the maids," I said without preamble.

His brow furrowed. "Has one of them acted out of line?"

"No." I shook my head quickly. "No, not at all. But I am in need of a lady's maid. Helen does her best, but she's really too old to be helping me dress. I was wondering if I could take on the new kitchen maid, Letta, to fill the role instead."

Bernard's frown deepened. "I'm afraid, my lady, that Letta has been let go. Yesterday, in fact."

My heart sank at his words. "Let go? Why?"

"The chef realized her skills were not satisfactory for the role she inhabited."

From what she had told me of her past, I found that hard to believe. "Could you contact her? Lacking kitchen skills isn't necessary for a lady's maid. "

He shook his head. "I'm afraid that would be quite impossible. I'm very sorry, my lady. Now, if there's nothing else..."

"No, that was all."

He bowed, then he left me in the hallway, my heart down in my gut.

Tolomon had interfered again.

Letta had seemed happy here. She'd said the chef had complimented her on her skills more than once. With her mother needing the specialist, she wouldn't want to move.

And now, because of me, she had been let go. I desperately hoped she'd find a new position that would cover the expenses of her mother's medical care.

With her, my hope was gone too. None of the other servants were more than distantly respectful. None of them responded to my efforts to bridge the gap between us.

My eyes burned with a sudden wave of despair, but I shook my head to rid myself of it as I hurried down the hall.

I was alone again. Tolomon had made sure of it.

15

Nothing but Air

When morning comes, the silence is thick between us again, tense and cold. Daenn looks distant and unapproachable—kingly—but I almost get the sense that he feels frustrated and hopeless.

Or maybe I'm projecting my own feelings onto him. What does he have to be frustrated about? He's the one who killed my husband and stole me, though his words keep echoing back to me.

He didn't start the fight. He only finished it.

Tolomon was a jealous man and prone to bursts of anger. There had been plenty of evidence of that throughout our marriage.

He once challenged a young lord to a duel shortly after our wedding, claiming that he was leering at me at a ball. I found it romantic that he was so determined to protect my honor, but then it happened again. And again, and again, until I was sick of it—and the subtle accusations he started throwing at me that I was luring them in somehow. And then once, he'd beat a stable hand within an inch of his life before releasing him from service, all because the man got too close to me when helping me with my horse in the stable .

Yes, I could believe Tolomon started the fight. I could believe it very, very easily.

He never liked Daenn, growing irritable any time I mentioned my childhood friend. So if he was going to start a fight with anyone, Daenn would certainly be it.

But why did Daenn kill him? Tolomon was my husband. Daenn doesn't know what Tolomon was like. It was his right to defend me against threats, real or perceived.

Surely Daenn understands that. But it doesn't really matter if he does—Tolomon is dead now, and good riddance to him.

The thought rouses my always-simmering guilt, so I turn my focus to breaking down camp and preparing the gryphons in silence.

It is irritating how well Daenn and I work together, despite the silence, despite the years apart, despite the anger in the air.

I don't need to speak to him to understand what needs to be done, what he will gravitate toward or leave to me because he knows my strengths. We make an excellent team.

We get into the air soon after, Raindrop following Storm up past a little layer of clouds.

Once we're flying, it's easy to leave the thick anger behind. It's easy to focus on soaring, on the wind pressing against me. It rips strands loose from my braided crown, slapping them into my face and back over and over.

I'm just getting into the rhythm of the flight when a shadow passes overhead. I frown; there's nothing above me but sun. I turn in my saddle to look—

Something slams into Raindrop's side, and suddenly I'm free falling .

There's nothing to grab, nothing but air around me. I can see Raindrop above me, tangling with another gryphon. It has a rider, the detached part of my brain says.

I recognize the rider's gear and colors, but I'm panicking too much to pin it down. My thoughts are free falling like I am.

I'm about to die. There's no way around that. I have no way to stop my fall. No way to help Raindrop. I remember this lesson from my flying classes.

Losing your seat means losing your life.

My panic amplifies, white-hot, burning, making every moment feel so much longer.

Part of me wishes it wouldn't. I don't want time to catalogue where I went wrong. Holding on better to Raindrop, being more aware of my surroundings, forcing Daenn to talk to me before we left so things wouldn't have stayed so unresolved between us.

Oh, how I wish I had talked to Daenn.

And then my body slams into something, and I'm encased.

"I've got you," Daenn says into my ear. "Hold on to me."

My mind catches up with what's happened. Somehow, he's caught me. Somehow, I'm not dying.

I scramble for something to grip. I get my arms around his torso, digging my fingers into the grooves of his armor, and bury my face in his chest. He helps me shift so that I can straddle Storm, but the position is awkward since I'm not sitting in the true saddle.

So I shift to wrap my legs around Daenn's waist instead, locking my ankles together and clinging to him for dear life.

A small grunt escapes him as I secure myself, and I shift to loosen a bit.

"No," he commands. "Don't let go. "

So I don't. I trust Daenn will get us out of this. My stomach lurches as Storm beats his powerful wings. We're heading back up.

I dare to turn my head, and I get a glimpse of our destination: the gryphon rider who attacked me. It was more than one, I realize. I count two, which means there's probably a third. If it's not a lone rider, then more than likely they would follow the standard battle tactics, and all the clans fight in groups that are multiples of three.

My silver spiral tingles, unnaturally warm in contrast to the biting cold of the wind driving its way into every crevice. Now that my panic is subsiding, my predominant emotion is anger as we drive hard toward the gryphon riders.

But... that makes no sense. I'm not angry; I'm relieved. Relieved down to my very bones that Daenn got to me in time.

But Daenn is angry. The coiled tension is obvious in his body under my arms and legs. I can see his deadly focus trained on the warriors ahead of us as we close the distance.

My mind snaps through the past few days, a dozen little moments where my emotions made no sense to me, how my silver mark tingled at the same time.

In an instant, I know. I can feel Daenn's emotions over our bond.

I don't have a chance to process that because in the next moment Daenn and the first warrior clash.

I cling to him, bury my head, and make myself small, slipping one arm at a time down to wrap around his torso instead of his neck so I'm not hindering his range of motion. It's not comfortable, but it's all I can do for him right now. I have no weapon. I am nothing but added weight and bulk in this fight.

The screams of the gryphons are loud enough to cut over the wind around us. I sense the moment the first man falls. Daenn's movement shifts and Storm is no longer hovering in the air, but rather diving, no doubt to meet the second man. As we jolt, Storm swerving in what I assume is a dodge, I see the third gryphon coming in behind us.

I squeeze Daenn's chest, but when I try to speak, my words are swallowed by the wind. Even if I could warn him properly, he has an enemy at the front.

My mind spins frantically, desperate to help. I've never been trained as a warrior, a killer.

A killer.

I latch on to the word. Without waiting to think it through—there is no time to think it through—I reach for my magic.

A slow sleep is better than nothing, and at these heights, it is a powerful weapon.

The magic still feels slippery, effervescent, but maybe my desperation helps, because I'm able to grasp it better than before. I imagine that I grip it in my hands. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I focus on the man behind Daenn, and I will the magic to hurtle toward him and punch him in the chest.

I gasp as something rips away from me. The magic—and my strength.

But it works. The man slumps in his saddle and his gryphon veers, confused by the sudden sagging. My body trembles, and it's all I can do to keep my grip on Daenn.

He must sense it because one arm comes around me like a vise, pressing me to him.

We're descending, I realize.

Daenn must have finished off the second man while I was focused on the third.

Sooner than I would expect, we reach the ground, landing with barely more than a thump. And then Daenn is pulling me against his chest as we slide from the saddle. His hands moved to my arms, and he holds me back enough to look over me. "Are you hurt?"

He's shaking, I realize, and over the link I can tell it's the residue of the anger, of the panic from before. From almost losing me.

I take the chance to look over him too, check him for battle wounds. But he's whole, and that realization almost makes me collapse in relief. That relief echoes back to me from him as he pulls me in for a hug, crushing me to his chest.

"You're okay," he whispers, and I can tell he's saying the words for himself more than me.

"I'm okay," I agree, somewhat shocked that they're true. I almost died, but he snatched me from the jaws of death. Then he took down two men while encumbered with me. He's truly a marvel. He shifts, and then he's pressing a kiss to my hair crown. My arms tighten around him in shock.

He must sense my surprise, maybe feel it over the link, because he freezes and pulls away, expression tight. Panic echoes over our bond.

“We need to find those bodies. Stay here. Rest.” And then he’s striding away, whistling to Storm to follow as he hurries off.

I watch him go, overly aware that I can sense his emotions even as he flees—because that is exactly what he is doing. Fleeing from his relief, from a longing as deep in his chest as it is in mine. I wish I could flee from it too. Instead, I drop to the ground and dig my fingers into the earth there, needing the solid connection, and desperately try to wrestle down my own emotions so he won’t feel them. My confusion, my own aching disappointment. My quiet longing that makes no sense whatsoever.

A Bid for the Throne

It doesn't take Daenn long to find one of our enemies. He must have had Storm land us near where he thought they fell, because I can still see him through the trees when he crouches down.

I stay pinned to the ground for a few minutes until my heart rate slows, and then I force myself up to help Daenn. He shouldn't have to deal with the bodies alone.

I find him kneeling over the gruesome corpses. I grit my teeth to keep my stomach's contents in my body, but it takes effort, because with this sight another realization slams into me: I killed a man. No, I didn't stab him like Daenn, but I wielded my magic against him, and he's dead as a result.

I am a killer.

I didn't cry over nearly dying, but somehow this has my eyes watering. I blink back the tears. We don't have time for me to fall apart. I'm sure it's unavoidable, that soon I will have to face what I've done, but I will put it off for as long as I can.

I rip my gaze away from the awful wounds and find Daenn watching me.

"Emana..."

"I'm fine," I say quickly, focusing my gaze on the clan colors the rider wears. I hear a

quiet sigh from Daenn, but he lets me be. Gratitude has me fighting back the tears even more than before. Stupid tears.

I blink again and study the clothes. I can place the clan colors now that I'm not hurtling to my death. "They're South Peak riders."

Viggo's clan. Daenn doesn't say it, but I know he's thinking the same thing I am.

Viggo is behind this. Whether Viggo intended them to only kill Daenn or to kill us both doesn't really matter. What matters is that he made a bid for the throne, and if he's done this here, winds only know what he's done at home.

Suddenly, the three days we'll take to get back home feel too long.

We find Raindrop's saddle, but no Raindrop. We collect what we can, but only so much will fit in Storm's saddlebags, which are already mostly full with other supplies.

"Perhaps she panicked and flew back to the mountain," I finally say. I can't help the hope threading the words. Gryphons are precious, and losing even one is a tragedy in the clan.

"Perhaps." Daenn's agreement is stoic, not betraying any of the worry and anger I can sense simmering in him. Now that I've realized that I can feel him over the bond, it's so easy to tell, especially with how my tattoo warms and tingles whenever I sense his emotions. It's incredible—unbelievable, even—that I didn't make the connection before.

I wonder if he knows, if he's realized that he can feel my emotions too, but I'm afraid to ask. If he did, how long has he been seeing into my heart?

It's almost a relief that he doesn't exactly give me a chance to ask as we assess and gather things from the damaged saddle.

And then we're returning to Storm. Daenn stops at his gryphon's head, setting his forehead against Storm's. A peace settles over him as he communes with his gryphon, a hum that reaches into me through our bond and soothes me too.

I've never been so jealous of a gryphon bond before.

"Is he going to be all right carrying both of us?"

Daenn shrugs. Without the link, I never would have noticed the undercurrent of worry that clings to him. He hides it well. "He is probably one of the few gryphons who could do such a long distance, but even he will have to go slower than usual. We should still reach the temple by nightfall."

Nightfall, instead of midday, as we had originally expected. How long, then, will it take us to get home if Storm has to carry us both?

Daenn helps me up into his saddle, settling me in front, and then he leaps on behind me. His warmth is a wall at my back, his breaths a breeze against my ear.

My traitorous body wants to sink back against him, sink into the safety that instantly envelops me, as if everything else he's done recently doesn't matter, only the fact that he saved me. Protected me.

I don't have time to argue my body out of it, however, because as soon as Storm pushes off the ground, working to gain air, I reflexively lean against Daenn for support, and, in response, he wraps one arm around my waist tightly. A wave of protectiveness softens his constant worry and anger.

There's no point trying to speak as we fly—our words would be lost to the wind—so I let my thoughts wander, and, maybe just a little, I let myself savor the safety of being protected by Daenn Henriken.

A Risk I'm Willing to Take

We stop only once, and we do reach the temple by nightfall. Barely.

Shadows crawl around us as Storm angles down toward the stone structure. The Bompurak Jungle spreads out ahead, dark and menacing in the dusk. It was already less than inviting in the distance as we approached, but it only grows more ominous as darkness falls. I'm grateful yet again that we've only come up to its doorstep and we don't have to go any farther.

The trees all around the temple have been cleared away, and as we descend into that clearing, we push past a resistance, a zing in the air that makes my ears pop.

"What was that?" I say, speaking loud enough to be heard over the wind.

"Some sort of ward," Daenn responds directly into my ear, and I have to work not to shiver against his breath on my skin.

His answer sets me on edge. Wards, while something I've heard of, are a foreign concept. Is that why I feel like I'm being watched? Or is that the jungle?

Both possibilities are disconcerting.

As Storm touches down before the temple, the doors swing open and two robed men exit.

One is tall, taller than Daenn, and thin. He's likely in his mid-thirties. The other is old and so hunched he's shorter than me. Both have long beards and knotted bead ropes wrapped around their waists, looped in on themselves to make belts.

Daenn dismounts and helps me down before stepping in front of Storm, spreading his arms wide. "We come on an errand of peace, monks of Lirev. Will you bid us welcome and hear our plea?"

"We bid you welcome." The old monk's voice is frail and scratchy in the air. "Come inside. Your mount as well. It's best not to linger out of doors after nightfall."

We make our way up the stone steps. The monks have to open the doors all the way for Storm to fit through, but he does fit, and once we're all inside, the monks shut the doors with a heavy thud. My ears pop again as a sizzle of magic seals us in. A second layer of wards, perhaps, in case the first fail? It's not a comforting thought.

The entrance hall is an austere grey room with half a dozen hallways branching off it. Glowing lettering on the walls lights the space, but it's not an alphabet I've ever seen before.

"I can tend your gryphon if you'll have him follow me." The younger monk gestures to a side hall far wider than the rest.

Daenn nods and flicks a hand gesture to Storm. "There's dried meat in the left saddlebags to feed him."

Storm clicks his beak together, less than thrilled about the dried meat. He much prefers to hunt for his meals, but we have the meat on hand for when that's not an option, like tonight .

"We have plenty of fresh flesh we can share with him," the monk says, bowing a

little, and Storm brightens.

“Thank you,” Daenn calls at the monk’s retreating back, because the monk is now being herded by Storm toward their exit.

I press my lips together to hold in a laugh. The older monk has been studying us this entire time, but he finally speaks as his compatriot’s and Storm’s sounds fade down the hallway. “Would you like a meal first, or would you prefer to share your plea immediately? I gather it’s a matter of some urgency for you to risk flying near the jungle at night.”

“We would welcome a meal,” Daenn says, “but you’re right that I wish to speak to you first.”

The old monk spreads his hands in a gesture that says ‘speak away,’ so Daenn continues.

“We’ve come for the Bracers of Mundil.”

The old man’s entire face pulls into a frown, exaggerated by his deep-set wrinkles. “That is a serious request indeed, one I must decline. I will not allow you to use the bracers against your enemies. I will play no part in the wars of men.”

Daenn is already shaking his head. “I don’t want them for my enemies. I want them for me.”

This surprises the monk. His bushy eyebrows shoot up. “For you?”

“My magic is death, and not a death I can control.” Daenn’s hand flexes and fists at his side. His swirl of regret and guilt sits heavy in my chest. “I married her”—he gestures to me—“in hopes that her magic would neutralize my own. But when we

linked in the bonding ceremony, they mixed. And while it is now not an instant death, it is instead stronger, claiming more victims than before. ”

I purse my lips at his abbreviated story, but glossing over the complicated bits—Tolomon, how it was not just the bond but me that mixed the magic—is probably for the best.

Daenn’s voice lowers. “I cannot rule if I am killing my people, but I have no one trustworthy to hand my crown to. The bracers are my only hope.”

The monk takes this in for several moments after Daenn finishes. “This is a plea I want to heed,” he finally says, “and I’m willing to do so insofar as I am able. Now that I am not outright turning you away, I must admit we don’t have both of the bracers. We only have one.”

His words ring in the air around us like a hammer against an anvil. Would one even be enough? Had we come all this way—possibly lost a gryphon, given Viggo an opening to make a bid for the throne, wasted time we could have spent looking for a way to help our comatose clansfolk—for nothing?

“Do you know where the other one is?” Daenn finally asks. His voice is measured, betraying none of the desperation I can sense from him.

The monk shrugs a shoulder. “I do. When they were first entrusted to my order, we chose to separate them, to make them more difficult for one with ill intentions to lay their hands on. But I sense your intentions are pure.” As he says that, his eyes flash with an unearthly light, and I swallow back a yelp.

Did he use magic to read the truth in our words?

“But I cannot fetch the second one for you,” he continues. “You will have to get it

yourself. We sent it to our sister temple, deep in the heart of the jungle. It's a two-week journey to the south."

"Two weeks?" I say, my horror prompting me to speak for the first time. Two weeks to the temple. Two weeks back. Even if that is two weeks on foot, it will still be days by gryphon, especially an encumbered gryphon. It's too long. Every day we're gone is another day for Viggo to entrench himself in Daenn's place.

Grim resignation settles over Daenn. He nods. "I will make the journey. I only ask, will you house Emana—"

"No," I cut him off, rounding on him. "You're not going without me. I'm not going to sit here on my hands for who knows how long, wondering and waiting and dreading. I'm going with you."

"That isn't necessary, Emi—"

"It absolutely is."

"You would be safer here—"

I lean in and bare my teeth. "I can either ride with you, or I can set out on foot after you. Your choice."

Either he senses my stubbornness over our link or he reads it in my face, because he nods reluctantly.

"You can stay the night," the monk says. "Come to the kitchens and have some supper, and I'll fetch your bracer while you do."

He leads us there and finally gives us a name: Elium. He's the abbot of this sanctuary.

He leaves us in the kitchen with instructions for the monks there to prepare a warm supper, and they oblige swiftly. The simple fare they give us is delicious, far better than anything Daenn or I have managed, and we both have multiple servings—I have seconds, and Daenn thirds.

Abbot Elium returns as we're finishing, and he carries an unassuming cloth bundle. "Come, I'll show you to your room."

The quarters he leads us to are small, smaller than anywhere I've ever stayed. They're a monk's cell, stocked with only the essentials. A bed, a small desk, and a chest for storage. Elium bids us good night and shuts the door with a quiet snick as the latch catches.

I stare at the bed in consternation. Will we even both fit on that? But I'm distracted from my thoughts as Daenn unwraps the bracer and sets the cloth on the desk.

"What are you doing?"

"Maybe one will be enough." It's all he says, and I know what he means. Enough to cut off his magic, to siphon it away. Maybe we won't have to make the journey to the other temple. Still, my tender little hope at the idea is tempered by fear. The bracers are meant to be worn as a set, after all. What if putting on only one breaks him in some way?

But Daenn is already removing his own bracer, setting it aside on the table. Mundil's bracer is as different from Daenn's own as it could be. Daenn's is well worn, but also well cared for, in supple black leather that protects him but is lightweight for gryphon flight.

Mundil's bracer is battered, dull copper. Grommet holes with ragged brown leather ties line one side to tighten for fit. The most interesting thing about it is the curling

script rimming its edges, but I can't read it. I wonder if it's the same runes that the monks use in their magic.

Daenn slips the bracer on, and immediately there's a pulling sensation in my chest. Daenn staggers. I rush to his side, catching his arm.

"I'm fine," he insists. "It was just unexpected." He tugs away from me and walks to the bed. His steps are straight, but he drops onto the bed with a little more heaviness than usual for him.

That pulling sensation continues. I'm being carved out with a spoon. Painful, yet distant. I search for my magical reserves, and I don't think I'm imagining that they're thinner. Less accessible.

"It's working." Daenn's voice comes out a little ragged.

"Is it?" I counter. If I feel this way, how is he feeling?

He only gives me a nod, and it's in character enough with who he is now that I can't tell if it's because he's in too much pain to speak or if he's just being taciturn.

"Is it killing you?" I can't help but ask. I need to know if it is before it's too late so I can rip the bracer off him, since he'll probably be too weak to do it himself.

The question earns me a raspy chuckle. "No, Emi. It's not killing me. I'm fine. The force of it shocked me a little at first, but it's already ebbed." His mouth pulls down into a frown. "I don't think it's going to be enough. We'll have to go get the other one. And I'll leave this one on—perhaps it will continue to siphon my magic away over time and the deed will be done by the time we get back to the mountain."

I can tell he's right. The pulling sensation has lessened, though it hasn't faded

entirely. I hate it. His worry threads through his fear over our bond. I want to call him on it, but what good would it do? The magic is dangerous. We knew there was a risk in searching for these bracers. It's a risk Daenn is willing to take.

It's a risk I'm willing to take.

...Isn't it?

18

Seared into My Memory

I wake sobbing.

Blank eyes and contorted faces fill my vision, lingering even into my waking. I barely even saw our attackers, but they're seared into my memory, preserved solely to populate my nightmares.

There's a soft touch on my shoulder, and I scream, scrambling backward across the bed. Maybe it's the man I killed, come back to haunt me from death.

"You're safe." Daenn's voice is soft, with a rumbling quality like he just woke up. "I won't hurt you."

I gasp in a breath and force myself to look at him, focus on him instead of the horrifying images in my mind. It's far harder to do than it should be, but once I manage it, my whole body begins to calm. Whatever else he is, however complicated our relationship is now, Daenn is safe. I may not have believed it when he first stole me away—was that really only a few days ago?—but I do now.

"Was it a nightmare?"

I can only nod. I don't trust myself to speak quite yet.

Daenn is crouched by my bed, but he carefully shifts to sit on the edge. I didn't even

hear him move from his spot on the floor in front of the door. “About the attack? ”

My small shiver is answer enough for him. Anger and a flare of protectiveness flit past me over the bond. “They’re gone, Emana. They can’t hurt you again.”

This drags words out of me, clawing their way free in an anguished cry. “I killed him!”

Understanding softens Daenn’s face. He closes the distance, laying one gloved hand on my blanket-covered knee. “You defended us. Killing isn’t something to revel in, but sometimes it’s necessary.”

I know his words are true... logically. But I can’t banish the lingering guilt or my grief over the life I stole. “It’s so... so permanent. And heavy.”

“Yes.” He doesn’t try to soften the word. “But would you choose differently if given the chance?”

I want to say yes, but... “If I had, you—we—might have died.”

“They certainly would have kept trying, though I’d like to think my skills are honed enough to avoid outright death from such a cowardly attack.” There’s a hint of wryness to his tone, but he sobers as he continues. “We definitely wouldn’t have gotten out of the fight unscathed.”

“You think I made the right choice?” I don’t mean to phrase it as a question, but that’s how it comes out.

Daenn shrugs. “You made the choice I would have. If protecting you means killing someone, I will make that choice without any hesitation as many times as necessary.”

The words are spoken casually, despite the dark undercurrent to his emotions, too faceted for me to really decipher what it is. I know with crystalline certainty that he means every word, though. It soothes something in me, but it also makes me feel like I should fear for anyone who dares look at me wrong .

“It’s still heavy.”

“It will never stop being heavy. But sometimes we must do the heavy, hard things to protect those under our care. Better us than them.”

The words sound like something the Daenn I used to know would have said.

No, not quite. My Daenn was young, not yet acquainted with the burden of ruling. But it sounds like something my Daenn would say, given a few years of experience. Maybe the man before me is not so entirely different as I originally thought.

While the thought is comforting in terms of my hopes regarding him, it doesn’t make it any easier to face what I have done.

I sigh—and it turns into a yawn. My body is protesting being awake now that the adrenaline from the nightmare is fading.

“You should get back to sleep.” Daenn begins to pull his hand from my knee and rise.

“Wait—” I grab it, but when he freezes at my touch, I release him just as quickly. “Please. I—don’t want to be alone with my nightmares.” Maybe it’s silly, but I imagine them lurking at the edges of the room, merely waiting for Daenn to leave my side to pounce again.

I can’t read his expression. The predominant emotion over the bond feels like... protectiveness, I think, which is far better than annoyance, so I’ll take it.

He sits back down and shifts to a more comfortable position. “Go to sleep. I’ll stay until you do.”

I steep my words in my gratitude. “Thank you.”

He nods, and I wriggle back down under my covers. It doesn’t take me long to fall back asleep, not with Daenn’s steady presence on the edge of my bed, his strong grip on my hand, keeping the nightmares at bay.

A Curl of Ash

We leave first thing in the morning.

The monks advise us to wait until after the sun has fully risen, and they give us small portable wards—Elium calls them charms—to place around our camp at night, with strict instructions to have them in place before nightfall. A large part of me worries my magic will interfere with them, but maybe it won't—my magic used to do such things, but it's not just my magic anymore, and in this instance, that's a blessing.

As we fly, I test the bond between Daenn and me, not prodding at it, simply being aware of it, noticing the subtle shifts in Daenn's mood at any given time. Mostly, there's not much to feel. I think I can only sense the strongest of emotions from him, and as we fly, he's focused on the task at hand: directing Storm, watching the jungle below for anything different from the ominous green swath that covers the land as far as I can see.

Occasionally, we'll catch the sun reflecting off something below, blue or green threads of water, but otherwise there's nothing to see. As we've left the temple behind, green has consumed the ground in every direction, and the canopy is too thick to make out individual trees .

When we land for lunch though, Daenn seems slower, tired. We've found a small stream, and I immediately kneel by the water where it's flowing the swiftest over a tumble of rocks and take a long drink. It was cool up in the air, but descending into

the jungle itself is hot and muggy. I'm already sweating.

I lift my hair off my neck and splash water over my skin. It cools me for all of a second before it just adds to the sticky wet feeling. I sigh and rise, turning back to Daenn. He stands beyond Storm, studying something on the ground. Concern flickers through our link. It has me hurrying to see what he's found.

Strange slashing burn marks are scattered around on the ground and on the trees, like someone took a fire-imbued sword and hacked at everything in sight.

"What is this from?"

Daenn only shakes his head.

I shift warily. "Should we get back up in the air? Head somewhere else for lunch?"

Wry amusement ghosts through him. "Somewhere else will still be in the jungle," he points out. "These are old." He presses his fingers to one of them. He's not wearing his gloves, I notice, and something about that small detail pleases me. Maybe he doesn't feel the need to be quite so guarded while wearing the bracer. "Whatever made them moved on a while ago." His gaze rises and roves over the jungle.

I look too. It's dense. I can't see much farther than the few trees surrounding this little clearing by the stream. Everything is green. Dark green, light green, a multitude of shades, but all green. Even the tree trunks are coated in green moss.

The color has never felt ominous before. But now, I can't shake the feeling I'm being watched. It's been running up and down my spine since we reached the jungle, a new permanent companion I could happily do without.

"We'll stay here," Daenn says after a moment of perusal, "but let's eat quickly."

Storm slinks into the jungle to find himself some lunch, and I hurry to unpack mine and Daenn's. The monks were kind enough to send us with provisions that should last us until we reach the second temple. This meal is some sort of softened leaf wrapped around a mix of rice and spiced vegetables. The entire thing is tart, as if it was fermented after being wrapped together. It's strange but delicious.

I'm full after three of the small wraps, but Daenn's reaching for another by the time Storm returns and flops onto the earth nearby.

I wipe my hands and study Daenn. The bracer's copper color, even dulled, stands out against his armor.

"How are you feeling?" I ask lightly, doing my best to hide the worry threaded through every word.

He tenses. Not so much in body language, but tension and guilt radiate through him to me over the bond as he speaks. "Fine."

The single word, the emotions behind it, punches the air from my lungs. He just... He lied to me.

I'm certain of it; it's the only thing that explains the guilt I'm sensing. Even if he's hiding it, casually finishing off another wrap in one bite.

Daenn has never lied to me before. Not before when he was my Daenn, and not even as the king he is now, since my return. Maybe he withheld information, but outright lying?

No.

It worries me that he feels the need to hide the truth from me about how he's faring.

But even more than worry, I'm hurt. It's a sharp ache starting in my chest and burning out from there, like a flame devouring a leaf into a curl of ash.

Daenn looks up suddenly, his brow furrowing as he meets my gaze.

I've been caught staring. Instead of looking away, I stand. I close the distance between us, stopping so close that the fabric of my fitted trousers brushes his knees. He has to tilt up to meet my gaze. I can see the flecks in his green eyes.

"Try again." My voice is barely above a whisper.

"Try what again?" He matches my volume, but his voice comes out in a rumble that I can practically feel in my bones.

"Try lying to me again." I lean closer, stepping forward between his knees to maintain my balance. "Better yet, you could tell me the truth."

There's barely any distance between us. His legs frame me, and his hands rest on his knees, his thumb touching the side of my leg from my stepping in so near to him.

"Why do you think I'm lying?" He tilts his head as he speaks, and a strand of hair falls over his forehead. I have a sudden urge to brush it back into place.

I curl my hand into a fist instead. The man might bowl over the back of his log to avoid me if I try to touch him. I don't need him breaking his neck, especially in such an undignified way.

"I think the better question is why you think you can lie to me. I know you, Daenn Henriken. Even without this bond between us, I would know."

He goes still, and I realize my error.

“You can feel my emotions.” It’s not a question.

“And you can feel mine.” I can’t be certain, but he’s not surprised by my slip, and it’s the only reason that explains that. I knew it was a possibility, but I’d hoped it was one-sided .

His jaw ripples, and I know it’s true. The confirmation has my mind flashing back, rifling through my memories to think of what exactly he’s felt from me.

“How long have you known?” My voice is breathless, a step away from panic. “I only realized yesterday, when I almost—” I swallow the word. I can’t say it out loud. “After you caught me.”

What has he seen? What does he know now that I’d rather he didn’t?

His hand closes over mine, and it shocks me out of my spiral, until I realize—he put his gloves back on at some point. He uncurls my fist, one finger at a time. I can’t tear my gaze away from it. How his hand engulfs mine; how gentle he is.

I almost pull my hand away when I realize why he’s doing this. He can sense my panic. He’s distracting me or soothing me from it. I’m not sure which.

I hate that it’s working. My heart rate has slowed. My breathing has evened. Against all reason, his touch has pulled me from my panic.

“I’ve known...” He hesitates. He’s anxious, an echoing emotion that makes me feel hollow. “...since the day after the wedding.”

I suck in a gasp and rip my hand from his. It’s only been a few days longer than I have, but it feels so long. He’s known basically the entire time we’ve been bonded and never said a thing.

But I wasn't intending to tell him either. I can't really blame him for not wanting to admit it.

Knowing he can sense my every secret emotion makes me feel exposed, vulnerable .

"I'm sorry. I should have said something. I just didn't want you to feel like... that." His hand flickers to gesture to me; he must mean the vulnerability I'm drowning in right now.

It's surprisingly thoughtful of him. Far more reminiscent of my Daenn than King Daenn.

But it also reminds me of where this conversation started. I take a step back and cross my arms. The space is good. It helps me clear my head, to breathe in the wet, earthy scent of the jungle around us instead of him. To not be so close he could scoop me into his arms with no effort.

"I can appreciate not wanting to admit to knowing about the bond, whatever reasons for it. But lying, Daenn? We're not skipping past that like it didn't happen."

He stands, and suddenly he's in my space again, even closer than before. My heart kicks into another gallop, but it's not panic causing it. It's him. His proximity. His intense gaze, wholly focused on me, tracing over my face. His scent, woodsy and fresh, like our mountain home, crowding out the jungle odors. The way his hair frames his face, loose and ruffled.

Everything about him is making my head spin, my heart pound.

"Do you want me to tell you I'm sorry?" His voice is low, sending a sweep of tingles through my limbs that makes me wobbly. "I'm not. What good does it do you to know that the bracer is eating away at the magic, but it's also eating away at me? I'm

the only thing standing between you and whatever lurks in this jungle. You don't need to worry that I'll fall and you'll be left alone."

"I think I deserve to know if that's a danger."

"It's not." His voice is a growl. A promise. "I won't leave you unprotected, Emana. I'll stay cursed with this magic for my entire life before I'll risk that. "

He means every word of that. Fierce sincerity burns through him to me, bright and hot. I want to wrap it around me like a blanket.

I want him to wrap around me, enclose me in his arms and bury me against his chest.

The thought comes out of nowhere, shocking me to my senses.

It's madness. This man is not my Daenn. I know that.

But it's getting harder and harder to remember it, to remember why I hate him.

His gaze darkens. Hope curls around my heart. He reaches for me—

And Storm releases a battle shriek as a monster dives out of the jungle toward us.

20

Eyes among the Foliage

A massive monster streaks from the trees. It's bigger than Storm, with a long, thin body and limbs, and a dark purple-brown carapace. Its two forearms look like sawblades with jagged little teeth running along their edges. Its mandibles clack horrendously, and venom drips from its jaws, dropping and burning away the foliage on the forest floor; this is the source of the burns we saw before.

It's a monster insect from someone's nightmares.

I hate this jungle.

It flies at us, sword-like arms raised as it lets out a shriek that will give me nightmares if we survive this. Daenn steps in front of me, already drawing his sword.

But the monster is intercepted. Storm charges in from the side, slamming into the beast and bowling it over. It snaps at him, narrowly missing his neck with those dripping jaws. His beak clamps down on one of its wings. There's a crack, almost like a breaking branch.

I'm mesmerized watching them, terrified some of that acidic venom will land on Storm and burn him.

"Emana, get down!"

I obey on instinct, dropping to the jungle floor and rolling just in time to see Daenn clash with a second monster where I was only moments before. The monster's arms slide along the blade of Daenn's sword, and Daenn has to duck and spin away when the monster darts in to snap at him with its mandibles.

I scramble farther away, out from under their feet, and scan the edges of the clearing. If there are two, are there more?

Storm shrieks triumphantly as he uses his claws to tear the monster's head off. He gives it a small shake and then drops it, turning to where Daenn faces off against the second one.

Daenn's holding his own, using his smaller size to weave around the monster and hack at its limbs when he has the openings. The creature is fast, though, and succeeds in landing a slice against Daenn's armor. My heart nearly stops at the sight, but while Daenn stumbles a bit from the force of it, I can't tell if it penetrated down to his skin.

Storm leaps onto the monster's back when it turns away from him, toward Daenn, making quick work of it from such an undefended angle.

The silence is sharp as the monster falls. No more clacking or shrieks. Only Daenn's hard breathing and the rustle of Storm's feathers as he picks his way off the monster's body.

He nudges one of the legs with his beak, almost contemplatively, as if he's considering eating it. Fortunately for us, he turns away in disdain.

Daenn lowers his sword and looks over at me. He's breathing hard. "Are you all right?"

The question triggers my instincts to take stock of my own body. I've scraped my

arm a bit from where I dropped onto the jungle floor, but it's not bleeding, so I don't bother mentioning it.

"Are you?" I counter.

He takes a moment to clean his blade before sheathing it again. "I'm fine," he says, but he's scanning the edges of the clearing, and I'm not entirely sure he even bothered to take stock before answering, so I look him over as I stand.

His armor has a scratch along it where the beast hit him but otherwise looks untouched. Before I can do a more thorough examination, Daenn is moving toward Storm.

"Let's go. I want to cover as much ground as possible before we make camp."

I don't point out that we've seen evidence of these monsters since we've entered the jungle, and moving won't mean we're safe from them. But I also have no desire to camp next to two giant carcasses. So I don't say anything at all, just follow Daenn to the gryphon, resisting the urge to look over my shoulder for eyes among the foliage.

Trapped by His Side

The spot we find to camp is hours from where we were attacked, but it looks exactly the same. Cursed jungle. I try to pretend it's different enough that we're somewhere new entirely, that we won't encounter any more monsters.

It's not really working. Especially when Storm shrieks and stomps at a slithering emerald body as thick as Daenn's thigh and as long as one of the towering tree trunks as it disappears into the brush, quickly hidden by the huge green fronds rimming the small clearing.

I shudder and try to focus on setting up the charms Elium gave us and starting a fire.

Daenn tends to Storm. I expect the gryphon to disappear to hunt as he has previous nights, but he must be on edge from the earlier attack too, because he doesn't stray more than a little way into the jungle.

I prepare a simple dinner from the supplies the monks gave us, setting the wrapped leaves on a stone along the fire's edge to warm. When it has sizzled long enough, I tug it off gingerly. I hiss at the sharp heat in my fingertips and drop it on the waiting plate more abruptly than intended .

A soft huff of laughter draws my attention to Daenn. He drops to a crouch beside me, reaching his gloved fingers out and snagging the second bundle of food with ease.

“You’re cheating,” I mutter. “I don’t have gloves on like you.”

His mouth ticks up on one side. My heart squeezes at the sight, so familiar from before. I feel like more and more of him is slipping into the Daenn I knew before. I don’t know if being out here is softening him somehow, sanding away the wall he’s erected around himself... or if it’s all my own wishful thinking, my desire making me see what I want to see.

I pull my gaze away from his face, from that teasing smirk that makes me want to lean closer—and my eyes snag on his arm. He’s taken off his armor, and there’s a long tear in his brown tunic. Red rims the ragged edges.

I scramble toward him. “Daenn, you’re hurt!” I grab his arm and examine the wound. It’s a narrow jagged burn, red and blistering, that stretches over his forearm at an angle. I’ve never seen anything like it.

He’s stiff under my arm, and a thread of panic from him reaches me over our bond. His muscles are taut under my touch.

He tugs away before I can release him. “It’s not bad. I barely even feel it.”

I want to grab him again, but instead I turn to my pack and start rummaging. “You can’t leave it untreated. What if it’s poisoned or something?”

“Emi, it’s fine. I’ll tend to it after dinner.”

Maybe he thinks using my old nickname will dissuade me from my course of action, but he is sorely wrong. It only makes me want to take care of his wound more. I pull out the healing kit and flip it open. “We tend to it now.”

“Please...” He trails off at my quelling look. “You can’t touch me.”

I pause at that, frustration surging. It's one thing to insist on that when we're talking, but this—taking care of his injury should supersede that. He's being paranoid; his magic can't hurt me. But he's pale and no doubt in pain. I won't force the issue now.

"I'll put on my riding gloves," I decide aloud. It will make this slightly more difficult, but if this is what I must do to convince him to let me care for him, then I'll do it. "Now sit down before I make you."

That smirk ghosts across his face again, probably because the Daenn he's grown into is one I couldn't possibly force to do a single thing, but he obediently sits in the dirt right in front of me.

I tug on my gloves and pull out the salve. I hesitate before dipping my fingers in it; will it ruin my gloves? Or worse, what if the leather ruins the salve so it's useless for him?

"I'll apply that," he offers after a moment. "You can do the rest."

I consider, then agree. I tilt the salve jar toward his free hand. He efficiently strips off his glove and dips his fingers in the salve.

"I've been thinking..." I trail off as I watch him smear the salve over his wound. He gives no visible reaction to the touch of salve, but his tension is palpable over the bond. I have to resist the urge to wince despite feeling no pain myself.

I clear my throat and start over. "I was thinking—what if we don't need to get rid of the magic?"

Daenn's hand stills for half a moment. His jaw ripples. "No."

"No, listen. The problem before has always been that it would strike wildly, yes? You

couldn't control it, couldn't wield it. But I did. I used it during our fight with those riders. I've never been able to wield my magic before this bond either, so perhaps you can now too. Maybe you just need to learn to control it so it doesn't lash out without you willing it to."

He finishes applying the salve and silently offers me his arm. I pass him a rag for his fingers before setting about carefully rolling his sleeve up without brushing it against the wound or the salve. Once it's out of the way, I begin wrapping his arm in bandages.

The silence stretches. His gloved hand rests on my shoulder to keep his arm in the right position to wrap, and I find myself resisting the urge to lean into it. His lack of response is a growing thing in the air, making me want to squirm. I focus instead on my task, on the way his muscles ripple under his skin with every slight shift, on the rich light olive tone to his skin.

It's certainly not a hardship to help him.

I am nearly finished wrapping his arm when he finally speaks.

"If this is a way you can defend yourself while we travel, I encourage you to do so. But it carries too much risk as a permanent solution." He glances sideways at me. "And if we don't dissolve the magic, you will have to stay in your current role. You can't be rid of me while our magics are tangled together. The bracers solve all our problems. They allow me to be free of my magic, and you to be free of me. Isn't that what you want?"

"Of course," I say automatically. "Of course I do." I tuck the end of the bandage under itself and lean back. "You're done."

He nods like it's settled, but there's a twinge of hurt over the bond. He speaks before

I can summon my courage to ask after it. “Thank you. Get some rest; I’ll keep watch. We have a full day of travel tomorrow.”

I bid him goodnight and prepare for bed, a nagging tightness in my chest all the while. I successfully dismiss it until I’m lying on my bedroll, buried under a blanket to keep off the mosquitos and too warm. Then there’s nothing to distract me, and the feeling refuses to be ignored any longer.

Why am I looking for ways to prolong this misery? Neither of us want this bond. I never asked for this. I should keep my mouth shut and leave him to his fate. Whether he survives the bracers with his mind intact is of no concern to me. I will be free of him once the bracers do their job, and that’s all I care about. I don’t want to stay trapped by his side forever. I don’t want to be his wife forever. I want my freedom. I want to be left alone.

...Don’t I?

A Twisted Tangle

We leave with first light. I didn't sleep well; every noise of the jungle around us made me jump, and I lay awake for ages after a particularly loud screech that Daenn told me was "only a monkey."

I'm not sure what a monkey is, so that's not really comforting.

But this morning is calmer, quieter. The sun is cheery, and up above the oppressive closeness of the jungle, the air is cool. I imagine the wind is tugging all my worries away from me, and for a little while, I simply bask in the sunlight and the wind and the solid feel of Daenn at my back.

We touch down for lunch in a clearing, scaring away some sort of fuzzy wildlife that chatters at us from the trees for a solid minute after we land. Storm loses patience and shrieks in its direction.

It's silent after that.

I leave Daenn to unpack the food, and I walk the edge of our clearing, stretching my legs and peering between the trees for any sign of snakes or monkeys or insectoid monsters. The sticky heat under the canopy is already getting to me, so I tug off my gloves as I go. There are a few flashes of color in this area—strange rounded flowers in shades of orange, white, and pink, with an opening that reminds me of a lowland lady's slippers. Waxy deep green fronds are interspersed with lighter green bunches

of a moss-like plant with long tiny strands I could see on an old, wizened man's face in place of his beard.

I stop at a flash of deep color out of the corner of my eye. In the shade of the trees beyond the clearing's edge grows a profusion of flowers. They're almost a maroon or purplish-black, especially toward the centers. Delicate yellow pollen stems cluster there, seeming even brighter against the dark petals. A single flower is huge, nearly as large as my face, each petal glossy. I walk closer, pushing past the leaves of a frond. I reach out a hand to touch one—

A spike of alarm stabs through me from the bond, and Daenn's gloved hand shoots out and grabs my arm before I make contact.

"Don't," he warns, his panic subsiding in my chest to a dull relief.

"What is it?" Clearly he knows, to have such a strong reaction to my attempt at touching it.

"It's a death lily."

The name is ominous, but it strikes a familiar note in my mind, a distant memory from time spent with my mother, watching her pound leaves into poultices.

"These are medicinal."

"They are medicinal in small doses," he agrees grimly. "And lethal in higher ones."

"Mother used to grind them up to make a sleeping draught." I reach forward again, but Daenn's grip tightens on my arm.

"Don't, Emana. We don't have the antidote." His calm voice is belied by the tight

worry in my chest, the echo of his feelings .

I give him a side-eye. “Touching the petals won’t kill me. It’s dangerous when ingested, not when touched.” My tone turns teasing. “I promise not to lick it.”

His jaw ripples as I turn away, and that worry is still thick in my chest, but he doesn’t protest again as I reach forward and pluck a flower.

A potent smell immediately fills the air, something between lavender and rose. Milky pink latex beads from where the stem ends. The stalk is half the thickness of my pinky, and the leaves are waxy to the touch. I brush a hand over the petals; they look glossy, but they feel softer than velvet.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmur, trying to swallow away the swell of emotions. The smell, the name, it all brings me sharply back to spending time with my mother before I left the clan, before she...

“It’s nothing but death.” Daenn’s voice is laced with derision. It’s not much, barely even there, but I catch it.

I frown at him. “That’s not true.”

He steps back, and only then do I register how close he was standing in the first place. “Of course it is. A safe dosage is miniscule. All that plant really brings is a quick end.”

It takes me a moment to pinpoint the tension I’m sensing in the air, behind his words, but once I do, I tense.

Like me.

It's unspoken, but the idea is clear in the way he turns away, hiding his expression, even though he can't hide the pinch of pain he's feeling or the tight set to his shoulders.

I dart ahead of him and press the flower into his hands. He takes it on instinct before recoiling, but I tighten my grip around his hands. I stare into his eyes, searching their green depths. When I speak, it's with an edge of steel .

“These flowers are so much more than death. The tonics healers can make from them ease pain and allow restless ill to sleep in peace. Yes, a higher dosage can kill, but even that has its uses. Death is an important part of life—a vital part. The aspens on our mountains wouldn't ever grow without wildfires first razing the ground. Mushrooms come from decay. Every living creature survives off the death of some other plant or animal. You can't reduce something to only the death that comes from it.” My voice drops. “Fire is deadly, but without it we would die on our mountain. We need it. We want it. It would be absurd for fire to despise its own nature.”

I'm not speaking about lilies or fire anymore, and I'm not sure Daenn knows that. I'm not sure if I want him to.

But... from the way his eyes flicker, the way a twisted tangle of emotions I can't sort through whispers from him, maybe he does realize.

My fingers tighten over his, and I drop my gaze to the lily held between us. “Appreciate the beauty of the flower instead of hating what it can do.”

His breath exhales over me, and I realize how very close he's standing. I can feel his gaze boring into me. It's too much. Too intense, too familiar.

I step back and turn, breaking the spell of our proximity, even if I can't break the bond that shares every emotion between us. I try not to think about how that means

he can sense my own tangle of emotions, how I ache for him, how afraid I am to care for him, how much I want him to be my Daenn. I can only hope they're mystifying to him, since he doesn't know the motivations behind them any more than I know his.

Never mind that he knows me well enough to figure out those details if he wants .

"I'm starving," I announce too brightly. "Is there any fruit?"

I collect a few more lilies and wrap them in a spare waxed cloth before we set out for the afternoon. I don't know why, but I badly want to keep them, maybe even try to make them into a sleeping draught like Mother used to make. Tangible proof of my words to Daenn earlier.

The afternoon starts as calmly as the morning was, but we've only been flying a few hours when I hear a strange buzzing noise.

I glance over my shoulder, but I've miscalculated the direction. Daenn swears and his own fear spikes as Storm suddenly swerves, dropping down and to the right to avoid the insect monster barreling up from the jungle beneath us. Daenn's arm turns into a vise around my middle, pinning me to his chest. I lean back into him, grateful for the anchor, doing my best not to devolve into panic as my mind flashes back to falling from Raindrop, as my emotions try to claw into my stomach and shred it.

I dare to peek over Storm's side. The insect monster has dropped several paces below us. A group of even more of the monsters rises from the canopy of the jungle, flying straight for us. There have to be at least half a dozen of them.

"Daenn—" I begin, but he's already turned to look. He whips back and tightens his grip around my waist. Behind my legs, his press hard into Storm's sides. The gryphon shoots forward like a bolt of lightning, flying faster than I knew he could.

The insect monsters' sounds are lost to the wind whistling past us, but when I risk another glance back, they're still there; I'm not sure if they look angry that we're expanding the gap or if their buggy faces are just permanently terrifying.

Daenn tugs me into place; he's pressed fully against my back, pinning me between him and Storm as we hurtle through the air.

I don't know how long we fly at this frantic pace, but we do slowly lose the monsters. Storm's sides heave and grow damp beneath us. Daenn hasn't loosened his hold on me, and I can only imagine how his muscles must be protesting from being so taut for so long.

Finally, by some unspoken agreement between gryphon and man that I'm not privy to, we slow. It's still fairly early, but with how hard Storm pushed, I suspect he can't go on any longer.

Storm glides to the ground, making for a break in the trees that's not quite big enough for him and that has him tucking his wings for a moment. He snaps them back out after we clear the top of the canopy, but we land with a slightly harder thump than usual.

Daenn drops to the ground and pulls me with him. By necessity I stay close; this spot they've chosen is barely big enough for two people, let alone two people and a giant gryphon. Storm immediately collapses to lie in the dirt. His sides continue to heave, and I can see frothy sweat on his hindquarters now that I'm off him.

I silently help Daenn tend to Storm. I pull out the dried meat rations we keep on hand for when the gryphon can't hunt and offer them to him. He scarfs them down in one gulp as Daenn rubs down his sides.

"You did well today, Storm," I murmur, scratching him on the side of his neck as he

eats. “Thank you. ”

He makes a noise a bit like a grunt. Probably something along the lines of ‘of course I did.’

Once Storm’s cared for, I set out the charms, then I find a tree and lean against its trunk. Daenn continues to fuss over his gryphon and gear, checking the straps on the saddle and speaking to Storm in a low tone I can’t quite make out. He moves with a slow weariness. It may just be from the afternoon’s misadventure, but something tells me it’s not.

I glare at the glint of the bracer on his wrist. If I tune in to my magic, I can sense the tug as the bracer pulls at Daenn’s magic. It’s not strong, but it’s steady.

I can’t banish the worry, and, in the back of my mind, I hope Daenn assumes it’s about the monsters. But it’s not. It’s circling, an echo that won’t leave me alone.

What is the bracer doing to Daenn?

A Portent of Death

It's mid-morning when we reach the second temple the following day. It looks much like the last one—squat, with dark grey stone—but it's smaller, and it's surrounded by the jungle like a lone prey fending off a circle of wolves.

But when we draw closer, where there was a magical ward at the last temple, that tightness that washed over us... nothing happens here.

Everything is like the fading of an echo. A memory of inhabitants and normalcy that's absent now.

We land before the doors, but no one comes out to greet us. The jungle is a tangible presence at our backs, pressing in, watching, waiting. I wish I knew what for.

Daenn helps me down. His gaze roves our surroundings; either he senses my uneasiness or he feels the same things in the air I do, because he is on full alert.

“We should get inside.” I glance at the door. How do we open it from this side?

Daenn grunts in agreement. He leads the way up the steps, and I follow close on his heels; Storm brings up the rear, his feathers puffed.

Daenn quickly finds a recessed handle along one of the stone doors and tugs. It groans as it eases open, seeming almost reluctant to allow us entrance—almost as

reluctant as I am to go in. Only my desire not to be out here in the open pushes me to step over the threshold into the shadowed hall beyond.

Still no one has come to greet us, but even more concerning is the mild disarray we find. There's not much in the room, but the torches that should line the walls are unlit, missing, or, in a few cases, fallen to the floor. In itself, that bit of untidiness wouldn't matter much to me, but there's also a gathering basket near one of the built-in stone benches. Its contents—some sort of withered flowers—are scattered around it on the floor.

There's something indescribably wrong about it for some reason, like a portent of death hanging in the air.

“Let's go this way.” My words echo through the room and into the distance down the halls, and I wince. I drop my voice before continuing. “If the layout is the same as the other temple, it should lead us toward the kitchen.”

Daenn nods, and we head down the suggested hallway. Our steps ring out, a warning bell to anyone around of our presence.

If there even is anyone around.

My wondering on that count is answered within minutes: the next corner we turn, four men jump out at us. No, not men—not human men, at least. Elyri men. Their pointed ears rise from hair of greens and golds—even some bright reds and oranges—which is braided away from their chiseled, fine-boned features. They all wear strange, matching armor that reminds me of leaves or ropey vines. Their blades—swords and spears—are gleaming wood that looks wickedly sharp in the impossible way only Spring Elyri weapons can .

They charge, and Daenn has to retreat to give himself time to draw his own sword.

Storm, though, leaps to meet them, ripping at the nearest man. His dying screams deafen us.

Daenn brings his sword up to block the second man's attack. They clash, again and again. The third swings at Daenn's legs with his spear when there's an opening, and Daenn trips over it, slamming his head into the wall. He stumbles to his feet quickly, before they can get any closer, but he's swaying on his feet. His gaze looks slightly unfocused. The fourth edges forward, waiting for Daenn to stumble again.

I won't wait. I reach for my magic, guiding it through me to strike at the fourth man like last time I wielded it. He crumples in an awkward heap, and the third man turns to gawp—which gives Daenn his own opening to stab the man in the chest before spinning back to cut down the second.

The fight lingers in the air as it echoes down the halls. I hate to break the silence; who knows how many more Elyri lurk in the temple?

"These are no monks," Daenn says drily. He leans on the wall, his eyes squeezed shut. Storm nudges his shoulder, and Daenn nearly topples.

"How hard did you hit your head?" I ask, my voice rising with my alarm.

He mutely shakes his head, wincing at the motion. I hurry to his side and look him over, but he waves me off.

"I'm just... I'll be fine. Give me a moment."

And then I realize exactly what it is. It's the bracer; it's draining him so much even the hit he took to his head—certainly not nothing, but usually easier to shake for the Daenn I know—takes it out of him.

I want to rip the bracer off him and throw it in the nearest fire .

Pattering echoes scurry toward us. I turn, putting myself between Daenn and the new noise. Storm releases a warning shriek.

But the next man to come out of the hallway isn't an Elyri warrior; he bears no weapons or armor or pointed ears and unusual coloring of the ones we just fought.

He's a monk with a long dark beard and plain robes. He pulls up at the sight of us, wide eyes casting over the scene. They shift slowly back to Daenn and me.

“You can't be out here—you have to hide.”

Worry Simmering

We follow the monk from the entrance hall. Daenn grips Storm's saddle, which I try to ignore. He won't want me fussing over him further.

"Where are you—" I start, but the monk hushes me, glancing around fearfully.

I snap my mouth shut. I can wait until we're safe if it means avoiding another fight. Daenn is in no shape to take on anyone else, and I have no desire to test my ability to protect him with magic if I don't need to.

There are more signs of the Elyri as we go—furniture ransacked or smashed, things tossed about on the floor. The monk practically runs past it all, leading us down the hall, through a dining room, and into the kitchen before we reach a heavy stone door. He presses his hand to it and mutters, and the door swings open silently. He ushers us through. Storm fits, but only just.

We take a short flight of stairs down. The room beyond is cool, lit only by a few small glowing runes on the walls. There are stores of food, large barrels, and other various supplies—and a small group of men.

It seems we've found the rest of the monks .

There are only six of them. They're a tattered group; several sport bandages, all of them look rather dirty, like they haven't been able to bathe in a while, and they watch

us with wary eyes. I edge closer to Daenn and Storm. The scrutiny makes me itchy.

The monk who found us comes down the stairs after a moment; a small glance over my shoulder shows the door—what little I can see of it—shut tight as a mild glow fades from its borders.

“I found them standing over some fallen Elyri in the entrance hall,” our guide announces to his fellow monks.

“The Bompurak border temple sent us,” Daenn says, stepping forward and into the familiar commanding posture I recognize. It seems he’s decided there’s no time to be weak here. “They told us you could give us the matching bracer to the one I wear, but they said nothing of Elyri. What happened here?”

The monk who found us scrubs a hand over his head. “Elyri—they’ve come as treasure hunters. We see them now and then, but usually they’re stuck outside our defenses, then driven away by the jungle’s dangers before too long. But these... They attacked about a week ago, overwhelming the outer defense with some sort of Elyri magic. They swarmed before we knew what was happening. The concentration of their forces has set up outside the treasure room, but they roam the halls as well. A few have been trying to break through our door since we’ve holed up here with the majority of the food stores, but...” He gestures at us. “I was scouting with my magic and saw you heading toward the kitchen, and their ambush of you, and then...” He smiles wanly. “You are welcome to our hospitality, as limited as it currently is.”

“Why don’t you leave?” I ask .

“This is the first time in a while they’ve left our door unwatched.” One of the other monks speaks up. His voice is scratchy and low, not at all what I expect from such a short, thin man. “And even if they didn’t, our best chance of escape that doesn’t leave us dying in the jungle is in the treasure room.”

“We have an anchored through-way door in there,” agrees the first monk.

I blink. I’ve heard of through-ways, magical doors that allow travelers to step from one place to across the country or even the world. They’re incredibly rare, but I could certainly see the value of such a thing for this secluded temple.

Daenn crosses his arms as he considers the monks. “How many Elyri are there?”

“Minus the four you felled? Eighteen. There were more, but some of them left on the second day.” The monk frowns. “I worry they’ve only gone to fetch something to get through the treasury defenses.”

“How do you know they’ve not already gotten in?”

“They’re still here,” the second monk points out.

The first nods. “And I have been monitoring them with my magic. They’re certainly trying, but with no success. They’ve tried this door a few times as well—they probably hope if they could get their hands on one of us that they could use us to open the door—but fortunately, thus far, they’ve failed.”

I look at Daenn. I have no desire to hide in this storeroom endlessly. He meets my eyes. He must know what I’m thinking or sense the tightness growing in my chest, because when he turns back to the monks, there’s a determined glint to his gaze.

“We’ll help you escape. We can get you into that treasure room. All we ask is passage out with you, and the other bracer. ”

“They’re yours,” the monk agrees, his voice quick with hope. The other monks around range from skeptical to hopeful.

Daenn nods like it's decided. "I'll need to rest a few days first." He hesitates, and I can feel worry simmering in him as if it's my own. Maybe it is. He's in no condition to fight with the bracer draining him and that wound, and eighteen—that would be a heavy challenge for him even when at full strength. And I don't know how much magic I can manage.

But we need to get out. I don't want to die here, buried amongst—

I straighten. "I have an idea."

Total Darkness

The next few days are uncomfortable, to say the least. The monks are willing to feed us, but their food supplies dwindle much faster with a gryphon eating them, and the quarters are tight—again, not intended for a gryphon. Storm is restless, growing more irate by the day.

But the monks humor my idea. They help me prepare the death lilies I collected into a sleep potion. I'm unsure how to make use of this at first—perhaps poisoning their water supply with it? But the monks solve that problem themselves: they have blow darts. Yiorgos—the one who fetched us, and the informal leader—says they're often used when the monks have trouble with jungle animals, or for hunting, and it's common to dip them in poisons. They just didn't have any poisons prepared—and the darts don't do much without that.

It takes us two days. During that time, I split my attention between the potion and Daenn. He's nearly as restless as Storm, but I insist he take the time to recuperate from his head injury. My suggestion that he remove the bracer is met with a firm, clipped 'no,' so I don't force that issue. But I watch him closely, looking for any signs that he's deteriorating. His head seems to improve after the first day, at least.

He's weary, restless, but I don't know if that can be attributed to the bracer or if it's because he dislikes being trapped. No gryphon clansfolk likes being kept from the open sky for too long, and our king least of all.

I worry about him taking on these mercenaries. He's a deadly warrior, but he can't win if he's weakened too much.

He's not alone; this is my only consolation. We have the monks and their blow darts, and we have Storm at our sides. And I will do everything I can, drain every drop of my magic, to ensure Daenn survives this fight.

Finally, we are ready. Daenn and I collect our things into Storm's saddlebags, and Daenn draws his sword. Around us, the monks prepare their blow darts; they each have two. I finger my dagger and tap into my magic. There's a constant tug at the edges, like a thread being pulled under my fingers: the bracer eating away at Daenn.

But I have more than enough, and I can draw on it at a moment's notice. I'll let the monks use their darts first, as we planned, but if—or when—those fail, I'll handle as many of the rest as I can.

If I do it right, maybe Daenn won't even need to fight.

When we are all armed, Yiorgos lifts the magic barricading the door. He eases it open with a whining creak that echoes too loudly in the stillness, loud enough to bring Elyri running.

We quickly file out of the storeroom and make our way across the kitchen. No sign of life stirs yet. Daenn walks right in front of me, blocking my view. His wariness gnaws at my belly, threaded through with fear and... determination, I think. I wish I knew what he was thinking, what thoughts he's having to cause such feelings. Is he even weaker than he's let on ?

The thought causes a surge of panic in my chest, and Daenn shoots me a glance over his shoulder. I tamp down on the sharp fear and shake my head at him. Nothing to see here.

Yiorgos and a few other monks are at the front of our party. They lead the way through back halls of the temple. Everything is dark, winding, and narrow. Storm has to tuck his wings in tighter to fit, and his saddlebags scrape in the doorways.

We've been going for what feels like forever when there's a shout ahead of us. I lean around Daenn to see—just as the cry cuts off and an Elyri, who looks much like the ones Daenn fought when we first came, crumples to the ground with a dart in his neck.

But his cry has alerted his comrades. The pounding of feet echoes against the stone walls. Daenn leans forward, like he wants to charge at our enemies. I grab his sword arm in silent warning; our plan is to take down as many with the sleeping poison as we can before he or I join the fray. His jaw works, but he stays put.

Two more Elyri men round the corner, and they quickly meet the same fate as the first. We move past them, and I sweep a glance over the fallen bodies.

Three down, fifteen to go.

We spill into a larger hall at the same time that a group of nine Elyri turn the corner at the far end. The monks let loose a volley of darts; most find their marks, and four Elyri drop; a few trip over their comrades before recovering. A few darts miss, clattering uselessly to the floor.

The monks who have shot their two rounds slide to the side and slip back past me and Daenn even as the rest of the monks shoot again, felling two more men .

Nine down—and we are out of darts. The rest of the monks hurry out of the way as the still-standing mercenaries close the gap.

I reach for my magic, and Daenn moves—graceful, deadly, sword rising and coming

in for a swing at the first unfortunate Elyri.

Ten.

I concentrate on the Elyri farthest from Daenn—he's already closing in on a second man, no point wasting my magic there—and funnel my magic to cocoon around him. He staggers drunkenly, and I feed a little more at him.

He drops.

Daenn pulls his sword from the last man's chest a second later.

Twelve.

Six left.

Yiorgos collects one of the fallen Elyri's swords and starts on ahead of us. The other monks collect the miss-shot darts. Storm rustles irritably. He wants to fight, I can tell, but the quarters are tight as it is, even without a gryphon thrashing around. I'm not sure if he'll heed Daenn's command to stay out of it forever, though. He's a predator, and he's fiercely loyal. I can imagine he's even less pleased to watch Daenn fight than I am at the moment.

We make it through another narrow hallway, where Yiorgos leads us around the corner, right into an antechamber—full of Elyri warriors.

Far more than six. I freeze. My stomach wrings as my gaze skips over them, trying to count, but there are too many.

I guess their reinforcements arrived sometime in the last few days. We should have had Yiorgos scan with his magic again—that was a foolish oversight .

And even worse, there's a giant hulking monster lurking near the treasury door.

It gleams in the dim lighting, with a hard carapace and a curved horn that rises well above the men around it—and two smaller horns framing it. I can see a glimpse of its mandibles through the crowd, and they look large enough to cut a man in half.

It's a beetle. A monstrously huge beetle.

I really hate this jungle.

Daenn doesn't hesitate like I do. He tears into them, a roar ripping from him. He spins and stabs and whirls with the ferocity of a crazed gryphon.

The sight fills me with even more terror—he's tapped into some hidden well of adrenaline, but how long will it last him?

"Storm—" I say, eyes pinned on Daenn, but the gryphon is already moving. He shrieks, and the sound is ear-shattering in such a small enclosed space. The first man who has the misfortune of being in his path screams—but not for long. The gryphon plows through the crowd, aiming for that beetle monster like it personally insulted him.

I pull magic and throw it toward an Elyri who's slipped past Daenn and Storm. It hits him as he's swinging at Yiorgos, and he slumps. Yiorgos shoots me a grateful look, but I'm already searching for my next target: I find it in a man sneaking into Daenn's blind spot.

We push farther into the room as we fight, slowly carving a path through our enemies to the great door centered on the far wall. It's inscribed with dozens of runes, some of which glow dully.

The rest of the monks have found melee weapons, but they fight poorly with them. I focus my efforts on their attackers, putting as many to sleep as I can before they can hurt the monks. With each man I drop, fatigue digs its claws deeper into me. I've never used this much magic in one go. But I grit my teeth and press on, scraping out more magic, because I can't stop, not when Daenn is still fighting. I can't leave him to fight alone.

We reach the door, and I station myself in front, with Yiorgos and the other monks at my back. I can barely hear their murmuring to open the magical locks. Daenn fights a few feet in front of me, with Storm skirting the beetle and making short lunges at it. It's fast, but it can't turn quite as quickly as Storm, and the gryphon is using that to his full advantage.

"We're through!" Yiorgos cries behind me. A gust hits my neck, and the scraping groan of stone on stone joins the sound of fighting as the door swings open. The monks halt it before it can swing all the way.

"Emana!" Yiorgos grabs at my arm to pull me into the room—but I jerk away.

I'm not going without Daenn.

But his unnatural awareness of his surroundings is as effective as ever. He's already turning on the spot as his latest opponent falls—he sweeps out an arm and catches me as he runs past, tucking me against his chest and darting through the door. Storm is on our heels, snapping one more attack at the beetle's legs before skidding through the doorway.

As soon as we're all through, Yiorgos speaks an invocation, and the door slams shut behind us, cutting off the sounds of fighting, of everything but our own harsh breaths. And that's all there is for a moment: breathing; cool, stale air; and total darkness. I press myself closer to Daenn without thinking.

Then the door flares with light, so bright I'm momentarily blinded, as the runes re-engage and lock.

Lock the Elyri out. Lock us in .

Even though this was our plan all along, I have to fight down the fear that wants to crawl up my throat. Daenn's arms tighten around me in response, as if he thinks he can protect me from my own fears.

We're trapped here.

A Perfectly Natural Reaction

The darkness returns as the runes' light fades, but it's lifted again only a moment later when one of the monks uses flint and tinder on a torch. The firelight flares to life, flickering in a way the runes didn't.

The monks are already in motion. Three settle by the door, pressing their hands to it and bowing their heads. The runes glow again, but only faintly, as they begin murmuring their chanting magic. I'm not sure what they're doing; perhaps reinforcing the lock?

Yiorgos and the other two head deeper into the treasure room, weaving between stacks of golden dishes and ornaments, silver chests and jewel-studded furniture.

Daenn steps back, his hands sliding over my waist. I force myself to mirror his retreat, force my hands down instead of reaching to hold on to him a moment longer. The danger has passed.

Yes, there are still over a dozen Elyri out there. Yes, they still have that big beetle monster. But the door is locked, and hopefully it should stay that way until Yiorgos has the through-way ready and we are long gone .

So there's no need to stay cuddled against Daenn. We may be married, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let him hold me like we're actually close.

I ignore how my heart aches to be right back in his arms. He felt safe; that's all. It's a perfectly natural reaction to a deadly warrior protecting you. It doesn't mean anything.

"You know," I say, breaking the strange hushed silence of the room, "those beetle horns were quite fearsome. Perhaps you should track more down and put them on your armor. Might enhance your ferocity."

Daenn gives me a dry look, but there's a tickle of amusement in my chest from the bond. "Would it now?"

I nod solemnly. "You're in dire need of help on that front. You look far too harmless like that." I gesture to him, to his wicked blade still dripping with blood, his dark armor that fits smoothly against his body—his broad shoulders and trim torso filling it out perfectly—and his face, with its stone-sharp jawline that is flecked with what I suspect is more blood. I clear my throat. "Maybe add them to your shoulders."

"Doesn't seem terribly sensible for flying." He turns away, heading deeper into the room, pausing to examine the hoard as he goes.

I glare at his back. Of course it wouldn't be good for flight, but can't the man pretend to play along?

He must feel my annoyance, because he shoots a half-smirk over his shoulder at me, and—

My heart might give out.

It's so achingly familiar; I've seen it a million times before. But the effect from this grown, muscular, kingly version of Daenn is devastating. My stomach flips and squeezes, and it's all I can do to swallow, look away, and shove down my emotions

before he can identify and decipher them through the bond.

A boom sounds from the entrance, and dust shakes from the ceiling. I cast a nervous glance upward, then at the door.

“It will hold,” a monk says from nearby—not one of the ones working on the door. I give him a small smile, but his words do nothing to console me. Yes, the spell locking the door will hold, but what if the Elyri bring the building down on us instead?

Daenn is already deeper in the hoard of treasures, rifling through in search of the second bracer. I wander in his direction. Not because I want to be near him. I merely want to better see what he’s doing.

The room is cluttered, piled high with chests of all sizes, furniture, and large metal items—like vases and trays and giant bowls. I don’t understand what monks would do with any of this... but maybe, like the bracers, it’s all magical and they’ve been entrusted to protect it? Not all of it looks terribly magical.

I keep my hands to myself just in case.

I pass Yiorgos and his monks as I go. They’ve stopped in front of what almost looks like a large, gilded frame, along the lines of what adorned Tolomon’s house. Except instead of a painting or tapestry inside it, it’s a dull grey material inscribed with so many runes my eyes want to blur over. Like the monks at the door, they’re murmuring, and a slow pulse of light flares through the runes, perfectly matching their cadences.

Daenn’s at the very back of the room. I reach Storm first. He’s sitting on his haunches, looking very put out; the pathway between the treasures is too narrow for his body to fit through to stay pinned to Daenn’s side like he seems to want to be. I

pat him consolingly as I slip by, and I earn a grumbling rustle for my efforts.

Daenn is standing before a long, narrow table pushed against this far back wall. It's lined with smaller chests and other ornate containers. He's systematically opening them, but as he flips the lid on a chest that looks comically small in his hands, there's a complex flare of emotions in my chest from him. Satisfaction, fear, determination, reluctance. I peer around his shoulder to see why.

Mundil's second bracer. It's nestled in a bed of shimmering dark velvet, which only serves to accentuate how old and worn the bracer looks.

My initial reaction is to slam the chest closed again and bury it amongst the treasures of this room. But Daenn's already reaching in, grabbing the bracer and pulling it out. With his free hand, he begins loosening the laces on his regular bracer.

“Wait—” I grab his forearm to stop him.

He stills at my touch, glancing over with a small frown.

“Don't put it on yet.”

The frown deepens. “Why?”

Because I hate it. I don't want him to wear it, to risk duplicating the effects the first bracer has on him. But that's why we've come so far. It's an unreasonable request.

“What if it overwhelms you? We're not exactly safe yet. You need to be able to fight.”

There. That sounded sensible.

But Daenn studies me, searching my face, no doubt looking for the source of the fear coursing through my body.

To my relief—a relief I may be imagining is also echoing back from him as well—he finally nods. “I’ll wait until we’ve made it safely home. ”

My hand slips from his arm as he turns and strides to Storm’s side and stores the bracer away in one of the saddlebags. I’m relieved, but not as much as I want to be. He’s still planning on using it, which is—good. That’s good. That’s what we both want. His magic to be gone so he can be free of it and I can be free of him.

So why am I not happier that we’ve achieved our objective and can return home?

We make our way back over to Yiorgos and the other monks. The room shudders under another large concussive blast; I shake the dust out of my hair. The monks keep working, undeterred by the sounds of the Elyri trying to break in.

It’s not much longer before the through-way ripples to life. I don’t need anyone to tell me that it worked; the inside of the gilded frame morphs from that dull grey to a deep, sucking green that tugs at my very being much like the bracer does. It’s not an entirely pleasant feeling, but it doesn’t have the same edge to it as the bracer. It doesn’t feel like it wants to devour in the same way.

Yiorgos stands and brushes his hands together. “There,” he says in satisfaction. He turns to Daenn. “I can’t deliver you directly to your clan—the through-way is limited by the mind of one who knows how to wield it, and neither I nor any of my brothers have had the honor of visiting your clan home. But there’s a village near the foot of the mountains; I’ve been there. Would that do?”

“Yes, that’s perfect. We can make the journey the rest of the way from there.” Daenn inclines his head to Yiorgos. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for assisting us, Your Majesty,” Yiorgos returns. “I trust you’ve found the other bracer?”

“I have. ”

“Good. May it serve you well.” He looks at me. “Thank you, Your Majesty, as well. Your efforts were invaluable in reaching this room.” He gives a small bow.

I swallow away my alarm at the title and nod. “Thank you.”

He turns and places a hand along the gilded frame. The green ripples and shifts subtly, its hue deepening to that of forests and underbrush.

After a moment, Yiorgos nods. “Safe travels to you both.”

Daenn places a hand at the small of my back, the other on Storm, and together we step into the through-way.

Dance with Nostalgia

We stumble into daylight and cool, dry air. The shock of the change freezes my whole being—body and mind; I can't move, I can only gasp and cling to Daenn's hand as I try to take in our surroundings.

The dark humid jungle is gone. The stone walls of the temple. We stand on the edge of a forest, but instead of vines and vibrant flowers and ten dozen shades of green, these trees are full of bright orange and pink peaches. The trees end just before us—and a village begins. Stone houses clutter before us with little wooden fences framing their gardens. A dirt road snakes between them, and above them all rise mountains—and the largest peak I would recognize from any distance or angle: our clan's mountain.

This must be Lissbury, the village at the base of our mountain.

Daenn pats Storm and steps back. "Go hunt. We'll leave for the mountain as soon as you return."

The sun is setting to the west, painting the sky the same shades of pink and orange as those peaches.

"Maybe we should sleep first and head out in the morning." I'm reluctant to make the suggestion, but we both expended a great deal of energy in that fight—mere minutes ago, though the change in our environment makes it feel like days. We could use the

rest before we face off against Viggo.

Daenn's displeased, but he nods. "Come find us at the inn when you finish hunting, then."

Storm twitches his wings, but he wastes no time in crouching and pushing into the air.

"No livestock!" Daenn calls after him, but whether the gryphon hears or not, we have no way of knowing. Hopefully no irate villagers come to complain about their sheep becoming supper.

Daenn watches Storm go. He's still holding my hand, and I can't even pretend I'm not glad for the touch after our unnatural trip through the portal, after that horrible fight before it.

"What now?" I desperately want the sleep I suggested, but I have never stayed in Lissbury before, only passed through.

Daenn glances at me, dropping my hand like he forgot I'm there until I spoke.

That's fine. I don't need his touch to anchor me.

I don't.

"We can probably get a room at the inn. We might not be able to find clothes, but we could at least bathe."

His words immediately draw up the last time I saw him shirtless, all that hard muscle and bare skin. I swallow and banish the image as I nod. "Good idea." Unwelcome daydreams about my husband aside, a bath has never sounded so appealing as it does

now.

Daenn starts toward the village immediately, and it takes us mere minutes to reach its heart. It's a bustling place, and already people have noticed our presence. It would be hard not to, in such a small place—but even if it were a city, I think we'd draw eyes. And by we, I mean Daenn. How could he not? He commands attention without even trying, and his armor and weapons only enhance that, especially with how stained they are from the fight. He looks deadly, focused.

And he knows exactly where he's going, because he cuts straight through the village to the only inn. It's larger than any other building here, but it's still a small building, despite being two stories. Daenn pulls the door open and holds it for me, so I enter first. I'm blinking at the stark dimness as Daenn steps up beside me.

It's a cozy room, filled with tables and a crackling fire and a long, clean bar. Patrons are scattered throughout, partaking of food and drink that drift mouthwatering smells toward us.

The owner hurries forward and bows low. His eyes are wide, like Daenn is the last person he'd ever expect to see. "Your Majesty—you're alive!"

Daenn's jaw tightens, his only visible reaction to the words. Internally, though, he's vacillating between shock and a hardening grimness.

Not as much shock as I would have expected.

"Why would you expect otherwise?" I ask the innkeeper.

He scratches under one ear. "It's just—rumors from the mountain... Word is you fell on a journey in the Bompurak Jungle. I didn't believe it at first—why would you be down there? But since the initial tale, even more rumors came of your cousin

replacing you.”

Daenn’s grimness sharpens into anger, and I tense. It sounds like, despite the failure of the attackers when we first left, Viggo decided to try to swoop in on Daenn’s throne anyway, exactly as Daenn suspected.

The fool. He’ll be lucky if he survives our return with his life .

“The rumors were wrong.” Daenn’s words are flat, distracted. I can almost see his mind racing with how to handle Viggo’s treachery.

The innkeeper’s eyes widen further. He nods rapidly. “I should have known. I will be sure to pass along the true story to anyone who stops in. But—” He glances over us, as if only just noticing our travel-weary state. “What are you doing here?”

“We need a room,” I say when Daenn doesn’t immediately respond. “Two rooms. And two baths. And supper—”

“One room,” Daenn cuts in. He shoots a side glance at me and speaks lower. “If Viggo has anyone watching the village, we’re better served staying together.”

I nod. It’s no hardship to share. I’d feel better staying close to Daenn, honestly.

The innkeeper snaps to attention, gesturing at his helper. “We’ll make sure you can rest and recuperate well tonight. There will be breakfast in the morning, too.”

“We’ll be leaving before it’s ready.”

The innkeeper blinks. “Of course. We’ll set aside two plates of dried foods for you to take with you. You’re no doubt in a hurry to get home, given—” He cuts off and glances at Daenn. “Given things,” he finishes lamely.

“We are. Thank you.”

He waves us off. “We may not be under Your Majesty’s rule, given that we’re not a gryphon clan, but we have only ever prospered thanks to your reign and proximity to our village. I’ll aid you however I can.”

I barely have a chance to thank him again before he hurries off. I glance at Daenn, but he’s lost in his own thoughts. His emotions are tangled again, but worry is a pall over the others. After a moment, he pulls himself back from his own mind. “Come. He always gives our clan the same room when we stay here.”

I follow him up the stairs and to the door at the end of the hall. He holds the door open for me. The room is large, with a single four-poster bed that calls me immediately back to Chambledon and my years with Tolomon. A tarnished copper bath peeks out from behind a large dressing screen, and, across from where we stand, a door leads out onto the balcony. I frown at it—it seems like a security risk I’m surprised Daenn is comfortable with, but he responds to my unspoken worry.

“Our gryphons sleep on the balcony. Storm will find us after his hunt and act as guard.”

“Oh.” Of course. It’s an ideal situation, in that light. I can see why this is a stopping point for the clan. I wander a few steps, examining the room more closely. Daenn moves to the fireplace and begins stacking the fresh wood stored beside it onto the grate.

The bed draws my eye, and heat creeps through me. We’ve shared a bed before, at the clan. We’ve slept within touch of each other while on our journey.

But this...feels different. In the mountain, it was because of the watching clan and, I suspect, Daenn’s well-earned belief I might try to run. In the jungle, Daenn wanted

me between him and Storm, the safest place in the camp.

But here...there are no watching eyes. There's no danger. I could suggest I sleep on the floor, or demand he does, but...

I don't want to.

I want to sleep with him within reach. I want him to pull me into his arms, curl his body around me as we sleep—that longing is hopeless, I know that. But surely it's not unreasonable of me to want him near. And from a logical standpoint, we both are in sore need of rest. It would be silly for either of us to sleep anywhere but the bed.

A throat clears behind us from the doorway. The innkeeper stands there, a steaming pot of water hanging from each hand. "If I may—"

Daenn rises from the small but happy fire he's just finished. "Of course."

He takes one of the pots from the man, and together they pour both into the tub. The innkeeper heaves up the empty pots. "My son will be up with more in a moment."

He bustles out again.

"You can bathe first." My cheeks flush at the need to discuss this. "I can see about our supper while you do."

Hesitation winds through the link. "You go first," he finally says, glancing at the balcony, and I immediately know exactly what he's concerned about.

"Do you think Viggo will send men after us tonight?"

Daenn glances at me, surprised, and a small smile, like I've caught him in the act of

worrying, slips over his face. My heart's reaction to the sight is ridiculously disproportionate to the expression. How can such a minute look affect me so deeply?

"Probably not," he admits. "But I'd rather not leave you so unprotected."

"You aren't leaving. You're taking care of yourself."

"I can take care of myself, as you say, after Storm returns."

His stubbornness is settling and making itself at home, I see. I refrain from a growl.

"Will you at least eat something?"

"Whenever the food is ready, yes." Daenn begins unlacing his armor.

I hurry to him. "Here, let me help. "

He relinquishes his arm to me, and I work at the ties for his bracer—his original bracer—in silence. He doesn't need my help—he's donned and removed his armor without my help for years. But I need something to do, and... maybe I want the excuse to be near him. His presence is soothing.

His gaze skims over me as I work, removing his bracer before moving on to his cuirass. I keep my head down, eyes focusing on my task, because we stand so close now I don't know if I could bear the weight of his gaze at such a close distance.

I break the silence. "You're still as stubborn as ever, I see. How did Eskil put up with you for so long?"

He huffs out a laugh. "He asks the same thing."

"Of course he does." Worry flickers through me for Eskil and the other comatose

clansfolk. I'm not even sure if it's mine or his, but I don't want to dwell in it. "Do you remember the first time I helped you put on your new armor?"

"My fourteenth birthday gift from my father." There's a slip of bittersweet nostalgia to his emotions as he thinks of it. "But we found it early, didn't realize it was for me. Eskil and I both wanted to try it on—only to try it, then we'd put it right back."

"You nearly wrestled over who would go first, but finally Eskil let you. He's always been nicer than you," I add as a teasing aside that Daenn scoffs at. "But none of us knew how to put armor on, so we just made our best guesses." I smile at the memory.

"The cuirass was backward." His tone is light as he remembers, and I can't help but chuckle too.

"You looked ridiculous. And then your father walked in—"

"He was horrified."

"I think more so by the incorrect wear than us spoiling your surprise."

"Of course." He leans forward ever so slightly, and I have to shift to finish working at the buckle. Rueful chagrin laces through him. "He lectured me that night for nearly an hour about being a good leader and not dragging others into mischief. He even threatened to separate us."

I roll my eyes. "As if you were the instigator of all our mischief as children. Eskil and I were certainly as complicit as you, and we were perfectly happy going along with it even when we weren't the ones starting it. And besides, if he had tried to separate us, I would have just found a way to see you anyway; I wouldn't have stood for being kept apart from you."

Grief is sudden, but muted somehow, like it's more of a remembered feeling, and I look up at Daenn involuntarily—why the sudden hurt? My breath catches at how he stares at me, the raw pain and longing I both see in his gaze and feel.

He rips his gaze away. “He managed it a few years later anyway with his treaty.”

“I suppose he did,” I murmur. The memory of that day rises, near the surface thanks to the dance with nostalgia we've already engaged in. I was crushed when the king asked the marriage of me. He did ask, not order, but it wasn't like I could refuse my king, not when he explained how our clan needed the treaty.

I did so well at hiding my feelings until later, when I was alone. Only then did I let myself weep. Daenn found me like that, but I couldn't bring myself to explain why I wept—for the loss of the future I hoped for with him .

But he still held me. Protected me in the only way he could at the time.

He's always trying to protect me, then and now.

A low greeting from the door has me stepping back sharply from Daenn as if I'm doing something I shouldn't. A young man who looks startlingly like the innkeeper comes in with two more steaming pots of water and pours them into the tub. Behind him, the innkeeper has returned with his own load.

“It's all unbuckled,” I tell Daenn, clearing my throat and turning away.

He thanks me softly and returns to removing his own armor, which is just as well. I am drowning in my emotions and memories—and Daenn's emotions, which only confuse matters. There's a longing and a heavy sense of grief from him that could be my own. Both lack that muted feeling they had before; they are fresh, sharper. They worry me. What is he thinking about? Is he thinking about us, like I am? It seems too

much to hope for. Is he worried about what will happen tomorrow when we go home?

We have a night of respite, but soon enough we will return and go straight into another fight.

I will help him, I decide suddenly. He won't face Viggo alone. Despite what I thought before, when I lived in the lowlands and heard only rumors, Daenn is still a good man. A good king, worthy of leading our people. I won't let anyone steal his throne. He's protected me so much in our lives. It's time someone protects him in return.

28

An Unspoken Hope

We leave before dawn.

Daenn did what he could to clean his armor last night, but there are scores and pits from our battles. He'll have to give it a more thorough tending after we reclaim Daenn's throne from his usurping cousin. I am in a clean dress, given to me by the innkeeper, but it's thin for flying, especially in the pre-dawn chill.

The sun has barely broken over our mountain when we reach our clan. The flight took us little time, but it crawled by for me as my mind whirled with worry. What state will we find the clan in? Daenn left our home in the hands of loyal warriors. Will they all be imprisoned? Dead? Did they turn on Daenn?

Daenn is wrapped around me, like he has been for every flight since Raindrop vanished, but as Storm circles closer to our mountain and my worry tightens like a corkscrew inside me with every circle, he tightens his grip and presses his lips close to my ear.

"I'll protect you, Emana."

His words send a shiver through me. Does he think I'm worried about myself? I'm worried for him, for our people. Viggo won't hurt me. If anything, he'll try to make me his queen—or mistress, I amend, as I remember that he's married now.

The idea makes me want to vomit.

The mountain looms before us, closer and closer, and then, barely even slowing, Storm swoops into the eyries.

Most of the gryphons are sleeping. They raise their drowsy heads to peer at us, and a few give low churrs of greeting to their flock member.

Daenn dismounts fluidly, running on silent feet toward the arch leading deeper into the clan caves. A man in full armor, even leather armor, should not be able to move that quietly; it simply defies reason.

I move to dismount too, but Storm spreads his wings, blocking me. He makes a low chiding sound.

“Storm—”

He looks back over his shoulder with his fiercest glare—which from a gryphon, especially one as deadly as Storm, is enough to stop me mid-protest.

Daenn must have told him to keep me here somehow, to ensure Storm could escape with me if necessary.

I dislike that he would try to send me away and leave him without any help. The thought makes me hot and prickly all over. He will definitely hear about this later.

A sharp cry cuts off before it can even truly begin. I tense and look where Daenn vanished.

He’s striding back toward us, sheathing a small dagger as he goes.

He stops by Storm's side. "I've taken care of the men Viggo had watching the eyries, but we should move quickly in case he has anyone patrolling. Storm, you stay here. If anyone tries to escape, stop them. No one leaves this mountain until I say so."

Storm ruffles his feathers, which shouldn't be a foreboding motion, but he's a gryphon—so naturally, it is.

Daenn pulls me from Storm's back, his grip strong at my waist. I steady myself with hands on his chest. Before he can release me and step back, I curl my hands to grip his leather armor as best as I can and I meet his eyes. He's so close—his green eyes draw me in, and I can imagine leaning forward, pressing my lips to his. He must catch my flare of desire, because his eyes spark and his brows pull together.

"I'm with you, Daenn," I say, putting my heart into those words. I can't explain my tangle of feelings to him—I can't even explain them to myself—but I need him to know this much. "We stand together."

If there's a note of accusation for his scheming with Storm, well, that can't be helped.

He goes still under my hands. Grief stabs through me, hot and sharp, before he jerks it away and buries it under gratitude.

Why is he grieving again? Sometimes I hate this bond between us. It raises more questions than it answers, leaves me bewildered.

Before I can probe about his buried grief, his gloved hands cover mine. "Thank you, my queen."

The words destroy me, take me apart piece by piece. I have done nothing to earn the title; I haven't acted in a manner befitting a queen. And I won't be one for long.

I pull my shoulders back and lift my chin. That changes now. I will be a strong, resilient queen until his magic is purged and he releases me. I will stand by him; I will defend him as he has defended me.

The hallways between the eyries and the great hall are empty, disconcertingly so for the hour. People should be hurrying about, starting their days. With each step we take, tension and worry mount in my stomach, growing until my whole body is heavy with them. Beside me, Daenn carries his sword. I'm not sure when he drew it, but he looks like a man ready to commit violence—calm, focused, lethal violence. I have no doubt he can and will cut down anyone who dares face him.

When we near the great hall, the low susurrations of bodies finally reach us, but there's very little speaking in the mix of sounds.

Daenn halts at the end of the hallway, just around the corner from the great hall's entrance. "Is there any way I'll convince you to stay out here?"

I stare at him.

I feel the sigh over our bond more than I hear it: complete resignation.

"Stay behind me, Emi."

I give him a nod; that I can do. I'm not a warrior. I'll happily let him carve our path with his sword.

His gaze sweeps over my face one more time, like he's trying to drink me in before it's too late, and for a moment I lean forward, an unspoken hope twisting through me—but then he's turning away. I exhale and put away my disappointment. I'm not even sure what I hoped for. It's not like Daenn was going to kiss me. The man won't even let our skin touch. And I shouldn't want him to. Not touch me. Not kiss me.

That's so far from what I want. I want to leave; I want to be free.

Yes. That's... that's what I want. Such a sparkling future. All alone.

I start after my husband, snuffing out my misery and replacing it with anger. Until we've dealt with Viggo and his greed, what I want is inconsequential .

The doors to the great hall are open. The two guards to either side wear the colors of the South Peak Clan. They must be so bored that they're falling asleep on the job; it's the only reasonable explanation for why neither of them even stirs until Daenn is nearly upon them.

They scramble upright, though, when it's clear he has no intention of stopping, and they drop their spears to block his path.

"I am your king. I suggest you step aside before I remove you." Daenn speaks with quiet menace. I am incredibly grateful that I stand at his back instead of in his way.

The guards shift, but they hold their post. The one on the left speaks in a gravelly but unsure voice. "Viggo Agnarken is our king now. You left your throne. We thought you dead."

"No, your spineless clansmen didn't quite get the job done." Daenn shifts the sword in his grip, and their eyes trail the movement. "Last chance."

The righthand man breaks ranks and turns to run. "Intruder! Daenn Henrik—"

Daenn's sword silences the man before he makes it two steps. Daenn spins and fells the second man, disarming and wounding him.

Beyond him I see the hall—it's full. Our entire clan is here, as well as a great number

of other gryphon clansmen—more of Viggo’s minions he’s swayed to his misguided cause. Why Viggo has gathered them all so early in the morning is anyone’s guess, but the faces I recognize look discontent—but it quickly shifts to surprise as they turn to look at Daenn.

Viggo lords over the room, sitting in Daenn’s throne. His face is a mask of shock and outrage as he stares at Daenn.

Daenn focuses on Viggo. He takes a step, and another, stalking forward like a gryphon who’s sighted his next meal. I follow, keeping my steps quiet. I don’t want to draw attention to myself—I can better help Daenn if I go unnoticed.

I needn’t have worried; every eye is glued on my husband. When he speaks, it’s low and angry, and I don’t doubt everyone in the room can hear him.

“I challenge you, Viggo Agnarken, traitor of the Allied Gryphon Clans. If you want my throne, take it like a warrior instead of a coward.”

Viggo’s face twists into a sneer. “Fight you? The cursed tyrant who murders anyone who dares dissent?” He flicks a hand as if dismissing Daenn. “You don’t deserve my efforts, you monster.”

Daenn’s attention is fixed on Viggo, but mine is not. My gaze skims the crowd—so I see the South Peak clansmen who are quietly readying their weapons, edging to surround Daenn.

Viggo is a coward who will let others do his dirty work. That certainly hasn’t changed.

I tug on my magic, gathering it to me. It’s Daenn’s right to deal with Viggo, but these men aren’t a part of that equation. Not if I have anything to say about it.

“It’s my duty and honor as ruling monarch to accept any challenges for my right to rule,” Daenn says. “As you are too afraid to issue that challenge, I will bring it to your feet instead. Take it and retain the shreds of your honor.”

One of Viggo’s men raises a bow—and I strike with my magic like a jungle snake. He slumps back against the wall. Those near him notice, and their eyes widen. I don’t wait for their reactions, though. I sweep my magic through the enemies, enveloping each one by one with the swiftness of Storm in a dive. It’s tiring, especially since I’ve only had one night of rest since using my magic yesterday, but I can’t let that matter .

I make it through half before Viggo notices. He jerks to his feet and roars. “He’s using his curse! Kill him now!”

The men descend on Daenn. He falls into a crouch. Deadly calm echoes over our bond. His body is grace and death; he moves with brutal efficiency, spinning and dodging and striking.

I do what I can, reaching for men who are out of Daenn’s range and dragging them into sleep before they can hurt my husband. I’m tiring further, but I push past it, drinking up the magic that flows around and through me until it grows thin.

And suddenly, silence falls again with the last body that Daenn pushes off his sword.

Viggo hasn’t come any closer. He stands, white-faced, fists clenched, before he gathers himself enough to speak. And he speaks in a near shout. “Is this murderer what you want to rule you?” he asks the room, the crowd of our clan, the faces I grew up with. “He’s killed them all, even the ones who didn’t come near his blade. He is death. He will kill every one of you.”

“False.” My voice rings out, louder than I intended, and draws every eye to me. Viggo’s expression flickers; I’m not sure he even realized I was here until this

moment. I straighten my spine and move forward, stepping over the fallen bodies that litter the ground around Daenn. “He won against the men who approached him, but I handled the rest. You were worried about his magic—but you should have been worried about mine. And now you have no one else to hide behind.”

My words cause murmurs amongst the people, which comes as no surprise to me. Wielding magic isn’t our way.

But I don’t care. I’m protecting Daenn.

Viggo’s expression twists in outrage. “You? You couldn’t even bear your first husband an heir.” I hold back a flinch as he continues. “If you weren’t already defective as a wife, you’re now tainted by him—you took on his curse when you accepted his vows and his bed, you—”

“Enough.” Daenn’s snarl cuts through Viggo’s tirade. “Being a coward is bad enough; I won’t let you insult my wife. This has gone on too long. Challenging you was a courtesy, but you’ve made it clear you don’t deserve even that. That is my throne. Abandon it or die.”

Viggo splutters, but he has no time to say anything else. Daenn stalks toward him with deadly intent—so Viggo scrambles down, tripping over his own feet. He jumps up, draws his sword, and makes a weak lunge at Daenn.

Daenn bats away the strike and disarms Viggo with an easy twist. He raises his sword to Viggo’s throat. Viggo’s throat bobs, but he doesn’t dare move another muscle.

Daenn glowers down at his cousin. “Someone throw this insect in a cell.”

Fear Cleaving through Me

O ur clan is quick to obey Daenn, and they do it with delighted zeal. Sigrid ushers Jakob off to release the warriors who are loyal to Daenn and were thrown into holding cells by Viggo. Many, she says, were injured and are bedded down in the infirmary. Many of Viggo's men, too. We just polished off the remainders.

It's nice to know our clan, at least, is loyal. They didn't take Viggo's invasion with passive acceptance.

Daenn settles himself onto his throne and listens to the story of exactly what happened while he was away. I choose to help Sigrid and several other women with cleaning up the fight instead. We lay out the bodies to one side, and soon buckets of soapy water are brought to scrub the floors. When the warriors return with Jakob, I direct them to take the sleeping South Peak clansmen to the infirmary.

As I work, men and women stop me, smiles wide and eyes bright. They thank and praise me. It's more than I expect, given how I helped, using magic like a lowlander or Elyri. I don't deserve any of it, but when I try to protest, Sigrid scolds me—so I keep my mouth shut.

I've lost all sense of time's passage when we finish cleaning up the room and handling the bodies. Daenn vanished long ago—headed to the infirmary to check on Eskil and the others we left comatose.

It's not even midday, but I'm exhausted. Using all my magic in that fight has left me desperate for sleep. Food, too, but my need for sleep is more pressing.

I tell Sigrid where I'm going and make my way to my quarters.

I don't even register where I end up until I've reached it. I'm not at my old quarters, the ones I had for years, the ones I spent all of one night in when I first arrived.

Despite how short of a time I spent there, my feet—or maybe it's my heart—have led me to the quarters I shared with Daenn before we left on our journey. I don't examine the desire too hard. It's natural to want to be near him after what we've been through. It's been him and me and Storm through what feels like weeks, even though it was only days. And people would talk, anyway, if I went anywhere else.

This is where I'm meant to be. I'll greedily take it until Daenn sends me away.

When I step through the door, shutting it behind me, Daenn is already here. He crouches by the firepit in the center of the room, angled away from me. His hair is wet, curling slightly at the base of his neck, and he's wearing nothing but low-slung trousers. The muscular planes of his back glisten with droplets of water.

I may have just seen him like this last night, but I'm still frozen at the sight of him, my whole body flushing with heat. His back ripples with his every small movement as he stokes the fire, and then he rises and turns, and I can't help but run my gaze over the front of his torso too. More bare skin, more hard, ridged muscles, and—

I catch sight of his wrists. Of the bracers there .

Bracers, plural .

And suddenly I'm cold all over, fear cleaving through me. “You put the second one

on.”

“The clan is secured.” His voice is a low rumble. It would be delectably distracting if he were speaking of anything else besides the horrid bracers. “There’s no more reason to delay.”

I reach inside myself through our bond to check the magic. How did I not feel the moment he put it on? It’s already made a notable difference; I can practically see his magic being pulled and devoured, bit by bit. Small shreds of my own magic are getting caught in the flow, but not much. Near my end of the bond, my magic is no longer grey; it’s nearly back to the sparkling white it was before we married.

The bracers are stripping Daenn from me.

I swallow my protests. This is what he wants. What I wanted.

“I’m going to the springs,” I say instead, trying to push life into my voice. I don’t want to, but I don’t want to be here, with Daenn watching me. A small frown mars his features, but he doesn’t call me on how I don’t acknowledge his words about the bracers.

With as much speed as my tired body can manage, I collect a fresh change of clothes and some toiletries before fleeing. Another moment and I have no doubt I would have burst, begged Daenn to remove the bracers.

I may deny it to him, but I can’t deny it to myself.

I don’t want to lose Daenn again.

30

Hope and Desperation

I am dead to the world for the entire afternoon. When I wake, Daenn sleeps beside me—as he was when I returned from my bath. He’s wearing a shirt and gloves again, and he lies on top of the covers instead of under them. But one hand has found me in his sleep, and the soft weight of it on my hip is grounding, comfortable.

I like it far too much.

So I force myself to scoot away and sit up. There’s a tray of covered food on my bedside table. Courtesy of Sigrid, probably. The thoughtful care warms me even more than the food does as I scarf it down.

I get up and stretch, careful to stay quiet. Daenn shifts and grimaces in his sleep. His hand curls into a fist.

I hesitate a moment, but... I am still tired. So I slip back into the bed and uncurl his fingers, wrapping them around my hand. His fingers clamp around mine for a moment before his whole body relaxes.

I wriggle down into my pillow, getting comfortable. I’m already growing sleepy again, despite sleeping all afternoon.

I drift off quickly, but I don’t sleep well this time. Part of it is because Daenn doesn’t sleep well. He’s restless, and every time he shifts, it pulls me from my dreams, until I

can't even get back to sleep.

He settles more in the latter half of the night, but I can only lie there, staring at the stone ceiling, barely lit by the low glow of dying coals from the firepit. He still holds my hand, and I let him, but the contact only serves as a reminder that soon enough he won't need me. If the bracers are successful, we'll part ways. He'll tell Jakob to dissolve our marriage, which shouldn't be hard since we never consummated it. He'll take a new wife, because a king needs heirs, which, as Viggo so helpfully announced to the entire clan, I probably can't give him.

Such a defective wife.

So instead, I... I will leave. Go... somewhere. I have no idea where. I don't want to return to the lowlands. This is the only home I've ever truly known, the only place I belong.

These restless feelings are what plague me for the rest of the night. Daenn wakes before dawn and leaves soon after. If he realizes I'm awake, he doesn't acknowledge it, but that's fine with me. I don't know what to say to him. Better to say nothing. If his scheme works, we'll be parting ways soon enough.

I rise soon after he leaves and dress for the day. A thought wormed its way into my head in the middle of my sleepless night, and between worries about my future, it's been feeding itself on hope and desperation since. I won't have any peace until I test it.

When I step into the infirmary, Healer Annika straightens and bows to me. "Your Majesty."

I'll never get used to that.

I won't have to , a cynical voice reminds me.

I push it away .

“Good morning. How are the comatose patients?”

Healer Annika grimaces. “No changes, Your Majesty. They don't wake. We are able to get them to take a bit of broth, but they're still deteriorating. I fear...” She trails off and glances at Eskil, who lies in the bed she was leaning over when I entered. “I don't know how much longer they'll last like this. A few have already... already passed while you and the king were away.”

My heart clenches. Those deaths are my fault. I have to fix this.

“I want to try something. If you don't mind.”

Uncertainty flickers through Healer Annika's eyes, but she only steps back and inclines her head. “As you will, Your Majesty.”

I try to exude confidence as I march to Eskil's bedside and lower myself next to him, perching on the sliver of space his bulk isn't taking up.

I have no idea if this will work. For a moment I'm paralyzed by that fear. If I attempt this and fail... Eskil will die.

But he's on course to die if I don't, too, as the Healer Annika just pointed out. He can't live like this forever. I swallow my fear and brush my hand over his where it rests on top of his blankets. I don't know if the physical contact will help, but it feels like the right choice, so I maintain it as I close my eyes and reach for my magic, grasping a thread of it. Instinct has me grabbing not the blended grey of both mine and Daenn's but instead the soft glowing white that is my magic alone.

With that in my mental grip, I try to sense Eskil, imagining the physical connection creating a bridge between us that I can cross. I follow this path, searching for his mind. It's like walking blind, but soon enough I do sense a light of sorts. I can't see it, exactly, but it's almost like I can feel it, its brightness and warmth. This is Eskil, I know somehow. It's suffused with his essence, his easy laugh and fierce loyalty.

But it's muted, like it's hidden behind a cloth. I reach out my mental touch, and I am greeted by a wall—but a wall that's as soft as gossamer silk. It's there, and it's strong, but it's malleable.

Better yet, it's familiar.

I brace myself, and then I imagine myself gripping that wall, and I give a sharp tug, as if I'm pulling back a curtain. It holds at first, but my will is stronger than my magic. It only takes another sharp tug for it to recognize me and my sovereignty, and all at once it gives way, flooding through me and splashing into the reserve I'd drained the day before while fighting Viggo's men.

I hear a gasp. Eskil's hand jerks under mine. I tighten my grip on him and drag myself back over the path I created between us before I release him. Only then do I open my eyes.

Eskil's eyes are open. He looks like he's half asleep, but he blinks, and his gaze shifts from me to Healer Annika.

He's awake. I did it, and I didn't kill him in the process.

"You broke the curse," Healer Annika whispers, her voice full of awe. "You're winds-blessed."

I give a faint shake of my head, but I don't care to argue with her, so I don't respond

otherwise. Instead, I address Eskil. “How are you feeling?”

He shifts, moves to sit, and groans. “Like I’m on the tail end of a terrible sickness. My whole body is weak.”

That sounds fitting. “Daenn will be pleased to see you.”

Eskil’s brow pulls together. “What happened? How long have I been out?”

“I happened. And then a lot of time passed. And then I fixed it.” I wave a hand toward Healer Annika. “She can fill you in on the details. I’ve others to tend to.” I stand but pause before turning away. “I’m glad you’re all right, my friend.”

He must notice the depth of relief in my voice, because he studies me. No surprise; it’s a stark difference from how I acted before he fell under our magic, which felt like moments ago to him. “Thank you, Emana.”

I nod, but then I’m moving. I can’t stand here all day. I’ve figured out how to fix the chaos I wrought, and I won’t leave until I’ve woken up every single person I can.

It takes me most of the day. Sigrid is summoned at some point, and she hovers, shooing away anyone else who tries to linger and watch me. But she lets me work, so I ignore her and continue my delving to wake the comatose clansfolk. I pause briefly for water, but I can’t eat, despite Sigrid’s cajoling that I need my strength.

Pulling my magic away from these minds feels a great deal like eating too much at a feast. My entire being, soul and body, is heavy and bloated, the magic weighing down my limbs the longer I go. It’s a strange sensation, because I get the sense I won’t be able to use this magic. It’s been used. It just doesn’t have anywhere to go. I can only hope it will dissipate on its own. If it doesn’t, I’ll have to figure out somewhere to put it that won’t hurt anyone else.

But first, I wake the sleeping.

When I pull back from the final person, I struggle to open my eyes. I feel unsteady, in body and mind, and it takes me a moment to register the murmuring behind me.

A small crowd has gathered despite Sigrid's best efforts. I was vaguely aware of others coming into the infirmary, because when I began on the South Peak clansmen, Sigrid sent for guards to escort them to holding cells. But it's more than just warriors who crowd near the doorway. Healers, servants, a mother and her children. They all watch me like I'm a goddess—with awe and maybe a touch of wariness.

I rise to my feet, but a wave of dizziness washes over me. I sway, struggling to stay upright. This seems to help humanize me again—the wariness is replaced with concern amongst my watchers.

Sigrid bustles to my side and steadies me.

“You need rest.” It's a command, not an observation.

I'm more than happy to oblige her. She shoos everyone out of our path. I avoid their eyes as we pass. I don't like how awestruck they all are. All I did was fix my mistake.

The longer we walk, the better I feel. My head clears, and slowly, even the heaviness from the overflow of magic I've pulled into myself starts to recede. Not leave, but it's no longer crowding my every breath.

“Where's Daenn?” Eskil managed to escape from Healer Annika's clutches sometime while I worked, so I assumed he went straight to find Daenn, but Daenn never came to the infirmary himself. I've been carefully ignoring that. It doesn't matter that I haven't seen him. I can sense him over our bond, faintly, though it's hard to find him amongst the deluge I've dragged into myself—but it's enough to know he's alive, and

that's good enough for me at the moment.

Sigrid clucks. "He's been tending to matters of state. Some of the elders of South Peak flew in around midday."

Ah. I imagine explaining why all their clansmen were imprisoned was an adventure, if the elders did not already tie their loyalties to Viggo like his men did. Thinking about the political tangle of that situation makes my head spin again .

We reach Daenn's and my quarters, and I brace myself against the doorframe.

"Do you need anything, dearest?"

"I think I could use some supper after all," I admit.

Sigrid's eyes gleam smugly. "Of course you do. I'll fetch you something right now."

"Thank you, Sigrid."

She pats my arm before she turns with purpose in the direction of the kitchens. I let my head rest against the cool stone. I'll have to brave crossing the room alone. I think I can make it, but one more moment to steady myself can't hurt.

But maybe Daenn has already retired for the day. If he's here, I'm certain he'll help. He'd be warm and steady. I let myself imagine how his arm around my waist would feel, and longing lights in my core.

I fixed the comatose clansfolk today. I haven't given voice to the thought, but it's growing with every breath. If I ask him to take off the bracers, would he do it?

They served their purpose—I suspect it's only because of how they pulled our magics

apart that allowed me to wake everyone, because it was my magic that I was controlling to do so. Not our combined magics, but mine . That wouldn't have been possible without the bracers separating them.

But he doesn't need to get rid of his magic entirely if I can wield mine to undo the effects of it when it's blended with mine. We can control it. If our magics end up blending too much for me to use mine alone again, he can just wear the bracers for a short time, long enough to separate our magics again. They can be a tool, but not one Daenn has to use for so very long. His original instinct to find me had been right. No more of our people have to die .

The truth of it grows in me, unfurling into a brilliant ray of hope. If I stay with him, he will be free of the cursed life he's been burdened by for years. He doesn't have to struggle alone any longer.

If I stay...

I hesitate. Does he even want me to? Even with our bond, I can't read him. I don't know what Daenn wants. Oh, I know what he wants as king, what he wants for his people's sake. But what does he, as a man, want? He married me for them, but is it possible... do I dare hope he might want me to stay for himself?

I don't hope for love. Thinking of Daenn still leaves my heart in tangles, each strand a thread from our history—the sweet moments and the painful ones.

But I don't want to leave. I may have buried it when I was given to Tolomon, but I have cared about Daenn for years. And I have nowhere else to go besides my clan.

A marriage of companionship wouldn't be so bad. He's given no indication of interest in any other woman, and he does need a queen. I... I could fulfill the role, if he lets me. Maybe I'm not entirely defective and could bear him heirs given time,

maybe with some assistance from the healers. Maybe here, without the crushing presence of a cruel husband, my body will work right. If he lets me stay. If he takes off the bracers.

I turn the idea over in my head one more time, and the more I consider it, the more I like it. Yes. I'll present it to him. I can't see any reason for him to dislike it.

Thus fortified, I push off the doorway and enter our quarters. They're empty. I try to ignore the disappointment gaping in my chest at that. It doesn't matter. What I want to discuss with him can wait until he returns. I leave the security of the wall and take slow, careful steps toward the bed. Sigrid will scold me endlessly if she returns with my supper and I've fallen.

I'm halfway there when I see him.

All that's visible is a loose, limp hand stretched out from behind the bed. Horror rips into me, and I lurch toward him—and stumble and fall, because my body isn't ready for this level of motion yet. But I push myself up and crawl the rest of the way. I need to reach him; I need to make sure he's not—

I can't even think it.

I close the last awful distance and hover a hand over his mouth, watching his chest with a clawing desperation.

A faint warmth washes over my palm as his chest dips, and I let out a shaky sob. He's alive. He's still alive.

I press a hand to his chest as I close my eyes and delve through my magic for our bond. I need to feel his every breath and heartbeat; I'll lose myself completely without that reassurance.

Distantly, I hear the door open. Sigrid gives a cry of alarm. I don't even look at her as I issue an order.

“A healer—Daenn needs a healer!”

Her footsteps recede at a run, and I let myself sink back into my magic.

It takes me too long to find the bond, but after an agonizing stretch of searching, I do. I can see at a glance why it took so long, and it makes my insides turn with nausea.

The bond is dwindling. It's not only that the bracers are eating away at Daenn's magic; they are. But it's worse than that. I can barely sense him, and what I can sense is faded, like a used, threadbare rag.

I don't need a healer to tell me what's happening. I know with an icy, curdling certainty.

Daenn is dying.

An Agonizing Finality

I hover as Master Healer Tyr examines Daenn.

Sigrid returned with him in record time. Eskil and two other warriors came too. They moved Daenn to the bed, and Master Healer Tyr took his vitals, careful to not touch any exposed skin.

Master Healer Tyr is a little more grey at the temples than I remember from before I moved to the lowlands, but he otherwise looks much like he did when I was a child running freely through his caverns while he and my mother worked together.

The other warriors have left, but Eskil stands beside me, arms crossed and watching the healer work with the same intense anxiety that I feel. I'm sure everyone will worry when they hear what's happening to their king, but Eskil is the only other one who I know feels the same bone-deep fear about it that I do.

Sigrid comes to stand by me and presses one wrinkled hand to my forearm. "Emana, dearest. You need to eat."

"No," I snap, my voice tight. The thought of trying to stomach anything while this worry for Daenn churns in me is nauseating. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her lips press together in a thin line, but she doesn't push the issue .

Master Healer Tyr straightens, and I take a step forward instinctively. "Well?"

He doesn't look at me but rather taps a finger on the bracer as he ponders it. "You say these are draining his magic?"

"Yes."

"And he only put on the second bracer today? He wasn't wearing it at the feast yesterday when you arrived?"

I shake my head. "He put it on last night. I didn't want him to, but..."

"The king will do what he wants," Master Healer Tyr finishes when my voice trails off.

I nod. He may have been saying it simply because Daenn is a king, and kings always get their way, but Daenn is also an incredibly stubborn man, king or no.

Behind me, Eskil shifts and scoffs. He knows how Daenn is. He understands.

"Well..." Master Healer Tyr steps back and finally turns to me. "My own magic is specific to the body, so I can't see what the bracers are doing to his magic." He frowns as he speaks, his brow drawing together. "But I can tell you the bracers are draining his life."

I grit my teeth to keep from shouting, even as my stomach drops at the confirmation. I knew that already. I don't want him to confirm it. I want him to fix it. Why is the man wasting time instead of doing something about it?

He continues, oblivious to my impatience. "Since he put them on separately, they're out of sync with each other. But the longer he wears them, the more they will attune, and the faster they will drain him."

Getting my next words out is like speaking with a mouthful of glass shards. I hate that they even exist, but I need to know the answer. “How long until they kill him?”

Master Healer Tyr tilts his head as he considers it. “I can’t say. It’s impossible to predict how long it will take them to attune to each other. Our best course of action is to remove them immediately.”

A part of me wants to leap forward at the words to rip them off Daenn right now. A smaller part holds me back.

Daenn wanted this. Daenn put them on. He wanted nothing more than to be rid of his magic, but... they’re killing him.

“Do it,” I say. I will take Daenn’s wrath if he’s alive enough to bestow it. And when he’s done raging, I’ll tell him of my idea.

Master Healer Tyr wastes no time, and I move to Daenn’s other side and begin unlacing the other bracer. I glance at Daenn, and the sight makes my fingers shake. He’s so still, almost like he’s already dead. I flex my fingers and focus on my task. I refuse to entertain that idea.

Master Healer Tyr finishes first, and he begins to pull the bracer off Daenn’s wrist.

Daenn arches his back and screams.

That scream holds a world of pain. Inside me, the bond jerks taut, like a bowstring ready to snap.

“Stop!” I cry, jerking my hands away from the bracer.

Master Healer Tyr shoves Daenn’s bracer back into place. Eskil is by my side, I

realize. He moved in an instant at Daenn's reaction.

My whole body shakes, and I drop to the bed by Daenn's knee. "We almost killed him. We can't remove them."

My words hang in the air with an agonizing finality. I stare at Daenn. He's still again, the only sign of life the movement of his chest as he takes in shallow breaths. Sweat dots his unnaturally pale skin .

After a long moment, Master Healer Tyr re-laces the bracer back to a snug fit. I don't bother with mine. I hadn't gotten that far.

"Why isn't it killing me, too?" I ask, my voice breaking. "Why are they only affecting him even though we're bonded?"

Master Healer Tyr blinks, bemused. "Are you?" He glances at Daenn and then Eskil.

A tired, slightly hysterical laugh bursts from me. "Daenn dragged me here and married me. Eskil and Sigrid were there as witnesses. It took me a while to notice it, but I can feel him all the time."

The confusion on Master Healer Tyr's face lifts, and he looks almost apologetic. "Yes, well, I heard about the marriage, of course, and that would have begun the bond, but there's no way the king would have completed it."

A hot flush starts climbing my neck. How could Master Healer Tyr know we didn't—and then to bring it up in front of Eskil and Sigrid...

Am I the only one delusional enough to think that Daenn might be capable of caring for me enough to have a true marriage?

Master Healer Tyr catches the look on my face, and his eyes widen. He shakes his head rapidly. “Oh, no—no, Your Majesty. Not that. That helps reinforce the bond, of course, and is integral to the marriage being valid, but what I was referring to is a part of the wedding ceremony. Given His Majesty’s aversion to touch, I assumed he skipped over it during the ceremony.”

My memory slaps me in the face. During the wedding, Daenn didn’t removed his gloves. He didn’t even let me put the wedding band in place fully so I wouldn’t graze his skin. I noticed, but I didn’t realize it was that significant .

Master Healer Tyr continues, his voice slowing as he chooses his words. “Has the king ever touched you? Directly, skin to skin, I mean.”

I know that answer immediately. No. Daenn was always very careful to avoid that. I shake my head, unwilling to risk any hurt leaking into my voice if I dare speak.

Master Healer Tyr nods, as if that explains it. He glances back at Daenn. “On the one hand, if he had, if the bond was complete, it might have been enough to stop the bracers from killing him. But they are an unknown. We can’t say for sure if that’s the case. He might have been saved by it, or perhaps you both would have died. It’s a relief from that angle, really. At least we’ll have you, should the worst come to pass.”

I feel dizzy as his words wash over me.

“There’s nothing you can do, then?” Eskil asks, speaking for the first time since entering the room.

Master Healer Tyr sighs. “I can induce a healing sleep with one of my lowland enchanted talismans. I’ve done it before on patients. It’s much like the sleep Her Majesty’s magic put you into, except mine encourages regeneration and he won’t worsen from lack of food or water. We tried administering that over the comatose

patients, but it wore off quickly, like the body couldn't hold both enchantments simultaneously. That shouldn't happen here, however, and we can hope it will slow down the bracers."

"Do it, then."

He wastes no time in pulling out a small stone from his supplies. It reminds me of the ones the monks gave me to ward the camp while Daenn and I traveled through the jungle.

Master Healer Tyr hovers his hands over Daenn's head, then his heart. Daenn's breathing evens out and deepens slightly, but he's still pale. Master Healer Tyr straightens once he finishes. "There. I've done what I can." He shakes his head and starts to move toward the door. "I'm afraid it is only a faint hope. Call me if anything else changes, Eman—forgive me, dear girl. Your Majesty." He chuckles, the sound too light for the heavy worry trying to drown me. "That title will take getting used to."

The door thuds. Sigrid and Eskil speak in low voices behind me, but I don't care enough to decipher what they're saying.

I stare at Daenn. My chest is no more than a gaping, hollow gash where my heart used to be.

32

Fate Conspired

Four Years Prior

“E mana? Emana.”

I blinked and looked up at Tolomon. “Yes?”

His mouth pinched. “Are you feeling all right? That’s the fifth time I had to say your name.”

“Of course,” I said. “Why wouldn’t I be?” Truth be told, I wasn’t feeling all right. I’d had hot and cold flashes since waking, and my mind felt agitated and fuzzy, struggling to focus on any one thing. “I just didn’t sleep well. I’m excited about my journey.” This would be the first time I would be going home—back to the clan, that is, since marrying Tolomon.

Other visits had been planned, of course, but something always came up. Not this time. This time, I had planned meticulously to ensure success. I dearly missed home—the clan, that is. It had been years since I had seen my mother or Daenn, or even Eskil and Sigrid and dear, sweet Zephyr.

“Are you ready to depart, then?”

“Almost.” I forced myself to take one more bite of fruit, and then I stood. “I’m going

to go pack.”

“Already? You’ve barely eaten.”

I smiled and shrugged, and I moved to kiss my husband on the cheek; little gestures like that kept him happy, and I needed him in a good mood so he wouldn’t call off the whole trip.

As I straightened, a wave of dizziness washed over me. On instinct, I gripped Tolomon’s chair for support.

“Emana?”

“I’m fine,” I assured him. “It was only a dizzy spell.” I gave him an indulgent look.

“You worry too much.” My attempt to lighten the mood had no effect on his frown.

“Are you sure you’re up for the journey? You seem piqued. Heaven forbid you fall ill while traveling and have to stay there any longer than necessary.”

“I’m fine, truly.”

He sighed and shook his head. “You would say that even if you weren’t.”

“Possibly. But I am fine.” I gave him one more reassuring smile. “I’ll be in my room.”

Tolomon was still scowling when I turned for the door.

I’d barely made it two steps before the world spun out from under me.

Voices dragged me from restless dreams of empty halls and ugly laughter. I was

freezing and clammy, and my head pounded with how my thoughts lurched and spun. I struggled to comprehend the words I was hearing.

“—poison, my lord, and you would do well to be on guard. If someone’s bold enough to attack your wife, they may well do the same to you.”

“Let me deal with finding the responsible party, Abney, and you deal with your expertise.” Tolomon’s voice promised violence if Abney pushed the matter .

A throat cleared. “Yes, well, luckily, I am an expert in poisons. I have an antidote that can extract it from her bloodstream. She’ll be back to full strength within the hour.”

“No,” Tolomon snapped before moderating his tone. I lost the thread of his voice, and once I regained it, I could barely make out his words. “—stay on bedrest for the week.”

There was a long pause. “It would cause her undue suffering, my lord. Are you certain you don’t want me to do more?”

Tolomon’s voice was deceptively calm. “You wouldn’t be fool enough to question me, would you, Abney? Not after the example I made of your predecessor for that very mistake.”

“No, my lord,” Abney said quickly. “I will perform my duties precisely as you’ve asked. She’ll be unable to travel, of course.”

“Of course.” Tolomon sounded pleased. “Report to me when you’ve finished.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Footsteps pounded through my skull, and then a door thudded.

I tried to open my eyes, to move, anything, but a cool hand pressed against my head, and the last thing I heard was Abney's voice murmuring me back into oblivion.

The next time I woke, the room was shrouded in darkness, save for an oil lamp casting light that only accentuated the shadows. I rolled over onto my side with a groan. It felt as if a cart of bricks filled my head, shifting and tumbling with my movement. I wasn't freezing any longer, which was a small blessing lost amongst how awfully my head and body ached.

Tolomon lounged by my bed in a plush chair, a crystal goblet of dark amber liquid gleaming as he sipped from it. He lowered it and smiled at me. "You're awake."

I managed a faint hum of acknowledgment, but my throat was too scratchy and dry for anything else. Faint snatches of dreams swirled in my head; my sleep had been polluted by them. Me alone, sobbing. Me chained in darkness, unable to reach my loved ones beyond a veil. Lost in a forest. Falling from a cliff. Listening to Tolomon argue with another man. That last one had felt more concrete, more whole. More like a memory instead of shreds of scenes or sounds like the others. But that was absurd. Talk of poisons? Bah. Life with Tolomon was too urbane for that.

Tolomon continued smiling. He seemed cheery tonight. Pleased I'd awoken, perhaps? "How are you feeling?"

"Awful," I admitted. I tried for a rueful smile. "I guess I wasn't as fine as I claimed."

He chuckled and reached over to brush a strand of hair from my face. I tried not to shiver away from his touch. He always hated that. "Well, the physician's come and tended to you. You should be back on your feet in a few days. Maybe a week."

"So long?" My heart plummeted. "But my visit—I'll have to postpone it."

Tolomon hushed me. “I’ve already sent a letter. You’re in no condition to travel, my darling.” His face twisted in concern, and his voice dropped low. “Even once you’re feeling better, I loathe the idea of you going. What if you relapse while you’re gone?”

“The clan has healers,” I protested weakly. Despite my best efforts, he was cancelling my trip home ?

Tolomon’s lip curled briefly with derision. “Healers are no replacement for a proper physician.”

I tensed. I hated when he got like this, sneering at my clan and what he considered its ‘archaic, barbaric practices.’ “They took perfect care of me throughout my whole childhood.”

“Of course they did.” He patted my hand. “But this is a serious illness you’re battling, darling.” He looked down for a moment before meeting my eyes once more. “I couldn’t bear to lose you.”

My chest tightened at the empty words. He was only affectionate when it suited him—like when he wanted me to fall in line with his whims without complaint.

I forced a small smile. “I wouldn’t put you through that.”

“I know how you were looking forward to your trip.” Tolomon ran his thumb over my cheek. I didn’t pull away, though I longed to.

I dared a question, knowing the chances of a favorable answer were low. “Maybe I can try again in a month or two?”

“Just as soon as your health allows, darling,” Tolomon promised. His lips curled up again on one side. “Until then, I’m here for you. I’ll take care of you.”

Take care of me like he had in my nightmares?

No—that was a stretch, even for Tolomon’s cruelty. I tried to manage another smile to flatter him, but my eyelids were drooping closed.

He stood. “I’ll let you sleep in peace.” He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. A moment later, the door thudded shut.

The silence of the room washed over me, and I drifted, letting it wrap around me like a blanket. I had so desperately wanted to go home. To see Daenn. Mother. Sigrid.

Time and again, fate conspired to keep me away. Maybe I needed to accept that my place really was here. My loyalties lay here, with my husband, as little as I cared for him.

For tonight, I let myself grieve and rage against this horrible sickness that had stolen my chance to see all that I loved again.

I drifted to sleep with tears wetting my pillow.

33

A Foregone Conclusion

I refuse to leave Daenn's side.

He stirs occasionally, almost like he's waking. He hasn't yet actually woken up, but I will be here if he does.

Sigrid brings me food, and Eskil often keeps me company. Slowly, he fills me in on the years I spent away, giving me details about Daenn's reign I surmised but Daenn didn't fully disclose himself. The picture he paints is of a good man struggling to bear the weight of his kingdom when many are against him, whether from fear, resentment, or indifferent awe.

It makes my heart ache even more than it already was.

Advisors come to me, too. I recognize all of them, though many were not the king's direct advisors when I was a child. Evidence of Daenn's tale of his magic striking down those close to him, I suppose.

They've decided that given that I'm Daenn's wife, and the people are hailing me as a hero, I am fit to make the decisions they would normally bring to Daenn.

I don't appreciate their vote of confidence. Or maybe it's the inanity of the questions they see fit to present to me that I don't appreciate. All I want to do is watch Daenn and be ready to leap up at a moment's notice if he needs me.

All I want is my husband to wake .

Let him handle the inanity.

But I can't have that, so I don my lowland noblewoman mask and I do my best to direct them how I think Daenn would.

Their flattery of my every comment wears thin quickly. It's all "we are so blessed to have you here, Your Majesty" and "your wisdom is only matched by your beauty, Your Majesty." I want to scream at them to keep their ridiculous opinions to themselves. Especially when their opinions veer in Daenn's direction. They act like his death is a foregone conclusion.

I'm at the end of a long morning of tolerating these antics when one of the advisors, Lord Beck, clears his throat. "We have a... most delicate matter to discuss with you, Your Majesty."

The way he avoids meeting my eyes immediately raises my guard. "Delicate how?"

"Ah, well. Securing the throne is of the utmost importance, of course."

The other advisors present nod. They're also avoiding my gaze.

"And an integral part of that is the, ahem, line of succession."

Dawning shame rises in me, and I shoot a horrified glance at Eskil. His lips press together, like he's trying not to laugh.

"You want to know if I'm with child," I say, too mortified to dance delicately around the subject like they're trying to do.

Lord Beck's ears turn pink and he nods. "Given your past... Well, such a confirmation would put us all at ease about the future of our clan."

This is the most humiliating conversation of my life. This isn't something I want to discuss at all, much less with them. It was bad enough when Viggo pointed out my defectiveness to the clan, but this...

And I may have never been pregnant, but even I know it would be too soon to tell. This line of questioning is awful and ridiculous on so many levels.

"No." I manage to keep my voice even, and I mentally congratulate myself.

Their faces collectively fall.

"Ah, well, you were only married for a short period of time," says Lord Beck. "It's understandable."

Very magnanimous of him.

He continues in a matter-of-fact voice. "We'll find you a new king in time. After the mourning period ends, of course."

Rage lights my insides in an instant, burning away my shame. "No," I snarl. "We won't. Your king is right there." I stab a finger toward the bed, where Daenn lays, blissfully unaware that I'm on the verge of murdering all of his advisors. "I don't need nor do I want a new king. The next man who dares suggest as much can find his way off the mountain, or I will have Storm forcibly remove him from the mountain. Have I made myself clear?"

They stare at me, every one of them stunned. After a moment, Beck stammers acknowledgment, and I receive a chorus of agreement from the rest.

“Get out.” I’m finished with them for the day. I really will throw someone off a cliff if I have to tolerate any more of their nonsense.

It’s a wonder Daenn never stabbed any of them. The man has self-restraint the size of our mountain.

They leave with impressive speed. Eskil lingers, but I turn my back on him and go sit by Daenn .

“I’ll go tell Sigrid you need some lunch,” he announces, a sliver of humor in his voice. Of course he finds it funny. He has no way of knowing how tender the topic is for me. Or maybe he’s just trying to pull me back from my homicidal thoughts.

I don’t have a chance to snarl at him too, though, because he leaves promptly after speaking.

I sigh and drop my head into my hands. I’m glad I don’t have to deal with any of the advisors anymore, but I don’t truly want to be alone.

But then, I’m not. It’s just that the man I want to be with and talk to can’t talk back.

I tilt my head in my hands so I’m staring at Daenn. “I miss you,” I mutter, misery thick in the words. A trace of the anger threads through it. “If you don’t wake up, I’m never speaking to you again. I’ll leave and let your advisors deal with their own stupid questions.”

It’s all angry fluff, but venting my frustration helps loosen the knot in my chest. I sigh again and lean forward, pressing my head against Daenn’s bicep. The fabric of his sleeve is rough, but I don’t care.

His arm shifts under my forehead, and I jerk back.

“Daenn?” I reach for him, frantic hope bursting and drowning every other emotion.

Slowly—agonizingly slowly—he opens his eyes.

34

Original Intentions

His gaze is unfocused as it swings across the room, finally landing on me. He drags in shallow, ragged breaths. His skin is still that unnatural pale grey beneath his natural olive tone.

He's awake, though. I cling to that blessing.

"How are you feeling?" My fingers curl over his gloved hand. I have to make a conscious effort to not crush it in my grip.

"Water?" His voice is so hoarse I can barely make the word out. I hurry to pour him water from the pitcher Sigrid left for me by the table. Daenn tries to rise, but all he can manage is to prop himself on one elbow. Water sloshes over the rim of the clay cup when he takes it from me, but he manages to bring it to his lips and take a sip. His hand drops, and the cup slips from his grip. I barely catch it; water spills over my skirt. I set the cup on the tray with the pitcher.

"Daenn—" My voice fails me. I have to blink back tears. He's awake... but he's so weak. I've heard stories about people dying; they get a second wind right before the end. What if his waking up is just that? What if these are his final moments?

"I'm dying." He drops back onto his pillow and tilts his head to look at me.

I nod .

A calm, final sort of resignation snakes over the bond to me. It's faint, far fainter than how the bond was before his collapse, but I do feel it.

And it just fuels my anger. My voice comes out dangerously crisp. "Master Healer Tyr said your only chance is if we complete the wedding bond. Which came as a surprise to me, since I thought we were bonded already."

Daenn's gaze slides to me, and he has the decency to look ashamed for a moment, but then he buries it behind his careful, neutral king mask.

I'm too irritated to let this lie. "Why didn't you complete the bond, Daenn? You knew, and you took the risk of the bracers anyway. It's like you have a death wish."

His jaw clenches. "Yes."

"Yes?" I lean back; the single word is like a slap. "Yes, you have a death wish?"

"Yes, I took the risk without completing the bond." He meets my gaze with a familiar steel; he looks totally unrepentant. "There was no way in the four winds that I was going to risk you dying with me."

I can only stare at him.

"You knew," I whisper. "You knew this would kill you. You do have a death wish."

"I knew the chance was high. I don't fear death. I'm a warrior and a gryphon rider. I face it every time I pick up a weapon, every time I climb into the saddle. Death is an old friend."

I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head, as if doing so can rid my head of his words. "No, this is different." My eyes snap open, and I pin him with a glare. "You

should have completed the bond.”

His jaw flexes. “I couldn’t. ”

“You wouldn’t ,” I correct icily.

He flinches, and he turns his head away, staring at the canopy over his bed instead of at me. “Fine, I wouldn’t . I know how little you want this marriage. I needed you near me, Emi, but if I completed the marriage bond, there would be no undoing it. With it incomplete, you still have a chance to leave, to be free of me.”

“I never wanted to be free of you at the cost of your life!”

His eyes slide shut. If not for the way his jaw works, I’d think he’s falling back to sleep.

I soften my voice. “Please, Daenn. Complete the bond. Master Healer Tyr said if we were bonded correctly, the bracers wouldn’t be focused solely on you. With their focus split, you might survive them.”

Daenn’s eyes fly open, his green gaze snapping to me. “The bracers would be targeting you? Then my choice was the right one. I’m glad I stood by it.”

I grind my teeth. “Daenn, I can help—”

“Absolutely not.” Heat fills his voice, more fire than he’s shown since waking. I’m facing down the king of the gryphon clans right now, the man who expects his every word to be obeyed. “I won’t put you at risk to save myself.”

“But you’ll die !” My voice breaks, and angry tears sting my eyes. “You’re dying now. This is the only chance we have to save you.”

“No.” The word carries the full weight of his iron will. “I will die if it ensures you live. I’ve dragged you into my darkness enough. I was weak when I came to Chambledon. I only meant to invite you home as an advisor, but everything spiraled so quickly when Tolomon attacked me. Bringing you back as my bride was a last-minute idea because I need you, even if you hate me for killing the man you...” His face twists for a moment, and a faint pang of guilt and hurt accompanies it over the bond. But then his resolve reasserts itself. “I won’t do it anymore. You will be free of me, as you wanted. And...” Here he falters. When he continues, his voice is softer, pleading instead of commanding. “I trust you to care for the clans once I’m gone. I’ve secured blood oaths from the South Peak elders, and the rest of the clans are loyal. They’ll follow you, and I know you’ll lead them well.”

I can’t speak; the sheer vastness of what he’s saying is overwhelming me. Not that he’s asking me to rule once he’s gone. I’ve been trained enough that I don’t fear that.

But the rest of it, about his original intentions, and that he would...

The door opens behind me, and on instinct I turn, so I see when Master Healer Tyr’s gaze brightens at the sight of Daenn up.

“Your Majesty! It’s good to see you awake.” He hurries forward, casting a glance over to me. “Queen Emana, I know it’s not my place to ask, but will you send someone to get His Majesty something from the kitchens? It would do him good to eat something while he’s awake.”

I stand mechanically. “Of course. Do you want me to send someone to assist you here as well?”

“Please, if you would.” He busies himself with Daenn then, so I slip out, desperate to escape for a moment.

But even as I track down a servant to send to Daenn's room and make my way to the kitchens, I can't escape my thoughts.

Daenn is quite literally willing to die to protect me. He is dying to protect me.

35

Withstand the Blaze

I sit at the foot of Daenn's bed, my arms banded around my legs, knees tucked against my chest, as I watch Daenn sleep.

He fell asleep soon after I left on Master Healer Tyr's errand earlier today. The broth I brought back for him still sits untouched on the bedside table.

Master Healer Tyr had no answers for why he woke—none that he gave me, anyway, but he looked ill at ease when I returned. I can't help but wonder if the idea of a last surge of life before the end occurred to him too.

So I sit and watch Daenn's chest, terrified that every time it rises will be the last.

He's dying.

For me.

I can't get that realization out of my head. It circles and stalks and ambushes any other thoughts that dare stray into my head.

Daenn is dying to protect me.

Never has anyone treated me with such selflessness.

Tolomon certainly never did.

Memories raise unbidden at the thought and flip before me in rapid succession. So many moments where Tolomon belittled me, pushed aside my desires and needs for himself. Isolated me. Never once did he commit a selfless act on my behalf. I was nothing but his prized wife, there to be pretty and give him heirs—and I couldn't even do that properly. He was always subtle in his comments, but he made it clear how much I disappointed him with that failure.

I hoped to grow to love him when we first married, even if I never could care about him as I cared about Daenn, and I hoped he would grow to love me, but time disabused me of that. I resigned myself to it. It was not a pleasant existence, but it was... fine.

All right, in the quiet of my heart, I could admit it was worse than fine. But I was resilient.

But when compared to how Daenn treats me—with tenderness, respect... with selfless love.

There is no comparison.

I was never anything but another possession to Tolomon. It hurt to admit, every time. I knew for a long time, but his presence was all I had for years; he made sure of that, sending away anyone who showed me kindness, keeping me from visiting the clan after our wedding. He always hated when I mentioned the clan, especially Daenn. It's really no wonder Tolomon hated him enough to attack on sight. Tolomon was nothing if not possessive, and he probably couldn't stand the idea of me favoring anyone or anything over him. Objects, after all, aren't supposed to have their own preferences.

No. Tolomon didn't love me. But Daenn... he has loved me and cared for me since we were children. He's always cared for others. I knew this about him; I just didn't realize how deeply that ran. But I can't ignore it now. Knowing that he originally came not to steal me away... that was a decision born of desperation and too little time to think, from a belief it was the only way I'd go along with him because he thought I loved Tolomon and would harbor hatred for his killer.

And I did nothing to disabuse Daenn of that notion, with my questions about why he killed Tolomon, all because I was too afraid to ask about what I really wanted to know—why he treated me with as little respect as Tolomon would.

And now... Daenn loves me enough to die for me. Maybe it's only friendship that drives him—we do have such a long history—but it's love nonetheless.

And I can't stand it.

I can't stand it because I love him.

That truth sears me, burning through every lie I've told myself about my feelings for Daenn; none of them can withstand the blaze. I love my husband. I always have, since we were hardly more than children. I missed him more than my own mother when I went away to the lowlands. He was the constant in my life that I pined for once it was out of my reach. I buried it when I was ordered to give myself to another man, but it was never truly gone. One can't simply forget a man like Daenn Henriken.

And I know, with a certainty as clear to me as my newfound self-awareness: I can't let Daenn die.

I have to save him. Maybe his fears are founded and it will kill me too, but I have to try. If I fail and it does kill me, it's not like he'll know.

And if it doesn't, well. He can rage at me once he's alive and whole again. I'll happily take his wrath if it means he's here to deliver it.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. Through the bond, I reach for the bracers. I can see how they've sunk claws into Daenn's magic, into Daenn, and I try to force myself between him and them, but I might as well be trying to bend iron with my bare hands.

I need to do more.

I open my eyes. Daenn's chest rises, as shallow as ever. I shift forward, onto my hands and knees, and I crawl forward until I'm sitting by him, level with his torso. I stare for a long moment, considering my options.

Daenn's clothing choices are like armor, even when he's out of his leathers. Not that they'd stop a blade, but he uses them as a shield, so there's no risk of accidentally brushing someone, even though he's admitted himself his magic doesn't seem to require touch.

This means his skin is covered from neck down. Long sleeves. Gloves. Trousers. Stockings. His only exposed skin is his head.

Do I just need to touch him? It seems too simple. Maybe it needs to be a kiss? We skipped that, what Jakob called the sealing kiss, in the ceremony as well.

I've dreamed of kissing Daenn more times than I'd admit to myself before today, but the idea of kissing him on the lips when he's unconscious makes me itchy. I'm already pushing past his desires by doing this. It doesn't seem right to also steal a kiss when I don't know how he feels about me.

I hope a more chaste kiss will suffice.

I tuck my hair behind my ear, lean forward, and press my lips to his cheek. I don't know if I'm supposed to do anything else, but I try to fill the act with determination, with my love for him. My desire and longing and hope. I want this man. I want to be his wife, I want to be one with him, to share a full bond and a full marriage. And most importantly, I want him to live .

Even if that means living a life where I love him and he doesn't return that affection, I will endure it if it means he lives.

Instantly, the bond between us snaps into focus, tightening, growing like a vine that connects our hearts. The swirling silvery tattoo burns under my skin, from my heart down to my wrist.

I don't need to wonder if it worked. I know, as clearly as I know that he's asleep—not because I can see it, but because I can sense it. I can sense him in a way I couldn't before, and I can sense his mind at rest. Or, at the very least, asleep. It has an edge of weariness that sleep should have shaved off, but I suspect that has to do with the bracers more than a natural weariness.

I straighten and comb a hand through Daenn's hair. It's thick, and silkier than a man's hair has any right to be. I let my fingers trail over his cheek, brushing my thumb over the spot I kissed. I've broken the barrier he's held between us since my return to the clan, and I don't ever want to draw back. Touching him is my lifeline.

With that point of contact grounding me, I close my eyes, shift to get more comfortable, and reach for the bracers over the bond again.

They too feel different now. When I brush my mental touch over them, I know the moment they take notice of me.

That's right. I feel like Daenn now. Pay attention to me.

As if they know my thoughts, they do. And they are... aggressive. Their claws sink toward me, ravenous. Angry.

But I can handle anger. I've always been good at soothing.

I push my magic—only mine; despite the strengthened bond, there's none of Daenn's magic left intertwined with mine, a fact that might scare me if I gave it more than a moment's consideration—toward the bracers. I give silent thanks that I've learned to direct it, and that I still can direct it, despite Daenn's magic being absent.

The bracers latch on to my magic, lapping it up like it's a pool of water, and their hold sends agony through my veins.

Is this the pain Daenn has dealt with since putting the first bracer on? I can't fathom dealing with it for hours, let alone weeks.

I grit my teeth and ignore the pain to the best of my ability while I pull as much of the bracers' attention to me as I can, unhooking them claw by claw from Daenn. My magic has far vaster stores, especially after waking the comatose clansfolk days before, and the bracers have had their fill of him, at least in the case of one, for weeks.

They take what I offer, gobble it up, and go searching for more. My magic has taken the aggressive edge from them, but they're still insatiable. They take and take, diving into that lake of magic I pulled from the comatose clansfolk, and with each moment they're latched into me, a tension builds, like a dam holding back a flood.

I pull my attention back from them slightly, just enough to reach for Daenn over our bond. I ignore his magic, instead searching for his essence. I have no idea if this will work, but now that our bond is complete, I hope.

After a moment, I find where his essence is twined with my own, like lovers wrapped in an embrace, and I push more of myself into it, strengthening him.

He won't die.

I have no concept of time, no way to tell how much passes. I am weaker with each breath, pulled thin and worn to the marrow, but I refuse to retreat from the bracers or Daenn.

I'm too focused on Daenn to notice when it happens .

The building pressure from the bracers bursts. Power rebounds, a torrential flood that tries to drown me, to drag me from Daenn. It burns; it tears at me. The agony from before is nothing compared to this. But I hold fast to Daenn.

It will not take him from me.

At long last, the flood recedes, flows away, retreating into the bracers. Like they've seen our defenses and finally acknowledged defeat. With a final shudder, they go dormant, and the only magic I can sense is mine and Daenn's. The glittering black thread of his weaves around my own sparkling milky-white magic. They're no longer merged; they look like they did before I touched them, if fainter than before. The excess from the comatose clansfolk is entirely gone. I shudder to think what would have happened if I didn't have it.

Beneath my hand, Daenn stirs, pulling me from my internal battlefield. I take a moment to savor the feel of him, both through the bond and under my touch.

He's alive. The bracers didn't take him from me. Whatever happens now, whatever consequences I face for completing the bond against his wishes, I am at peace in that knowledge.

Then I exhale and open my eyes to meet his gaze.

36

Desperate

Daenn - A Few Weeks Prior

In the distance, I saw the Chambledon estate. Earl Tolomon Becker's home. Emana's home, though my thoughts recoiled from that idea. It didn't fit her. It was too impersonal and cold for someone like Emana.

I shook my head, focusing on the wind tearing over my face. I couldn't think about her like that. I needed her. I needed her magic. My people needed her magic. My chest tightened as I remembered again what had pushed me into making this journey now, after all these years.

Larken, one of my closest and wisest allies. Gone in an instant, just like the others, but this time, it had been as I'd looked in his eyes, as I'd grasped his hand in a moment of camaraderie.

I would miss him sorely, along with everyone else my cursed magic had taken from me.

I drew in a ragged breath. I'd lost so much, starting with Emana and continuing in what felt like an endless battle. I was so tired.

I desperately hoped she wouldn't turn me away. That was why I was doing this as formally as I could. I'd come with a full honor guard—as a king in need of an ally,

not as a man in need of a woman.

I couldn't have her. I knew this; she was married. But I had a plan. I would invite her to stay at the clan as an advisor. Invite Tolomon, her oily husband, as well, since no doubt he would want to go wherever Emana went.

I mentally planned out the conversation, telling Emana about my magic. I didn't fear her reaction, despite how monstrous I was.

Emana wouldn't shy away. Her compassion was part of why I loved her. Telling her husband about it was another matter. I didn't want to trust a lowlander with such a secret, but would he allow Emana to come if he didn't know the full extent of my crisis?

I clenched a fist on the reins. Storm churred, barely audible over the wind. I could feel a vague sense of questioning from him, but I shook it off. Our gryphon-rider bond didn't allow us to carry conversations, and trying to explain my heartache over Emana, my dislike of her husband, wouldn't compute to my gryphon. If he could speak, he would simply tell me to challenge Tolomon to a fight. But that would run counter to my goals. I needed the man to... not like me, but agree to what I needed.

I just had no idea how to accomplish this.

Below us, the castle looked like a plaything, dark and drowsy in the fading sunlight. I pressed lightly on Storm's sides, and he began his descent.

My men followed suit, I knew, even though I couldn't hear them over the wind. I could see Eskil in my peripheral, and the others were well trained.

I could only imagine the sight we presented to any of Tolomon's guards watching from below .

Yes, I decided. I would present the idea of her being an honored advisor first and hope that was enough for her husband.

Her husband.

The word was rancor on my mind, even after all these years. I needed to fortify myself. In mere moments, I would see her, I would see them together, and their happiness would destroy me. If I succeeded here, my life was about to become my own personal hell.

I couldn't help a grimly wry smile. It already was. At least this hell would affect only me instead of putting my people at risk. If that was the torture I had to endure, so be it.

We landed in front of the manor, and I dismounted and moved to scratch under Storm's chin. He preened.

"You flew well, my friend," I murmured. He pressed his head into my chest, and a sense of a demand rose in my mind. I smiled. "One. You can have one treat, but no more, or you'll be too lazy to fly us home." And I couldn't help but plan for the possibility that we would go home empty-handed, that Emana or—more likely—her husband would turn us away, and I would have to find some other way to save my people from myself.

As I started to move to fetch Storm the promised rabbit, the great doors of the castle slammed open.

I turned, resisting the urge to pull my sword on instinct.

Tolomon, Emana's husband, strode down the steps, his face stormy despite the smile affixed there, a smile that I had no doubt told the people of the lowland courts 'be

aware of me. I'm dangerous.'

I couldn't help but think it made him look like a petulant child who hadn't gotten his way .

I stepped away from Storm, flicking a hand at one of my men. He fell back from the others, who were already moving into position behind me. He would get Storm's promised treat and care for the other gryphons so we wouldn't have to worry about anyone sulking on the flight home.

I got halfway across the courtyard when Tolomon reached the bottom step, but I didn't get a chance to issue a formal greeting.

"Why are you here?" The anger lacing his voice matched his face, but that wasn't what put me on my guard. That would be the hatred. This man hated me. I knew hatred well. I'd seen it on the battlefield, in men intent on cutting me down, and while I didn't know why, I could say with certainty that this man hated me more than any I'd faced before.

I curled my hands into fists to keep myself from going for my sword. "Greetings, Lord Becker. I am Daenn Henriken, King of the Allied Gryphon Clans." We'd met before, when Emana had left the clan for her wedding, but I didn't know if he remembered who I was specifically or if he just hated gryphon riders in general.

"I know who you are," snarled Tolomon. "Why have you come?"

There would be no pleasantries, then. I shifted, straightened. "I've come to speak with Emana."

"Lady Becker. She is my wife, and you will not speak as if you are familiar with her."

I clenched my jaw. The years of memories I had gave me every right to familiarity with my childhood friend, but I lashed that line of thought back. The man was right. Emana was his wife, and I would do well to keep some distance between us. I was still desperately in love with her, but maybe I could keep that painful truth to myself better with the barrier of another man's name between us. It was a futile hope, but I chose to ignore that whispered voice for the time being.

I inclined my head. "Lady Becker. My apologies. Is she in residence? It's a matter of urgency."

"No." Tolomon's word clipped over the end of my sentence, and behind me, I could sense how my men shifted. If Tolomon were a gryphon rider, they would be taking him to task for his insolent behavior toward me.

"No," I repeated slowly. "She's not in residence? When will she return?"

Tolomon stomped closer. "No, you may not see her. You aren't getting anywhere near my wife."

Cold anger slowly began rising in me at the possessive note Tolomon hinged on the term of address for Emana.

"Isn't it for her to decide if she wants to see me?" I said, slowly. I could feel myself slipping into my warrior king mask, but Tolomon was too irate to notice—or less of a coward than I would have pegged him for.

"I decide. She's mine." Tolomon said the word with a sneer. "Mine to speak for, mine to bed." His sneer deepened. "Sure, she's a bit useless, given that she hasn't managed to produce me any heirs yet. But that's what bastards are for, and I have a few of those lying about."

My senses sharpened as my rage eclipsed me. The longer he spoke, the harder it was not to kill this man. “Where is Emana?” My voice was a low growl, but it cut through Tolomon’s tirade.

His face turned purple that I would dare use her name again. But I didn’t care. He would do well to remember Emana’s ties to me, because suddenly my reason for coming was not the only reason I was here .

Even if she sent me away, I would not be leaving until I had seen her, until I could ascertain her well-being. I had never liked Tolomon, but in the last few minutes, he had made it clear how far beneath Emana he was, how little he truly deserved her.

“I will see her.” My voice was full of menace. I could see the moment Tolomon realized and fear slid into his gaze.

But the fear didn’t make him back down. He snarled wordlessly and drew his sword, diving at me. I didn’t even think. I pulled my sword and blocked in an instant, instincts and years of training guiding me.

I was death, and this man deserved to die.

My opponent drew back, and I moved in, relentless. He barely managed to parry my feint, but I spun out of it and swept my sword around and deep into his chest.

It was a faster death than he deserved. But he was a danger, and that was the only thought driving me. The body dropped at my feet, and I pulled my sword out, blinking away the battle haze that had come over me.

I looked down. I had killed a lord of Verksland. I grimaced; even though he had attacked first, that would be a headache.

A feminine cry came from the great doors. I snapped my head up. Emana stood there. Whole, healthy, if it weren't for the look of pure shocked outrage on her face, and something inside me loosened at the sight of her after so long. But she was staring at me like I was a monster. I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes.

Of course she was. With the scene before her, I couldn't blame her.

Fine. I would be the monster. I needed her, and there was no way she would come willingly after this. I could only hope that once she'd had time to calm down, what she knew of me would allow her to listen, allow me to explain this.

I knew how futile a hope that probably was, but it didn't matter at the moment. It was time for Emana to come home. She was the only one who could keep me from tearing my clan apart.

I opened my eyes and met her gaze. "You're coming back to the clan."

Fire sparked in her eyes, and her chin tilted up. I knew that look. I knew her every look and mannerism. They were branded into my heart, along with everything else about her, marking me, making me useless for any other woman.

I spoke again, forestalling her protest as my mind snapped through my options. After what I'd just done, I needed a way to keep her at my side. Maybe even something that would give me access to her magic even if she tried to run or leave. Maybe that would be enough to stop my magic and save my people, even if she hated me for it.

I hated myself for it, but that didn't stop the words coming out of my mouth. "You're coming home," I said again, "and you're marrying me before tomorrow's nightfall."

Unbridled Delight

I look at my husband, taking a moment to savor all the signs of life. His eyes are open, blinking at me. His chest rises and falls with deep, full breaths. He's still pale, but he's lost that unhealthy grey undertone, and his skin—his skin is warm beneath my hand, and in my mind, instead of just a steady trickle of emotions, I can sense him with a depth, a solidity that is as tangible as his presence beside me. As if before, we were across the room from each other, could see each other, hear each other if we raised our voices—but now he stands before me, close enough that I can hear every whisper and breath.

So the moment he wakes up enough to realize what I've done, to register my hand on his skin, I feel that too, and I brace.

A torrent slams into me. A mixture of emotions, sensations, and unformed thought. Horror, rage, fear, relief. I pull back my hand, and I try to wall him off, to give him some privacy despite what I've done.

With a slowness that belies the maelstrom inside him, Daenn sits up.

It's a relief to see how easily he does it. There's no struggling, no weakness. I doubt he's at full strength yet, but without the bracers draining him, I'm sure he'll make a full recovery.

He pins his gaze on me, and it's indecipherable. Even with our connection now

stronger than ever—even though I can feel him and his emotions far more clearly than I ever could before—I still don't understand what he's feeling at this moment. I spare him a glance, but that's all I can manage, so I drop my gaze and reach for his hand, unlacing the bracer and pulling it off.

The fight was won, but I don't want to risk them reactivating.

“You stopped them,” he finally says. His voice is calm, unreadable. “You... you completed the bond.”

Over the bond, anger conquers his other emotions.

“You're a fool if you really thought I was going to just let you die, Daenn.” I tug off the first bracer and toss it to the end of the bed. I'm reaching for the second when his hand intercepts me. He grips my wrist and tugs me forward.

He's gentle but unyielding. “You should have let me die.”

I match his glare with one of my own. “That was never going to happen.”

“It would have been best for everyone. For you and the clan.”

“No,” I snap, leaning in. “In no way would that have been best for me. I couldn't let you die when I love you.”

Daenn freezes, and I realize what I've snarled. My terror flares at how blank he is, complete and utter shock, and it feels like my every fear is being realized.

He didn't want this bond. He actively avoided it. I chained myself to him and there is no way to break that. But in his blankness, I can see my life stretching before me, living every day beside him as he hates me for forcing this on him. With him, but apart.

I was willing to do it because it means he's alive, but it's a bleak future.

"I'm sorry—I know I'm not an ideal queen. I don't even know if I can bear you heirs; I never did for Tolomon, and—"

His grip tightens on my wrist. "Tolomon was vermin. I know you might have cared for him, Emana, but you never should have had to deal with him and his abuse—"

"He made my life a misery," I cut in. "He isolated me; he belittled me. Ours was never a marriage of love—not for him, and certainly not for me. My predominant feeling was relief when you killed him." I've never admitted anything so blunt about him aloud, but Daenn needs to know this. I can't let him continue with his deluded thinking that I ever loved my former husband.

He leans back in surprise. "Then why were you so angry?"

"Because, first of all, I shouldn't have been relieved!" I throw up my hand. "He was my husband. I should have been loyal, I should have been a better wife, I should have—"

But then his grip on my wrist tightens further, and he pulls me forward, closing the gap and encasing me in a hug. I can't help but instantly melt against him. He threads his fingers through my hair, and his fierce whisper is hot against my ear. "It's all right. You're allowed to feel relief when a man who so clearly disrespected and mistreated you is removed from your life."

I let those words swirl through me and take root. They're comforting, soothing that niggling guilt I haven't been able to absolve since I first saw Tolomon at Daenn's feet.

Daenn continues, his voice rumbling through my chest, "I'm sorry for how I handled everything, but I thought it was the only way. I thought you cared for him, and I

needed you, even if you hated me.”

“I understand that now. But I was also angry because I thought you’d become just like him. Stealing me away, claiming me like a thing . I should have known better, but all I saw was your actions, not your underlying motivation.”

“I will spend the rest of my life atoning for that, if you’ll let me. I never intended for you to feel that way. I just... I thought I had just murdered the man you loved. It seemed like the only way.”

I shake my head against his shoulder. “How could someone like him replace the adoration that had already embedded in my chest for you ?”

His inhale is surprised. He pulls back to meet my eyes. “How long have you loved me, Eman?”

There’s a desperation to the question, like the answer is a lifeline. It makes it easy to answer, despite how vulnerable it makes me feel. I do try to lighten the weight of my words with a small laugh. “Basically forever?”

The last thing I see is unbridled delight steal over his face before his lips crash into mine, and his other arm circles my waist—and it’s like my world has ended and begun all at once.

I’m spinning, but I’m safe, because Daenn will never let me go. I cling to him, unable to process anything except that Daenn is kissing me.

He pulls away before I’m ready, and I lean forward, trying to follow, which only earns me a husky laugh.

“I guess this means maybe you’re fond of me too?” I ask lightly, trying to disguise how much I need his affirmation in return to balance the field between us.

Of course he can see right through me. He cups my face in his hands, and the gesture is a cocoon only outmatched by his words. “My sweet Emi. I have loved you since before I knew what love was. I wanted you, ached for you, longed for you. I begged my father to change the terms of the treaty when I found out. I would have given them anything else— everything else—rather than you. When you were gone, you were my constant thought, and when you were here again, it took every strip of my will not to pull you into my arms like this. I needed you for your magic. But I want you for you, just like I always have.” He brushes a thumb down my cheek. “And while I may want children, that’s not why I love you. You are more than your ability to give me heirs. I want you even if we never have any.”

I’m heady on the euphoria of his words, of his touch, or maybe it’s the euphoria he is feeling, spinning my head like a rich liquor. I don’t know. I can’t tell, and it doesn’t matter. Because Daenn loves me. Our emotions tangle across the bond, multiplying as they play off each other, and it’s overwhelming.

I have no words, so instead, I hook my arms around his neck, crawl into his lap, and kiss him again.