



# When the Baker Met the Dragon (Leafshire Cove Monsters #3)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** She bakes warmth and comfort. He thrives on mischief and adventure. But love has a way of turning even the wildest hearts toward home.

I love my quiet life in Leafshire Cove—early mornings, the scent of cinnamon and honey, the simple joy of kneading dough while the village slowly wakes. Everything in my world is warm, steady, safe.

Except Cyrus, the dragon shifter next door.

With his roguish grin and endless charm, Cyrus runs a rowdy pub, flirts shamelessly with almost everyone, and lives for adventure. Our friendship is built on teasing banter and unspoken understanding.

But what most of Leafshire Cove doesn't know—what I've only ever suspected—is that beneath his carefree facade, Cyrus is desperate to discover the history of his dragon bloodline.

Even if it means poking his handsome nose into dangerous places.

When a noble's impossibly large pastry order threatens to overwhelm me, Cyrus offers to help bake. During the late nights in the kitchen, I start to wonder if I've been wrong about him—about us—all along. But when a mysterious merchant offers him the chance to uncover his true heritage, our burgeoning relationship goes up in flames.

I know some dragons are fated for distant skies, but could some of them—one of them—possibly be meant to stay?

**Total Pages (Source):** 35

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 am*

## Chapter 1

### Kaya

The crickets and spring frogs are still chirping and trilling as I climb out of bed and get dressed, donning a clean white apron on top. By the light of my candle, I knot my hair, then I pad down the stairs, stopping halfway to pick up Athanasios, the first maplecater I adopted years ago. He was already old when I found him in the rain, being sad and adorable; I have no clue how old, but his teeth are longer than any other maplecater's teeth I've seen and I've seen many.

"Good morning, Sio," I say, using his nickname.

I ease him over my shoulder as he purrs and continue down to the bakery's kitchen. Maplecater's pelts are a product of the Veiled Kingdoms' magic. Each of them look as though they are covered in autumn leaves, but when you get close, you see each leaf is made of fur and it's incredibly soft.

"How was your night, buddy?"

He gives his usual loud meow. I set him down, wash my hands at the pump sink, and begin gathering the ingredients for my cinnamon rolls. The actions of putting the dough together are as familiar to me as breathing, but I still pay close attention. I savor the scents of flour, sugar, and cinnamon.

Aside from time with my friends, Laini and Tully, this is the only activity I truly fall into with my whole heart. I have no desire to gallivant off into the unknown like

Cyrus, my friend who owns the pub next door, does from time to time. Neither do I want to risk my neck and climb to the top of this or that mountain like my brother, Renen.

Sio meows again. “You’d gladly follow Renen up the cliffs if I didn’t keep a keen eye on your old arse, wouldn’t you?”

Another painfully loud meow and now he’s doing turns around my ankles. He’s a darling.

I set the cinnamon rolls on the long countertop by the back wall so they can rise while I work on the scones. The sun is rising now too, buttery light pouring out of the windows above my brick oven and through the doorway that leads into the bakery’s eatery and display area. The kitchen is cool and dim and I love how quiet it is. I start the scone dough, then the jingle of the bells on my front door and a familiar voice breaks my reverie.

“Good morning, Kaya!”

My stomach flips. He just startled me, that’s all. It’s not his good looks or rich voice, making me feel that way, right? We have been friends for ages. I lick my lips and tuck a loose strand of my hair back into my bun.

“Back here, Cyrus!”

The dragon shifter ducks his horned head as he strides into the kitchen with his dark green hair still sleep-tousled. His gold eyes shimmer, reminding me of the name of his pub—The Gold Coin. Scales highlight his broad shoulders and proud cheekbones. I lick my lips again, wishing I’d remembered the gloss Tully had given me for my last birthday. My mouth is suddenly far too dry.

I reach for a small crockery cup and fill it at the sink as Cyrus does his usual perusing of my work.

“Looks good, very good,” he says.

“Nothing is ready yet.” I down a few swallows of cool water.

He reaches for the bowl of thyme-orange frosting I made yesterday for the scones and I lean over quickly to slap his hand. Chuckling, he pulls his taloned hand away and gives me a wink.

“What do you want?” I ask, sounding more harsh than I meant to. “You smell like you slept in the brewery.”

“Do I?” He actually looks upset as he lifts his tunic and gives it a sniff.

I laugh. “Yes, you do.” I grab one of yesterday’s lavender lemon bars and toss it at him. “Here.”

“Am I supposed to eat it or wash with it?” He pretends to scrub the bar under his arm.

“Brat. There is nothing soapy about my flavors and you know it.”

“True.” He gobbles the whole thing down in two bites, then rubs his flat stomach. “Delish. As always.” Leaning on the wooden block where I am making the scone dough, he watches my hands at work. His sleeves are rolled to his elbows. Cyrus is strong from years of lifting ale barrels and sacks of flour—he helps me on supply day.

My elbow bumps the measuring cup off the surface, and Sio yowls, dodging the liquid that splashes to the floor. Cyrus bends to pick up the cup.

“What do you need?” I ask, wishing he would leave me alone. He’s a good friend, but I feel more comfortable baking without his eyes on me.

Sio is curling around Cyrus’s ankles now, his right side soaked.

“I was hoping you could sell me four extra baguettes.”

“Sure. I will bring them over early this evening, all right?”

“Perfect. I’ll put my money in your till. I assume I can’t talk you into joining us?”

“For the gambling tourney?” I laugh and he joins in, his gold eyes twinkling.

“Yes, I don’t know why I even asked.” His fingers cup my elbow and he squeezes gently. “I’ll see you later, sweetness.”

I smile and try not to wince at the nickname. He’s called me that forever. It started when he was here fixing my sink pump. I tripped and spilled an entire bag of sugar across the kitchen and we spent two hours collecting the expensive ingredient as best we could.

“Have a good day, Cyrus.”

He pets Sio once, then whistles merrily and lopez into the front of the bakery. I watch him pull the large skeleton key I gave him from his pocket. He’s going to lock the door behind him. Good. I can’t have customers wandering in this early. Even though Tully’s duplication spell helps me produce double what I do with my own human hands, I am still painfully understaffed. My one employee, Rosalind, a pixie who usually works part-time, is visiting her sister, whose twins are due to be born today.

But before Cyrus can even finish unlocking the door to leave, there’s a female fairy

knocking. She peers through the leaded glass window, pink hair bouncing in time with her continued knocking.

“Hello! Hlllooo? Aren’t you open yet?” she asks through the door.

“Want me to get rid of them?” Cyrus twists and stage-whispers to me across the bakery’s eating area.

“No, it’s fine.”

I dust my hands on my apron and hurry out, wiggling past Cyrus to unlock the door with my own key. I swallow as I brush past Cyrus. He is so warm and tall—I guess it’s a dragon thing.

As soon as I swing the door open, a noble, middle-aged fairy dressed in a deep scarlet dress pushes inside. Her wings shimmer with pink light that matches her hair. I know she’s of the nobility because she wears a family crest—a large pin holding her cloak at her throat. She looks to be about forty, but it’s hard to know with folks who were born in the Veiled Kingdoms.

“Can I help you?” I force a smile even though I wish she had read the business hours sign next to the door and realized I wasn’t due to open for another hour.

“I’ve been told you are the pastry queen,” the noble fairy says.

“That’s the truth,” Cyrus says from behind me.

I glance at him and smile, then I focus on my customer. I can’t afford to ignore wealthy folks like her.

“I do enjoy making sweets. What are you looking for? Chocolate croissant? Scones?

Tarts, perhaps? The strawberries are in from our greenhouse, and they're wonderful. With spring officially here, I should have more fruit options any day now."

She waves off my suggestions. "I need enough scones to feed one hundred at the queen's tea in two days. I'll need at least three different flavors. Lavender and lemon, perhaps? Maybe orange? Strawberry would be good. Do you put the flavors into the scones or only into the frosting? They will have frosting, of course. Neatly piped. Oh, and about thirty chocolate croissants would do nicely."

My mouth is hanging open and I can't seem to talk. One hundred? The money this order would provide... I could get a new oven. I could hire a full-time employee in addition to paying Rosalind for her part-time work.

The heat of Cyrus's hand finds my back. "Kaya, do you need a moment to figure out the cost and details? I can grab a quill, ink, and paper."

I shake myself. "I would be happy to fill your order," I say to the fairy.

"Oh, wonderful. I will pay you one hundred sovereigns. I'll need them in two days."

Swallowing panic, I nod. "No problem."

"Can you make me a sample or two to take with me? The queen demands to taste everything before serving it to her guests."

"Sample, yes. Of course."

My mind is spinning. Do I have enough ingredients?

Cyrus walks past me and starts doing what he does best—charming people.

“Where did your tailor find that lovely fabric?” he asks, using his deepest, most alluring voice. “I have searched for that shade of red for ages. Looks good with my hair.”

He winks and she blushes.

“From the traveling market last autumn. There’s an orc who sails beyond our kingdoms to secure the finest and more rare dyes for his wools and silks.”

As they blather on, I head back to the kitchen. One hundred sovereigns! This is life-changing money.

But how will I fill this order?

I might be friends with a powerful witch, but she can’t solve this for me. The doubling spell she cast on my oven thankfully doesn’t affect the taste of my goods, but if she tampered more, I know the magic would sour things. We have experimented with the spells enough for me to be sure of that. No, magic is not the answer here.

I hear Cyrus bid the noble fairy goodbye, then he is walking into the kitchen where I’m stalled out.

“I didn’t even get her name,” I say lamely. “I didn’t write down the order. I’m panicking.”

Cyrus smiles and tilts his horned head at me. “Aw, Kaya. You’re amazing. It’ll be fine.” He snags the stack of scrap paper I keep by the back door and the quill I received when I finished my tutoring. Leaning on the counter beside my baking mess, he begins scribbling and going through the list.



“Lady Egrettington is her name. The order is for three scone flavors for a tea party of one hundred. Lavender. Lemon. Orange. Strawberry. She also requires thirty chocolate croissants.”

“Oh! I didn’t give her a sample!”

“I talked her out of that to take something off your to-do list.”

My heart warms and I study his handsome face. He is a wonderful person. Naughty and full of vices, but wonderful. “Thank you, Cyrus. I really appreciate it.”

“And guess what?”

“What?” I am always nervous when he gets that excited look.

“I’m going to help you fill this order.”

“What? You don’t know how to bake.”

Cyrus waves off my concern. “I know Rosalind will be gone for a while with those twins coming. Listen, I’ve picked up more than you think watching you work all these years.”

“Really? Won’t you be busy with the pub?”

“Halvard and Trustan can handle most of it. It’ll be fine.”

I cross my arms and give him a stern look. “You always think everything will be fine.”

“It usually is!” He squeezes her shoulder and starts to head out. “I’ll be back this

afternoon. I'll bring one of my part-time lads to watch the bakery. Sound good?"

"It does. Thanks, Cyrus. I really appreciate it."

"No worries!" He waves over his shoulder and I hear the door open and shut.

Why was he so set on helping me? I mean, I guess it's because if I fail in this, I'll likely be too overwhelmed to get his bakery items for the pub, too, so that makes sense. He's a good guy, but he isn't usually the first in line for work. I'm pretty sure he sleeps until almost noon when he can. And with a bed full of lovers. I roll my eyes, thinking of his wink and the way he made Lady Egrettington blush. My new baking assistant is truly incorrigible.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 am*

### Chapter 2

#### Cyrus

A fter a visit to Romulus in the watchtower to see how the weather will be in the next few days, I walk through my pub's doors. Today, The Gold Coin is a riot of noise, the opposite of both Kaya's bakery and Rom's tower.

What in the Blessed Stones is going on?

Two goblins and a pixie are strumming lutes near the stairs. A boisterous crowd is gathered at the bar top, raising cups and laughing. Halvard's worried, green face shows above everyone else's heads.

"Eh! While I adore this kind of nonsense, it's a little early, folks. What is happening?" I ease my way through the customers and join the orc.

No one seems to hear me, though. Behind the bar, Halvard is dishing out drink tokens—small, wooden discs we give to people when we have disappointed them in some way or done something I really enjoyed, like singing a good song during the dinner hour.

I grab Halvard's arm, and he turns to face me. The crowd chats up a storm behind him, and already quite a few of them are deep in their cups.

"Why are you giving out free drinks at ten in the morning?" I ask Halvard.

“Well, I told that man there,” he says, jerking his chin toward a thin human male with a beard who is talking to a circle of folks dressed in a similarly bright fashion as him, “that he could have a token because he wanted to talk to you, the owner, and you weren’t here. I guess word spread, then everyone was demanding to speak to you and asking for tokens and it just got out of hand.”

I chuckle and pat Halvard’s gigantic arm. “All right. You take ten, and I’ll do something with this wild lot.”

“Thanks, Cyrus. Sorry.”

Halvard paves a path through the gambling that’s started up—a dice affair that appears to require three tables and the bar top too.

I raise my hands and let out a small stream of fire over everyone’s heads. The music drops off. A woman yelps and grabs the man beside her while all eyes find me.

“You’ve had your fun with Halvard the Generous, which is forever his title as of today. The bar and kitchen are now closed until noon. Either pay up and be on your merry way or settle yourselves by the hearth there. Trustan, set some pitchers of water about the room. Cups, too.”

Trustan calls out, “Yes, Master Cyrus!”

The customers ease into chairs, their conversation and laughter more subdued now. It’s nice having fire to control a rowdy room. Works every time.

As I tidy up the bar, washing cups and returning bottles to the shelves, I wonder if other dragon shifters use their fire in ways like that. How often do they shift into their wild form?

I've never seen one of my kind in any other cities, villages, or towns either, and it's not for lack of trying. I head over to Kingstown once a moon to have drinks with a few old friends, and though every type of creature that exists seems to walk those fancy streets, there isn't a dragon shifter anywhere to be found.

I don't have much time to ruminate. Heading to the kitchen, I snag Halvard and we start slicing cheese and bread for the lunch rush. Once noon hits, Halvard takes orders and I dole out drinks at the bar. Trustan serves our spiced spring onion pottage, Kaya's perfectly chewy bread, and some of the fine Leafshire cheddar I purchase regularly from the family over the river.

The brightly dressed thin human male approaches the bar, his gaze peppering my face. "Ah, Master Cyrus."

"Yes?"

"I'm Rickon DeFleuris." He holds out his hand and I shake it. "I was wondering if I could have a word with you."

He looks like trouble and not the fun kind. "Sure, but what about?"

I hand two cups of watered white wine to Halvard, who takes them to the table by the hearth. The pub door opens and it's Kaya with the extra baguettes. My stomach tightens, and I'm not sure if it's the scent of the freshly baked loaves making me feel so excited or her glance my way. Her light brown eyes are exactly the shade of a good whiskey.

I lead the man to a small round table by the front door. Most people ignore this spot because it's farther from the bar, the fire, and the music, so it's a good table for actual conversation. Kaya always says it's her table though she rarely stays for longer than a few minutes. My boisterous pub isn't her favored type of environment.

We take seats opposite one another and he removes his dumb, yellow hat. It's a slouchy thing with a sad-looking feather. His eyes are sincere as he takes a breath.

"So you're a dragon shifter."

I lift an eyebrow. "I'm aware."

DeFleurtis laughs. "Your kind isn't often seen in these parts, correct? I've met a couple in the northern regions, but not in the southern areas of the Veiled Kingdoms."

My heart thumps loudly and I swallow. "I haven't met any. At all."

"I've taken up dragon study as a hobby."

"How nice for you. I hope we are more interesting than say knitting or collecting stamps."

Laughing, he bumps a hand on the table. "You are."

"Color me relieved."

"Did you know that the castle ruins on the mound outside Leafshire Cove's walls used to belong to dragon shifters?"

I blink. I had not known that. Did anyone know that? Did everyone but me know that? When I don't muster a reply, he continues on.

"It surprised me too when I found the records in the queen's library in Kingstown," DeFleurtis says.

"The queen's library has information on dragon shifters?"

“Just the record of that site. Sadly, I haven’t found a single other mention of your kind in any library I’ve visited. But the old castle’s construction documents were signed by a landowner named Dragorian Sunscale, and his kind designation was dragon shifter, as per the king’s scribe at the time.”

“Hell of a name.”

“It is! I plan to do some researching while I’m in town. Would you like to go with me?”

A chill dances down my back. “You don’t mean to the ruins, do you?”

“Of course.”

“That area is cursed.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 am*

### Chapter 3

#### Cyrus

I push away from the table and stand to leave. “You don’t want to mess around that site, let me tell you. The last person to give it a whirl died of a heart attack the very next day. We have a whole list of folks who have suffered various ailments after sticking their noses in whatever dark magic haunts that place.”

He’s rubbing his beard and looking off toward the rest of the patrons. “I didn’t realize that.”

“Aye, it’s not a good idea. But thanks for the information. How long are you here?” I’m only trying to be polite. He doesn’t seem to know any more than I do.

“A few days. Maybe more. It depends on a few variables with regard to my traveling party. We are off to the seaside villages for some fishing soon.”

“Sounds nice,” I say. “You stay away from those ruins, all right? I don’t want your death on my hands.”

DeFleurtis’s face clouds. “When you put it like that, it certainly paints a picture.”

“Good. Want another ale? It’s on the house.”

“You’ve given us too much on the house already. I’ll come up and pay for this next one.”



As he stands, I slap his shoulder in a neighborly way. “You’re not half bad, human.”

He laughs, looking a little nervous. “I mind my manners around folks who can breathe fire.”

“Smart.”

I head back to the bar and greet a stag shifter who comes through town every spring.

“Good day, Thanale. Want your usual?”

“Hi, Cyrus. Aye, thanks.”

I pour him a pint of Grumlin’s spring ale and hand it over. The retired wizard cooks this batch up each year alongside the brewer. It has fruity notes to it, but it isn’t overly sweet or acidic. They do a good job with the stuff. Thanale pushes a couple coins across the rough wood grain.

“How has living in the human realm been, Thanale?” I am impressed he chose to cross over after he married a human three years back. “It has to be a real adjustment.”

He takes a swig of his ale, then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. His antlers stretch across three stool spots. “It’s wild. The humans are even more curious about us as we are of them.”

“I bet it’s not easy being in a crowd and having those to deal with.”

“Probably as challenging as those wings would be,” he says, eyeing the tucked wings that peek over my shoulders.

I nod and pour myself a cup of the spring ale. He lifts his to mine and we toast to the

weather. Everyone is happy to see spring arrive, especially after that crazy thundersnow we had this winter. Turns out, it was pretty widespread and ended up in the human town criers' reports.

Kaya must have left because I don't see her anywhere. The hatch-marked candle holder on the wall shows that it's nearly time for me to head back to her bakery to help out. A flutter of excitement dances through me at the thought of being alone with her in her kitchen.

The dragon hobbyist is walking out the door with his group. I wonder if he'll go to the ruins despite my warning.

Halvard refills some patron's cups with water. I grab his elbow and lean close to his ear.

"Eh, do you really think the ruins are cursed?" I ask.

The orc's eyes widen, and his meaty hand grips the pitcher so hard that a crack runs from the handle to the lip. The folks seated at the table next to us glance our way, then go back to their game of cards.

"Aye, Cyrus. I saw a ghost up there when I was helping Delixian free that goat trapped in the old fencing."

"A ghost?"

He grimaces around his tusks. "It was a light and it screamed at us. Ask the healer. He'll corroborate."

"I believe you. I remember passing by during that drought when we were trying to find wishberries. It was Kaya, Tully, and I. Awful sounds came up from the ground

near what's left of the gates in the walls."

"Why do you ask?"

I shrug. "A customer was talking about going up there for research."

The pitcher cracks the rest of the way and water gushes onto the back of a female orc seated at the table.

"Oh!" She whirls and glares at Halvard, but then her face melts into a saucy grin. "You could have simply said hello ."

Halvard smiles politely. "I'll get you a towel. Apologies."

The female orc is still eyeing him as we make our way to the linen closet beside the bar. Halvard digs out a small towel and tosses it over his shoulder.

"I don't think she's too upset about that," I say, snickering. "I will say, that's a clever way to get a date."

Halvard gives me a withering look, but then he sobers as we return to the table. The female accepts the towel and my apologies as pub owner. I promise her a free meal, then I start toward the door.

"Do you think we should alert Rustion?" Halvard asks.

"Maybe. I'll take care of it. You all right here? I need to give Kaya a hand at the bakery."

"Sure. We're good." Halvard is already turning away to serve a party of humans.

Outside, the weather is just about perfect. Tree seeds float through the air, maplecats curl under flowering bushes, and the town is pleasantly busy with tourists and residents alike out enjoying the soft breeze. It's a short walk to Rustion's estate and once I'm inside his gates, I find him quickly. He's talking to his beekeeper, who wears a white tunic and a hat draped in gauze.

"Good afternoon, Cyrus," Lord Mayor Rustion says, giving me a smile. The old lion shifter helped me get the pub started years ago. He invested in me, giving me the funds to build out the kitchen and purchase furniture.

"Morning, Mayor. How are the bees liking this weather?"

The beekeeper—I forget his name—nods. "It's ideal as long as the wind doesn't get too wild. The dandelions, crocuses, and daffodils are out in force."

"Don't let me forget to put in my order when you have the honey ready."

"I will reserve your usual," the beekeeper says. "Don't worry."

"Thanks."

"What brings you here, Cyrus?" Rustion is studying my face and likely sees the concern there.

"There are some folks heading up to the ruins," I inform him.

Both males' faces fall.

I hold my hands up. "I know. I told them not to go."

"You mentioned the curse?" Rustion asks.

“I did. But their leader appears to have ignored my warnings. At least, that’s what it seemed like to me. I figured it might be worth a look.”

“I’ll send a few of my guards up to keep them off the grounds,” Rustion says.

“If you want a hand, let me know. I can ask Halvard to join them if you need me to. I’ll be at Two Cats all afternoon and probably into the evening if you need to find me.”

The mayor gives me a funny look. “Really?”

I narrow my eyes.

The beekeeper clears his throat and says, “All right. Well, I’ll be off then.”

“What is going on at Kaya’s?” Rustion asks quietly.

“A fairy named Lady Egrettington made a massive order for the queen’s tea.”

Recognition lights Rustion’s eyes. “Ah, yes. I’ve met her. That is good news for Kaya certainly, yes? The lady offered to pay appropriately? I’ll set her to rights if she is trying to get something cheap from our folks.”

“She offered plenty, yes. But it’s a lot for just Kaya to bake.”

“She has Rosalind part time still, doesn’t it?”

“Aye, but this is a complicated order. And I think Rosalind might be gone for a while. Her sister is having twins.”

Rustion nods. “It’s kind of you to help out. Now, I must be going. I have a meeting

with the Western Front Bridge Builders to improve the pass upstream.”

“Thanks for watching out for the tourists,” I say. “Their leader is a tall, thin human. A man named Rickon DeFleuris.”

I bid him good bye and hurry to Kaya’s bakery. The sun is already sliding toward the last half of the afternoon and I should have been there already.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 am*

### Chapter 4

#### Kaya

It's nearly three in the afternoon and Cyrus still hasn't shown up. My stomach sinks. I already bought the ingredients I need. I honestly didn't think I expected Cyrus to show, but I guess I had my hopes up. It's all right. I'm not angry with him. That's just how he is. You can't nail that dragon down. He is fun and kind, but he is flighty. I chuckle sadly at my own little joke. He belongs in loud places full of folks; he belongs in the skies, finding adventure. A dragon shifter like him can't be happy in a quiet bakery with only quiet old me to keep him company.

I roll my eyes at myself, throwing off my self-deprecating mood. I am enjoying my time in the kitchen and I refuse to ruin it by being mooney. I closed up the bakery early so I could get to work on this massive order so the place is serene and smells of cherry blossom tea and cinnamon.

I taste the honey I am about to add to the dough. It's sweet and almost fruity. I measure out a tablespoon and work it into the spongy dough. Sio circles my ankles and purrs in his odd, overly loud and staccato way.

"You're tickling me, Sio." I laugh and use my foot to nudge him gently toward his basket of toys in the corner

He takes the hint and trots over to retrieve his favorite item—a stuffed version of a shrub gryphon that my weaver friend, Laini, made for him last year. He tears into the toy like he is destroying a vicious enemy.

“Ooo, you are so strong, taking down the scary gryphon.”

I use the wooden paddle to adjust the coals in the oven, then slide the next batch of scones in to bake. At the back of the kitchen, I open up the carved wooden chest that Tully made for me. The chest’s magic keeps baked goods fresh as the moment you set them inside and it’s as priceless as Tully’s doubling spell. It would be impossible for me to make a living without them since I haven’t been able to hire enough staff. Wheat flour, butter, and sugar have all been too expensive to make it work.

The bell on my door chimes, making my heart jump. I close the keeping box and head toward the front. Did I forget to lock it?

“I’m sorry I’m late, Kaya.”

Cyrus is walking briskly toward me, a soft look of contrition in his handsome face. With shining scales highlighting his skin and spring-green hair—and those horns!—he is stunning. I have always wanted to touch his wings, too...

“Of course, he is,” a low, scratchy voice says.

I whirl around to see Sio stepping out of my magical chest.

“Yes, it’s me,” Sio says. “Your loyal companion.”

I can’t speak. I can only utter incoherent sounds and stare.

Cyrus does not have that problem. Ever. He hurries forward and takes a knee in front of Sio. “This is amazing! Nice to meet you, Sio.”

The maplecat gives him a withering look. “We’ve met.”



“Well, I know, but?—”

Heart skipping, I finally get my mouth working and I scoop the cat into my arms to hug him.

“Oh Sio! Do you like your new food?” I ask.

I’ve been feeding him a blend of spare fish parts supplied by Grumlin, the wizard who runs the Goat and Dragon tavern.

“I do.” He purrs into my neck and nuzzles my ear. “You are a very good human.”

“Have you always been able to talk? Why is this happening now?”

“I think that box of yours sparked the ability that is now latent in maplecat blood,” Sio says.

Cyrus and I both eye Tully the Witch’s trunk.

“Wow,” we say in unison.

Cyrus smooths the leafy fur of Sio’s back. “Should we take a few minutes and give all of your associates out there a turn in the trunk?”

“Definitely not. It would be overwhelming to them. They’re too young. Now, I’m tired of this style of communication. Please let me go back to being a silent friend for a while.”

“Oh, all right,” I say.

I set him on the stool by the wooden countertop. He sits and flicks his tail, sending

puffs of flour into the air.

Cyrus shakes his head, then faces me. “Magical talking cat aside, today has been strange, and that’s why I’m late. I’m so sorry. What can I do?”

“Let’s start on the second batch of icing, and you can tell me what strange things have been going on.”

I glance at Sio, wondering if he will speak again or if that’s all I’ll get out of him forever. Once Cyrus and I have the orange rind grated and the sugar and water gathered, we mix two bowls until the blend is smooth and smells divine.

“So tell me. What happened?” I ask.

Cyrus licks icing from his whisk, and the way his lips are parted holds my gaze for too long.

This job isn’t going to be easy, not with the best looking male in town in the kitchen with me.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:20 am*

### Chapter 5

Kaya

I cough, hoping to shake off this attraction I'm feeling toward my friend, and turn to check the oven. The scones are ready. We set them on my cooling rack and they fill the kitchen with their glorious scent.

"There's a tourist here who claims that dragons are his hobby interest," Cyrus says.

"I hope he didn't put it like that."

"He did."

"I'm sorry. I'm guessing he is one of my kind."

Cyrus chuckles. "Yes, but I won't hold it against you."

Humans can be so oblivious and even rude when it comes to dealing with Veil folk.

"Thanks. Did he try to poke and prod you?"

Raising an eyebrow, Cyrus grins. His elbow brushes my arm as we place the last of the scones on the rack. "He's not my type."

I give him a stern look. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

"If you wanted to do any poking or prodding, I'm yours."

When we first met, I found far too much joy in this flirting he does, but I know now this is just his normal behavior with almost everyone. He doesn't like me like that. We are firmly just friends. Despite what my head knows, my body remains under the influence of his considerable charm. My cheeks heat and my mouth goes dry.

"You better behave, dragon. I have a magical cat on my side now and his teeth are legendary."

Sio bares said chompers at Cyrus, who grimaces and holds up his hands.

"All right. I'll be a good lad," Cyrus says. "I swear it."

"Don't go promising things you can't deliver," I say, laughing.

While we drizzle the icing over the scones, Cyrus goes on with his story.

"This tourist said he is headed up to the ruins because the old castle was once owned by a dragon shifter."

I drop my icing bowl and Cyrus darts forward. He catches it neatly and returns it to me. When his fingers brush mine, my skin tingles like he has loosed a few sparks over my hand. He looks from his hand to my face and his eyes have gone serious.

"He knows that place is cursed, right?" I say quickly, trying to smooth over the awkward vibe happening between us. "Did you warn him?"

"Of course, I did." The serious look fades from Cyrus's expression; he appears legitimately afraid. "But I didn't get the idea that he was going to listen to anyone's advice."

"That type, huh?"

“Exactly.”

I tsk at this fellow human who must also be an idiot. I gather the bowls and bring them to the pump sink. “So you were talking to him and trying to keep him from going up there?”

Cyrus leans over me to dampen a small towel. “Yes, and I went to Rustion. He sent some guards to the ruins to keep them off the grounds.”

“That was a good move. They’ll listen to liveried guards, surely.”

“Or we will end up with a few dead tourists on our hands,” he says, wiping up the flour I dusted over the wooden counter.

“Do you truly think the curse is what killed Bentaki?” I ask.

He tosses me the towel. I catch it and lob it into the basket by the back door.

“Nice shot,” he says. “It’s impossible to know about Bentaki, but I think so and most other Veil folk agree.”

“You all do have a good sense for the magic in your realm.”

He spreads his hands and his wings shuffle behind him. “It’s part of us.”

“Maybe we should find a good stopping point here and go check on the man,” I say.

“I don’t know, he seems like trouble. Even though he did say he could help me find out about my bloodline.”

I grip his arm. “That would be amazing!”

He's only ever brought up his clouded history once when he was deep in his cups at Yule years ago. He was left by his shifter parents and has very little memory of them. He was raised by Robin and Lucretia, two humans who ran the pub before him.

He looks down at my hand on his arm and raises his eyebrows. I let go, my cheeks going hot.

"Sorry," I stammer. "I'm just excited for you..."

"Of course, sweetness."

He touches my shoulder and rubs his thumb over the little cats embroidered into the fabric. I'm having trouble breathing evenly. Releasing me, he heads to the bin near the door to the front of the bakery. A half smile pulls up one side of his lips, and he rubs his hands together, dislodging flour from his talons and palms.

"It would be interesting to find out why we are so rare," he says, "and what our culture was like when it was flourishing. I'm assuming that because that castle belonged to a dragon, then we must have flourished at some point."

"Makes sense."

"Eh, Kaya!" Tully's muffled voice carries through the closed front door.

I hurry out, Cyrus beside me. Laini is there too. They are my two closest friends, aside from Cyrus, and they're opposite sides of the same coin. Tully is unrestrained, loud, and outgoing. Laini has a shy personality and keeps pretty quiet unless someone stirs her up. Both are worth more than gold to me. They're always there when I need them, and they crow about my pastries and breads to everyone they meet. I probably have them to thank for Lady Egrettington's order.

I unlock the door, and they walk in, sniffing like hounds.

“Can I take a stale chocolate croissant off your hands?” Tully asks as she hurries to my display cabinet.

“Sure. Take whatever you like.”

She sets a coin I didn’t ask for on the countertop, then dives into the display.

Laini hugs me and smiles widely at Cyrus. “What’s going on? Why did you close early?”

I fill them in on the big order and how Cyrus offered to help.

Tully takes a big bite of her treat and eyes Cyrus. “That’s good of you.” Her look says she is surprised.

Laini nods and picks up Sio. “Need two more sets of hands? I can’t move forward on my tapestry today.”

“Waiting on wool?” I ask.

“Aye.”

“I’d love more help.” I glance at Cyrus to make sure I’m not hurting his feelings by accepting their offer, but he seems unruffled.

A bang sounds, and we see Laini’s dragonfox bumping his head into the door’s window glass. Laughing, I open it up and he flies in.

“Sorry about the lock, Spark,” I say to the dragonfox.

Sio jumps from Laini's arms, and the two magical creatures spend the next hour happily chasing one another, surrounded by ten more maplecats that I allow to slip in. The rest of us work on another batch of scones, more icing, and the packaging I'll need to transport the goodies to Kingstown.

I measure out some butter and flour while Cyrus works the last hunk of dough I mixed up.

"You're getting good at that," I say to Cyrus.

His wings tuck in tightly and he grins over his shoulder. "Right? I might have missed my calling."

Tully is laughing and shaking her head as she folds a half sheet of oiled parchment so it will fit six scones neatly for travel.

"What?" Cyrus stops working the dough and looks her way.

The witch shrugs. "I could never imagine you living a baker's disciplined, quiet life."

"You don't know. I might get tired of all the noise next door."

"Really?" Laini asks Cyrus as she sweeps some spilled flour out the back door.

"I'm more than just a gambling partier," Cyrus says in an accent that mimics the nobility's slight drawl. "I contain multitudes."

We all laugh at that.

"Well, I'm happy to have you as long as I can, anyway," I say. Then I realize that sounded different from what I wanted it to. "I just mean..." I swallow.



Laini is about to shut the back door, and a face peers in. Halvard, the orc who works at Cyrus's pub part-time.

"What is it?" Cyrus sets his dough to the side and wipes his hands on a towel I keep hanging from the wooden counter for that purpose.

"The dragon expert human is back, and he has everyone riled up about the ruins. You might want to come over."

"You're twice my size, buddy. Why don't you kick their moronic arses out and tell them to stop spreading dangerous ideas in our town?"

Halvard's gaze flits to each of our faces. "I can if you want me to. But maybe you should hear what he's saying first. You being the subject of his tale and all."

Cyrus rolls his eyes. "I think he's full of it. I bet he didn't even go up there. I had Rustion's guards keep them off. I seriously doubt he and his party went against them."

"Go on, Cyrus," I say. "We are fine here."

"You sure?"

"Yes. Take care of your business. We don't want a repeat of the 300-Year Festival nightmare," I say.

He snorts a laugh. "No, we do not."

After a friendly pat on my back, he takes off with Halvard, and I'm left with Laini and Tully, who are both being oddly quiet. Well, it's odd for Tully anyway.

“Come clean, Tully,” I say. “What are you not saying right now? What is going on?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 6

Kaya

Tully spins and locks her scary witch gaze on me. “Look. I know he’s hot. He’s a dragon shifter. Gorgeous. He’s a good guy. He and I have been friends longer than you two. But Cyrus isn’t the partner you need.”

I blink at her, wondering if she can somehow sense the way Cyrus’s presence stirs me up. “What are you talking about?”

Laini comes close and gives me a sad smile. “Cyrus will never settle down. I thought you two had crossed this bridge ages ago.”

“I didn’t suggest anything with him,” I say sharply. “I honestly don’t know what you two are talking about.”

“I’m not saying it’s you. It’s him,” Laini says. “The ultimate playboy gambler, who parties more nights than not, volunteered to make scones. That is incredibly suspicious.”

“It was just a timing thing. You both were busy, and he was here when Lady Egrettington arrived. He saw my problem and wanted to help. That’s all.”

Tully lifts one red eyebrow. “But I’ve never seen Cyrus offer to stitch a cute little lamb on one of Laini’s overdue tapestries.”

“It’s weaving, not stitching.” Laini elbows Tully. “And it’s not that late.”

“It is,” Tully says.

Laini huffs and glares, but then she softens as she looks at me. “Cyrus can’t help but be attracted to you. You’re everything he’s never had.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re sweet and inexperienced,” Tully says.

“I didn’t mean that,” Laini says, giving Tully a reproachful glare. “Kaya, you’re a stable, hard-working woman who doesn’t like to drink and play cards. You’re unique in his world. I adore Cyrus, but he is what he is. A player. He would never remain loyal. He would hurt you.”

“And we would have to murder him,” Tully says.

Now I’m starting to get mad. I cross my arms. “What exactly do you mean? That Cyrus, the friend I’ve had for years and years, suddenly wants to sleep with me? You believe I’m silly-headed enough to let him break my heart with a fling? I hope you both think higher of me than that.”

Tully and Laini exchange a tight look, then Laini works my hands free and holds them in hers.

“You are not silly-headed,” she says, a sincere look in her eyes.

“But you are the only one in the realm who would ever use that word while angry,” Tully whispers, grinning.

I stick my tongue out at her, and Laini turns me away from Tully.

“Look, he’s charming,” Laini says. “Very charming.”

Tully puts her head between us. “He has a massive cock. All shifters do.”

Laini glares. “Not helping, Tully.” She focuses on me again. “It would be easy for you two to fall into bed, and it wouldn’t end happily.”

It hurts because she’s completely right. He would bore of me quickly. I don’t know any tricks of the bedroom. I’ve only had one lover, and that was a fleeting, perfunctory affair when I was determined to at least experience sex once in my quiet life. I’m always too shy to approach males and I’m not interested in females.

I imagine Cyrus’s smile, and I know it’s always been him. I shut my eyes and sigh.

“I hear you,” I say to Laini and I open my eyes. “He was different here yesterday and today, too. I think I was starting to hope he’d finally grown up, but I wasn’t admitting that to myself.”

“Nothing silly about that,” Tully says. She slips around a stack of crates and hugs me from behind. “I’m sorry I was being a mean witch.”

I lean my head on hers and squeeze Laini’s hands. “It’s all right. I’m used to your thorns.”

Her body shakes as she chuckles. She kisses my cheek, then releases me to scratch Sio. “You are the best of us, Kaya. We can’t help but be overprotective.”

Laini pulls away, but she is nodding. “It’s true. You know what?”

“Oh no. She’s plotting,” I say, glancing from Laini to Tully. “You’re wearing off on her.”

Tully whispers into Sio’s ear, and the cat yowls like he agrees with whatever she said.

“Oh! I forgot to tell you!” I hurry to the chest at the back of the kitchen. “Sio went in here, and then he spoke to Cyrus and me!”

Tully blinks at Sio, who seems to grin proudly. “Some of the old line in this one, eh?”

“That’s amazing!” Laini says. “What did he say? What do you mean, old line , Tully?”

“Maplecats used to speak. All of them. The magic became too watered down as they bred with other types of cats. They have to live to be pretty old and come in contact with magic to bring up the ability. Vespertine’s Familiars , Scroll 9.”

“Wow. I had no idea,” I say. “I hope he’ll talk to me again.” I eye him and he purrs my way.

Tully scratches him, then sets him down. “Let’s get back to what Laini was saying. The plotting and all of that.”

Spark, the dragonfox, zips into the kitchen and flies in circles over Laini. She lifts one hand and gently grabs for his tail in the game they like to play.

“I was saying that I have a potential date for you, Kaya,” Laini says.

My heart trips. “You do?”

“If you’re interested.”

Tully hops onto the back counter next to the sack of oats and the jar of honey. “Ooo, do tell.”

“The Dyer family has a new employee, and he’s delivering my wool tomorrow. I met him last week and he was delightful.”

“What is he? Human like them?” I ask. “Or a creature?”

“He’s human, but he thinks he might have a vampire in his ancestry because he loves his steak rare.”

We laugh. “I don’t think that’s a telling trait,” I say. “But if you feel that I should meet him, maybe we can all get drinks at the tavern together so it’s not too awkward.”

“I love this idea.” Tully slides off the counter and goes to the oven. “I think these are burning.”

I hurry over and sniff. “No. They’re ready, though. Good job!”

Tully smiles and does a little spin.

“You’re as proud as Sio,” I say.

“There are worse creatures to be like.” Tully dances as I pull the scones out.

The small, baked triangles shimmer and double, her spell working as reliably as always.

I clasp my hands and gaze adoringly at my scones. “I love magic.” The treats are perfectly baked and smell like a morning in the sun. Divine.

“Can’t we just eat one?” Tully pokes at the one nearest her.

I slap her hand. “No. You’ve had your treat.”

She bumps my hip with hers. “Who is the meanie now?”

After working for a while longer and baking up another two batches, Laini and Tully help me tidy the kitchen. We head toward the front door. The moon is high, and the scent of early blooms whisks through the night breeze.

Laini steps out and smiles at me. “Let’s meet at the Goat and Dragon tomorrow for an early dinner, all right? I don’t know if he can stay all night, but surely he’ll have an hour or two to spare before he has to return to work.”

“What’s his name?” I set my foot against the door to keep it open and wring my sweating hands. I’m already nervous.

“Devin.”

“All right. Sounds good. I’ll see you then,” I say.

They hug me while Spark soars overhead. I watch them walk away, gratitude icing over the broken bits of hope I mistakenly created inside my heart.

They have definitely saved me from heartache. Cyrus isn’t a bad fellow. But he’s not for me. I have to remember that. Even when he seems so content in my kitchen and in my company. It’s temporary. He needs the wide skies and the excitement of travel and the pub’s noisy nights. We are too opposite to work out as a couple. I have always known that fact, but I’d been denying it again. Maybe I’d need a reminder every few years that Cyrus and I are, and will always be, only friends and that is fine.



Laini's idea of me dating is a good one. That will keep my traitor heart from leaning toward a dragon who could never be happy on the ground with me.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 7

#### Cyrus

Well, that was pretty awkward. Laini and Tully cockblocking me wasn't exactly subtle. They couldn't get me away from Kaya fast enough. Both females were far too happy to see Halvard come by and save their friend from being seduced by me. I actually don't blame them. Kaya is too good for me. I'm a scoundrel. I shouldn't be flirting with her at all. I could seduce her, most likely. But she's my friend and that's that. I won't ruin what we have. She deserves better.

"What is on your mind, Cyrus?" Halvard looks down at me and frowns. "You look miserable."

"I have to stop flirting with Kaya."

"Kaya? I thought you two were friends."

"We are. Of course. That's just it. I keep teasing her and saying stupid things like I would to other attractive potential partners. Tully and Laini reminded me that she isn't for me. Not in that way. They're right. No more flirting."

Halvard huffs a laugh. "I can't imagine you'll have anything to say if you take flirting off the table."

I punch his arm and pull my hand back with a wince. "Shut it, orc."

His chuckle is muffled. “But if you like her, then why not give it a try?”

I shake my head. “She knows what I am and she knows I’m not her cup of tea. I have to stop stirring things up between us. It’s childish at best; a friendship-breaker at worst. I don’t want to lose the connection I have with her. It’s worth more than anything else to me. From now on, I’ll help her fill this order and there will be zero flirting.”

“Right.”

I scowl at Halvard. “You sound like you don’t believe me.”

“That’s because I don’t.”

“I will prove you wrong,” I say.

“I’ll bet you a full night of the best mead that you can’t stop yourself from at least uttering one innuendo in her presence.”

I stop and look at him. He pauses, a funny look on his face that reminds me of something I can’t place.

“I’m having a bad influence on you, aren’t I?”

Halvard shrugs. “Depends on who you ask.”

I start walking again and then push open the back door of the pub. “Damn it. I am just traipsing about life, ruining folks left and right.”

Halvard laughs as we enter the pub’s front room, where the crowd is loud and two males are close to blows, yelling in one another’s faces. I don’t see DeFleurtis

anywhere.

I push through the group of tourists and locals alike. “What’s going on?”

Betilda, the town’s gossip, is there, and she grabs my shoulder, her overly rouged cheeks rising as she smiles down at me. The orc female is nearly as tall as Halvard.

“Cyrus, darling, don’t interrupt. I have twenty coppers on the wiry human. I think he’s tougher than he looks.”

I pull away. “Sorry, darling,” I say, giving her a wink. She grins and snickers. “But we can’t have any more fist-fighting in here. I had to buy three new tables the last time.”

The two potential combatants are in one another’s faces. It’s a human I don’t know, and our town butcher—a goblin with a temper.

“We told you not to go up there, you idiot!” the butcher shouts, waving a dark green fist.

“You can’t stop our research,” the pale-skinned human male snaps. “We have a king’s pass to peruse the area!”

The butcher’s black eyes widen, then narrow on the human. “That pass isn’t worth shite! It only talks about land in Kingstown. He knows nothing about the curse here. You’ll bring darkness down on us all if you keep at your foolish work!”

“Eh!” I blow out a stream of fire above their heads. Breaking up fights in my pub is becoming far too commonplace. “I’m the only one allowed to shout in here!” I flap my wings and rise over the group. All faces lift to look at me, and the room goes quiet. “That’s right. I can toast the lot of you if you don’t break this up. You two,

outside, now. The rest of you can stay if you go back to your tables and immediately take up a new subject for your conversations.”

The customers listen to my strong suggestions and I land beside the human.

“You’re with DeFleurteis, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“Where is your fearless leader at the moment?”

“He twisted his ankle coming back down the hill from the ruins, so he is at the Acorn Inn, resting.”

“Didn’t you see our Lord Mayor’s guards up there?”

“We did,” he says with an obstinate tone, “but we forced our way through them.”

“And now your friend is suffering the first touch of the curse I warned him about.”

He glares, but doubt shows in the depths of his eyes. “It’s just a twisted ankle.”

“Right. Well, if you’re going to go back up there, don’t return to my pub. I don’t want the drama.”

Betilda is passing behind me, on her way to her regular game of cards with her friends.

“I thought you adored drama, Cyrus,” she says in a stage whisper.

I give her an admonishing look. “Not this brand.”

She grins and heads off, and when I turn back around, the human who is friends with DeFleurtis is gone. Good riddance.

Trustan, my other orc employee, takes an order at the one table still waiting on food. The lad has it under control, so I decide it's past time I have a drink and a game of my own. But not here. I need a break from my pub.

Two hours later, I'm seated at the Goat and Dragon. My head is pleasantly fuzzy from Grumlin's fine ale, and I have Romulus, a gargoyle, and Argos, a minotaur, across the table from me. They're about two cards away from losing every coin in play to me.

Argos pushes his glasses higher on his nose and studies his cards. "I don't like my chances right now."

"Stop using math to play cards, Argos," I say. "It takes the fun out of it."

"I can't just stop thinking."

"Try to be a little less intelligent, all right?" Rom asks, grinning. "We can't compete with your genius brain."

I take another card. An archer's heart. I lay it out along with the rest of my hand. "Speak for yourself, Rom."

The gargoyle and the minotaur set their hands on the table, face up. With his king's sword and two fives, Argos was close to defeating me. But not close enough. Rom doesn't even have a pair to his name. I gather the coins from the center of the table and slide them into my money pouch.

"Thank you, friends. I always enjoy playing cards with you two."

Rom gives me a flat look. “Is that due to our sparkling companionship or because you destroy us every single time?”

“If I say both, will you stop asking?”

We laugh, and I deal out another hand.

I felt a kinship with Rom right away when he first arrived in Leafshire Cove. I think it's the wings—we both know what it is to crave the open sky. Pixies and fairies have wings too, but theirs don't allow soaring in the clouds. Pixie and fairy wings aren't nearly as large or as strong as dragon shifter and gargoyle wings.

The fire crackles in the tavern's massive hearth, and it's really nice not to have to worry about the crowd or serving anyone. The tension in my shoulders eases as we play another hand, this time with fewer wilds and more ale.

Kaya's concerned face flits through my head. Should I go back and see if she needs any night prep done for tomorrow's baking? No, she had Tully and Laini there, and they were probably finished for the evening anyway. Plus, I have to limit the time I'm spending with Kaya or I'll give myself away. I don't know why she is so much on my mind these days. It's childish of me to want her, to even think of ruining the solid friendship we have. I shake her from my mind and focus on my cards.

Rom takes off after an hour; he has to rise early for his job at the tower. Argos sticks with me, though, and we pick up a couple of travelers, dealing them in. It's a fun night of lute music, me winning a great deal of small change, and laughs.

When I pay Grumlin and leave, I don't feel tired enough for bed. I should sleep. It's late. But the moon casts a long beam of silver light over the town, and I can see the faint outline of the ruins up on the hill beyond the western walls.

A shiver dances down my spine, and I head in that direction. If those humans can poke around without immediately dying, maybe we are all wrong about the curse?

I consider what DeFleurtis said about the old castle belonging to a dragon shifter. Maybe it's safe for me because of my blood? I can't deny that I'm insane with curiosity.

I trip over a shopping sack someone dropped in the market, then I pick it up, slinging it over my shoulder. Whistling, I make my way out of the town walls.

"We will be locking up in an hour!" the wall guard calls out.

I might be a little drunk. "I know, Whitby. I won't be long."

"I'm not Whitby!"

I blink up at the human leaning out of the gatehouse window. "Oh, sorry, Denian. You two look alike."

"But he's a goblin... You feeling all right, Cyrus?"

I wave him off and continue my walk to the ruins. Maybe I shouldn't have downed that last ale. But I'm fine. I'll just nose around the exterior of the ruins. It'll be okay. Surely.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 8

#### Kaya

The day has been productive, full of baking and serving customers this afternoon and early evening. I feel satisfied even if I'm still very nervous about getting Lady Egrettington's treats prepared on time. I still have the chocolate croissants to do. I have one day left because I'm not going to be able to bake the day we deliver the goods to Kingstown. It'll be too much to do in one day. My eyelids are drooping; I should go to bed.

I start to shut the door when I notice a very familiar shape loping across the street.

Cyrus. He doesn't seem too steady on his feet. Perhaps he has been partying. Laini and Tully did say that Rom and Argos were asking about playing cards with him at the tavern when he had time.

Where is he headed when he should be sleeping off his drinks? Hmm.

"Are you going to follow him?" A deep, scratchy voice says behind me.

I whirl to see Sio looking up at me. "I will never get used to this."

He meows.

"I guess I should follow Cyrus," I say, looking out the cracked door. Cyrus's tail disappears between buildings. "Where could he be going? Certainly not to those

ruins, right? He's smarter than that."

"I doubt it," Sio says. "He has an air of recklessness about him. Curiosity too. Like us cats."

"Will you go with me? I hate to venture out there alone in the dark."

"I'm too old for shenanigans like that. Just take your walking stick and bang anyone who bothers you over the head. Give that dragon a good smack to knock some sense into him as well."

I laugh and scratch behind Sio's ear. "All right. I'll go. Will you watch the candle?" I usually blow out all candles and gaslamps when I leave, but maybe Sio likes a little light.

"I will handle it."

"Thanks." This is so weird, talking to my cat.

Taking up my walking stick and a heavy shawl, I leave the cozy cocoon of my bakery and home to enter the chilly spring night.

The hill of ruins rises under my boots, and I hurry, hoping to catch Cyrus before he enters the cursed area. I can't see him anymore; I had to take too long explaining to the gate guard that I just wanted a walk. Clouds like ghosts have swamped the moon, and he has a good head start on me. He might have flown the rest of the way and is already inside, getting good and cursed, the idiot.

"Cyrus?" I call out quietly. It seems dangerous to shout in a place like this.

The ruins dominate the hill. Time-worn stones make up what was once a proper

castle gate, a ring of curtain walls, and a tower keep. A few boards from what had to have been a bridge over a moat still stretch across a weed-choked ditch. The edge of a dragon's wing shows beyond the nearest wall.

It must be Cyrus landing inside the walls. It is as I feared.

I swallow as the wind gusts around me, colder than it should be on a spring night. I grip my walking stick and start across the dilapidated bridge, keeping my feet sideways on the boards that appear the least rotten. I don't care to fall into that ditch and deal with those thorns.

"Cyrus?" I call out, feeling like I'm being way too loud. Can you wake up ghosts? How about curses? Blessed stones, why am I here? This is so foolish. "Cyrus, I'm going to murder you. Or get Tully to do it for me. Where are you?" I whisper out as I reach the arch of the castle gate.

A howl echoes through the old structure—just wind?

I gather my shawl more tightly around me and debate whether or not to step inside. Cyrus could be hurt in there. He might be desperate for help. Who knows what is inside? No one, really. It could be anything. Even just bears. Bears are lovely, but I do not ever want to meet one. Especially not right now.

"Bears? Please move on. There is a nice forest just a mile west. Sounds good, right?"

I think of Cyrus working so hard in my kitchen to help me. Of how he patched my wall after a storm last year. About the time he helped me figure out the error in my bakery bookkeeping, so I didn't get in trouble with the king's tax collectors. He is a good friend. He deserves my help even if he is being a moron. It's understandable; he's wildly curious about his bloodline. A creature like him, well, he is meant for big things, for open skies, for the adventurous life of a dragon. It isn't all that surprising

that he is risking his well-being to find answers that the human tempted him with.

A laugh bubbles out of me despite the circumstances. I keep calling my fellow humans humans , and it's just odd. I guess I've been around Veil creatures for so long that humans are nearly as strange to me as they are to the monsters born in the Veiled Kingdoms.

I bite my lip and step through the old gate and onto the ruins' official grounds.

A hum buzzes in my ears—a slight sound that I wouldn't notice if it weren't for the sudden silence. No spring frogs peep. No bats make their funny chirping noise. I almost miss the horrible howling. Not quite.

“Cyrus?”

The courtyard of broken-down structures includes a dove house with a domed roof that is half collapsed, the remains of two horse stalls, what was likely an outdoor kitchen, and, of course, the conical tower keep one can see from town.

But no dragons.

Where could he have gone? The wind whips my skirts, and I shiver, hurrying to shelter against the side of the keep. A row of windows sits in another outbuilding that the tower was blocking at first. It is long and huddles right up against the protective wall.

A flash of scales shows in the middle window.

Cyrus.

I rush through the knee-high weeds, then through the long structure's simple

rectangular entrance. What's left of a wooden door hangs from its hinges and creaks quietly as I pass.

The inside is very dark—no surprise there—and I squint.

“Cyrus!”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 9

#### Kaya

A freezing wind travels from the toes of my boots to the top of my head, and I can't move. If I could, I would be shivering so hard that my teeth would crack.

In the dark, Cyrus is suddenly standing right in front of me.

Then he shimmers into nothingness. My frozen state retreats from my body and I turn to run, fear eating all my good sense. I sprint out of the structure, through the courtyard, under the archway entrance to the ruins, and across the one sturdy board.

But the wood snaps beneath me. The ancient moat's thorny ditch rushes toward me and I land hard. Pain branches up my hand and I cry out.

Cyrus flies down to me, scoops me up, and takes off. Tears stream down my face.

"What hurts?" he asks as we fly through the starry night.

"My hand. I think it's broken." My pulse thumps in my hand, the sensation particularly strong in my thumb.

"Why did you go in there?"

"I was following you."

“I didn’t enter the ruins. Did you trail me from town?”

I nod, savoring the heat of his chest and arms through his clothing even as the pain in my thumb screams. “I saw you in the corridor. Inside the castle. You don’t have to lie to me.”

“I’m not lying. I almost went in and decided against it. I was sitting under the double oak just past the stream.”

“But...”

“I don’t know what you saw, but it wasn’t me,” Cyrus says. The wind tears at his hair and he squints down at me.

“There aren’t any other dragon shifters, though,” I say. “And your eyes are the only ones that look like that. Like dragon eyes with the fiery flecks of color and?—”

Pain takes the last of my words and I squeeze my eyes shut.

Cyrus holds me tighter, and soon we are landing outside Delixian’s place. The windows of the healer’s house are dark. No wonder—it’s the middle of the night. Cyrus knocks on the door with his boot.

“Eh, Delixian! We have an emergency!”

“You can let me down,” I say. “My legs are fine.”

“You’re freezing. I’m not letting you go, sweetness.”

My heart warms, easing some of the cold that seems baked into my bones since that paralyzing moment in the ruins.

I try to hold my hand in a way that hurts less. “I’m an idiot.”

“No, it’s my fault. You were only trying to help my dumb arse.”

“It’s normal for you to be curious about your kind. I would be.”

Delixian opens the door, his blue face drawn with fatigue. “Please, come in.”

He gestures to the long table he uses for his healing work, and Cyrus sets me on the wooden surface. I am sitting up, holding my hand like it’s on fire because that’s exactly how it feels. Delixian’s gaze goes up and down as he takes stock of my injuries. He nods, more to himself, I think, then he goes to another table along the wall. Pixie wings fluttering slightly, he grabs dried herbs from the clusters hanging from hooks above his head and then grinds them into a pestle.

“Tell me what happened,” he says, his voice curt but not unkind. Businesslike.

“I fell off a bridge into a ditch. I think I broke my thumb, maybe? I’m not sure.” I realize now that I have scratches and cuts all over my arms and even on my neck and cheeks. Some are bleeding freely.

Cyrus meets my eyes, and I know he is wondering if we should admit to going to the ruins. It will make him and everyone else who finds out very nervous because of the curse.

“Which bridge?” Delixian fills a teapot with water from his pump sink and places it on the wood-burning stove in the corner. He bends to stir the coals and to add a bunch of small pieces of wood.

Pain is making it hard to breathe.



Cyrus's hand covers my uninjured one. He sends heat into my skin, an ability he has as a dragon shifter. It feels so nice that if I weren't dealing with cuts and broken parts, I'd probably lean right into it and sigh.

"She is hurting pretty badly, Del. Can I help you hurry up whatever concoction you've got going there?"

The healer glances at Cyrus, and his eyes tighten like he's suspicious of something. "Go to the green cabinet over there. Get out a roll of gauze, that brown glass bottle, and two of the flat, wooden sticks."

Cyrus pats my leg gently and gives me a pained look, like my injury is hurting him too. He follows Delixian's orders. The teapot whistles. The blue pixie pours steaming water over the herbs he ground. He transfers the stuff to a small cup and brings it to me. It smells like the forest and mushrooms.

"Drink up. It will make you drowsy, but you can stay here for the last part of the night. All right?"

Cyrus deposits Delixian's requested items onto the table beside us. "I'll stick around and keep an eye on her," Cyrus says.

The healer nods and uses a small knife from his belt to cut the gauze. "Good. Then I can go back to sleep. You were at the ruins, weren't you?"

I swallow. "Why do you say that?"

Cyrus's mouth lifts at one side like he's amused at my inability to be sneaky in any way, shape, or form. He fetches a clean square of cloth and wets it at the sink. He returns to my side and starts cleaning my cuts with easy, gentle movements. I give him a smile and mouth thanks .

“Because I saw a ghost around the ruins once. Only a flash of light, but I know what I saw, and you are suffering the effects of seeing a ghost that wasn’t planning on a run-in with a living soul.”

“She followed me,” Cyrus says, finally giving Delixian his answer. “I’m the idiot here.”

“You both are,” the healer says, shocking me. “In more than one way.”

Cyrus’s lip curls, showing his sharp, dragon teeth. “That’s a bit harsh for someone dealing with a broken hand, don’t you think, healer?” His tone is biting and his eyes are bright.

The pixie shrugs and flaps his wings, making Cyrus back up. “I’m not a seer or an advisor, so you’ll have to figure all this out yourselves tonight.”

What did he mean exactly?

The herbs must be taking effect because I can no longer focus on anyone’s face, and I feel like I’m floating a few inches off the table. But despite the concoction’s fuzzy relief, the next few moments are not pleasant. Cyrus is nearly snarling as Delixian splints my thumb.

I must drift off because I realize I’m on the two-person-wide chair in Delixian’s sitting area now. The large cushions envelope me, and an incredibly soft, white blanket covers me from my bootless feet to my chin. My thumb is still throbbing, but it’s not nearly as bad as it was. I blink up at Cyrus, who is sitting in a straight-backed chair he’s pulled up beside me. His wings stretch wide, creating a cocoon effect and blocking out the first of the morning’s light. The dawn turns his green wings into a golden sage color as the light tries to pass through. The large claws on the tips of each wing look massive for some reason. I rub my eyes with my good hand, then look

again.

“Your hooks are bigger.”

His eyebrows lift and he leans close. “My what is what?” His flecked eyes dance.

“Not hooks.” I shake my head in an attempt to clear it. That doesn’t work. “Your wing claw things.”

“Wing talons, sweetness. They’re called wing talons. And aye, they do that sometimes.”

“They do? I never knew that about you.”

“It’s not something I like to discuss. It’s...”

“Are you blushing?” I grin and lift my right hand, forgetting my thumb is broken. I wince and hiss with pain.

Cyrus’s face drops, and he reaches for a cup on the side table. He puts it to my lips. “Have a little more. You don’t need to be in pain right now.”

I drink a bit more of the forest-tasting concoction. “I saw a dragon in those ruins, Cyrus,” I say, my words slurring a bit.

“I believe you.”

“Because I was so cold when you found me?”

“Aye. I think Delixian is right. Something is definitely up there.”

I chew my lip. “I think so, too.”

“It might be the ghost of the dragon shifter that DeFleurtis told me about,” Cyrus says.

“What does he know, what say he him...” I chuckle at myself. “I can’t get words going.”

Smiling patiently, Cyrus takes the cup from me and puts it back on the side table.

“The shifter had some godsawful name I can’t remember. Completely pretentious.”

“Definitely related to you then.”

Cyrus feigns a glare at me, and I snicker.

“What else did he say?” I ask.

“Nothing. He just claims there is more to see.”

“At the ruins.”

“Yes.”

“I would ask you to not go there, but it’s a waste of my breath,” I whisper.

He shrugs. “I am tempted.”

“Unless I die right here. Then you might stay away from the ruins?”

He barks a laugh. “Kaya, don’t say that. You’re fine, aren’t you? Your color is back. It’s just a broken thumb, right?” His gaze peppers my face and body.

“I was teasing. I’m okay. Should check on DeFleurtis and see if...” I can’t remember what I was saying.

“Check to see if he really did just have a sprained ankle and the curse didn’t kill him?”

I nod and shut my eyes. I don’t know how much time passes, but I dream of Sio telling me he opened up the bakery and now knows how to count change.

My heart flies into my mouth. I shoot up. “Lady Egrettington’s order! I have to finish today!”

The room tilts and sways.

“Eh, easy, Kaya. You have to be still for a bit.”

He tries to ease me back, but I fight him and remain upright.

“I don’t have time for resting. I have to bake. With one hand!” My eyes are burning, damn them. I don’t have time for tears either. “This blasted concoction is making thinking impossible!”

“This blasted drink has healing properties that Delixian says will knit your bones faster if you remain still for another hour. You’ll still have to remain splinted and not use that hand for a while, but?—”

“I need this hand! I am the baker! I want to be independennnn...”

Cyrus spreads his wings more fully and I’m cloaked in a golden, sage-hued light. I feel so safe and like nothing matters but us right now. I sit back, allowing my eyes to close and my thoughts to float away.

I hear Cyrus talking as the concoction takes over again.

“...and I will make your chocolate croissants,” he whispers. “Laini and Tully will help. We will get it done, don’t worry. Just sleep...”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 10

#### Cyrus

Blessed Stones, but Kaya is so lovely when she sleeps. She's angelic when awake—pure of heart and with a goodness that shines through her smile and her eyes. But now? She looks like a goddess awaiting the moment she will rise to bring the entire world peace. But it's not like she is all smiles and flowers. When she's angry, everyone had better watch out. She doesn't get riled easily, but when she does, it's something to see.

I laugh quietly at myself. I'm a fool for this woman. I can deny it all I want, but I'm lost. If I worked my usual rakish way with her, she'd let herself be seduced. It's incredibly tempting.

Her skin is radiant and softer than lamb's wool. I can only imagine how she would feel melting into my arms, her delicate body against me, and her quiet voice in my ear... I would be gentle with her. She knows so little about love and the art of love. I would give my left wing to be the one to teach her, the one to draw out what makes her feel the most pleasure. My lips ache to feel her sweet mouth and to make her gasp with delicate strokes of my tongue. I would take her away. She deserves a long break from her work. She loves baking, but she needs to find her pleasure too, to experience it all. What would she like? A massage? Foot rubs, most likely. I would start there and let her relax.

I cough quietly and adjust my trousers. Looking away from her lovely form, I focus instead on the row of scrolls and books the healer has stacked on his shelves near the

front door.

I won't follow my longing for Kaya. She deserves a steady fellow—perhaps the wool merchant that I heard Laini was going to introduce her to today, even though the thought makes fire rise in my chest and tickle the back of my tongue.

I have a bloodline to research. I could never make her happy. I'd drive her nuts with my adventurous ways.

While Kaya continues sleeping and recovering, Delixian provides me parchment, ink, a quill, and some notewater. I send a message to Trustan. He knows where I keep Kaya's bakery key and he can manage selling what she has in her display case for the first morning rush. We covered for her when she caught that fever going around last summer. I also pen notes for Laini and Tully, asking them to meet us at the bakery if they can this afternoon.

When Kaya eventually wakes, I'm relieved to see the color has returned to her cheeks. Delixian examines her broken thumb and checks her pulse and so forth. Once he has determined she is well enough, he kindly feeds us some strong black tea with orange rind and sizable bowls of roasted asparagus soup with lemon.

"Don't push it with that broken bone, Kaya," the healer says as he takes our empty bowls and piles them on the tea tray. "Come back to see me in a couple of days if you like, and I'll recheck you."

"Do you think there is any lasting damage from whatever happened with her temperature because of the ghost?" I ask, feeling sick that Kaya followed me into a dangerous place. "Have you ever seen anyone chilled like that from a ghostly experience?"

"I wasn't when I saw it. Neither have I treated anyone with these effects. But I've



read about such instances. Normally, the victim of the ghost's fury recovers after a dose of citrus fruit and some rest."

"That's why you put so much lemon in that soup, isn't it?" Kaya asks.

"It is." Delixian's blue mouth lifts into a smile. Everyone loves Kaya. "Anything for you, Mistress of the Bakery."

Kaya blushes and grins down at her lap. "It was delicious. Thank you. I'll send your payment over tomorrow with Sio, all right? By the way, he talks now."

The blue pixie's eyes widen. "That's a new one on me, too. I know the old kings and queens used to have a line of talking maplecats."

"That must be what Tully was referring to when she mentioned his bloodline." I use one of the healer's linen napkins to wipe down the table.

Delixian nods. "You're lucky to have such an old, wise familiar at your shop."

"I am. He's very loyal."

The healer lets us leave, and Kaya seems back to her old self. She's talking quickly, planning out the day to finish Lady Egrettington's order. We discuss the making of chocolate croissants and whether or not she has enough ingredients, and once we are back at her bakery, I send Trustan to the pub. I help Kaya finish serving the rest of her customers, and once Laini and Tully arrive, the place is empty, and we are ready to start baking.

Now, I just have to make sure I don't show how I feel about Kaya. I have to let it go and stick to the work.

Tully is telling dirty jokes as we drink white peach tea and wait for the dough to proof. Once the dough is ready, Laini, Tully, and I each knock out our own portion. Kaya flits from work station to work station, giving us quick directions and grumbling about her injury.

After that, Kaya has me cutting parchment paper into precise sizes while Tully and Laini are in the front room trying to get Sio to talk to them. The paper is ready, and Kaya waves the other females back into the kitchen.

“Shape them into rectangles and put them in these,” she orders, pointing at the sheets I cut. “Roll them to fit once they are wrapped.”

It’s a long and complicated process, but with a witch who can do a few small magics here and there—she makes sure the magic doesn’t touch the food directly because it can make foods bitter—we end up getting to the lamination stage, as Kaya calls it.

Using her good hand, Kaya dusts each of our work stations with flour. She directs us as we fold the cold butter into the dough. I don’t know how she remembers all these crazy steps.

“This is more complicated than doing my yearly taxes, Kaya,” I say, looking up from my project. “I’m probably doing this all wrong.”

“No, it looks perfect,” she says to me, eyes twinkling. “Thanks for the help. I can’t thank you enough.”

She sets her healthy hand on my arm, and a shiver travels up to my chest. Her lips part, and a lock of her fawn-brown hair slips from the messy knot on top of her head to touch the edge of her heart-shaped face. Without thinking, I smooth the strand behind her ear. Her breath catches, and she shuts her eyes briefly.

I want to kiss her. My body hums with desire. I want to do more than kiss her. I want to lay her out on this floury surface and taste every inch of her until I find what makes her moan the loudest.

Laini and Tully have gone quiet behind us, but then Laini clears her throat.

“What are you going to wear tonight to meet the wool merchant?” Tully asks, her words too loud in the soft atmosphere of the kitchen.

Kaya seems to shake herself and turns to face the witch. “I have no idea. Is this not good?” She gestures to her simple dress and apron. “I mean, without the apron, of course.”

She laughs nervously. Dark pink suffuses her round cheeks, and I wish I could make her flush like that for very different reasons. I have to show her I support her meeting potential partners who aren’t me. I’m no good for her.

“How about that deep green dress you wore last May Day?” I say.

“You remember that?”

Uh oh. Caught. “It’s similar to a dress Rychell wore the day we made our deal on spice supplies.”

“Oh, right.” Kaya nods and smiles, but disappointment clouds her pretty eyes.

My recall of that garment has absolutely nothing to do with Rychell, even though the spice merchant is a lovely female. I couldn’t take my eyes off Kaya last May Day. She had led the dance around the bonfire that night, and the way her hips swayed and her voice rang out with the song of the spring... Well, I can’t tell her that if I want her to give this wool merchant a chance.

Laini smiles approvingly. “Good idea, Cyrus.”

I give her a look that says I know exactly where her mind is on this and that I’m not an idiot. “Thanks.”

I face Kaya, who is slicing the dough and marking the opposite edge.

“Maybe wear your hair down,” I say to her. “It’s good hair. He’ll be besotted by the time your food arrives.”

She glances at me out of the corner of her eye and raises an eyebrow like she’s not sure what I’m up to or why I’m helping so much. She can tell I’m holding something back. We know one another too well, I guess, to keep secrets.

“All right, Cyrus. I will do that. Laini and Tully, come here and see what I did so you can do the same to your dough.”

The day turns into evening, and the females head upstairs to help Kaya get ready for dinner. I’m left to finish the baking and add the chocolate at the right time. Sitting on a stool near the oven, Sio stays with me. I expect him to correct my technique at any moment now.

“No comments? Really?” I eye the old maplectat.

The cat opens his mouth to speak.

### Chapter 11

#### Cyrus

“Y ou care for Kaya. Why don’t you try for her hand?” the cat says.

I drop a square of dark chocolate and pick it back up. “I’m no good for her. You know what happened at the ruins.”

“So? She won’t go back if you don’t.”

“I’m going back. But I don’t want her to know. I have to find out who I am, Sio. I can’t live with that mystery. Kaya will be so much better off keeping me as just a friend. She needs a steady partner, not one who is about to fly off on a dangerous adventure. I also stay up too late for her lifestyle. I like to drink and gamble. I’m a mess. She deserves someone who has their act together.”

“She deserves to make that choice.”

“I disagree. She’s too kind and inexperienced. She only thinks she is developing feelings for me because I’m good-looking and charming.”

“Humble as well.”

I glare at the talking cat. “Look, I know who and what I am in that regard. I’m no good for her. She would think we could work things out. But I’m not right for her. In many, many ways.”

“Keep telling yourself that, dragon. It’s easier that way, isn’t it?” Sio jumps off the stool and sashays into the front room.

That cat doesn’t know anything.

I light the rest of the gaslamps hanging from the rough-hewn beams, and then finish up the last of the croissants.

Kaya walks in, flanked by Laini and Tully.

Kaya is a vision in emerald green. Her hair gathers in soft curls at her shoulders, and her eyes sparkle. Her lips are painted a light pink. Kaya didn’t come from money, and she doesn’t charge enough for her goods, so she doesn’t have expensive jewelry to show off, but she doesn’t need it. She looks like a treasure, exactly as she is.

“You are the most beautiful creature in any realm, sweetness,” I say before I can school my thoughts. I should have gone with a less enthusiastic tone to keep her from knowing how I feel, but the words spilled out like wine from a tipped goblet.

Her cheeks flush, and she looks at the cooling croissants. “Thank you so much for all the help,” she says to Laini and Tully. “I’ll meet you outside in a minute, all right?”

The weaver and the witch eye her and then me, then they give in. They leave the bakery, the door jingling lightly behind them.

Kaya approaches as I wash my hands. Her scent blends with the butter and chocolate of the kitchen. She smells like springtime, gently floral and sweet like her spirit. When I don’t face her—I can’t because I would give myself away—she places her good hand on my bicep. Her touch is so feather-light, but it infuses my blood with energy. I’m like a stag in season, more than ready for rutting. I swallow the fire licking up the back of my throat.

One thing I do know about dragon shifters is that my kind uses fire in their mating rituals. Every time I'm aroused by Kaya, my fire lifts inside me, longing to do something. What, I don't know. And I'll never find out because no one will ever stir the desire to permanently mate like she does.

She runs her hand up and down my arm, and it's all I can do not to grab her and kiss her.

"Cyrus, thank you so much for all you've done for me. Do you want to come with me to deliver the order tomorrow?"

Of course, I want to, but I need to distance myself. "I wish I could, but I have to give Trustan and Halvard the day off. They've put in some seriously long hours."

Her face falls, but she keeps her hand on me. Her forefinger shifts and catches the edge of my bare skin where my sleeve is slightly rolled up. A feeling like sparks dances up my flesh. If she can do this to me with one finger...

That's when I notice she has rewrapped her splinted thumb. That injury is on me. I force my mind to behave and be friends with this lovely creature instead of lusting over her like a madman.

"Ah, right," she says. "Yes, tell Trustan and Halvard I appreciate them covering for my best baking assistant lately, will you?"

I smile at her. "I'll do that. Would you like me to ask Halvard if he wants to go with you? He has a cousin in Kingstown. Orcish company gilds the hand, as the saying goes."

The saying means that orcs help you keep your coin by scaring off thieves. Rustion says it on occasion.

“That would be great!”

Suddenly, she is on her tiptoes and kissing my cheek chastely. I freeze, my heart hammering in my chest, smoke rising from my nostrils, and my cock growing in time with my wing talons. I pray to any god or goddess that will listen that she won't notice.

Her mouth is softer than I could have imagined. Like the petals of a crocus.

She breaks away and pats my arm. I finally make eye contact because not to would be too awkward. I attempt nonchalance as I tuck my wings in tightly and keep my hips turned toward the countertop.

“I'll let you know how delivery goes. This is as much your order as it is mine,” she says.

She trots out of the kitchen, appearing happy with the prospect of meeting her wool merchant.

The wild dragon inside me is raging. Ready to burn the town down just to rid us of said fellow. But I squeeze my fists, breathe slowly in and out, then leave the bakery as it should be without so much as a spark coming from my mouth.

But as I head into the night, my mind continually flashes images of another male holding Kaya's hand, kissing her lips, making her laugh, and I am about ready to shift to my wild form and burn the world.

Betilda is sitting on a bench near the town fountain, chatting with a few other female orcs and fairies. I walk in quick strides to join them, hoping to glean some information from our town gossip.



“Have you seen the tourist who went to the ruins?” I ask the group, trying to simply look concerned for the fellow.

“Oh yes,” Betilda says. “He is doing rather well. His ankle is still swollen, but aside from that, he seems good.”

“He’ll probably die tomorrow,” one of the fairies says.

The orc beside her nods.

I guess Delixian is keeping his mouth shut about Kaya and me. That’s good.

Betilda shrugs. “Maybe the curse is finished bothering folks. Magic can run dry in old places like that.”

“That’s true,” I say. “And maybe poor Bentaki just couldn’t withstand the fright of seeing a ghost?”

“I didn’t know there was a ghost,” the fairy says.

Nodding, Betilda pats the fairy’s hand. “There have been sightings. Nothing for certain, of course.”

“Well, you have a lovely night, folks.” I wave and lope off.

Once I’m on the darker side of town, away from most of the homes and evening entertainment spots, I inhale deeply, then take off into the sky. Only the possibility of discovering more about my kind will be able to distract me tonight.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 12

#### Kaya

At the Goat and Dragon, I'm at a long table playing the dice and card game, Kings and Plots. Tully eyes her cards, and her minotaur mate, Argos, rolls the scarlet dice. Laini and her gargoyle mate, Rom, laugh over their hands of cards. The wool merchant, Devin Dyer, is here too, and I can't stop blushing at the idea that he came here to meet me.

Why did I agree to this? I hate these kinds of awkward meetings. They're unnatural. Relationships should happen naturally over time, not shoved into place. But Devin isn't hard to look at. He is tall and human like I am, but he does have an odd sheen to his skin. I think the information Laini mentioned about him having some vampire blood is likely correct.

I do my best to smile, ignore the pain in my broken thumb, and join in the conversation as we play.

"So Halvard is going with you to Kingstown?" Laini asks.

He's not, but they don't need to know that. I can do it on my own. If word gets out that I'm going alone before I leave, Cyrus will insist on going with me.

"Yes, I think so," I lie.

Tully finishes her drink. "Good."

We play another hand and chat about the upcoming May Day festival. The conversation breaks into pieces, each couple chatting on their own.

Devin eyes me as he deals out the next hand. “What do you like to do when you’re not baking?”

I huff a laugh aimed at myself. “I’m hardly ever not baking.”

Cyrus is always telling me I need a holiday. He is probably right, and since I’m finished with this big order, maybe I’ll finally take one. Lady Egrettington’s money will help with that.

“How about you?” I study my cards.

Two kings, a holly leaf, an arrow, a vial of poison, and a maplecater. I always enjoy getting maplecater cards because the illustrations are usually so off that it’s hilarious. I should take one back to Sio and see if he has a few comments to share about the inability of upright walkers to draw his kind.

“I like reading,” Devin says. “Gardening.”

Tully raises her eyebrows at me over her cards.

“I’m surprised,” I say, glancing at his many muscles. “You seem like the type to enjoy adventuring in the woods or hunting.”

Devin gives me a smirk that would be handsome if he weren’t, well, I’m not sure, but it doesn’t give me butterflies like Cyrus’s smirks do.

“Shearing sheep requires a lot of muscle,” he says.

“Of course. Right.”

While Tully rolls the dice and Rom plays one of his cards, Devin lifts a hand, and a server comes over.

“We will take another cup of spring wine, please,” he says, nodding toward me.

I play one of my kings. “No, thank you. I’ve had enough.”

Neither the server nor Devin reacts to me because I’m too quiet for this loud place. I sigh, and Laini puts her hand over mine.

“You want to go outside for a breather?” she asks.

“Thanks, no, I’m fine.” She knows this isn’t my scene.

“You’re going to beat us all if you have more than that one king,” she says, grinning at the pot of coins in the center of the table.

“Cyrus taught me this one.”

“Ah, yes.” She leans back in her chair, then plays a queen and a holly leaf card. “So Devin, do you play Kings and Plots often in your hometown?”

The wool merchant clicks his tongue and narrows his eyes at the dice’s numbers. “We don’t. We usually play chess or throw darts.”

The server brings the spring wine I don’t want.

“May I have chamomile tea, please?” I ask him.

With a nod, the server leaves.

Tully's eyes light up. "Kaya is very good at chess. You should play after we finish this hand."

Rom finishes his play, and Argos rolls the dice.

The minotaur glances my way. "After Kaya takes our money, you mean." His tone is cool, but his eyes dance behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

Shrugging, I take my turn. "Sorry."

The dice show four sixes, and the table erupts in laughter and cheers.

"Wow, Kaya. You are a lucky gal," Devin says. "But luck will get you nowhere in chess. Care to play?"

"There's a board by the hearth," Rom says, his gaze saying he doesn't quite trust this wool merchant.

It takes Rom a while to warm up to people. I'm not usually like that, but maybe I am now? I turn to see a chess set on a small square table by the snapping fire.

"All right. I'll play."

Tully and Argos start up a reel near the back of the tavern where the lute players and drummers are filling the air with a quick folk song from the mountains. Laini gives me a quick hug.

"If you want to leave, just let me know," she whispers.

But she doesn't give me time to say that I would love to leave before she is off to join the dancing with Rom, so I trail Devin to the chessboard and we start a game. His first few moves show that he does know how to play well, and I lean forward on the table to study the pieces.

My mind wanders to Cyrus and what he might be doing right now.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 13

#### Cyrus

The night sky is exhilarating. Chilly. Bright with stars. Full of possibilities. I don't feel like shifting, but I stretch my wings to the widest they can go within this version of me. The ground below blurs, and soon I'm back at the ruins.

I want to see what Kaya saw—a dragon shifter ghost.

Wind moans through the gate as I pass under the old, rusted portcullis that's permanently stuck in a raised position.

“Hello?” I call out, feeling foolish. My wings shudder as if a part of me knows this is reckless. “I mean no disrespect. I'm a dragon shifter, and I would love to know more about my kin. About you.”

The courtyard holds a few dilapidated structures. I pass them quickly, keeping my head on a swivel, and I continue into the longer building that stands against the northern wall of the castle. This is where Kaya said she thought she saw me. The corridor is long and dark, only a thin film of starlight illuminating the ghostly place. A chill runs down my body, from my horns to my toes inside my boots.

“Seems like you might want some company in a cold place like this? Want me to start a fire? I could light up what's left of that wagon in the courtyard?”

A grumble echoes down the corridor, and I force myself to keep walking.

“I wouldn’t bother you, but you see, I’ve never known any other dragon shifters. I know nothing about our past. Our rituals. Our fire. If you could guide me or teach me in some way, I’d be forever grateful.”

Although the place is indeed terribly creepy, a sense of belonging suffuses me. This is a place built by my kin. There are small details that reiterate that fact. The corridor is wide enough that I can stretch my wings out, at least in what Kaya calls my humanesque form. Dragon-head shaped windows look onto the courtyard—divots and curves carved into the stone openings give the appearance of a dragon’s horns and prominent cheekbones. I didn’t know until this minute that all dragon shifters must have the same facial structure as me. A smile tugs at my mouth.

A gust of cold air blasts me, then heat rises in front of me. Light shimmers in the dark and a form appears from the sparkling magic. My heart crashes against my ribs. The form has glittering black scales. Bright green eyes appear.

A dragon shifter ghost.

I move my mouth, but I can’t speak. The shifter’s wings shuffle and he points to a room off the corridor. The door is shut. I try the handle only to find it locked or possibly rusted shut. I test the doorknob again, but no luck.

“You want me to go in there?”

The ghost opens his jaw wide. I fall back a step. Ghostly flames pour from his mouth and engulf the door. The ground shakes, and I set a hand on the wall, my pulse pounding relentlessly against my temples.

The door cracks and disintegrates to nothing. Like it was never even there.

He faces me and gestures for me to enter the dark room. I do as ordered, checking to



see if he's following me.

“Do you know me? I can't believe you've been here this whole time, and I've been clueless. Can I ask you some questions?”

He shakes his head and points to a torch on the wall. With a flare of his fingers—taloned fingers like mine!—he indicates I should light the torch. The thing is ancient, but it seems the tallow-soaked fabric remains and hasn't crumbled to dust like so much of this place. The air is incredibly stale. I summon some flame from my chest and set the old torch on fire.

I turn to examine the room, but my gaze keeps going to the ghost. He scowls and opens his hand near one of the tall shelves that line the walls. Slanted desks sit in rows between the shelving, so I'm guessing this used to be the scribes' room. Some wealthy lords and ladies still have rooms like this in their castles and palaces. Rustion even has a small version of this with one desk and his decent collection of history scrolls and agriculture books. He let me rummage around the place when I was first curious about my kind. I found nothing there, but this place, well, this is a dragon's home. I bet it's all here—every answer I've ever sought.

A wisp of blue-white light surrounds one scroll and scoots it from a high shelf. I freeze as the scroll floats toward me. I glance at the ghost, and he nods encouragingly.

I catch the scroll, then head to one of the scribe desks, roll it out with careful movements. The scent that rises from the parchment is musty. I nearly sneeze my arse off before I can go back to trying to make out the faintly inked words.

But they aren't simply words.

It's a map.

The river is the first thing I notice. It's wide and labeled Greatheart River , but it takes a sharp turn past a mountain range just like our Leafshire River.

“Is this the river beside my town of Leafshire Cove?”

The ghost nods.

The mountain range leads into a valley filled with markers that appear to be villages if the triangle and two lines are indeed meant to symbolize a house. Ah, I recognize a few. There is Kingstown, represented as a city. It's been well established for centuries.

The ghost's nearly transparent talon lands on a spot north of Kingstown, a spot beyond a small sea that I've never heard of. Wingwash Sea , it says in the old tongue. The old language isn't that much different than the modern one. They just enjoyed using more vowels and didn't have a regulated way of spacing or capitalizing words.

Pointing again at the spot, the ghost grins. It's not a comforting smile, but he does seem delighted about wherever this is.

“What is so good about this place?” It's marked with more lines and dark dots. “Wait. Are those cliffs? Or a deep ravine, maybe?”

A rush of both cold and heat comes from the ghost and suffuses the air around me.

“Does that mean yes?”

He nods. Lifting his hand, he places his palm on my chest. I can't quite feel the touch, but the odd cold and hot sensation increases there. His eyebrows lift and he stares at me pointedly. Then he jerks his chin at the map.

“You want me to go there?”

He smiles that chilling smile once more, and then he disappears.

A shiver tracks down my back and along my tail. I swallow and gather the map, tucking it into my belt as carefully as I can.

Why would a dead dragon shifter want me, the only other of his kind in the area, to run off into the wilds of the northern lands? Maybe there were civilizations there long ago, but I don't think any settlements remain that far north. There's an area beyond Kingstown that has always been called the Desolation. Certainly, nothing important could be past that barren land. Could it?

Excitement flutters in my stomach as I hurry out of the ruins. I don't want to push my luck. At least now I have a lead on finding out more about my kin.

I just hope that ghost doesn't decide to follow me home and stop my heart. Were those earlier cases of the supposed curse truly just coincidences? Or am I an idiot for risking it?

I guess I'll find out soon enough.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 14

Kaya

“S orry about the wine,” Devin says, surprising me.

“It’s all right.”

“I was just trying to take care of you.”

“I appreciate that, but I like to order for myself.” I don’t care that much. I’m just feeling grouchy. It isn’t fair to Devin. I resolve to cheer up and stop being a dark cloud on this perfectly nice evening. “But it is very good wine, isn’t it?”

He finishes his second cup. “Very. I wish we had some of this vintage at home.”

“What do you tend to have there?”

“More reds because of the weather.”

The server brings my cup of tea finally, and I give him a portion of my Kings and Plots winnings as a tip because I’m not mad about the wait. This place is incredibly busy, and I have been in this type of rush many, many times. I completely understand what the servers are feeling right now.

The chess game moves forward, and Devin nearly catches me out, but I manage to beat him.

“Well done, Kaya.”

I start to frown, but then clear my features. “Thank you.”

There’s just something condescending about his praise. It gets my hackles up, as Tully would say. Once again, I’m just being grouchy.

“Want to head outside for a little bit?” Devin asks. “I’d love to take a break from the noise.”

“I would love that.”

Outside, the stars are a dusting of sugar on the black sky. Spark and his mate, Moonpetal, are chasing one another through the new leaves of the oak that towers over the front of the tavern. Their little bursts of flame are bright in the near dark.

Devin chuckles and eyes me. “Is it safe for them to be doing that in a tree?”

“We can keep an eye on them and call for Laini and Tully if need be.”

Devin takes my hand, and I start to pull away, but stop. This is fine. This is what one does on a date, right? I honestly have never really been on a date. I’ve only been with one person in my life, and that was a clumsy youthful tumble that did little to dispel the mysteries that surround love and lovemaking. I basically know nothing.

He leans against the tavern wall and pulls me gently against him.

“I am so happy your friends introduced us, Kaya. You’re beautiful. I think we suit one another. What do you think?” With one hand, he brushes my hair away from my face, and with the other, he braces my back so I’m firmly pressed into his chest.

“I do, yes.” My cheeks are hot, but not because I’m aroused. It’s more like I feel uncomfortable. But I’m not sure. Is this how it’s supposed to feel?

His mouth is close, and I’m not so ignorant that I don’t know what he is physically hinting at. Even though I’m not feeling swoony or anything, I want to give him a chance, so I tip my head back and shut my eyes.

His kiss begins nicely enough, but his mouth turns rough and demanding, his tongue driving between my lips before I’m ready. I pull away, and he looks confused as to why.

“Thank you for the fun game of chess,” I say. “I’m going to head home now.”

As I start to leave, he grabs my arm. Anger darts through my body. I whirl around and jam my knee into his stones. He shouts, releases his hold on me, and doubles over. I stumble backward and fall onto my back.

A whoosh sounds behind me, and I leap to my feet as Cyrus lands in his wild, fully dragon form.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 15

Kaya

Cyrus releases a torrent of crackling fire, then partially shifts back to his more human-looking form. His wings remain very large and his eyes are still reptilian.

“What in the fuck is going on here?” he spits out.

Devin straightens even though he’s gone a bit green in the face. “It’s none of your business, monster.” The merchant reaches forward and yanks me toward him.

A flash of gold and green blinds me momentarily, and Devin yelps.

A wall of flame now separates the wool merchant from me. Cyrus’s fire isn’t hot against my skin, even though it’s so close that it should be burning me. Instead, its warmth is comforting.

“Are you all right, Kaya?” Cyrus’s voice is booming and shaking the very ground.

I swallow and take a step away from the wall of flame and get closer to Cyrus. “I am fine.”

Black smoke pours from Cyrus’s nostrils and ears. His taloned hands are curled like he’s ready to rip Devin’s throat out.

“Eh,” I say softly. I set my hand carefully on Cyrus’s arm. The scales that cover his

forearm and hand in this half-shifted form are hot to the touch, but I maintain contact. “I’m okay. Let’s breathe together, okay?”

His dragon gaze snaps from Devin to my face. He eyes my body like he’s looking for damage.

“I’m fine. Breathe,” I say.

“This is madness,” Devin says. “I’m getting out of here.”

Cyrus’s wall of fire spreads and surrounds Devin. “Apologize to her or die twice.”

“Twice?” Devin says mockingly, even though he is sweating and darting nervous glances at the magical fire. “Don’t think that’s possible, dragon.” He says the word like a curse.

“Won’t stop me from trying, asshole. Fire first, then I shred you into pieces she can dance on.”

My heartbeat triples its pace. Warmth pools low in my belly. I can’t deny that Cyrus defending me like this is incredibly attractive.

“Cyrus, that’s not necessary.” He’s never used his fire like this. I wonder if he’s had this type of control over it all this time. But he isn’t in control of himself at the moment and all the magic in the world can’t bring back a dead man. “We don’t want the paperwork involved with murder, Cyrus. Really. Let’s go to the bakery. We’ll have a nice chat.”

“I’m not going anywhere until this pathetic excuse of a person grovels on his fucking knees.” The wall of fire cracks loudly and Devin jumps.



“Fine. Insanity...” the merchant mutters. He goes to his knees and looks at Cyrus. “I’m sorry for kissing your female, monster.”

A dark laugh comes from Cyrus and the fire creeps closer to Devin. “Keep on being a dick. Please. I am fine with the trouble murder brings. I will savor every consequence. Now, look at her. Not me.”

Devin sets his steely gaze on me. “I’m sorry,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Beg for her forgiveness.”

“She probably permanently injured my stones, dragon, so I don’t think I will.”

Cyrus says nothing, but his wings are trembling in his rage and the fire crawls closer to Devin.

The wool merchant jerks back, going greener. I can’t quite see how close he is to the flames because only his shoulders and face are visible above Cyrus’s wall of fire.

“I’m sorry, Kaya. Please, please forgive me,” Devin says quickly.

There’s not a trace of snark in his tone now, and the scent of burning clothing and hair rises into the night air.

“I don’t forgive you,” I say, likely enjoying this far more than I should be.

A purr comes from Cyrus, and he looks at me with approval shining in his eyes.

“But that’s enough,” I say. “Cyrus, stop it now.”

Blinking, Cyrus shakes out his wings. They return to their usual size, and the

additional scales on his skin fade until they are invisible.

The merchant is patting the back of his head and one leg of his trousers. He gets up, watching Cyrus, then takes off at a run down the road.

I take Cyrus's hands in mine. I'm shaking as much as he is.

"I ..."

My heart beats in my ears, and the feel of his hands on mine is so very different from how Devin's felt. "Thank you."

He reaches up and cups my face with one hand. "Kaya."

The tension between us is as hot as his fire magic. I'm about to explode or disappear into smoke.

We crash into one another, and there is nothing friendly about our kiss. I bite his lip, and he growls and pulls me closer. All of the years of pining over Cyrus, all that time locking away my feelings for him, it's all coming at me in waves of heat. His firewall is back, and it surrounds us, but my mind has no time to process that. His tongue slides over mine and my body melts like hot butter on fresh bread. I press myself into him, feeling the hard and wonderful angles and lines of his body. His hands are in my hair and his mouth finds my jawline.

"Kaya. Kaya."

In turns, he whispers my name and licks his way over my skin. I feel like I've been struck by some powerful potion. My body is all sensation. Logic is nowhere to be found and everything feels amazing. I am safe with Cyrus. I know him as well as I know myself. His fire intensifies those comforting but also passionate feelings, and I kiss him again on the mouth.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 16

#### Kaya

The tavern door bangs open, the haze of desire lifts briefly, and it's the end of what feels like a dream.

We break away from one another, panting. I imagine my eyes are as wild as his. My hair is tangled and hanging halfway over my face. His protective circle of fire is smoke now, and the chill of the evening dusts my damp skin. An ache low in my belly complains that I'm not shoved against him anymore.

A group of traveling bards and three orc females are leaving the tavern, their voices loud and their laughter louder.

Cyrus takes a step toward me, holding out a hand. "I didn't mean to ..."

"I know. I, I wanted to ..." But I can't find the words. Was this a mistake? Does he think that?

Tully, Argos, Laini, and Rom walk out and stop to stare.

Tully sniffs the air. "I'm going to need to hear the story," she says to Cyrus.

He faces the clouds, shoulders dropping. "I might have overreacted."

Laini comes to my side. "Where is Devin?"

I grimace and try to find the right words. “He isn’t the nice guy we thought he was, unfortunately.”

Tully steps toward me, her hand on her wand. “What did he do?”

Rom and Argos look into the night-cloaked town like they might spot Devin.

“He ran off,” I say.

Rom looks from me to Cyrus. “What happened?” His voice is quiet, but danger laces his tone. I know the threat is aimed at Devin, not me.

“Well, I was trying to leave and he grabbed my arm. I kned him between the legs, then Cyrus showed up.”

Chuckling, Tully gives me a grin. “Good work, friend.” She strides toward Cyrus. “Did you burn him into nothing? Please say yes .” She clasps her hands like a supplicant at the throne.

“I did not.” Cyrus’s voice is far less subtly dangerous than Rom’s; his voice is thunder and lightning right here on the road. Even Tully backs up a step, eyeing him warily. “But only because Kaya’s kind heart stopped me.”

“Thank the Blessed Stones,” Laini says. “You would have been brought to the king’s court.”

I nod. “That’s what I was worried about. Devin is not worth the trouble.”

“I’m so sorry he was a waste of good air, Kaya,” Tully says. “What can we do? How can we help?”

“I just want to go to bed. It’s been a long night. As you all know, this is way past my bedtime.”

“Want to have some tea with me?” Cyrus asks quietly as the others bid us goodnight. “I have something to show you.”

I’m exhausted. I feel exposed. My feelings for Cyrus have been brought out of hiding, and now he’ll discard me like he always does with lovers. There is no way I could recover if we let this relationship bloom and he cut it down afterward. But I’m curious about what he wants to show me.

“What is it?” I ask.

He takes a scroll from his belt. “I went back to the ruins.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did.” He grins at me. “Reckless. Remember? You won’t be able to see anything out here in this dark, though.”

“Let’s go to my place then.”

I unlock my bakery’s front door, and we settle at a front table where I light a few pillar candles. Cyrus spreads the scroll out.

“It’s a map?” I lean in to eye the inked rivers, mountains, roads, and villages. “This is Leafshire Cove,” I say, pointing to a small representation of our hometown.

“Yes.” He pushes his hair back, and I can’t help but appreciate the roll of muscles under his slightly scaled flesh. If only he was hideous. “But you won’t believe how I found it.”

The wood grain of the table presses into my fingers as I grip the edges of the surface. A chill gallops over my back. “The dragon shifter?”

“Aye. The ghost of one. He appeared to me and took me into his library. He wanted me to have this map, but I have no idea why.”

“That’s incredible! Didn’t he want to tell you?”

“He didn’t speak at all. I don’t think he is able.”

I nod, fear scratching at my nerves. “I’m glad you’re all right. You don’t feel sick or anything, right?”

His smile is kind, and I could fall into those sultry eyes of his. “I feel fantastic.” But a sadness cloaks the tone of his voice. He must regret our kiss. “Betilda told me that DeFleurtis is fine, by the way. He hasn’t had any other curse-like symptoms.”

“That’s a relief.”

Cyrus nods and puts a talon on the top half of the map. “The ghost pointed to this spot.”

“I thought that area was deserted and barren.”

“I did too, but perhaps not. There must be something there for me to find.”

“More information?”

“I don’t know. The ghost disappeared right after he led me to the map.”

“When do you leave?” I ask, feeling hollow and forcing a calmly curious expression.

He eases back against the chair and crosses his arms. “Well, I probably shouldn’t go.”

“Probably shouldn’t is pretty much the beginning and ending of all your days.”

His head falls back as he laughs and I marvel at the rich sound. I can be friends with him. I can do this. If I can stop lusting over him and wishing those taloned hands were on me. I clear my throat and look back at the map.

“Halvard said he can’t go with you to Kingstown, right?” Cyrus asks. “His goats chewed through his fence, and he has to fix the fence before they all figure out they have freedom at their hoof tips.”

Ah, he already knows. “Yes, but I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll go with you. I’ll close up the pub for two days. No problem.”

“No, I can get Tully and Argos to go. I forgot to ask them tonight, but I’ll send Tully a note.”

Cyrus’s gaze brushes up my face and down again. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, thanks anyway, though.”

I start to touch his hand, but I pull away. He pretends not to notice, rolls up the map, and stands. My cheeks flush and I want to disappear.

Why can’t this be easier?

It was just a kiss. Most people kiss plenty. It’s not a huge event in their lives. But for me, Cyrus is only the second person I’ve ever kissed. I’m so inexperienced. Cyrus runs a hand through his hair, his talons clicking lightly against one of his horns. It’s

like he doesn't know what to do now.

"Do you want me to stick around in case that asshole comes back?" he asks.

"I don't think he'll be coming back. You nearly fried him." I laugh jerkily, feeling incredibly off.

"I can still do that. Just say the word and he's gone. For good."

"No, Cyrus. Don't do that."

If I touch him, we will start kissing again. I can't handle his imminent rejection or how he will turn our affair into something casual. There is nothing casual about my feelings for Cyrus—that much is obvious to me now. I will be friends with him, but that is it. My heart isn't built for casual affairs.

"I won't," he says. "But the offer will always be on the table."

He's talking about Devin, but could he be hinting that the offer of us having a romantic relationship would always be on the table too? But he would be bored with me in a week and then I'd pine for him for the rest of my life. It's pathetic, and I'd never admit to it, but it's the truth.

"Have a good rest of your night, Cyrus. I'll see you when I get back."

"All right. Keep me posted on how it goes with Lady Egrettington."

"I will." I smile and swallow, wanting more than anything to fall into his arms and feel him kiss me like I'm the only person he ever wants to love.

But I watch him walk out the bakery door with the starlight glinting over his horns



and wings, over his big hands and wide-set shoulders. Blowing out the candle, I force myself to stop looking and I head upstairs to bed. I grab Sio and hold him close as he purrs. I have to move forward. I need sleep and to focus on delivering my order tomorrow.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 17

#### Cyrus

I can't go to bed now. I'm too riled up. What was that with my fire? I've never done that wall thing before now and I must assume it's due to my feelings for Kaya. My very much not just friendship feelings for her.

That kiss...

Blessed Stones save me, but that was amazing. Her sweet lips on mine, her body pliant and soft with desire in my arms.

I find myself on the bench that sits diagonally across the market from Kaya's bakery. Rom's tower blocks Kaya's front window from view, but the front door of Two Cats Bakery is easy to watch even in the dark. Rustion has held off the lighting of the tall gaslamps for this season. He says oil prices have gone up, and unless it's a festival night, we can deal with the dark.

I curl my tail around the back leg of the bench and spread my wings slightly so I can lean back on the wall of the town's tools storage building. I guess I'm watching to make sure that damned wool merchant doesn't return and attempt to put his filthy hands on Kaya. Heat surges through my body, and I realize I'm digging my talons into the bench's old, soft wood. I release my death grip on the slats and take a deep breath.

Kaya was right to push me away—metaphorically—after our kiss. She deserves

better than me. But there's no chance I can get myself to wish that kiss didn't happen. It was the best moment of my life. I can hold myself at arm's distance from Kaya until our friendship goes back to its balanced state again.

At least, I think I can.

The wild dragon inside me roars and sends fire through my chest and throat at the thought of sitting back and watching her find a life partner that isn't me. I shut my eyes and will my fire magic to calm, to sleep. Once I have myself under control, I set my gaze on Kaya's door again.

Before dawn, I hurry back toward my pub. I don't want Kaya to know I was keeping watch on her place. It would seem suffocating to her, I'm sure.

Betilda is waiting outside the pub when I get there. "Blessed Stones, Cyrus, where have you been?" She looks me up and down while I unlock the door.

I like the orc female, so I don't mind her nosing into my business. But I'm not going to tell her the truth.

"Where do you think?" I wink and give her a suggestive flick of my tail.

She puts a hand on her chest and sighs. "Oh, of course. Cyrus the lover. If only I was a decade younger. I'd make my move, you can be sure."

I chuckle and set a peck on her green cheek as I pass her and enter the front room. The chairs are stacked on the tables, the floor has been swept clean, and the bar top and drink preparation area is tidy with everything where it should be. Trustan has left me a note about low stock on potatoes and spring wine.

Betilda leans on the bar, and her perfume wafts across my face.

“How can I help you, Betilda?”

“I’m on the May Day Festival committee this year. You might have heard that, aye?”

“I did.” I open the till and remove the larger coins, stashing them in a bag at my belt. I’ll put them in the vault later. “How can I help?”

“I was wondering if you would work a shift at a kissing booth.”

I look up and can’t stop myself from grimacing. “I don’t love that idea.”

“I know. I know. But you’re the hottest ticket in town, and you know it.”

“True.” I grin and preen, but it’s an act. Years ago, I would have agreed in a heartbeat, but now the only one I want to kiss is Kaya.

“And the booth’s income will all go to charity,” Betilda says.

“Oh?” That makes this harder to refuse.

“Aye, yes. All the coin you earn at the festival will go to build a new orphanage. Our darling lord mayor has agreed to match whatever you bring in.”

“That is generous.”

Betilda nods and rolls one of her many cheap rings around her large forefinger. “You only need to do it for an hour or so.”

“Will someone else be taking over after my shift?”

“Possibly. We haven’t organized a list yet.”

“All right. I’ll do it. But only because it’s for the orphans.”

A number of human orphans had been drawn to Leafshire Cove from the human realm. Young curiosity played a role in that, most likely, but also it was widely known that Veil creatures are kinder to young without homes than most humans are. Not all, of course, but most.

“Thank you so much, Cyrus. Is it too early for a drink? Just something light. That fruit wine you had on the menu last spring, maybe?”

“They call it sangria in the human world. I don’t think it’s too early. The sun isn’t up yet, so in many ways it’s still last night!”

She guffaws, and I pour her out a small cup of the dark pink beverage. I made it with mint, lemons, strawberries, and dessert wine.

We share a chat on the weather—the most popular topic in Leafshire Cove—and the sweet and bright taste of the sangria almost cheers me up. It is going to take a lifetime for me to get over Kaya, but I’m good at pretending. I can act like a simple friend and keep her close by. Not too close, but ...

Betilda sets her cup down and gets up from her stool. “... and if the rain comes during the festival, it will only make everything more exciting, right?”

I missed the first part of what she was saying, but I reply vaguely as she sashays toward the door. “Definitely. See you soon.”

She waves over her shoulder.

The minute the door shuts behind her, my mind goes back to Kaya. I’m annoying myself with this obsession. She’s bringing her baked goods to Lady Egrettington

today, and I truly hope all goes well.

Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to fly over the road to Kingstown and check that Kaya is all right. Just a quick peek through the forest.

### Chapter 18

#### Kaya

N one of my other friends were available to travel to Kingstown. But it'll be fine as long as I get on the road quickly. I load up the wagon I borrowed from Rychell—not easy with my thumb still hurting—and get moving right after sunrise.

Traveling to Kingstown won't be dangerous if I get there during daylight hours. The Veiled Kingdoms are fairly safe because we haven't had any droughts or political uprisings—the two things that tend to make folks desperate here. I've only heard of one instance of robbery in the woods that separate our town from the city that houses the king and queen. That was over a year ago, too.

Sio curls up beside me on the wagon's bench. He hasn't spoken this morning, but he has stayed close. Last night, I told him all about Devin, Cyrus's protective fire magic, and the dragon shifter ghost. I didn't have time to talk to Laini or Tully about the ruins and what Cyrus found, and besides, I don't want to. They would only give Cyrus trouble for going up there and tempting the supposed curse. Sio slept in the space between my shoulder and head all night long, and it was truly comforting. I'm so grateful for him.

I click my tongue at Rychell's black mare, Tamar. She's a sweet old female, and she immediately increases her pace until we are beyond the town walls and in the dappled shadows of the forest.

We bounce over a rough area on the road. The cart wheels squeak lightly, and Sio

dig his claws into the bench. I turn to check that the ropes I have securing the magical chest of baked goods are still in place. Thankfully, they are. A nice scent comes from the wooden container—cinnamon, orange, and butter—and it combines with the perfume of sun-warmed earth and green plants. Mistberry bushes grow along the road, but their fruits are still too small to eat as they get less sunshine under the large oaks, beeches, and maples.

I pass a merchant family on their way to Leafshire Cove. Younglings hang from every edge of the cart, and they laugh uproariously every time the wagon goes over a bump in the road. I wave, and the merchant and his wife raise a hand in greeting.

After that, I don't see anyone for hours. Tamar and I stop a few times to rest, eat a little—bread and cheese for me and clover for the mare—and to drink from the Leafshire River's offshoot, Mossy Creek.

I don't mind being on the road like this. The finches are chirping merrily overhead as we make our way through the woods. Sio and Tamar answer all of my little questions with meows, whinnies, and huffing sounds.

“So you think I'm doing the right thing, backing away from Cyrus?”

Tamar whickers, and Sio rubs his head against my arm.

“All right. Good. But that kiss...”

A growl of sorts rumbles from Sio's warm body, and Tamar grunts.

“Fine. I'll try to stop thinking about it. I just wish I was more used to being kissed.”

Sio meets my gaze. “You should ask Betilda about the kissing booth at the May Day Festival. Get yourself some experience kissing other upright walkers.”



I blink and nearly drop my reins. “Sorry. I, I don’t think I’m used to you speaking yet, Sio.”

He purrs and touches my wrist with his cold nose like he’s saying, That’s all right. I understand.

“I had forgotten about that booth. I don’t think they did it last year, did they?”

Sio meows what feels like a no .

“That’s why I didn’t think of it. It’s a great idea!” I shake the reins to encourage Tamar gently and get her moving more quickly. “I can kiss the whole town if they’re up for it. The coin the committee collects usually funds a charity, so this would be good for more than just my selfish purposes. Maybe if I kiss enough people, I will stop thinking about my moment with Cyrus.”

Like I summoned him with a word, Cyrus drops through the tree canopy high above and lands in the back of the cart. My heart careens up my throat. The wagon lurches, and Tamar whinnies though she eyes Cyrus with raised ears so I don’t think she was as surprised at his appearance as I was.

“What are you doing here?” My heart beats like a crazed drummer has been released inside my chest.

Behind the bench where I sit, Cyrus kneels. He eases one arm over the back of the bench.

“I found out you decided to go alone, and I thought you might need company. Besides, it’s an unnecessary risk going alone like this,” Cyrus says.

“Have you turned into a granny overnight? Why are you so worried about everything

now?”

A chuckle rumbles from him and I see the tip of a wing over my shoulder. He is shielding my head from the inconsistent sunlight through the trees.

“I guess I have become rather granny-like when it comes to you.”

“You’re a good friend,” I say, quickly. My hands are sweating and the reins feel slippery between my fingers.

“Aye.”

I wish I could see his expression right now. Does that fact make him feel content or is he frustrated about it like I am? No, I don’t care. I refuse to consider it.

“We’re nearly to Kingstown now,” I say. “I would have been fine.”

“You still have the ride back.”

I give him a look. Secretly, I’m glad he is here. But I also know that concentrating on my delivery will be so much harder now.

He grins. “Look, let’s forget about everything and simply enjoy ourselves in Kingstown.”

My heart races and my palms grow even stickier. Tamar seems to notice my mood and slows down.

Cyrus moves his hand back and forth as if to dispel whatever dark look I’ve given him. “Just shopping and seeing the city,” he says. “Doing whatever you want to do. You never take time off, Kaya.”

I snap the reins lightly over Tamar's back and she trots faster. "I went climbing with Renen a few weeks ago."

"You hated every second of that."

I purse my lips. "Not every second."

He tilts his head and raises an eyebrow.

Shrugging, I say, "The last part when we returned home was really nice."

A chuckle comes from Cyrus, and then we are turning off the main road and onto the lane that leads to Kingstown's mighty walls.

I wonder how this is all going to go. I have a friend I wish was my lover and a ridiculous amount of baked goods to deliver to the queen's tea.

"I have to admit that I am nervous the nobles won't like my pastries."

Cyrus takes my hand and smiles. "They will love it, Kaya. Everyone does."

He releases me, and my fingers mourn the loss of his touch. I nod and click my tongue so Tamar will line up behind the row of folks trying to enter through the city gates—gates larger than my entire shop.

Cyrus's eyes glitter as finely armored guards patrol the top of the curtain wall. "It's an adventure."

That's exactly what I was afraid this was. Sio curls into my lap. I shake my head at myself and try to feel excited instead of anxious.

### Chapter 19

#### Cyrus

Kaya looks like she is about to vomit over the side of the cart. “It’s bigger than I remember.”

Her voice is strained like she’s trying so hard to have a good time that it’s nearly killing her. Maybe if I get her talking, she’ll relax.

“When was the last time you were here?” I ask her.

“I was maybe ten years old? Renen brought me here before he took me to Leafshire Cove.”

The city is a riot of sounds and smells. Chicken roasts on sticks at a stall festooned with thin, red banners. Horses and fine carriages clog the streets, residents calling out to one another as they pass. Kaya grimaces as she tugs on the reins to keep Tamar on the far left of the road to avoid a four-horse carriage. She looks my way and laughs nervously.

“So exciting,” she says, trying to smile.

“I’m sorry this isn’t your cup of tea.”

“No, no. I like it. Some of it. Look at the little goats!”

A herd of black and brown spotted goats bleat and trot by, their shepherd tapping his staff on the cobblestones on either side of them to keep them in line.

“Adorable,” I say. “Did you see the acrobats?”

I touch her chin and turn her face toward the display on the castle keep’s raised stage. There’s always something going on here around May Day. The king and queen enjoy entertaining their subjects. Two figures in bright yellow and blue do cartwheels and then leap onto long scarves that hang from wooden scaffolding.

“Amazing!”

She truly does seem happy to see the sights now.

“What is the address Lady Egrettington gave you for delivery?” I ask.

Her features slide into what I’ve always privately called her “work face,” and she pulls a slip of well-worn paper from the pocket of her apron. The front of the apron boasts her bakery’s name and the two maplecats that are also on her sign at home.

I study the paper. “Ah, this is a receiving area the royals have on the northeast side of the keep. It’s a separate building.”

She raises a brow. “You know everything about every social event in the world, don’t you?”

I laugh. “No, but I did attend the princess’s birthday party there once when I was visiting a friend. I was just a youngling.”

The cart bumps over a damaged spot in the cobbles, and a wagon full of vegetables pulled by a mule narrowly misses sideswiping us. Sio yowls and hisses from Kaya’s

lap.

Kaya makes a whimpering sound, but she manages the wagon and Tamar like a natural. “As in the princess who is now queen?” she asks me.

“Aye. She was a wild little thing, let me tell you.”

Kaya steers Tamar through the madness of the city like it’s nothing but another recipe to untangle. I have to give her credit because most would balk at this.

“I’m impressed with your ability to handle the cart in this chaos, Kaya.”

“I handle the reins when Renen and I journey up to the mountains. This is no worse than fallen trees, pitted roads, and rabbits.”

“There are that many rabbits on the way to the cliffs?”

“Yes. More than you can imagine.”

I shake my head and blow out a whistle. “So the old saying about their procreation habits is accurate.”

“It is,” she says.

A pretty pink blush rises in Kaya’s cheeks and I force myself to look away. I can’t see her like that. Must be friendly. Not lusty. I shake my head at myself; I’m fully aware of what a piece of work I can be.

Once we are through the smaller gate at the keep’s grounds, Kaya drives the cart to a shaded spot where maples stretch toward the keep’s various balconies. Sio jumps to the ground to sniff at some yellow flowers planted around the trees. Kaya and I

unload the trunk from the cart, and a fairy stable lad flies over with a bucket of water for Tamar.

“Which way should we take this?” Kaya asks the lad as she points to the trunk I am holding. “These are the baked goods Lady Egrettington ordered.”

The stable lad directs us to a side door that leads into the room I remember visiting.

“You sure you don’t want a hand?” Kaya asks me, eyeing the trunk like a mother hen does her chicks.

“I’ve got it, sweetness.”

She nods, wrings her hands—carefully avoiding use of her splinted thumb—and studies the beams of the vaulted ceiling. Carved rosewood tables fill the space, and more of those yellow flowers have been tucked into crockery vases on each one.

Lady Egrettington flutters into the room, her glowing pink wings a blur behind her poofy head of similarly-hued hair. “Oh good! I’m so thrilled to have found you, Baker Kaya.”

She gives Kaya a full smile and Kaya returns it.

“Thank you for the business,” she says. “I hope the queen, you, and your guests enjoy the treats.”

“I know they will.”

A few young females and males—more fairies, a human, and a couple of shifters—scurry out of a back room, and Kaya starts handing off the cloth-wrapped platters of baked goods to them to set on the tables.

I sniff the room discreetly, hoping to scent a dragon shifter. I always do this, and of course, never find one. These two shifter servants smell like birds, perhaps birds of prey. I do my best to help them set up the multitiered tea trays and then set orange-iced scones on the bottom level of each one.

Lady Egrettington stands with her hands clasped. “Perfect. It’s just perfect.”

Kaya is beaming like a ray of sunshine. I can’t look away this time. She stands straight and proud of her accomplishment—she deserves this.

She turns to me. “What is it?”

Her gaze gives me the sensation of her delicate fingertips brushing my cheeks. My heart is racing and blood surges down my body. It’s mad how she can drive me wild with simple, innocent looks.

“I’m happy for you. That’s all.”

Taking my hand, she grins. “You’ve been amazing. You’re a wonderful friend.”

The word cuts as well as that baking knife she has in her kitchen, but I cover my reaction well enough, I think, giving her that grin right back.

“I am pretty fantastic, right?”

A laugh peals from her pink lips and she releases my hand. My fingers, which are never cold, feel positively icy without her warmth.

Lady Egrettington invites us to stay for tea, but Kaya seems uncomfortable and nervous about what she’s wearing, so we thank her, take the two heavy sacks of coins, and head back to the wagon.



Tamar is munching on a small pile of alfalfa, but Sio is nowhere to be found. Kaya takes both sacks of coins and locks them into the small trunk attached to the underside of the wagon's front bench.

"If it's just the clothing you're worried about," I say, "you can easily get a dress or whatever makes you feel good at the market. I'd be happy to help. And if you think I need something, I'm open to a little shopping for myself, too."

Kaya shakes her head and looks around the courtyard. "It's not that, but I appreciate it. I'd rather explore the city with you than make polite conversation with the queen and her ilk."

"No fear of polite conversation with me," I say, teasing and hoping for another lovely laugh from her.

She chuckles, then her face pales and her arms fall to her sides. "Sio!"

I whirl around to see a tumbling mass of orange fur, a green pelt, claws, and the sharp beak of a shrub gryphon.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 20

#### Kaya

I sprint toward the fight, my lungs tight with worry. “Stop it! Sio, no!”

Cyrus flies past me. He has Sio by the back of the neck and pulled away from the gryphon before I can blink twice. Sio wriggles, howls, and spits. The shrub gryphon, its pelt sticking up in spots, lets out a snarl in Sio’s direction. It begins digging up the ground around a patch of flowers, like he is glad to be done with the maplecater and back to his earthy endeavors. Cyrus lowers Sio to the ground.

“I suppose I must thank you for drawing me out of my rage,” Sio says.

Cyrus just stares. “I...”

“I’ll find you both tonight by scent,” Sio says. “Have a good day.”

“Bye!” I wave as Sio trots out of the courtyard and toward the city.

Cyrus runs a hand through his hair. “About fifty thoughts have come into my head, but I’ll just say that Tully could sell the king’s weight in gryphon repellent spells here.”

Then I realize I forgot something that I was looking forward to. “Ah, no.”

“What is it?”

“I meant to save us a few treats. It’s a tragedy that we had to smell them all the way here, and we don’t even get a single bite.”

Cyrus’s grin turns devilish. He’s painfully handsome when he has that naughty look. He pulls a small bundle from his cloak and holds it out. I unwrap a linen napkin to see exactly what I forgot—two perfect chocolate croissants.

“After all these years, I’m an expert at stealing your pastries, Kaya.”

I laugh. “You’re a menace.”

“I’m your menace.”

A smile stretches my face, but then my stomach flips and I fully absorb the way he said that. What does he mean? It sounded like...

And then he is putting the treat to my lips and I can’t do anything but bite into the flaky, buttery layers. The chocolate is soft and just the right level of sweet.

I shut my eyes and savor the taste. “Yummmm.”

When I open my eyes, Cyrus is staring at my mouth. He coughs and sets the rest of my treat in my hand and takes a quick bite of his own.

“Come,” he says, not looking at me. “Let’s go have some fun.”

I probably am reading too much into everything at this point. That kiss tangled me into knots.

Outside the courtyard, the city is a storm of sounds and smells. It’s a feast you can live inside, and now that I have finished delivering my goods and all that is settled, I

feel more capable of enjoying this. Plus, the gleam in Cyrus's eyes raises my spirits further. He was made for adventure like this and more. I sigh and trail him into the market proper, where he begins haggling with a hemp bag merchant.

"For this size bag, I wouldn't go that high now..." Cyrus turns the satchel this way and that, his eyebrow lifting and his scales catching the afternoon sun's warm light. His tail swishes behind him in the way it does when he's enjoying a challenge. "I'll give you this much and not a copper more." His taloned fingers uncurl to drop coins into the merchant's hand.

"I'm being robbed," the merchant mutters. But he slides the coins into the small box on his table and is already seeking his next customer.

The next spot features bright silks, wools, and linens. I run my hand down a draped length of purple-dyed linen that would look so pretty as an apron.

"Let me get it for you," Cyrus says at my shoulder.

His body is so close that his heat seeps into me. I take a slow breath to calm my heart, wishing he didn't affect me so strongly.

"No, you don't need to do that. But thank you anyway."

"I know I don't need to. I want to."

My cheeks flush, and he's already passing a coin to the fabric merchant, a tall faerie with a square jaw in direct contrast to his rounded, sparkling wings. The merchant seems unwilling to barter and has his prices jotted on parchment here and there around the display.

Cyrus tucks the fabric into the satchel he bought. "Consider it a congratulatory gift

for your big sale.”

I smile and try not to fall in love with him. He’s just so wonderful sometimes. He studies my face and I turn, the look too intense to maintain.

“You know, none of these folks are reacting oddly to you being a dragon shifter. That must mean they see your kind from time to time.”

“True,” he says. “I’ve thought of that in the past. I even asked some folks about what they knew of my kind, but no one ever had anything to say beyond what I already knew.”

I’m sad for him. Despite his many friends, he has to feel incredibly lonesome sometimes.

We shop more, examining a table of mechanized timekeepers.

“I don’t think I want a fine clock like this,” Cyrus says, holding up a brass and shell contraption that one only winds once a week. “No need to keep that good of an eye on how much time I waste.”

I chuckle, and we move on to an array of utensils and my heart throbs almost as hard as it does when Cyrus stands close.

“Baking tools!” I practically leap onto the merchant who has shelves and shelves of flippers, dividers, thin parchment paper, whisks, and finely painted mixing spoons.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cyrus grinning at me.

The merchant is a goblin with black eyes and a sweet smile. “I can tell you know your way around a kitchen.”

“I do!”

“She just delivered all the baked goods for the queen’s tea,” Cyrus says with a bragging tone.

I blush and study a whisk made of some light wood. “What’s this made of?”

“Bamboo from across the sea,” the goblin says. “Isn’t it just a feather in your hand?”

“It’s divine. I’ll take two.”

Once I pay the merchant, we decide it’s time to find a room and a meal for the night. The first two inns we try are full. The third inn is a three-story structure with a thatched roof that leans over the front door like a troll’s shadow. Cyrus opens the door for me and we enter the warm establishment.

There’s a bard at one end of the main room, and he’s singing a soft song and playing a small harp with the head of a mermaid. The fire snaps and crackles from the other side of the room, where a group of humans and monsters alike share laughs and raise their mugs to toast something. Long tables run across the place, echoing the lines of the beams on the ceiling. There is a set of stairs that leads to a corridor, presumably where patrons sleep.

The familiar scent of lavender and bread sifts through the air, and I trail Cyrus to the half-counter where the bangs and clatters of a busy kitchen come from around a corner. This is the largest building I’ve been in, not counting the castle keep, but it’s still very cozy.

“I love this place,” I say to the curly-haired woman standing and smiling at us behind the half-counter.

“Thank you, good woman. Can I get you two a meal? A room?” She wiggles her eyebrows, then laughs at what I’m sure is my extremely nervous expression.

Cyrus winces at me and takes the lead. “We would love whatever you have for dinner. Kaya, what do you want to drink? I’ll have an ale.”

“Ale is fine.” I smile, glad he asked me, unlike the stupid wool merchant.

“And we need two rooms,” Cyrus says.

I offer up the money before Cyrus can try to pay. “This is on me. A business expense.”

“But I can pay for my half...”

“No, I won’t hear another word.” I grin at the innkeeper, who nods and tucks the money into the bag at her belt.

“The only trouble is that we just have one room left. Will that be all right?”

“Are there two beds?” Cyrus asks.

“Aye. Two small cots and a blanket for each.”

Thank the Blessed Stones for that. I can’t share a bed with Cyrus. I do not have that kind of willpower. I’d be curled up next to his wonderful heat before sunrise for certain. I wouldn’t be able to resist!

That night, we head upstairs and I use the skeleton key to unlock the door. The room isn’t too tiny, but the beds, well...

“That is not two beds.”

“No, it is not.”

“That is, in fact, only one bed.”



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 21

Kaya

At least there is a surplus of pillows. Pillows are stacked in the corners of the room, on a set of shelves, and on the bed, too.

“Why did she tell us there were two beds?” My voice waffles between insecure and overly bright. I roll my eyes at myself.

Someone runs up behind us and stops. It’s a young man—all knees and overlarge teeth. Can’t be more than ten years old.

“Um, my ma said to tell you she is sorry. She was mixed up. We had to throw out the other cot in here because of an incident.”

“Do we want to know?” Cyrus asks.

The lad shudders. “You don’t.”

I grimace. “Oh my. One cot is fine.” I don’t want to hear any details.

“It involved a clowder,” the lad says.

Cyrus frowns. “A what?”

“Chowder,” I say, clarifying even though I don’t know how it would have anything to

do with the situation.

“No, a clowder,” the lad says. “Of cats.”

Cyrus jerks back, eyes wide. “Cat stew?”

The lad lifts his hands. “Noooo, Master Dragonkin,” he says, using the generic term for dragon shifters. “We don’t eat cats. I love them. The kittens live under my bed now.” He smiles, showing those large front teeth. He’s adorable.

Cyrus is nodding. “Ah. A mother cat had kittens on my bed, did she?”

“Not just one cat,” the lad says. “Three. All in one night! We think it was something to do with the witch that passed through town that very evening. She was a mischievous one.”

Raising an eyebrow, Cyrus leans forward. “Aren’t all witches?”

The lad purses his lips. “Aye, I think so.”

I cover my mouth to hide my laugh as the lad gives us a bow and hurries back down the stairs. When I face the single bed again, I swallow hard around a sudden frog stuck in my throat.

“I’ll take the floor, Kaya. Don’t worry. I’m tough enough to handle it.”

“You hate discomfort.”

“I would hate it more if you were on the floor.” His eyes heat, and this time, I can’t look away.

“Th-thank you,” I say lamely, wishing I knew how to act and had his confidence.

He shakes himself, looking away at last. “Ah, see? There’s an extra quilt. It’ll be fine. I’ll see the innkeeper and fetch us an extra bowl and linen for washing. You go ahead, and I’ll knock before I come back in.”

Suddenly, I wish for the courage to try out a relationship with him. A romantic relationship. What if I could face the idea of being broken into a thousand pieces when he leaves me? Would being with him be worth that risk? He would always be at least my friend. We could go back to watching one another’s romances. Well, I never have any, but I would see his and...

A shiver rocks me.

No, I can’t handle it.

In fact, I’m already unsure how I will react when he’s cozying up to someone in town. I was fine with it before this baking project. A sigh flutters out of me and I try to let it go, that want I feel for him, that incredible pull toward his scent, his arms, his voice. To his smile and his easy way of living in the world.

After taking off my traveling boots and stockings, I remove my apron and dress and hang them on a hook by one of the windows to air out. In my shift, bralette, and silk shorts, I wash my face with bracingly chill water and attempt to clear my thoughts. The lavender scented soap lathers between my hands, and the drying cloth is incredibly soft. I tuck myself into bed, feeling shy about only wearing my shift, when Cyrus knocks lightly.

“Come in,” I say, my voice cracking.

Why, oh why did I agree to his idea of joining me on this trip?

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 22

Kaya

With another folded linen and a bowl in his hands, Cyrus enters. He uses his tail to shut the door behind him. At least he isn't looking over here. I attempt regular breathing, but I'm a failure.

Especially when he strips off his tunic and proceeds to wash his face and hands while only wearing his trousers and boots.

Muscles tense and relax in turn as he cleans the road dust away. The curve of his lower back is partially hidden by his wings, but I can see enough to realize he has a finer arse than I had realized. I bite my lip and roll over so my back is to him.

"Want me to stoke the fire?" His voice rumbles through the room, and I shut my eyes to savor the sound of it. "I'm warm enough, but I don't mind at all if you're cold."

"No, I'm all right."

I hear him remove his boots and I sit up to take the pins out of my hair. I don't like sleeping with the little things jabbing me in the scalp.

"Ow!" One of the double pins is snarled in a tangle.

Cyrus's footsteps thump lightly behind me. "Want some help?"

“Sure. Thanks. Yes.”

He comes close, and I try to keep from showing how much his nearness affects me. He sets one hand on the side of my head. His palm is almost hot and I have to fight not to lean into the touch. His other hand deftly detaches the pin, and then he hands it to me. I turn to face him. With those powerful features of his and that glint in his eye, he could charm the clothes off anyone.

“Thank you. Good night!” I say a little awkwardly, my words tripping over one another. I snuggle under the quilt and shut my eyes before I can do anything else odd.

Cyrus’s chuckle is so faint that I wonder if I imagine it. I hear him shuffling about and getting comfortable on the floor.

“Will you tell me about how you ended up in Leafshire Cove?” he asks. “If you’re not too tired and feel like sharing?”

“It’s not that much of a story.”

“I’d still like to hear it, to know how you ended up there.”

I open my eyes to see him on his side, facing me, propped up on one elbow. He is surrounded by pillows and has at least five stuffed under him like a makeshift mattress. His quilt is draped over his narrow hips, leaving his torso bare. The muscled lines leading from his chest to his waist have me drooling. I lick my lips and roll to my back to look at the ceiling instead. The beams above have leaves and stars painted on them in shades of green and gold.

“My parents weren’t the best, to be honest,” I say.

“In what way? Only share what you want. I’m just curious about you. Feel free to tell

me to shove off.”

I grin and smooth my quilt over my stomach. “They never hit us, but their words were harsh. Overcritical is what Renen called them. Nothing we did was ever done correctly, in their opinion. I was constantly afraid that the raised voices and angry looks would turn into something even worse, so I kept quiet and tried to do exactly as I was supposed to do. Chores finished early. Never speaking too loudly. That sort of thing.”

“Blessed Stones, Kaya. That’s awful.” His words are kind enough, but rage laces his tone like he wishes he could have it out with my parents.

“It was a long time ago. Once Renen and I were adults, we took off for the Veiled Kingdoms that we had already fallen in love with during trips. It was odd once we settled in Leafshire Cove.”

“How so?”

“I had so much freedom. No one was looming over my shoulder to tell me when I was being lazy or doing something incorrectly. I went from days and nights structured and controlled by my parents to a life where I was fully in charge.”

“Is that why you’re so tough on yourself? You feel like you would slip into some kind of woeful slothdom if you don’t work your arse off every day?”

I glance at him sideways. “What are you saying, Cyrus?”

“You’re amazing. You deserve pleasure and relaxation time. You don’t have to work your fingers to the bone to deserve the lovely things life has to offer.”

“I don’t work my fingers to the bone,” I say, my tone filled with vinegar.

“Oh really? When was your last holiday?”

“Just recently. I went climbing and hiking with Renen and his partner, remember?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about time off to do what you choose to do. Not to please anyone else.”

I clear my throat and turn onto my side to face him. My chest feels heavy, and I want him to understand why I live how I do, but I can’t seem to find the right words.

“Renen doesn’t force me to spend time with him.”

“I know that. He’s a good fellow. But if you could take a trip to see anything anywhere, where would you go? Or would you stay home and read by the fire? What is your ideal day when you’re not baking?”

“I’ve never thought about it. I enjoy my work. I’m good at it.”

“Of course. You are an expert. An artist. But perhaps you don’t allow yourself to be selfish once in a while, to do something just for you.”

Chewing on my lip, I let his words sink in. “But if I don’t get up early every day and bake, my life will fall apart. It’s not like my job is tough. I’m not laying bricks in the summer heat. I don’t have to shovel muck or perform difficult healings like Delixian. I have it easy.”

“You don’t have to earn time off, Kaya. You deserve pleasure and relaxation just because you exist.”

I laugh, but it doesn’t feel funny. “I know that.”

But do I? He's right that I haven't ever planned a day off with only myself in mind. Is that because of my parents and the way they raised me?

"I think it's your turn to talk, Cyrus."

"That's fair. Well, you know I have no clue who my biological parents were."

"I'm sorry about that. Does it bother you?"

"It does, if I'm honest. Aside from wondering about my kind, I just would like to know why they gave me up. Probably knew from the start that I was trouble." He grins and lets out a sad huff of laughter, but there isn't any joy in his expression.

It breaks my heart. "No, Cyrus. Now, it's my turn to lecture you. You're fun. Mischievous. But not trouble. You are always there for anyone who needs you. You make people laugh and enjoy themselves."

"I am fun, you're right about that."

"But that's not all," I say.

Cyrus makes a humming sound. "You yourself have chided me about my behavior."

"I know you better now. You've proven you are responsible and worthy of trust."

His eyes pinch and he stares.

"What? Do I have gravy on my chin?" I touch my face and worry that I look ridiculous, doling out kindness while covered in dinner.

"Do you truly believe that?"



“About the gravy or the trust thing?”

He chortles and tosses a pillow at me. I catch it and throw it back. Soon, we are fully at war with the pillows and we’re cackling like naughty children.

The last candle still lit finally snuffs itself with a puff and a trail of smoke. We ease into a silence that feels comfortable. The last thing I hear before sleep is Cyrus’s soft snoring.

Then dreams take me...

“You know,” he whispers, “maybe I’ve been thinking about our relationship all wrong.”

I frown, and my skin feels stretched too tightly over my chest. “What do you mean?”

He sets his satchel on the floor. The glowing log on the hearth fire bathes the room in varying shades of red and gold. I worried the room would smell like sweat and crowds, but the scent of lavender is here as it was downstairs. The whiff of laundry soap touches my nose, too. It’s quite pleasant, and if it weren’t for Cyrus’s cryptic words, I’d be happy to sink into that little bed and relax.

Cyrus approaches me, hands spread wide. “If you only wish to be friends with me, that is fine. But that doesn’t mean we can’t have some fun.”

“I agree.”

He stumbles and catches himself on a small round table set with a pitcher and two cups. “You do?”

“We had a lot of fun today.”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I mean, sweetness. I thought maybe if you wanted to...” He gives me a tentative look as his big hands cup my elbows. Goosebumps run up my arms and onto my scalp. “I can see that you are physically attracted to me.”

“Blessed Stones. I’m sorry, Cyrus. I know we’re just friends. I don’t want to feel this way.”

His gaze slides to the floor and a wrinkle appears between his eyes. “I understand.”

“We are friends.”

Nodding, he faces me again. “We are. Nothing will ever change that.”

“You have always been so supportive. I appreciate you, Cyrus.”

He has that expression again, the pinched look and the downward gaze, and I can’t nail down what exactly he is feeling. “And I appreciate you, Kaya. So if you want to explore kissing or touching or anything at all, I’m your servant, my lady.”

My stomach flips and I can’t blink. He bows formally, his wings spreading slightly and his tail swishing slowly behind him. His horns catch the moonlight streaming through the two windows. Does he mean what I think he means?

When he straightens, his eyes darken. He cups my elbows again and draws me close. His scent ? —

“Kaya. You’re having a dream. It’s all right,” a voice says, waking me.

I open my eyes to see Cyrus looking down at me. He’s sitting on the side of the cot and his weight has me rolling toward him. His thigh is pressed against my arm, warmth soaking into me. His right wing stretches over us like a noble’s fancy canopy

bed.

“Oh. Sorry.” My face is one hundred thousand degrees. “Did I say anything?”

His eyebrows lift like my expression is telling him too much, and I’m exposing exactly what I was dreaming about.

“You didn’t.” His smile is kind. “You were tossing and grunting.”

“Like a frustrated pig?”

He chuckles. “Definitely piggish.” With a quick move, he pinches my arm lightly.

I laugh and go to push his hand away, but his fingers linger on mine. It’s only a moment before he puts his hands on his knees, but the sensation of his touch hums through me. I wonder what it would feel like to have his whole body pressed against mine like his thigh is right now. I inhale and scoot over to give him an inch more room.

“I’m all right. Sorry if I woke you.”

“No, it’s fine. I have nightmares a lot,” he says.

“You do?”

He heads back to his spot on the floor. “About being left when I was little.”

My chest aches for him. “Cyrus. I’m so sorry.”

Shrugging, he lies down and pulls his quilt up to his waist. “Robin and Lucretia were kind to me. I’m luckier than most orphans.”

That reminds me about the kissing booth charity portion of the upcoming May Day festival. I hope I can earn a bunch for the younglings and children who need help.

We fall back into silence, but before I nod off, I have to ask... “Are you going to visit the area your ghostly kin directed you to? You have to. Right? I would in your shoes.”

Actually, I probably wouldn't. There's always so much work to do at the bakery, plus venturing into the unknown is not my style.

His look tells me he knows that about me. “Yes. I'll go after May Day.”

Heart sinking, I nod because I don't trust my voice. I'm too sleepy, and that dream felt so real that I wish he wanted to stay forever by my side. “Of course. Good.”

“I'll be back, Kaya.”

So he says. But he might find something there that he is missing out on. He might decide to stay.

“Oh, I know,” I say, feigning a relaxed mood about the whole thing.

The night wears on, and Cyrus's breathing grows even. I savor the feel of having him here with me. It's a stolen night—one I'll always treasure. He's different when he's alone with me. He's not the gambler, the flirt, the wild dragon shifter. He's just Cyrus. And he's perfect.

Soon, I'm asleep again, too.

### Chapter 23

#### Cyrus

K aya wakes me again with some incredibly cute mumbling in her sleep. She throws an arm into the air and kicks a leg, sending her quilt to the floor. I get up and lay it back on top of her. She turns onto her side, still muttering and frowning viciously like her nightmare is back. Nightmares are the worst. I know exactly how it feels to be under their sway. Maybe I can comfort her for a minute without her knowing.

I crawl into the slender cot with her and ease her gently against me, setting one arm loosely over her stomach. She stops grumbling and thrashing, but my quaking heart will likely wake her. This is foolish. Regardless, I can't seem to help myself. Her eyes are firmly shut and her breathing indicates she's asleep. I allow myself to bend a wing around her and satisfaction curls up in my soul like a sleeping cat. She's so soft and smells absolutely divine. A goddess in my arms. What I would give to smooth the fine hairs at the nape of her neck away and nibble the fair skin there.

I fill my lungs with her scent, and my dragon magic crackles inside me, wanting to wall us in flame and claim her as my mate. I can't let it get away from me. I need to move away from her physically, but the pull to remain at her back is a hook latched firmly in my chest. I can't make myself move.

The sun's first light sneaks into the room. I have to leave her and return to the floor. I grit my teeth, pull back my wing, and slide out of the little bed. I'm back in my quilt before I hear her roll over. Hopefully, she will never know I held her like that.

She may think I'm trustworthy, but I'm not good enough for her. Likely, no one is, but definitely not me. I'd mess things up. I'd ruin our friendship just to have a temporary affair that would hurt us both. I have never been able to hold onto a relationship. I get itchy and back off every time a partner tries to get serious.

Although things feel vastly different with Kaya, I'm a huge risk for her and her sweet heart. I won't experiment with my personal growth at her expense. She's worth so much more than that. She can't be my test case.

Maybe I'll help her find someone so she can look at them in the way she looks at me. Pain spears me and I grit my teeth again, fisting my hands in the quilt and turning so I'm facing the door. I'll go against every feeling I have and help her find her true mate. Because it can't be me. I refuse to drag her down the bumpy road of my life.

A yowling erupts outside the door, and I roll to trade a surprised look with Kaya, who is now fully awake. I hop up and open the door to find Sio.

"Finally," he mutters.

Kaya pats the bed beside her, where I just was. "I am so glad you're here. I was wondering what you might be getting into."

Sio purrs loudly, jumps onto the cot, and curls up.

"Guess he's not telling his secrets," I say.

Kaya's eyes dance in the dawn's first gray light. "How about we sleep for another hour. For Sio."

"Right. For Sio."

The fire somehow brought itself back to life and it crackles quietly as we doze. I can't remember ever being this at ease. I could live in this very room for eternity. I almost laugh at myself, but I'm too drowsy. Never in my life have I wanted to remain in the same place. But now, I definitely do.

The trip back is full of conversations about Kaya's new whisks, the fire eaters who performed in the city's main square on our way out, and Sio's grudge against shrub gryphons.

"It's a question of respect," Sio says sharply.

"How exactly was he being rude to you?" I ask.

Kaya grimaces, like maybe I shouldn't have queried for details.

Sio's tail whips back and forth, hitting me in the cheek because I'm sitting behind the bench in the empty back section of the cart again.

"He should have bowed upon my arrival," Sio says.

I frown at the cat. "And these creatures are taught to do that by..."

"By their elders. It is the way of things in the world of smaller mammals."

"Maybe the shrub gryphons are more bird than mammal and that's why they behave differently."

Sio glares and curls up on the bench. His eyes close, and I guess that subject is shut as well.

"So you think Rychell can find you some of that purple turmeric?" I ask.

Kaya nods and lightly lifts the reins so they touch Tamar. The horse speeds up. “I wasn’t about to buy spice from another merchant. I have faith in her.”

“It tasted amazing.”

“Agreed. Those buns would have been rather plain without it. The texture wasn’t quite right. Too stodgy.”

I nod even though I didn’t notice anything. She’s the expert.

“They would go well with a creamed wishberry jam filling,” she says.

“Now, you’re talking.”

Her grin makes my stomach flip in a good way, a very good way. I have to stay on track.

We drive into town. Every surface glitters with the remains of a magical storm they must have had while we were gone. Lord Mayor Rustion, his staff, Grumlin the tavern keep, and even Rickon DeFleurtis and his group are sweeping and putting things to rights. DeFleurtis stops and looks my way and I give him a nod.

The map in my pocket feels hot and my fingers itch to take it out and retrace the area my ghost kin showed me.

Betilda helps Widow Warton gather scrolls that appear to have been flung from a tourist’s leather satchel. Betilda wiggles her eyebrows at us as we pass through the market square.

The stones around the fountain lift into the air, and a cloud of misty stone magic swirls around them. They drop and arrange themselves, now free of magical storm



sparkles. I look up to see Rom giving us a wave. His stone magic is impressive.

Thankfully, the weather is perfect now. Tree blossoms float through the air, a few getting caught in Kaya's hair. I pluck one out of the knot on top of her head and she laughs. I feel like I'm dreaming. If this is all she can give me, I'll take it and be happy. She is a spring goddess, her skin glowing like she holds her own kind of fire magic. Sio leaps from her lap to the ground to trot beside us, and soon the trip is over. It will forever be a highlight of my life.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 24

#### Kaya

I give my new oven a pat; a person from the forge installed it this morning. My new hire, Giorgio, won't be able to work until next week, but I'm so glad I finally have the funds to pay another employee and buy what I need. It's such an incredible relief.

Heading out to the bakery's main room, I stop at the counter to hand Rosalind her payment for the hours she's worked the past month. Bending low, I scratch Sio's head.

Rosalind pockets the linen envelope of coins and picks up a tray of tea cakes. "Thanks." She carries the tray to a table of tourists in the corner.

At their usual table, Laini and Tully drink the cherry bloom tea I steeped for them and order another orange scone to share. They appear to be discussing the magical storm that struck the town while Cyrus and I were gone.

"...and Rom rang the warning bell a good twenty minutes before it blew in," Laini says. She gives Spark, her dragonfox, a crumb from her plate. He gobbles it down and then begins flying around the ceiling beams. "I don't think anyone suffered any roof damage this time because of him and you, Tully."

Sio jumps from the counter, fur rippling, and dives at one of the other maplecats. The cats tumble and yowl, but I can tell it's just play-wrestling because Sio's claws aren't digging in and he's letting the smaller, younger cat get in a couple of swipes.

Tully laughs, faces me, and lifts her teacup. “The combination of Rom’s magic and mine is pretty powerful. I’m glad he’s comfortable enough now to shield us all.”

Laini agrees and sips her tea. “The only foul magic that crept in was blown sideways by the wind.”

“That’s incredible,” I say. “I almost wish I’d been here to see it. It’s been a while since we had a magical storm. Does Rom know why?”

Laini shakes her head and stirs another sugar cube into her tea. “No, but he’s going to ask at his next gargoyle assembly.”

“It’s great that he found more of his kind,” Tully says. “Are any of them Allysium gargoyles like him?”

That kind of gargoyle is the most powerful.

“Just one,” Laini says. Her gaze slips to the May Day festival flyer that’s pinned to the wall. It shows a maypole streaming with ribbons in every color of the rainbow. “When will you be there this evening?” she asks me. She sips her tea and gives a shimmy of enjoyment.

“I have to set a few things up for the next morning bake, so I might be there an hour after it begins.” The May Day festival starts right before sunset. “It’s easier now that Rosalind is back. Not that you two weren’t fantastic help. Thanks again, by the way.”

“Not a problem,” Tully says. “Don’t be too late to the festival. Argos is presenting a new invention and I don’t want you to miss it. He’s a genius in his workshop and in bed. I’m a lucky witch.”

Laini and I trade a grin.

“What’s his invention?” I ask. “Did he use the khymeia stones in a new way?”

Tully tosses her red curls over her shoulder and picks up Sio. “No hints. You have to watch it yourself.” The cat curls up in her lap, happy to have the witch’s attention. “I can’t wait to see who our kissing booth folks are this year.”

Betilda keeps this element a secret as long as she can when she’s in charge, building the excitement. It’s honestly a little childish, but who cares? It’s fun and Betilda is the mistress of fun, that’s for sure.

I shrug, hoping they can’t read my face like a book as Cyrus says he can. I am still shocked I agreed to work a shift at the second booth.

“I’ll be back,” I say, walking off.

Swallowing my nervousness, I slip behind the counter to grab Laini and Tully’s scone. I slide the treat onto a plate that has cherry blossoms painted around the edges.

The bell on the door jingles, and Rychell the spice merchant walks in.

“Rychell,” I say, motioning for her to come here.

She is alone this morning; her pixie son must be helping Betilda. Most of the younglings do.

“Happy May Day!” Her brown skin is luminous and her grin is infectious.

“Thanks! Back at you. So when I was in Kingstown...”

“With Cyrus, right? How is that going?”

My face flushes hot. My dream passes through my mind—the way Cyrus looked at me, like I was something to devour and I wanted so much to be devoured.

“Oh, um, that’s just...” I clear my throat and open my cash box just to have something to do with my hands. Laini and Tully stop chatting and eye us. Definitely eavesdropping. They’re right to watch out for me, to make sure I’m remaining firmly on the friend side with Cyrus. He would hurt me even though he’d never do it on purpose. “He’s a great friend,” I say, loudly enough that my wonderful, interfering friends can hear. “We had a blast.”

Rychell’s brow furrows and she studies my face. “Oh, right. Good. Okay.”

“In Kingstown, I tasted some sweet buns with purple turmeric. Can you get some of that in stock? I’d love to try it out in a couple of recipes.”

“Why didn’t you buy it there?”

“You’re my supplier, Rychell. I would never buy spice from another soul.”

Her smile is wide and earnest. “Aw, you’re sweet. Thanks. I think I can get some. I have plans for a new trade route, and once I untangle the details, I should be able to get several new spices and maybe even new dried fruits from the southeast coast.”

My heart lifts and I make a squealing sound. “I can’t wait!”

Baking and experimenting with recipes is a simple joy, and I’m grateful to have the distraction of planning that out instead of obsessing over the set of Cyrus’s shoulders and the way he walks and the way he smells and how that quilt looked draped over his trim waist at the Kingstown inn.

Rychell orders a cinnamon scone and a cup of iced raspberry tea. I take her coins and

set up her order, positioning everything on a spring green tray. When I deliver it to her table, she thanks me sincerely.

The morning and lunch rush pass quickly, and Rosalind and I are sweating by the time we have the place to ourselves.

“You never mentioned how your trip went,” I say to Rosalind.

Her long, pink fingers are quick as she writes down our total take for the day. The quill feather flicks this way and that. I’m so glad she’s back from her sister’s house.

“It was a tough road after the storm,” she says, “but we made it all right. Did I tell you she had twins?”

“You did. Both are well?”

Rosalind chuckles. “Perfectly healthy. They’re so loud. I was happy to be there for the birth, but I’m glad I don’t live with them.”

I laugh. “I can imagine.”

We wipe every surface down and prep some bread and other items for the morning bake. When we are done, the place practically sparkles, it is so clean. Scents of cinnamon, citrus, rising dough, and chocolate fill the air.

“See you later!” Rosalind calls as she leaves for the evening.

I hurry upstairs to wash up and put on the soft woolen dress Rosalind brought back for me from her sister’s place beyond the Veil in the human realm. It’s a pretty peony pink, and triangular sections of the skirt have layers of fine lace. The neckline is lower than I would have chosen, but it’s May Day. If there is ever a time for

cleavage, this is it. I giggle at myself as I brush out my hair. I twist the length into two knots that I pin low on the back of my head. Drawing two locks out to frame my face, I look in the mirror. Not bad. Not bad at all. Maybe tonight I'll find someone who won't break my heart. At the very least, I will learn more about kissing and have a good time. It should be a great distraction for my Cyrus-focused mind.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 25

Kaya

Music sweeps across the Lord Mayor's estate. His lovely wife, Nisa, welcomes me at the gate, and their butler, a goat shifter named Zemy, hands me a crown made of braided green ribbons and pink-spotted mountain daisies.

"So the curse isn't really a curse, eh?" he asks, his voice low enough that only I can likely hear him.

"Oh, the ruins' curse?"

"Aye."

"Seems like there never was one. Just a few coincidences," I say.

Zemy purses his lips and studies my face. "You're certain you and Cyrus both are fine?"

"Definitely. And I heard the dragon kin enthusiast is doing all right as well."

Zemy rolls his eyes. "He's here, making an arse out of himself at the maypole."

"I can't wait to see it."

Laini, Rom, Tully, and Argos meet me under the big oak tree that lords over the



grounds. Tully shoves a cup of something emitting smoke at me.

“Drink up. You look stressed,” she says.

I shrug and down it, coughing as the liquid burns its way through my body. “Wow. It’s definitely May Day now.”

Everyone laughs, and then Argos goes on about his upcoming demonstration. Gears, magic, inertia—a bunch of phrases I have no hope of understanding. I lean left to look at the crowd around the maypole. Little ones are weaving the ribbons around the pole.

DeFleurtis is in the midst of them, looking incredibly out of place. He is skipping and shouting out questions to Betilda. “When did this specific ritual begin? Do you know if it involved fire originally?”

Betilda shakes her head and heads to the cluster of round tables filled with food.

I don’t see Cyrus anywhere.

“Time for my presentation,” Argos says.

Tully kisses him, and he heads off for the stage that Rustion erected at the edge of the grounds. We trail him slowly, chatting and making jokes.

Argos raises his hands. “I have a new contraption for everyone to be suspicious about!”

The crowd laughs. We are used to him and his crazy experiments now.

He tugs a tarp off something massive. There are brass knobs, iron bracings, and a big

cage sort of thing. It's open at both ends, though.

"This is my Horse Cleaner, Version twelve!"

And there is Cyrus suddenly, leading one of Rustion's black mares toward the contraption. I take a stuttering breath. He walks into the cage-like structure and passes all the way through with the horse in tow. When he stops, the horse is positioned under the rounded iron bars.

"Watch this!" Argos calls out.

The horse whinnies nervously and Cyrus feeds her something from his palm.

Argos pulls a brass level down and water spills from the bars. They must have holes drilled into them. I can see now that he has hoses running from his invention to Rustion's well. The horse is drenched. Argos pushes a few buttons, and long, slim brushes swing out from the bars to brush the mare.

Everyone cheers, and Argos takes a bow. He takes an apple from his pocket and feeds it to the mare.

"My mate is such a smartie," Tully says proudly.

"He truly is," I say.

Cyrus leaves the horse with Argos and walks toward the dancing that is starting back up again.

"I'm going to get something to eat," I say to Laini and Tully.

They nod and keep on chatting about Argos's contraption.

I glance left and right as I make my way toward the towers of turkey legs, rolls, tureens, and platters. I had to hand the dessert job over to Nisa this year. Seems as though she did a great job. She used to run her own bakery, but she happily retired right after mine was up and running. Flaky pastries filled with custard and slathered in chocolate fill a platter beside three plates of expert-level entremets. Each one looks like a fruit—ripe red apples, green apples, oranges, and blue ones that look like enlarged berries. Their glaze is so shiny that it reflects the sunset’s glittering light. I slide one onto a crockery plate. When I cut into the treat, the layers are perfectly defined. A cookie base, a fruity gel, and a heavenly mousse. I take a bite and moan with pleasure.

Then I feel a familiar heat at my back.

I turn, dessert all over my chin. Of course, it’s Cyrus. My pulse doubles in rate and I’m lightheaded. Maybe it’s just the drink Tully gave me. Who am I kidding? It’s Cyrus. He does this to me. I try to wipe my chin on my sleeve.

One eyebrow and the corner of his lips lift. “Pretty good dessert?”

That voice. So deep. His wings shuffle, and the setting sun glows through them. He’s just way too lovely.

“Yes. Very good. You should have two.”

His chuckle warms me and he follows my suggestion, piling two of the apple entremets onto a plate. We eat in quiet satisfaction, watching the maypole dancers finish their pattern. The flutes and harp start up another jaunty tune, and soon almost everyone is dancing. Betilda bosses a few lads about as they set up the two kissing booths beyond the oak, nearer to the forest.

I take a deep breath and set my plate in the basket for used items just below the table.

“You look a little ill,” he says.

“Gee, thanks.”

He snickers. “You are stunning as always, sweetness, but I mean, you look worried.”

I put my hands on my hips and try not to play his words through my mind again to enjoy the imagined sound of them. “I volunteered for the kissing booth.”

“I was telling Argos that—” Cyrus’s eyes widen and he coughs. “Wh-what?”

I pat him on the back and take his half-empty plate. “Need some water?”

“No, no. I’m fine.” He straightens and thanks me when I put his plate in the cleaning basket. “I didn’t realize you were taking a shift. Or that you would want to do that.”

“I do. I need more experience with love-related, um, activities.”

Cyrus’s eyes do that smoldering thing, but this time they are more dangerous than seductive. “Activities.”

“Yes. I’ve only kissed, well, now two people.” I bite my lip and try not to go even redder than I already am.

Mouth opening and closing like a broken frog’s, Cyrus can’t seem to get a word out.

“It’ll be fine,” I say. “It’s just kissing. We did that and we are friends, right?”

I want him to argue, to shout and grab me and kiss me so thoroughly that there is no doubt in my mind that we are definitely not friends.

But I also don't.

If he wasn't here, I could have the simplest, most fun time. That's an awful thing to think, but it's true. He makes me crazy, and if I can't have him forever—which I know I can't—I need some space to get over these stupid feelings.

“Look, I have to go. My shift is starting. Bye!”

I leave him with his features churning like he doesn't know what to say.

Well, it's not his business. It's my business. I want to learn more about the arts of love so I can be comfortable enough to seek out a true mate. Or at least a partner I can enjoy and live with.

At the booth, Betilda ties a ridiculous red heart hat onto my head, knotting the monstrosity's strings below my chin. She clasps her hands and laughs joyfully.

“You look perfect. Thank you for doing this. The orphans thank you, too!”

“I'm happy to do it.”

She takes my hand and her face grows serious. “Remember, everyone is well aware of the rules. If someone comes up to get a kiss, you have the right to simply say no. They will leave with no hard feelings and they will still donate. All agreed to this upon entering the festival. Understand?”

“I've been going to this festival for over a decade, Betilda, but thank you for the kind reminder.”

Nodding, she gives me a quick hug and leaves me to it.

I scoot my wicker chair closer to the table and eye the wood framing set up around me. May flowers and hearts are painted all over it and two oil lamps are suspended on each side by a brass hook. Very nice, really. I only feel a little bit like a complete idiot.

The second kissing booth is set up a few feet away. Widow Warton is there now, accepting kisses on the cheek from the children who danced around the maypole. It's an unspoken tradition—one of the town's elderly gets first shift at the first booth—and it always warms my heart.

My first donor is Trustan from Cyrus's pub. He wrings a balled-up cloak in his green hands and swallows, his skinny neck showing every move of his throat.

"Mistress Baker, may I? I have coins for the orphans."

"Trustan, it's lovely to see you. How old are you, dear? I don't want to, uh, upset your parents."

He looks offended. "I'm twenty!"

"I'm sorry. I am the absolute worst with knowing ages. It's a human flaw."

His features smooth out. "Oh, right. With me being an orc and all... Makes sense." His smile is back, hopeful and nervous.

I lean forward on my elbows and tip my chin up. Closing my eyes, I prepare for a kiss from this lad who is only five years younger than me, but who seems far younger than that. I must be old for my age. I do hope my next donor is older. I don't think I can learn much from another person who is new to this. But who knows? Maybe Trustan is a natural. Can one be a natural?

His kiss is chaste and sweet, just a peck. Honestly, I'm relieved. He draws away, his green ears gone a dark emerald with embarrassment.

"Thanks!" he says as he runs off.

The next person in line is Tully.

I bark a laugh. "Tully, what are you doing?"

She shrugs. "Eh, I have always wanted to see what it would feel like to kiss you. I will keep it simple. Don't fret."

"This is too weird."

"I won't if you don't want me to," she says. "Just thought it would be fun, and it's for a good cause."

"Only you, Tully. Only you would do this." I laugh and pucker up dramatically, closing my eyes.

She launches into me, but her kiss is like Trustan's—quick and easy. When she pulls back and I open my eyes, she is nodding at Argos, who stands nearby, chuckling.

"I knew she would taste like cinnamon!" Tully shouts. "You should give her a go, Argos."

Argos laughs, grabs Tully, and tosses her over his shoulder. She is waving her wand at his arse as he carries her away. Their laughter is infectious and everyone standing around joins in. My line grows, and I force myself not to look for Cyrus. He wouldn't try to kiss me, would he? No. What if he did? What would I do?

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 26

Kaya

The next donator is Delixian. I swallow as he leans down and sets a hand on the table. He is such a handsome pixie with his large, muscular arms, transparent wings, and dark blue skin.

“Hello,” I say, suddenly shy.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, eyeing my thumb.

“Very good. Thanks for all your help.”

“Anytime.”

Is he interested in me? I never considered him. He’s always so businesslike during healings, and I haven’t spoken to him often outside of those scenarios.

Widow Warton is leaving her booth, and I can’t tell who is taking over; there are too many people blocking my view. Was that a wing I just saw?

“Kaya?”

I face Delixian. “Aye?”

“Are you all right with me kissing you?” he asks politely.



“I’m sitting in a kissing booth, so yes.” I smile and my body warms.

He grins. “But I might want to really kiss you.”

What does he mean? With tongue? Or is it like he is interested in me and his kiss will mean something? I’m lost.

“I...” I know I’m five shades of red. “Yes. I would like that.”

His smile is very nice, and his gaze is confident and kind. I give up trying to figure anything out, edge forward, and close my eyes.

Delixian’s lips are cool and quick. His tongue darts between my lips and I tangle mine with his. Desire slips down my spine and coils low in my stomach. I open my mouth further and his hand slides around the back of my head. The kiss deepens, and it feels lovely, but my body isn’t responding like it did to Cyrus. I don’t feel like I’m going to explode with want. It is good, though. Like getting a pleasant massage at the Acorn Inn after a long day of working dough.

He breaks away and his eyes are shining. “Kaya,” he whispers. “Promise you’ll dance with me once your shift is over?”

“All right. I’ll meet you over there as soon as I’m finished.”

He leaves with a wave.

“Good afternoon. Or should I say evening?” a new voice says.

It’s my next donor. He’s a goblin with that same curl to his hair that the butcher and his daughter have.

“I’m visiting my brother. My name’s Thirron.”

“Are you a butcher too? I wasn’t sure if that was a family business going back or not.”

“We look that much alike, do we? You knew who I was right away.” He seems delighted.

“You do.”

He grins. “I was a butcher. My family has been in the business for four generations. I’ve gone into vegetables though, so I’m the proverbial black sheep now.”

“Ooo, a rebel.” I lean forward and pucker up.

A very familiar voice breaks my concentration and I turn my head to see Cyrus taking the seat at the other kissing booth. Thirron misses the mark and kisses my temple.

“Ah, sorry,” he stutters out.

“I, what?” I mutter.

Cyrus is about to kiss a leggy fairy. I can’t breathe. In slow motion, he looks my way, then lets her lay a kiss right on his lips. My stomach twists and sours.

“Everything all right?” Thirron asks.

I blink and shake my head. “Yes, so sorry. Go right ahead.” My smile feels more like a grimace, but he doesn’t seem to notice. He comes close, his large body taking up most of the booth’s wooden frame.

“What do you like in a kiss?” he asks. “Should I be easygoing or bring it on?”

“I don’t know.” I wish he would just be confident and do it already.

He nods nervously and kisses me. It’s a simple one and does absolutely nothing for me. He says something else, and I mumble good night, but I’m too busy eyeing Cyrus’s next donor to worry about Thirron.

Blessed Stones, Tully is in Cyrus’s line now, too, farther back. I laugh and she waves at me, shimmying her hips. Argos is with her, and I wonder if he’ll get a kiss too.

Cyrus is talking to the next person in his line. She must be a tourist because I don’t recognize her. He comes out from behind the booth to kiss this tourist with the long black hair. He drops her into a dip of sorts, and as he kisses her, he looks up at me and makes direct eye contact.

Desire zings down my body. I clench my thighs. His half-lidded gaze stays locked on me while he nibbles the tourist’s bottom lip. Then he is raising her up and she is laughing and grinning like she just won a bag of gold. Cyrus says something to her, his hand on her lower back, then he glances my way again and raises both eyebrows like he is challenging me.

I feel so strange. Too wound up. Like I’ve had five cups of very strong tea with absolute mounds of sugar.

I could leave the booth and opt out of this bizarre competition Cyrus seems to want between us. Or I could stay.

Yep, I’m going to surprise him and join in on this little game.

I wink at Cyrus, not sure if it comes out right. His face goes slack for a second, and

then he is grinning fiercely. Always the competitor.

I face my next donor. It's another tourist, this one of average height with very dreamy lavender eyes. He's likely part fairy. His kiss is sweet and solid, very pleasant. I part my lips to see if he'll follow my lead. I wish he would lead, but it seems like everyone is too polite. I shouldn't complain, but I can't help silently comparing all kisses to Cyrus's.

I slide my gaze sideways to see if Cyrus is watching. He is, and smoke is pouring from his nostrils. Twin lioness shifters are kissing his cheeks, but he doesn't noticeably react to them. No, he is just staring at me with black smoke twisting out of his nose.

I close my eyes and finish the kiss, pulling away.

Why would Cyrus be fuming? He started this competition.

I try to ignore him and work my way through my line. Some folks are sweet and just give me a peck on the cheek, others—like Grumlin the tavern keeper's cousin, Maeve—kiss me thoroughly after I convince them I'm all right with it.

Betilda comes rushing toward our booths, two long sheets of parchment in her hands.

“You're both doing so well! We are going to hit our goal in no time.”

She pins a sheet on each of our booths. They show a series of hatch marks and a line. My marks are nearly at the top, which is marked with a star. Cyrus's aren't far behind.

“I'm going to beat you,” I say to Cyrus over the crowd, the music, and the young ones running about.

“Not a chance!” he calls back. His grin is vicious and my body melts at the sight of it.

We kiss more folks that come through our lines, our gazes drawn toward each other like magnets. Betilda keeps us supplied with iced cakes and glasses of very cold ale. It’s fun, but there is also a side of me that feels incredibly odd. Hot. Frustrated. This all just feels so strange.

I’m five marks from the star on my parchment when Delixian returns.

“Back so soon?” I say.

“If you are as happy to see me as I am you. If not, I can go.”

I’m not sure I am as excited to see him, but he is nice. “Of course, I am.”

He hitches a hip to the table and lifts my chin with one blue finger. He smiles and studies my face before pressing a kiss to my lips. I pull away and glance toward Cyrus.

Cyrus gives Zemy a good kiss, bracing the goat shifter up against his body. Cyrus never did take his seat again.

Delixian moans into my mouth, and his tongue delves farther. I grip his muscular shoulders, enjoying the feel of his strong arms around me. Delixian notices my line is currently lagging due to Argos, who is setting up what looks like another experiment and drawing most folks’ attention. Delixian takes the opportunity to hold me longer and whisper sweet things in my ear.

Zemy is gone now and Cyrus is kissing Plum, the tailor. The water sprite’s wings sparkle and flutter as Cyrus smooths a hand over her blue hair.

I'm on fire. But I can't let him get to me.

"Kaya, did you hear me?" Delixian cups my face and looks into my eyes.

"Ah, no. Sorry."

"Let me help you focus on your goal," he says, a teasing note in his voice.

I wrap my arms around his waist and kiss Delixian back. Our hips meet, and I can tell that the healer is getting rather more aroused than he should be at a little festival kissing booth. That makes two of us, but it's not him that I'm worked up about.

Heat rises around me. More than just the heat of my body... A crackling sound has me opening my eyes. There are flames everywhere. It dissipates quickly, and if the damage wasn't obvious, I'd have thought I imagined it. The booth is nothing but a charred husk. My wicker chair is a pile of charcoal. The ground around me is scorched and Delixian.

Delixian is grimacing and shaking out his hand. Blisters show along his palm. "Cyrus, I'm guessing you did this?"

Cyrus exhales roughly, smoke pouring from his mouth. "Sorry."

After throwing a quiet curse Cyrus's way, Delixian asks one of the servers for one of the injury kits he brought to the festival, and they walk off to retrieve it.

I'm not so foolish that I can't see why Cyrus's fire magic rose up. He's jealous. Of me. But he doesn't actually want me as a partner; he isn't going to settle down. We both know it. And this behavior of his isn't fair. He can't have it both ways.

Now, I'm mad. He ruined Betilda's booth and caught Delixian on fire.

I storm over to him and poke him in the chest with my forefinger.

“Listen, you. If you can’t control your competitive streak, then you should go. You burned Delixian and ruined half of the orphanage’s efforts to raise funds. You’re selfish, Cyrus.”

Am I being too harsh? I feel off. Angry. Itchy. Frustrated. I want him out of my sight so I can think straight again. My head pounds with the ale I’ve had and the noise of the festival.

Cyrus swallows and rubs the back of his neck. He tosses something at Betilda as she runs up and shouts questions.

“You’re right, Kaya. I need to leave you alone. Tell Delixian I am sorry.”

There’s a snap and a wash of light, and then Cyrus is in full dragon form, flying away into the evening sky.

I stomp and fist my hands, long past being able to act like a reasonable person. “Ugh! That male is infuriating!”

Delixian returns with his hand smeared in salve. He looks up and then stares at me. “You’re in love with Cyrus, aren’t you?”

My face goes white hot. “I most certainly am not.”

Laini and Tully rush up and cover me in questions. I do my best to answer them, allowing them to lead me away to some seats by the food table. I eat my weight in rolls, and then try to dance my anger away with my friends.

Finally—wearing a tired smile that doesn’t feel as happy as I wish it was—I leave the

festival.

Stupid dragon. He ruined tonight. But I feel bad about shouting at him. I can't quite untangle where things went wrong and why I feel guilty. It's a problem for tomorrow.

At home, I collapse into bed with Sio at my feet.

I dream of scales, fire, and a pair of lips I didn't kiss tonight.



## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 27

#### Cyrus

I am the worst monster. A menace, for certain. The night is cool and pleasant, but I can't enjoy it. The memory of Delixian's mouth on Kaya's is stabbing my mind over and over again. Sometimes, the thought of Kaya's accusatory eyes and her angry shouts weaves its way in, too. Damn it. I ruined everything. Our friendship. Any potential romantic relationship. Her night with someone who might actually be trustworthy—Delixian. I should wish them well. I should have been completely fine with the way Kaya melted into his arms. This is what I wanted for her. Someone steady and safe. But the second the wish came true, I found myself engulfed in fire and rage.

I rub at some odd tingling on my chest, then tug on my shirt to look at what's bothering my skin there.

I nearly fall from the sky.

It's a mate mark.

Tea leaves and sparkling spots like sugar surround a symbolic heart. This magic states very clearly that my body, my blood, and my soul are committed to claiming Kaya as my true mate.

I fly faster, my fire rising inside me.

For a multitude of reasons, there is no chance for that happiness.

I speed up, slashing through the sky like a meteor. I don't need to look at the map from the library in the ruins. I know it by heart. I know it as well as the wrinkle that appears between Kaya's eyebrows when she is worried and the scent of her skin in the morning. The lift of her laughter when she's had a drink.

I swallow around the sparks simmering in my throat.

"Fuck it."

I breathe a massive stream of fire into the night, scaring the shite out of anything within a mile, I'm sure. But I have to get this fire out. I can't think straight.

Faster and faster, I fly away from Leafshire Cove and toward whatever the ancient dragon shifter ghost wants me to find.

It's all I have right now.

When I land, my mate mark tingling like people say they do when they first show up, I'm faced with a wall of rock. The place the ghost indicated is just a ravine housed in dark purple stone.

There's nothing here.

No rock drawings of old. No caves to explore. I go over it and over it, combing the cracks in the rock to make sure I'm not missing a passageway. I fly up and over the ravine, but barren stone goes on for miles.

Am I misremembering? Is that even a word? Kaya would know.

I swallow the ache in my throat and press a hand against my mate mark. It is incredibly uncomfortable being away from her. I didn't think this through. Some say the pain is the worst thing one can experience when the mark is fresh. I don't feel physically weak, though. Just a pain of the heart and soul. Maybe for dragon shifters, it's different. Perhaps my kind don't react the same way with the marks.

The wind bites at my chin and cheeks, but I'm always warm enough to deal with the cold. I simply stoke the fire within me, and I'm as toasty as I would be lying in the sun by the Leafshire River. I can't stoke contentedness or happiness, though. Only Kaya could rouse such emotions in me now.

I walk slowly down the ravine again, looking for tracks of any kind. My own boot prints have likely ruined my chances on that front; I wish I had thought of that first. Small cloven prints tell me there is a deer-like creature nearby. The paws of a wolf or a large dog are stuck in the dried mud near a bend in the stone. Not fresh.

Wait. What's that?

A print ahead of the wolf's paws looks decidedly like bare feet. My heart beats in my ears. Behind the footprints, a swathe of dirt has been smeared as if the walker had a tail. A tail like mine, heavy and dragging the ground if one doesn't lift it.

I can't breathe.

"Eh, you there," a voice says.

My pulse takes on a frenetic pace, and I whirl to see a male with wings, horns, and scales like mine.

Another dragon shifter.

“You all right? Just visiting? You’ll need to get a pass from the gate.”

He is walking toward me and it’s like looking in a mirror.

I can’t find any words at first and he’s staring at me like I’m mad. Maybe I am. Between the ache of being so far from Kaya and the shock of seeing another of my kind in the flesh, I’m truly shaken.

“Wh-where is the gate? I can’t see any entrances. And what am I visiting exactly? I just...” I clear my throat. “Someone told me about this place.”

The male blinks at me like he’s not sure how to respond. “Are you injured?”

“No, why?”

“Because it’s the usual type of gate for our kind. Firebreath entry.”

I just stare right back at him because I’m lost.

He gives me a sympathetic look, turns toward the stone wall of the ravine and breathes fire in a slow and steady stream over a wide area. Sparks dance over the rock, then come together to show a massive arch. Another arch partially appears beside this one and yet another on the other side. Through the arch, on the far side, dragon shifter females, younglings, and adult males like me walk in the sunlight. Buildings in every color of the rainbow line cobblestone streets, not too different from the streets at home.

The male with me puts a hand on my shoulder. “You okay?”

“No, I’m not.” A hysterical laugh bubbles out of me. I wish I could show this to Kaya.

“Come on. I’m Joaquin, House of Stars. I’ll show you around. Where are you from?”

He leads me through the magical gate and into the city. The buildings are tall like those in Kingstown.

“I’m Cyrus. From Leafshire Cove,” I finally answer.

“Haven’t heard of it.”

Dragon shifters fly overhead, greeting one another and carrying satchels and small younglings through the air. Two small males blow fire at one another, and a female, I assume is their mother, pulls them apart, squawking at them about manners.

“It’s near the Veil crossover.”

He whistles and raises his eyebrows. “You flew a long way. I bet your head will straighten out once you get some food and drink.”

“No, you don’t understand. I’ve never seen another dragon shifter. I have never seen a Firebreath gate.”

“Ever?”

“Well, there was a ghost of one in the ruins by my town.”

I can’t stop smiling. It’s a marvel. Everywhere I look, there is someone like me. To say I have one thousand questions bumping around in my head is a massive understatement.

Joaquin leads me to a blue-painted building. He swings the door open—a doorway that is exactly wide enough to pass through comfortably without having to tightly

tuck my wings.

“We have a new visitor, Afonso,” Joaquin says to another dragon shifter at a counter.

“Nice to meet you,” I say, extending an arm in greeting.

But instead of grasping my forearm as we do in Leafshire Cove, he and Joaquin eye me curiously.

Another shifter, a female with bright red hair, comes out of a back room. “He’s doing the greeting of the southern regions, fellas.” She reaches over the counter and grasps my forearm. I do the same to hers and then release my hold.

“I’m Beatriz, House of Sun. Welcome to Ravina Roxa.”

“I’m Cyrus. I don’t have a house?”

All three shifters trade a stressed look. Joaquin is the first to recover.

“It’s all right. Let’s get you a pass, and then we can go from there.”

“Maybe his mother moved away while she was pregnant,” Beatriz says quietly, her gaze on me.

“What does that mean? I’m sorry. But I’m just blown away right now. I need so many answers.” I laugh and run a hand over the back of my neck.

“We keep track of all dragon shifters, but when a pregnant female leaves and it isn’t obvious she’s carrying a youngling, sometimes we miss recording that individual.”

“We can get into that later,” Joaquin says.

They help me fill out a form, and then Joaquin and I head back out into the sun and the cacophony of a city filled with fire-breathers.

I feel like I'm dreaming, but my heart isn't whole. It's like this can't be real without Kaya to see it with me. I rub at my chest.

"I know that rub. Where is your mate?" Joaquin is leading me down a side street.

A cart painted in shades of pink and red stands beside a fountain. The merchant is waving around knots of what might be bread. The scent of cinnamon wafts through the air.

I pause, my mate mark practically sizzling.

"Cyrus?" Joaquin eyes me. "Is it still bothering you? When did you claim your mate?"

"I haven't. It just showed up on my way here."

"But..."

"I guess we dragon shifters can handle distance a little better than other creatures right after the mark shows up? My friend, Romulus, is a gargoyle, and he couldn't be far away from his mate at all on that day or even a few days after. I am hurting, but it isn't debilitating yet." I still ache for Kaya like someone has dug my heart out of my chest. I don't need a mate mark to help me understand how I feel about her.

"No. Wait," Joaquin says. "You don't know anything about our kind and marks?"

"I guess not?"

Joaquin's face pales. "You have one turn of the sun to claim your mate or you die."

A chill sweeps down my body and my wings tremble.

"Mate marks are different for us dragons," he continues. "I can't believe no one told you. Where is she? Or he? Or they?"

"She is in Leafshire Cove." Pain hits me like a storm wind and I stumble back a step. I feel colder than I ever have. Like my fire is being doused.

"It's starting. You have to leave. Now. Get to her. Claim her. Or you'll lose your fire and you'll die. I hate that I'm telling you like this, but you don't have any time. When exactly did the mark appear?"

"I don't know." My mind is spinning, and now we are jogging back toward the front gate of the city. "Maybe at sunrise? I flew from dusk until, well, you saw me right after I arrived."

"You're fast."

"I am."

"That's good. You can do this." He grips my shoulders and looks me straight in the eye. "Skip food, water. Everything. Just fly and get there. You don't want to wait until the last few hours. You won't feel like doing anything. You'll be unable to speak if you wait too long. Some lose the ability to fly pretty quickly. You have to go. Now."

"All right." I grasp his forearms and he does the same to me. "Thanks for everything."



“You must have many questions. But you can return. All dragons are welcome here at any time. It’s only the non-dragons that have to wipe their memories.”

I have no idea what he is talking about, but there isn’t time to ask. I pull him into a hug and slap his back, carefully avoiding his wings.

“Thank you, friend. I really appreciate this. I don’t know if I’ll see you again, but here’s hoping.”

I wave as I take off into the sky and leave the shining city of my kin behind. Honestly, I’m torn. It’s as if half of my heart is in Leafshire Cove and the other half is here. I hate the sensation of a divided loyalty.

My mind is spinning once more, and I don’t know what to hope for with regard to Kaya and the possibility of her also having a mark for me. She likely doesn’t. She was mad. She wanted me to leave, and Delixian seemed to tickle her fancy quite well. A snarl tears out of me, the wild dragon side of me taking over. My mate. Not his. I breathe and try to rein that side back in. I have to think clearly and be reasonable.

Blessed Stones, I hope Kaya isn’t in pain.

I’ll have to explain everything to her when I get there, but I can’t tell her that if she denies me, I’ll die. I won’t put that on her. It’s not right. But if she is somehow miraculously in love with me, well then...

The first few miles go well, with no pain worth fretting about, but on the third hour of flying, exhaustion sets in. I’m hungry, tired, and the chilling, debilitating pain begins in earnest.

### Chapter 28

Kaya

I can't believe Cyrus is gone. Just like that. It's my fault. I should have talked to him and tried to listen, too. He knows so little about his kind that the incident at the May Day festival was likely as much a surprise to him as it was to the rest of us.

Plus, he obviously has feelings for me beyond friendship. He might want to deny them like I've been denying mine, but they exist and are powerful.

I squeeze my eyes shut and refuse to cry anymore. The day has been a slow one. Most folks are tired from the May Day fun and aren't up for bakery treats and socializing today. Sio ventured off to who knows where early in the morning, Rosalind sent a note telling me she couldn't come in because of too much festival punch, and I've only had four customers, so I've been alone most of the day. I used to love being alone, but it's lost some of its shine, as Widow Warton would say. I long for Cyrus—for his laugh, the way he flirts, his jokes, easy conversation, and his zest for life.

A tingling starts inside my chest and burns its way out. I pinch my apron and the front of my dress and look down.

A black heart surrounded by scales and flames.

A mate mark.

There is a mate mark designed for Cyrus on my chest.

I gasp and brace myself on the counter as the room spins. An ache spreads through my body and I bow my head under the agony of it. I grab the stool and sit, trying to pull in long breaths.

Cyrus is far, far away, most likely, and there won't be any relief from this pain until he is close by or the mark fades. I'm in for a period of true agony.

I hastily grab the quill, parchment, and ink that sit by my cash box, and I ink a quick note to Delixian and Tully each. My bottle of notewater—courtesy of Tully—still has a little left. I open the green glass container and sprinkle some of the magical liquid on my notes. I lift them into the air, and they are off. They zip through the air, flying in looping circles over the bakery tables until they find the door's mail slot and pass through, making the bells jingle.

The rest of the day is a blur of Laini scowling down at me and giving me cups of tea, Tully swearing Cyrus up one side and down the other, and Delixian whispering apologies as he helps Tully work up soothing concoctions for my pain.

Whatever they give me makes me feel like I'm half asleep. They've carried me to my bed and I watch them come and go from my room. Dreams or daydreams—I'm not sure which—float through my head and every single one of them is about Cyrus. I just need him. To feel his body on mine with nothing between us. I must hear his comforting voice in my ear. I can't possibly survive unless he kisses me. I want nothing but to have his hands on me, rough and demanding and confident. I want him to claim me in full and in every way he can. My throat is dry, my lips parched, and my body thrums in a desperate, silent wail for my true mate.

### Chapter 29

#### Cyrus

At some point, I must have fallen from the sky because now I'm lying on the ground, looking up at the stars. I should move to check my wings for damage, but I'm unable to even lift an arm, let alone get up. A shiver rolls through me like a wave, another one right behind it. Over and over.

I turn my head—the only thing I can do at the moment—and see stone walls, ivy growing over an old well with a broken bucket, and a row of arches within a time-worn structure. I'm at the ruins outside Leafshire Cove.

It's fitting that I die here, I suppose.

"At least, I have you to keep me company, cousin," I say weakly to the ghost. Whether he is here or not, I don't know.

Every beat of my heart sounds like her name. Kaya. Kaya. Kaya.

A light shimmers above me and finally takes form as the ghostly dragon shifter who showed me the map.

"Ah, hello," I croak out. I feel like part of the cold ground at this point. Like I'm already dead. "Might be joining you shortly. Can I get a room with a view? I'd like to look down on her from time to time if possible."

The ghost studies my face, his expression unreadable. He disappears, and I'm alone again with nothing but the pain and the love I have for my true mate.

Before the darkness eats me up, I hear an odd sound. Something that doesn't belong with the hoot of the owls and the chirp of the night's insects. It sounds like a cat's meow...

### Chapter 30

Kaya

“Leave her alone, Sio!” Tully whips out her wand and points it at him.

“Tully. No.” My voice is a whisper even though I’m trying to yell.

Laini bends down to put her face level with Sio’s. “What is it? I promise, she isn’t going to die from this.”

“You sure?” I rasp out.

“Positive,” Tully and Laini say in unison.

Argos is across the room, pushing his glasses higher on his nose. He’s making notes in that journal of his, his quill bobbing.

I roll to my side, and the effort makes me lightheaded. “Athanasios, what do you need? Can you speak again to help us understand?” I whisper.

Sio meows. “Follow me, witch,” he says. “We need to go to the ruins.”

We all trade looks of surprise.

“Why the ruins?” I ask.

But Sio doesn't reply; he trots out of the room and I hear his paws padding down the steps.

Tully shrugs. "I guess I need to follow. Is that all right, Kaya? I doubt he is wasting our time. He's a wise, if not completely annoying, familiar."

I smile and lie back, shutting my eyes because it takes too much effort to keep them open.

"Go, Tully. Thank you."

Argos eyes me from across the room. "What would Sio want at the ruins?"

Laini frowns. "No idea. Maybe there's an herb that only grows there that can help Kaya. I'll go ask Delixian."

She leaves, and I fall into an uneasy sleep full of more Cyrus dreams. His hands on me. His breath on my skin. The connection I always feel when he is around.

### Chapter 31

#### Tully

“ I did not have following a magical maplect into a cursed and ruined castle on my list of evening activities, Sio, so this had better not be a wild goose chase.”

The cat refrains from answering and merely trots on, his tail lifted as if nothing at all is wrong. Perhaps the magic that sparked his ability to speak like us is fading. I’ve seen such things happen.

The gate guard doesn't question me on our way out. They know not to meddle in a witch’s business.

The ruins sit atop the rise like a sleeping beast of old. Gripping my wand tightly, I force myself to continue forward. I never had the temptation to visit these ruins. I respect curses in every form and have no wish to dally with them. Or with ghosts. But Kaya is my friend, and Sio is her familiar, and if my intuition is right, there is some solution here.

Sio and I cross the dilapidated bridge over the old moat and enter via the remains of a gate and portcullis, which appears stuck halfway up. Sio is running now and I pull out my wand.

“I mean no disrespect, ghosts,” I say clearly. “I am not here to stir your power, curse. Let this witch walk and help a friend.”



Chills draw cold lines up my spine and across my chest. A sure sign of the otherworld, of things that are meant to remain behind the Dark Veil, the second passage of this world. I find Sio sitting beside not only a ghost but also a very dead-looking Cyrus. My heart cinches, and I fight to keep from attacking the ghost because I'm not sure he is hurting Cyrus.

I lower my wand and the ghost locks his gaze on me. A cold like winter's deepest night crosses my soul. He is a dragon shifter, just as Cyrus told Kaya—likely the one who led Cyrus to a lost library of scrolls and to that map.

"I mean no harm," I say. "I'm a friend of the dragon shifter at your feet, my lord."

I am not sure the ghost was a lord in his days, but he has a noble bearing. There's nothing casual about his stance, and the way he regards the world around him reminds me a little of Argos. Nobles are raised quite differently from anyone else.

The cold retreats, and the feeling in my limbs returns. The ghost gestures to Cyrus, so I get closer, then kneel beside Sio. I touch Cyrus's arm. His skin is like ice, and his gold and green scales have gone gray.

"Cyrus, can you hear me?"

He grunts, and I set a hand on his chest to feel his heart beating. My rings catch the neckline of his tunic, and there it is—a mate mark with tea leaves and tiny dots like cinnamon or sugar around the symbol of true love, a black heart.

They are truly meant to be.

Now I feel like an asshole for getting in their way. Cyrus wouldn't hurt his true mate. It's impossible. Laini and I were wrong about him.

“Let’s get you to Kaya, shall we?” I stand and look to the ghost for permission.

The dead dragon shifter nods once and disappears. I waste no time in casting a spell to lift Cyrus. As the magic wraps itself around him, it fluctuates between gold and purple flashes of light that mimic the twinkle of the stars. Once Cyrus is properly levitating, I lead him out of the ruins. Sio is on my heels.

“You’re a fantastic cat, Athanasios.”

A proud meow rises from him.

“If you want me to see if I can make speaking permanent for you, just let me know by meowing thrice.”

But Sio is quiet as we hurry back to town.

The gate guards are shocked to silence as they let us back in, and thankfully, it’s late enough that no one else is out and about. Even Rom is missing from the tower, likely using his magical weather map as an alarm as needed and enjoying some sleep.

I can’t stop checking Cyrus’s pulse at his neck as he floats beside me, surrounded in purple and gold sparkling light. When I enter Kaya’s room with Cyrus behind me, Kaya’s eyes flash open and color infuses her pale face.

“Tully, what have you done?”

“Excuse me? I saved both your arses, actually. You owe Sio and me a big thank you for facing a grouchy dragon shifter ghost and that questionable curse up there in the ruins!”

I lower him onto the bed beside her and she is wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

“He’s alive,” I say. “I wouldn’t drop a corpse beside you. Well, unless you wrong me at some point.”

Argos gives me a hug and Laini grips my free hand, her smile spreading across her face.

Cyrus stirs and opens his eyes. “What in the hells is going on?”

He turns his head and his eyes go hot.

“Time for us to leave,” I say, grabbing Argos and dragging him toward the door. “Come on, Laini. And you, too, Sio. It’s way past all of our bedtimes.”

I silently wish my friend a good mating and grin with satisfaction that I was able to play a role in what will be her ultimate happiness. I refuse to think about my earlier meddling. It’s in the past, right?

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

### Chapter 32

Kaya

“Cyrus.” It’s all I get out before we are kissing, devouring one another as best one can with lips and tongue and teeth. Every inch of me is fully awake now and pain-free.

“I’m so sorry, Kaya.” He drives his tongue into my mouth and swipes it over mine.

Pleasure floods me and heat builds in my core. “No, I should have been honest with myself. Even if you do end up leaving, I can handle it. You are worth the risk of a broken heart.”

His hands are in my hair, his talons lightly scraping and digging into my scalp, and I feel like I’m the dragon because my body is on fire.

“I will never, ever leave you. I was a fool to think I could give you up even though I should.”

“Don’t say that,” I gasp as he kisses a trail down my throat to my chest. “You aren’t a fool.”

“Kaya, my Kaya,” he murmurs against my shoulder as he rolls on top of me. “I went to the place the ghost showed me on the map.”

“You did? I thought maybe you had.”

“I’m sorry I left like that. I am an idiot.”

I kiss the side of his neck and move my hips to feel his cock against my center. Desire rips through me and I suck in a series of quick breaths.

He is shaking like he is barely hanging on to his self-control. “I found a city of dragon shifters.”

“That’s wonderful!”

“But no, Kaya. It’s nothing without you at my side. I don’t give a whit about my kind if I can’t have you.”

His wings spread over us, blocking out the light. His eyes are sparkling and half-lidded. I know he has a mate mark before I see the edges of it peeking from his tunic. I know it like I know myself. We are fully aware now of our feelings for one another. It’s like we are connected in mind, body, and spirit.

“This is…” I giggle and can’t stop smiling as he draws a hand down my shoulder and my arm.

“It’s intense, isn’t it?” His breath dusts over the tops of my breasts and my nipples peak. “Kaya, will you marry me?”

I freeze, thinking of the map. “Don’t you want to go back?”

“No. I want to be here, in our hometown with you. Forever.”

His words are the song I always wished to hear, but I don’t want him to miss out on being a part of his kind’s community.

I put my hands on his big chest to slow down his kisses. “Cyrus, I have an idea.”

He leans over, and his tongue flicks out to touch my ear. I’m melting. What was I about to say? My mate mark is throbbing, but this time it feels perfect.

“We can visit the city, can’t we?” I ask.

Pulling back, he stares at me. His gaze is a touch on my cheeks, nose, and forehead. “You are a goddess. I will never deserve you. Of course, we can visit if you are up for the flight.”

“I trust you.”

Cyrus’s eyes shut momentarily, and he takes a deep breath, his body pressing into mine in the most glorious way. “I know you do. And you are teaching me to trust myself. I can never thank you enough for that, for seeing me as more than a gambling partier who has more bad habits than all the folks in the king’s dungeon.”

Grabbing him and pulling him against me, I laugh. His hair smells like the night and I kiss one of his horns. He moans and I feel his cock twitch between us.

I put my mouth next to his ear. “We will go to your kind’s city for our honeymoon.”

He jerks back, face split into a massive, open-mouthed smile. “You accept?”

“I do, my gorgeous friend, I do.”

“Don’t you dare call me friend ever again,” he says, pushing his hips forward roughly.

My laugh at his comment is swallowed by the sheer delight coursing through my

blood. “Blessed Stones, that feels amazing.”

“Tell me what you want, sweetness. I will do anything you request. Absolutely anything. If you want a list of my skills and my desires, I’m happy to provide that as well. But I think I need to fuck you simply first to calm this mate mark magic down.”

A shiver of want shakes me and my heart races. “Yes, please do.”

“I will be careful. I know you haven’t...”

“I have only had one partner. It’s been a long time, too.”

Not that I don’t pleasure myself with the fancy toy that Tully gave me for my birthday ages ago. She said it’s as healthy and normal as cleaning one’s teeth. I smile at the memory, then my focus shoots back to Cyrus, and my body heats up again.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “I will take good care of you, my sweetness.”

“I know. But please, don’t ask me to tell you what I want. That...” I make a face, unsure of how to voice what I’m feeling.

“You like to be told what to do?”

“I guess? I haven’t experienced that, but at the kissing booth,” I say eyeing him for signs of combustion, “I found that I didn’t like those who were careful and always asking me what I wanted. Your kiss is the only kiss I’ve truly felt here.” I put a fist on my heart and then place a hand between us, between my legs. “Or here.”

His eyebrow lifts and he smirks. “Just as I thought. That healer didn’t have a chance.”

Another chuckle escapes me. “No, he didn’t. Too soft for me. I like my rough dragon

shifter with his naughty side. Boss me about. Tell me what to do so this is the best it can be for both of us. I think, I...”

“Don’t lose steam now. Tell me everything.”

“I think I want you to be rough.”

“I will do my best, but I don’t want to hurt you this first time. We can ease into that. All right? Just say stop if you need me to.”

“Perfect.”

He nods, then a dark look sweeps over his eyes, a look as hot as coals. He rises onto his knees and his cock looks enormous even though it’s still trapped in his trousers. He grabs my dress and lifts it to my waist, exposing my silken shorts and my fine wool stockings. My face flushes. No one has looked at me undressed in this much candlelight. It was dark the last time I did this. And this is Cyrus, my soon-to-be-husband and my true mate. I hope he likes what he sees.

I touch the neckline of my dress. “Do you want me to...” I tug at it like I can show my breasts to him.

“Not yet. Grip the headboard, Kaya.”

Delicious chills run down the backs of my legs and I grab the wooden rungs of my headboard obediently. He reaches between my legs and his finger finds the open slit of my shorts. He hums appreciatively and runs a talon over the seam of my cunt.

“You’re incredibly wet. Very good.”

He lowers himself and spreads my knees with his hands. His talons dig into my skin



and the pinch is exactly the right level of pain to make me pant. He looks at me over the layers of my rumpled skirts, and then his tongue finds the spot where his finger was. The wet heat of his mouth on just the outer areas of my cunt is already unspeakably wonderful. He licks once, twice, then his tongue divides my seam and drives into me. I buck my hips and he lifts his head.

“Stay still.”

His commanding voice just makes me wetter. “Yes, Cyrus.”

“Call me your mate.”

“Yes, my mate.”

“I’m going to fuck you now. I can’t wait any longer. The mate mark in dragons is brutal.”

I imagined as much since he seemed near death when Tully brought him here. I draw my hands down, placing them on his head.

He scowls and jerks his chin at me as he tugs his tunic off and then pulls his trousers down to his knees. “On the headboard.”

Why do I love him ordering me around? Because I don’t have to think or worry. Because it’s just pleasure and Cyrus and it’s perfect.

His chest is a marvel of angles and curves. Green and gold scales run over the tops of his pectorals, then dive down. His mate mark shows tea leaves and sugar, and my own mark pulses with satisfaction. His scales lead to his narrow waist. The tendons and flat expanse of smooth flesh that stretch down to his massive dragon cock is a work of art. It’s all gorgeous. He is stunning from every angle. Every inch of him.

I wrap my fingers around the wooden rungs again and study his cock. It grows right there before my eyes. Scales shimmer along the head, and veins of what looks like fire run beneath the flesh.

“Tully was right about shifters.”

He grins, then goes serious again. “Hold tight. This will be a little painful for you, but you can handle it.”

I nod and grip the headboard.

His gaze roves over my body, his hands dragging over my shorts, talons snagging on the embroidered flowers that run down the sides where my hips stretch the fabric.

“So beautiful. My mate is so very beautiful.”

I preen at the tone of praise in his deep and rumbling voice. His wings shudder and rise to cover us fully. He braces one hand on the bed beside me, then positions himself at my entrance.

“You’re soaked.”

His jaw tenses, and his throat moves in a swallow. Sparks appear and dance around the edges of his wings, creating a sort of net around us that casts a golden light. Magic. Dragon magic.

He pushes into me, hot and so hard. Inch by inch, he enters me. My body is squeezing itself around him. He bites my shoulder and I moan, loving the pressure of him inside me and the hint of pain.

“Be still,” he orders.

But I can't. The pleasure is mounting, and I just need him to move or I need to move. He snarls, and a thrill shoots through me and I nearly come just from that.

"Be still, mate."

The sparks increase in intensity to flames that warm but don't burn.

"Please," I whine. My body shudders, and that coiling pressure deep inside me quivers. "Cyrus, my mate, please."

"You'll wait. If I can wait, you'll wait." His lip curls and shows his teeth, which are sharper than a human's. His hips move again, inching himself farther into me. He inhales sharply. "Your scent. Ah. You smell divine."

The flames join with one another to form a complete crescent of light that extends over our heads and along his wings.

"Now," he growls, more monster than ever.

Then he drives his hips forward. Pain and delight mingle to make me call out. The pleasure is untangling, expanding. His cock is as hot as fire and it feels as though sparks of pleasure spread from its insistent pressure. He is fully inside, his stones against my body and his hot cock deep and throbbing. I'm about to beg for more when the tremors of a climax begin. He refuses to move.

"Hands on the headboard, mate," he snarls out, holding firm.

Pleasure ripples out from my center and echoes through my entire body. My head falls back, and I am gasping and panting and straining for more, even though I just came and it was astounding.

“Very good,” he says. “Now, I can fuck you fully.”

I can’t get enough of that look in his eye.

### Chapter 33

#### Cyrus

Remaining inside her soft, tight heat, I rise and tug her legs more tightly around my hips. Leaning over, I cover her hands with mine on the headboard, and I grip her fingers roughly. She's so stunningly gorgeous, her hair coming down around her face, caramel wisps sticking to her forehead. That look in her whiskey eyes nearly undoes me. She's a dream come true. I can't get enough of her sweet scent, the tip of her chin as she moans, and the way she bites her lip and begs for more.

The layers of her dress and the presence of her dainty shorts just makes her all the more alluring. I am the one who gets to see her like this. Only me.

My mate mark sears my chest and fire magic flares hot in my blood. I will claim her.

"Mine," I growl and I jerk forward, plunging deep.

The slit in her little shorts is ripping and I love it.

"All mine."

I slam into her. Her breasts come free from her neckline. My cock strains for release. She is just so damned perfect. I bend to suck her nipple and she arches against me. I ram forward again, nearly coming, but holding back and gritting my teeth. I bite her nipple, just hard enough for a bit of pain and she cries out in pleasure. I can't stop looking at her. My body shakes, and my fire magic screams for me to claim her, to

finish this. I roar and smash into her to the hilt once, twice, and then I am coming apart in a chaos of sensation.

The ecstasy morphs into a glowing feeling of powerful, but calm and pure love, and I ease to my side. I take her in my arms and wings and roll her on top of me. She rests her damp cheek against my chest, her fluttering heart matching the rapid pounding of my pulse.

“If I were Sio, I’d be purring,” she whispers as she toys with the scales that run over the top of my chest.

“I’m very glad you aren’t, if I’m honest.”

Her laugh makes her bounce and I lick my lips, already prepped for round two.

“I feel so silly for wasting so much time,” she says.

“I do as well.” I smooth her hair and let satisfaction simmer through my veins. “It’s wild that we were meant to be true mates and didn’t know for years.”

“Maybe that’s how our story had to go. We needed to be friends first, to grow as people side-by-side until we were ready.”

“I’m so glad you didn’t choose Delixian. He’s great, but I would have died.”

She sits up and folds her arms on my chest, resting her chin on top. Her eyes are so big and lovely.

“Tell me more about the mark and why you were so ill,” she says.

“All right. It started a few hours into my flight back.”

I get up and find a cloth at her washstand. I dip it in water and return to clean her up while I explain what Joaquin told me about dragon shifters and how different we are with regard to mating and claiming. She has a shy look as I remove her dress and underthings, then tidy her. I keep my gaze diverted to give her space to adjust to this new level of intimacy.

When I finish my tale, she blows out a breath and shakes her head. “We are so lucky. I need to write a thank you note to Joaquin.”

I chuckle and rest a hand on her lower back where her arse begins to rise into that lovely slope.

“A very long thank you note, yes. Eh,” I say, pushing a lock of hair out of her eyes. “I didn’t hurt you, did I? I wasn’t over the top with anything?”

“Not at all.” She looks down and bites her pink bottom lip. I want to eat it like candy. “It was wonderful. I can’t wait to do it again.”

“Well, now that you mention it.”

I turn so she is on her back again and then I’m climbing slowly down her completely naked body. I drop kisses as I go, enjoying the slide of her stomach, the angle of her hip, the fluffiness of her thigh.

“You are stunning, Kaya. Like the best pastry, the most decadent cake, the sweetest treat.”

She makes mewling sounds and squirms as I lick and kiss my way to her center.

“You’re in charge, remember?” she says raspily. The sharp look she gives me is hungry and I’m more than happy to satiate that need.

“Lie back and put your hands on my horns. Lightly. I am in control here.”

“Okay.”

I dip my head down. Her fingers find my horns and I am momentarily dizzy. Normally, it's nice to have a lover touch them, but it isn't this nice. Another benefit of the mating, I suppose.

I close my hands around her ankles to keep her in place, and taking my time, I lazily lick the layers of her innermost warmth. She grips my horns, but I keep my movements easy and steady. I move her legs so they drape over my shoulders. From the trembling of her legs, I'm guessing she is about to come so I take my time.



### Chapter 34

#### Kaya

Each slow, upward stroke of his tongue has me shaking even more. I'm murmuring nonsense. It just feels so damn good. The tip of his tongue swirls through my folds as if he doesn't know where to settle. He tips his head one way and then the other as he delves deeper. His horns are cool on the flushed skin of my thighs, and I'm losing my mind. His tongue slips deep inside me and pleasure rockets up my spine. My inner muscles spasm as if to capture the wet heat he brings. The tension in me builds and builds and builds as his tongue and teeth nip and tease. He's teasing me, making me wait for it. Sweat blooms on my chest, in the nooks of my arms, and behind my knees. A curled finger enters me and he focuses his mouth on my stiff bud, tongue dancing over the most sensitive spot. I raise my hips, but he stops and gives me a commanding look. I go still and swallow. With his lips slicked with my wetness, his horns glinting in the dim light, his wings stretched wide, and that expression, he is truly my monster. He resumes his work, now using two fingers inside and his tongue flicking faster. It feels like tiny, hot sparks are traveling up from his mouth, and I look down to see fire magic lighting my body and his face. Ecstasy rises wild and unabashed in me and I cry out as my body clamps on his fingers. Every spasm is more powerful than the one before.

I collapse as satisfaction undulates through my bones, and I'm as limp and heavy as dough with too much water. He pulls away and I reach for him, so he tucks me into his embrace, his wings wrapped around us.

"You're so beautiful, Kaya. I will never stop telling you. I need a new word to

describe you,” he whispers against my ear.

“I love you, Cyrus.”

“I love you, Kaya. Always and forever.”

We spend the next two days in bed, only leaving to find food downstairs. It seems word has spread well enough so that no one tries to come to the bakery and none of my employees attempt to find me. There are bonuses to a small town especially ones with a Betilda, gossip queen and protector of love.

When we are finally washing up and readying to see the outside world again, a wave of anxiety threatens to drown me. I pause in putting my hair up. I can’t voice what I fear. But I must. I’m strong enough. I trust myself to deal with whatever happens here. He is worth the risk.

“You still want to get married, right?” I ask, silently proud that my voice is steady.

Cyrus’s eyes narrow and my heart squeezes. He leaves his boots unlaced to cross the room and sweep me into his arms.

“I will marry you every day until I die if you wish it.”

I laugh, relief filling my lungs with air, and I kiss his handsome mouth. I savor the feel of his big arms around me.

“I do wish it, Cyrus. Propose to me every dawn and I promise to always say yes .”

Needless to say, we didn’t quite make it outside that day either.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:21 am*

Halvard and Cyrus walk behind my friends and me. It's a gorgeous summer day in Ravina Roxa and the blue sky is filled with dragon shifters flying to and fro.

"Call me crazy," Cyrus says, giving my arse a pinch, "but I don't think one is supposed to bring half of their hometown on their honeymoon, sweetness."

I slap his hand away and continue down the colorful main road. "Hush and eat your croissant."

Cyrus grins and does as ordered.

"She's the boss, boss," Halvard whispers to Cyrus, chuckling.

"She definitely is," Cyrus says back.

I don't fight the smile that stretches my cheeks.

Renen and his partner, Bertrand, exclaim over the architecture. My brother and Bert are probably the only human couple within a five hundred mile radius. I grin at their linked hands and the wedding bands on their fingers. They eloped and showed up here at my honeymoon trip with that surprise news. I'm over the moon for them.

"Have they ever hired any non-dragons to design here?" Renen asks Joaquin, who kindly offered to give us a tour once we were rested and ready.

Joaquin walks beside Tully, Rom, Argos, and Laini. "No," the dragon shifter says, "but you could be the first. You'd just have to complete the memory elimination

again.”

Anyone who isn't a dragon shifter must have a witch wipe their memory of how to get here before leaving.

Tully licks the crumbs of her croissant off her fingers. “I can do detailed work. I'll keep the offer of design work in your big noggin, Bert, and get rid of the path here.”

Joaquin smiles at her until Argos raises an eyebrow and steps around the group so he's between the shifter and Tully.

I chuckle and link arms with Laini. Spark flies over head, yipping happily at all the dragons in the sky.

“I guess Argos's open mind only goes so far,” I whisper to Laini.

Laini grins. “I thought they were going to proposition everyone at the May Day festival after they both got all worked up during the kissing booth craziness.”

I shake my head and bat Cyrus's hand away from my arse again. He's following close and being quiet, but he can't keep his hands off me. Which I love.

We tour the winding streets, then Joaquin takes us on a boat around the lake. A castle with rounded domes and flapping banners sits on the far side of the water, its reflection broken by the fins of golden fish.

“I wish Rychell could have come with us,” I say to Cyrus and Halvard. “She wants to expand her trade and bring more foreign spices to Leafshire Cove.”

“She's a clever one, isn't she?” Halvard is looking across the water at the castle, a funny look on his face.

Cyrus and I swap a grin. I think someone has a crush.

“She is,” I agree. “Next time, I suppose.”

“Aye,” Cyrus says and Halvard nods.

Rom beckons Laini to peer over the boat’s edge. He’s pointing at one of the fish, a much larger one than the rest.

I snuggle up to Cyrus, and we watch the sun shimmer off the castle’s roof. Halvard begins walking the starboard side, his gaze drawn to the field of poppies beyond the castle’s towering form.

“It’s so beautiful,” I say quietly to Cyrus. “If you want to move here, you know I would do it for you.”

“Not a chance.”

“Really?”

“It’s not home,” he says.

I lean back against his broad chest and exhale, incredibly relieved. “I’d miss my bakery.”

“I’d miss my pub.”

“And all of our friends.”

They’re chatting and laughing, and I know I couldn’t live without them. Cyrus is my lodestone, but they are the breath in my lungs.

“Agreed,” Cyrus says. “This is simply our new holiday location. In fact, I might be able to purchase us a villa on the lake. Would you like that?”

“I would! But do you even have any savings left after paying off our booths?”

Betilda had informed me that after ruining the remainder of the orphanage’s chances to raise money, Cyrus had bought up all the leftover tickets and filled their coffers more than full.

He curls a lock of my hair around his finger. I’ve been wearing loose styles on holiday because I love it when he touches my hair. It makes me shiver in the best way.

“I was able to do some work for this city in exchange for a hefty sum,” Cyrus says.

I twist and look up at him. He’s smirking like he does when he wins at dice.

“What did you do?”

“I taught the pub guild owners how to play Ice and Bones.”

My mouth falls open. It’s a high stakes betting game and Cyrus’s favorite. He rarely allows for it to be played at his pub these days because it ends up in fights.

“You didn’t.”

He snorts. “I did.”

“You introduced an entire city of your kin to an entirely new vice.”

“I mean, is it that surprising?”

I laugh and he holds me close, nibbling my ear.

“Let’s go back to our room,” he whispers.

A thrill sweeps through me at the thought of having my mate, my husband, all to myself again. He’s so deliciously naughty and sweet and kind. I will never get enough of him, so I don’t argue against this idea of his.

When the boat docks, we bid everyone goodbye for now, making plans to meet for dinner later.

At the inn, a large structure with more rooms than our little Acorn Inn back home could ever dream of, Cyrus carries me over our threshold and sets me on the bed.

“You know that’s only a tradition for the wedding night, right?” I ask. “We have been married for almost a month.”

“You’ll be carried and you’ll like it, human,” he says, grinning and pinning me on the bed.

I laugh and struggle in vain. I don’t really want to escape, of course. This is just our game.

The room is already lit by numerous pillar candles set into pewter holders shaped like the mountains that surround the city. The bed is a four poster with velvet hangings and rich coverings. It’s sumptuous. Not what I would choose for every day, but perfect for a fine honeymoon. The employees at the inn have followed all of Cyrus’s detailed instructions. The fire is stoked, and multiple trays of bread, cheese, nuts, and dried fruits sit around the room amid pitchers of wine and fresh water.

“So what will you do with me this afternoon, my menace?” I ask, kissing his knuckles and then the gold ring I put on his finger the day we wed.

A low growl rumbles from his chest and throat, and he flips me onto my stomach. He begins tearing off my clothing, piece by piece, and dropping rough nips and kisses over my calves, toes, the backs of my thighs, and my arse. Once I'm liberated from all thought of body-covering fabric, he takes his time with more kissing, touching, and fondling. His hand snakes around my waist and dives low. His talon gently nudges its way through my folds to caress the area right around my bud. I set my teeth into his upper arm and he growls against the nape of my neck.

"Mine. My mate," he snarls quietly.

I am already incredibly wet from his delightful treatment. He knows exactly what I like somehow. Is it because we were friends for so long and my likes and dislikes outside the bedroom helped him understand my desires with him like this?

His teeth bite down on my arse cheek and he hums with appreciation.

"So lovely. So round."

He crawls up to lie on me, his cock like a brand between us. He rocks forward once and grunts.

"Oh, Kaya. You are almost too much for me."

I whimper and tilt my hips for more contact and he slides a hand under my hip to help me along. His cock slides between my legs and notches at my entrance, hot and hard and exactly what I want. He moves a fraction of an inch and I moan into the bedcovers, knowing he will tease me forever before giving me everything. With painfully slow movements, he does just that, edging forward and back, never entering, only teasing. Then he rises up suddenly and rolls me to my back. He is on his knees, lifted up and looming over me.

I take a moment to appreciate the sheer beauty of my mate. His scales glitter in the



candlelight and his tail moves gracefully behind him, the spines sharp and dangerous-looking. His taloned fingers are loose at his sides and his wings are spread half-way. Absolutely the most handsome male in the world, no doubt about it.

“On your knees, mate,” he commands.

I do as he asks and wait for my next order. I love not having to think. I can just be and feel and do. It’s incredibly freeing.

“I want your pretty mouth on me. Now.”

He grabs a handful of my hair and guides me to his cock. Even though we play at him being rough, and indeed he often is, he is still gentle when it counts and I always feel completely safe. I part my lips and take his length into my mouth as best I can.

Keeping a firm grip on my hair, he moves my head closer. “Relax for me, sweetness.” He smooths his thumb over my chin and along my jaw. “Relax.”

I exhale around him and let my jaw go slack. He pushes into my mouth a bit more and he groans loudly. His body shudders and his talons pinch at my scalp. I’m about to come just from how virile and sexy he is. I love it when he takes firm charge of everything.

“Look at me when you’re sucking my cock,” he commands.

I lift my eyes and he grins down at me. “Good. Very good. You are so damned beautiful when you’re on me like this. You can take some more, I think.”

Moving his hips and keeping a hold on my hair, he begins a slow rhythm. The sounds he’s making, the inarticulate mutterings, are building a tension in my core that could tear me to pieces.

“You wish I would fuck you now, don’t you?” he asks, his voice low and rumbling.

I mumble a yes around his cock.

“You must wait, sweetness. I’m in charge, and I’m taking what I want. You’ll wait for your mate and you will come when I say you do.”

I’m about to fall over that edge despite his demands. Because of them.

He thrusts gently into my mouth again, then he snarls and goes still. He is about to lose himself, too.

With a quick and graceful movement, he uses his tail, wings, and hands to put me on my back with my legs spread. It happens in the space of one heartbeat. He presses into me, entering me fully. My head drops back onto the velvet pillows as I gasp and pleasure scrapes its way down my entire body. I’m shivering with want.

“More, please,” I whisper.

He only gives me a sultry stare and withdraws, pausing at my entrance. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“Please, Cyrus. My mate.”

I press my face sideways into the pillow to muffle my moans. My inner muscles are already coiling, grasping on nothing. His hand curls around my breast and he licks my nipple, making me squirm. His hips shift. With his weight on his elbows, he enters me again in one excruciatingly slow thrust, but it’s all I need. I’m spasming around his fiery length, and the sparkling heat of his fire magic is sending pleasure across my breasts and down my legs and all along every feverish inch of my body.

“That’s all it took, hmm? Interesting. I wonder how many times I can accomplish this

today and with as little work on my part as possible.”

“You’re a terrible brat,” I gasp out as the climax fades.

He jerks and thrusts three quick times and I’m rising to the very peak of desire again immediately. “Let’s make a bet.”

“I don’t...” I am shuddering. So close.

“What was that?” His cock throbs deep inside me and his fire lances out from the contact creating long streams of pleasure through my entire torso.

“I don’t gamble,” I pathetically gasp out finally.

He grins against my cheek and smooths my hair away from my damp forehead. “I order you to place your bet, Mistress Baker, my mate, my heart.”

“Five!” I can’t stand it. I buck my hips and do a snarl of my own.

“Ooo, I think we can do that. If not, I owe you. We can figure out a prize later.”

Cyrus finally works into a quick pace and I’m unraveling in his arms.

After, he pulls me against him—my back against his chest. It feels so perfect that I might die of happiness.

“Will you tell me now what Joaquin found?” I ask, my words so quiet that I’ll be surprised if he can hear them.

The city clerk had found records of Cyrus and his family, but Cyrus hadn’t wanted to talk about it with the others around. We had met up with them after their research and bought chilled cider to drink at a cafe.

“My parents didn’t leave me,” Cyrus says.

I put his hand over my mate mark and hold it there.

“Aye, they were brewers here in the city and decided to expand south, so they moved to Brightsburg. My mother didn’t know she was pregnant and so she didn’t record my potential existence in the city’s books.”

“Is that the Brightsburg that’s a day’s walk from Leafshire Cove?”

“That’s the one.”

“Do they know what happened to them?”

I didn’t want to say too much for fear of upsetting him. He’d told me had no memory of his childhood and very little from his adolescent years.

“The records don’t say. And neither Robin nor Lucretia ever spoke of it. I will just have to let them rest, all of them, and appreciate the fact that I wasn’t abandoned as I had thought.”

“Where did you get that idea anyway?”

“Not from Robin or Lucretia. I’m not sure now that you mention it.”

“I bet it was just some arsehat’s cold bullying when you were young. You took it to heart.”

“Arsehat. You sound like Laini and Tully.”

I smile and curl into him even closer. “I’m glad you know the most important part of your history. That you were loved.”

He kisses the top of my head. “Thank you, my friend, my love.”

We trade kisses and trace one another’s faces, simply enjoying being together in the quiet peace of our new bond.

“There is one more thing I learned,” Cyrus says.

I raise my eyebrows and halt in running a finger over the tip of his ear. “Yes?”

“I am descended from the ghost.”

My mouth pops open and I smack his chest lightly. “Really?”

“Yes,” he says, grinning proudly. “Joaquin believes that’s why my parents were drawn to the area around here. I am directly from the noble line of Dragorian Sunscale.”

“You’re noble?”

“Not truly. Too many other marriages that were quite far from those noble bloodlines over the years. But I did sign on to use the surname Sunscale since I do have a claim on it.”

“So I’m Mistress Sunscale now?”

“You can be. You choose.”

“I do choose! That’s way more exciting than baker.”

He chuckles and whispers in my ear, “I adore you more than the stars love the sky, Lady Sunscale.”

“I adore you right back, Lord Sunscale.”

With his warmth all around me, I fall asleep and dream of our future together. Dancing in Rustion’s courtyard glade with our friends clapping around us. A bigger bed in my room, taken up mostly by a large set of wings and a tail. Sio curled up on Cyrus’s lap. Maybe three or four younglings from the orphanage and one child we made running about the bakery and the pub.

Life, rich as cinnamon and sweet as sugar.