



Moon Child & Sun Knight

AYU SAKATA

illust. by Sekiranun Circle

Prologue

The young girl raced through the forest. Branches tore at her arms, but she barely noticed. Behind her, the stench of blood and death hung thick in the air. The Agent had told her how to get to safety. How to escape the dragon. Her tiny lungs screamed for air, but she didn't dare stop. She knew her life would be forfeit if she did. Tears blurred her vision, but she pressed on. Up ahead, the trees began to thin out. And there it was - a chasm that separated the forest from the Dark Beyond. The chasm stretched into the earth, a deep yawning fissure of black. The girl's legs throbbed with pain, but she didn't slow down. With one last burst of energy, she sprinted toward the ravine, launched herself into the air, and hoped that it would be enough.

Chapter 01

"No." Ciaran made no effort to hide a frown as he inspected at my current attire. "Not happening."

I pouted and put my hands on my hips. "You disapprove?"

"Would it matter?" my older brother sighed. "Will you at least tell me why you're dressed as a servant?"

I huffed and tossed my head. My distinctive red hair was usually tied up, but I had opted to let it hang free in waves around my face. My royal clothing had been switched out for a dress used by most of our maid servants. "I want to see your princess at her most honest. If I disguise myself as a maid and visit her before the trial, I'll be able to see if she's any good for you."

My brother sighed and twisted the silver ring on his finger. It was a habit he had picked up ever since the ring was granted to him. The band was shaped like a dragon's claw, and it denoted him as the next High King. The sapphire twinkled at me as it caught a flash of sunlight peeking in through a slit in Ciaran's tent. A breeze pushed aside the tent flap long enough for the sunlight to catch in his hair. His red hair shone as bright as mine - a sure sign that we were born of House Ars. "In point of fact," he said "She's not MY princess. She's the people's High Queen, just as I will be their High King. We lead as equals, beholden only to the Kingdom we serve."

I stuck my tongue out at him. "In point of fact? Beholden? You're sounding more and more like a perfect old monarch every day. You may be fine with

this situation, but I'm not. Besides, let me have my fun before I'm stuck handling all your work back at home."

Ciaran pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose, as if staving off a headache. "Dragons below, Cally. It's our duty to serve, and yet every time the subject arises, you complain."

"Who cares about duty?" I let out an exaggerated groan. "I didn't ask to be born into any of this!"

"Cally!" Ciaran warned. Despite my constant trouble making, he rarely raised his voice. "We didn't ask to be born to these luxuries either, but they have still been given to us. In return, we must sacrifice our own desires for the well-being of the people. I don't- WE don't have a choice." I felt a chill rise in the tent, and a light frost crept across the floor with Ciaran at the center. He usually had better control of his Dragongift, and I realized I had probably gone too far.

I clenched my fists and bit back a retort. As much as I hated it, there was nothing to say in rebuttal. Finally I turned away to hide the flush on my cheeks. "Fine. But I'm still going. I'd like to get to know the future High Queen of the realm." I marched out of the tent. Ciaran didn't try to stop me.

As soon as I stepped out of the tent, the noonday sun blinded me. I raised my hand to block the light and wound up hitting someone beside me instead. "Steady there." Whomever I had hit let out a good-natured chuckle. As my eyes adjusted to the bright light, I was able to make out the silhouette of a princess dressed for battle. I couldn't remember her name, a fact that Ciaran would certainly chastise me for. Her blonde hair was pulled back and braided with several leather cords. Her leather armor was dyed the traditional deep blue that symbolized House Mentis. I

had only met this princess a few times, but the members of House Mentis were known for their sharp memories and keen insight. I immediately turned away, hoping she wouldn't recognize me, but it was too late. "You're from House Ars, yes?"

I turned to face her slowly. "Yes..."

She nodded and clapped a hand on my shoulder. I tried not to wince at the weight of her gauntlet. "Ciaran is a fine man! You must be honored to serve him."

I allowed myself to relax. She remembered my face, but not my identity. I was safe for now, but I decided not to push my luck. I nodded and murmured a quick "I am," disguising my voice as best as I could.

"Then please wish me good fortune, young one," she murmured. "That I might be elevated alongside your master."

I nodded and pressed two fingers to my lips. "May the dragons of the sky turn the sun's light towards you," I spoke the traditional blessing of the Sky Dragon. She nodded gratefully and strode onto the tournament field.

Chapter 02

The crowd cheered for the princess of Mentis as she marched onto the field, and she coolly accepted the adoration with a single nod.

"She's going to pass," I jumped at the sound of a voice by my side.

A girl with the same straw blonde hair, but hers hung down to her back. She looked younger than the other one, too. Another princess of Mentis? "Miss?"

"Elaina." She glanced around and leaned in to whisper to me. "And that's my sister, Helene. She's going to pass and be named High Queen. I'm sure of it. Do you want to watch the trial from the Sky Dragon's gallery?"

"W-what?" I was caught off guard by her question. "Servants aren't allowed in there!"

She smiled, "You work in House Ars, right? I'll say you were sent to attend to my needs, and it would show very poorly on House Mentis to turn away such a gesture of diplomacy."

I stifled a smile. She was sneaky. "I would be honored," I replied.

Elaina strolled around the edge of the battle grounds, careful to maintain a casual air. I followed a few paces behind to maintain my ruse. "Are you proud of your master?" She turned abruptly, and I stumbled to keep myself from walking into her.

"I'm sorry?"

"High King Ciaran," she replied. "House Ars must be very proud of him. I've heard he's capable, smart, and very good looking."

"Ew." On reflex, I stuck my tongue out at the last phrase.

Elaina burst out laughing. "Many of the other competitors say they wouldn't mind pursuing a romance with him, even if they aren't elevated to High Queen. But I don't see the appeal either, to be honest!"

Despite my initial reaction, I felt a bit of a sting at Elaina's words. "You don't think he's ugly, do you?"

"Of course not!" Elaina held her hands up in self-defense. "I mean no insult to your master. It's just that appearance has nothing to do with ability. To be interested in someone for their looks is entirely illogical."

I sighed. Right. House Mentis. Their best known sport was recreational debate. Logic was everything to them. I chose my next words with care. "I'm sure he is a fine looking man, but I don't think it would be right for a person in my position to look at him in such a

manner." Nice. Truthful, but misleading at the same time.

Elaina accepted it the way I expected her to, and she resumed her stroll toward the Dragon's barracks. Each of the Houses of the Kingdom had their own castle to call home. In the shared territory, the Dragon's barracks acted as temporary living quarters for competitors. Princess Helene of House Mentis had defeated all her rivals in a series of increasingly difficult competitions. Today was her final trial: a display of her Dragongift. Once she passed, she'd be granted the title of High Queen and join my brother as leaders of the Seven Houses.

The Dragon's barracks had a balcony on the second floor that allowed members of royalty to watch the trial from a comfortable position. It had rather uncreatively been nicknamed the Sky Dragon's

Gallery. A carving of a such a dragon loomed over the doorway – tribute to those who bore the Sky Dragongift and the sun powers they wielded. A shadow under the statue shifted and I yelped. "What's wrong?" Elaina was surprised by my outcry. I pointed at the shadow just as a man dressed in black armor emerged from the darkness. Streaks of white highlighted his otherwise black hair. He appeared to have seen several decades worth of fights, and come out the winner in all of them.

"Who is that?" I whispered.

Elaina frowned. "I don't know. His armor isn't from any of the Seven Houses." The man strode behind the building calmly, not bothering to slow down for anyone else in the area. Elaina and I exchanged glances, but anything she was planning to say was cut

off by a swell of cheers from the audience. "Oops! We have to hurry!" Elaina said.

I looked toward the field and saw Elaina's sister raising her sword towards the sun. The trial was about to begin.

Elaina and I raced up the stairs to get a seat in the Sky Dragon's Gallery. The guards at the entrance waved us in as soon as they saw her. We arrived in the gallery in time to see her sister mow down a series of straw dummies with her sword. The crowd clapped politely, but they all knew the first part was simply for show. The real trial was what came next.

Chapter 03

A row of archers lined up on the far side of the field and waited for their cue. Helene sheathed her sword and the crowd fell silent. The archers nocked their arrows, took aim, and let the arrows fly. Helene's eyes lit up a brilliant yellow as she summoned her Sky Dragongift. The air around her shimmered with heat and her form appeared to twist and dance, even as she stood unmoving in the center of the field. The first arrow raced toward her head, aimed precisely at a spot between her eyes. It burst into flame and fell to the ground in a pile of ashes without even touching her. All around Helene, arrows lit up in flame and disintegrated into ash. She remained as still as ever. The final arrow dissolved into ash, and Helene exhaled slowly. With a flourish, she unsheathed her sword. As

she did, the straw dummies that littered the field caught fire. She thrust her sword skyward, and the flames on the field roared to life and stretched skyward with her.

The crowd let out an exuberant cheer at the spectacle.

Elaina sighed. "She's such a show off." The words were critical, but it was obvious that Elaina admired her sister.

"She's incredible," I said. I found myself equally in awe of Helene's Dragongift. "The arrows were already a feat, but to light so many fires simultaneously and control their strength is truly special."

"The Sky Dragon's blessing you prayed over her must have worked." Elaina smiled at me. I arched an eyebrow. The princess was young, but not young enough to still believe in dragons as any more than

folklore. It took me a moment to realize she was saying it for my benefit. Those of us who lived in the Houses knew that dragons were merely symbolic of the powers we had been born with, but the less educated took the stories literally. The princess thought I was a servant, and must have assumed I believed. It was a surprising gesture of empathy from a House known to look down on such frivolity. Something in my expression must have seemed off. Elaina frowned. "You don't believe?" she asked.

"Should I? They sound made up to me." I retorted. Even disguised as a servant, I didn't want her to think me a simpleton.

Elaina tilted her head, as if examining me. "The famed diplomacy of House Ars does not extend to its workers, I see."

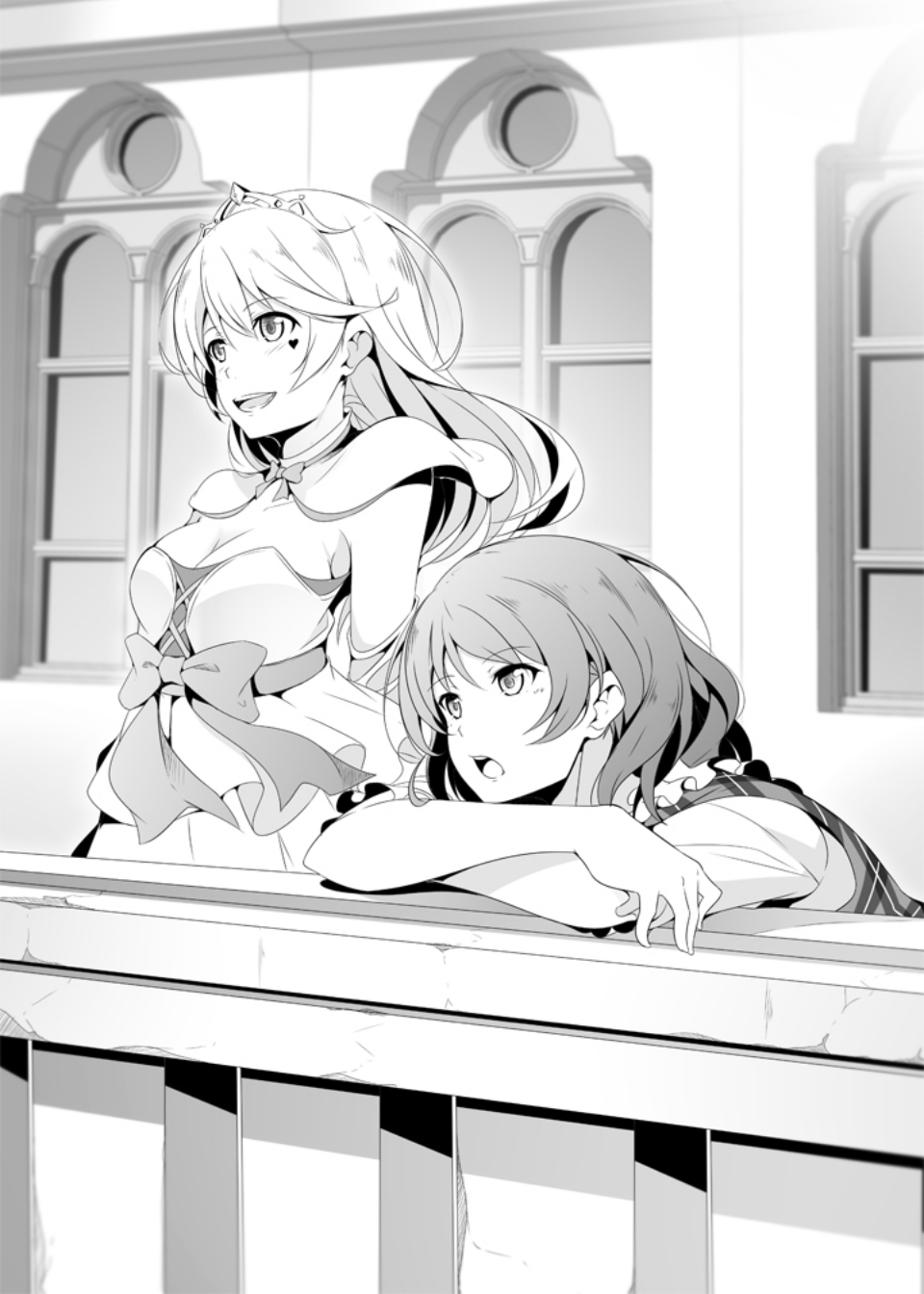
"The famed logic of House Mentis couldn't possibly leave room for giant monsters that no one has ever seen," I retorted.

Elaina burst out laughing. "The wisest of us know that there is much in the world that remains unseen." She shrugged. "For example, none of us know what exists outside the kingdom."

"The Dark Beyond means death to anyone who steps outside the borders," I countered. "Nothing survives out there."

"That we're aware of," Elaina shot back. "But if the Sky Dragons can siphon the sun and the Ocean Dragons can breathe water into ice, surely they can survive the Dark Beyond." She had a point, but I didn't want to concede.

"Well, if they're so powerful, why do they live out there? Why not just take over the Kingdom?"



Elaina hesitated for a moment. I felt a small moment of victory, but it was immediately crushed when I saw a triumphant smile creep across her face. "You're thinking from a human standpoint. Clearly dragons prefer the fire and ice of the Dark Beyond. We don't have enough resources in the Kingdom for them to live comfortably."

I groaned. "Fine, you win. Dragons are real."

She stifled a giggle, "I doubt it."

"What?" My jaw dropped. "Just a second ago, you were arguing that they exist."

Elaina nodded, "And you provided me with a lovely debate. I appreciate the exercise." I felt a flush of embarrassment creep into my face. Typical Mentis.

"Princess Elaina," a strong voice rung out from below the gallery. I looked over the railing to see Ciaran. Of course he knew her name.

"High King Ciaran!" Elaina smiled and waved.

"Not quite yet," he replied, bowing his head modestly. "Your sister's trial was impressive. Has she returned? I'd like to extend my congratulations to her."

"She's probably retired to her room by now," Elaina said. "I can pass the message along."

Ciaran smiled and offered a slight bow. "It would be an insult to you to treat you as a messenger, Princess." My brother had managed to both compliment Elaina and demand a face-to-face meeting with Helene in the same breath. All while being perfectly polite.

"Come up here, then," Elaina replied. "I'll go see if she's ready to entertain a guest."

"I appreciate it," Ciaran ascended the staircase and sat beside me. We both avoided eye contact.

I waited for Elaina to leave before speaking. "I'm sorry."

"No, I should be the one apologizing," he murmured.

"What?" I was almost too stunned to speak. Almost.

"I'm sorry. I know this has been hard on you, Cally." He reached down and began to twist the ring on his finger. "I've been trying to be good, but the truth is, I'm scared. Princess Helene has shown her worth, but the Seven Houses chose me without a trial. I haven't proven that I'm enough."

"Of course you're enough." I laughed bitterly. "Besides, it's not like they had a lot of options."

Ciaran sighed and his perfect posture sagged. "Please don't say that. I know this ruins your chance of ever joining the High Court."

"That's the last thing I want," I folded my arms across my chest. "You know that." I sighed and allowed myself to look Ciaran in the face. "I just... I'm going to miss you. You'll be in the High Court, and I'll have to take on all your duties once you're gone. What if we're too busy to see each other?"

"Oh, Cally," Ciaran dropped all pretense and wrapped his arms around me in a warm hug. "I would never let that happen. We'll find a way," he promised. "We-"

"High King!" Elaina burst into the gallery. If she saw me pull away from Ciaran's embrace, she didn't mention it, but the look of distress in her eyes made me think the scene hadn't even registered in her mind.

"Princess!" Ciaran immediately returned to his royal self. "What's wrong?"

"My sister-" Elaina sobbed, trying not to choke on her words. "She's been murdered."

Chapter 04

Ciaran immediately raced down the staircase, taking two steps at a time. Elaina and I followed as best we could, but he quickly outpaced us. He skidded at the bottom and turned on his heel.

"Which one?" he asked, gesturing towards the row of doorways that stretched down the hallway.

"At the end!" Elaina pointed. We followed him down the hallway and into Princess Helene's room. As soon as I entered the room, I was hit with an overwhelming stench of smoke and ash. Embers floated listlessly in the air. The stone walls glowed like coals. In the center of the room lay Princess Helene. It was impossible to tell what had killed her, but it was clear that she was dead. From the look of the room, she had put up an incredible fight. I swallowed.

Whoever managed to overpower her must have been terrifying. Elaina's panicked breathing turned into wailing. Ciaran was instantly at her side, his hand on her shoulder. He knelt in front of her and bowed his head. "I'm sorry to ask this of you, Princess, but there's a chance her killer is nearby. Did you see anyone when you came to get her?" Elaina shook her head. "What about earlier? Did you see anything or anyone suspicious?" A broken sob escaped her lips.

"The man in the black armor," I said.

Ciaran and Elaina both looked at me. "Th-that's..." Elaina's chest shuddered as she tried to control her tears. "That's right."

"What man?" Ciaran's expression darkened.

"We saw a man outside before the trial. Tall. Black armor. It looked like he didn't belong here..."

Ciaran nodded. "Cally, I need you to find the guard captain and alert them to be on the lookout. Elaina and I are going to check on the other princesses."

"Um," I gestured at my clothing. "They might not take me seriously if they think I'm a servant."

"Right." Ciaran removed his ring and dropped it in my hand. "Show them this as proof that I sent you."

"Got it," I closed my fist around the ring and raced out the door. I sped away from the Sky Dragon barracks and across the field. The ash and embers from Princess Helene's trial lay scattered across the field, still glowing red with light. My stomach lurched. I had managed to hold it together in the barracks, but seeing Princess Helene's work so full of life while her body lay lifeless nearby felt wrong. I felt my breakfast rise in my throat, but I forced it down and kept

running. A river ran along the north end of the field. I traced its edge until I reached the guardhouse, strategically positioned with its back to the water. I skidded to a halt. The front door hung open, swinging wildly on its hinges. Something was wrong. I crept to the door and peered in. The room was dim, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust from the sunlight. The guards lay scattered across the ground. A woman dressed in silver armor wove her way among them calmly. She knelt to inspect one. His chest shuddered, and I caught my breath. At least he was alive.

"Your friends are dead. Tell me where the High King is, or join them," she spoke. Her voice was full and melodious. There was an inviting warmth to her demeanor, and if not for her cold words, I would have wanted to tell her everything.

The guard coughed up blood and shook his head. "We already told you. High King Jacobi lives in the center of the Great Sea."

She rolled her eyes. "No, your next High King. Ciaran of House Ars, if I'm not mistaken."

I stifled a gasp. Ciaran? Why? I backed away from the door as quietly as I could. I had to warn my brother. Too late, I heard the clink of metal behind me. I spun around and found myself face to face with the man in black armor.

Chapter 05

The man in black armor wasted no time. He grabbed the collar of my dress and threw me into the guardhouse. I landed on the stone floor and let out a pained groan. The woman glanced at me with bored disinterest. "Who is this?" she asked.

"Found her outside spying on you," the man replied. "Looked like she was planning to run off and tell."

The woman knelt in front of me. "You wouldn't happen to know where High King Ciaran is, would you?" she said. Her expression was kind and inviting, but a light in her eyes told me that her friendly demeanor was a thin veil to something terrifying. I knew that a wrong answer would probably be my last. I closed my fist tightly around Ciaran's ring and hoped

feverishly that neither of them noticed. A series of panicked shouts echoed outside the guardhouse followed by the sound of people running about. The woman looked up at the man. "It seems your handiwork has been discovered."

"At least I did my job," he said. My mind raced to connect their statements. The man in black armor was obviously Princess Helene's murderer. And if this woman's turn was next... she was here to kill Ciaran! More shouting outside. The entire tournament was in a panic.

"I'd be delighted to do my job," the woman said. "But no one seems to have any idea where he might be." I bit my lip. She noticed. "Oh, but this one seems to be hiding something." She examined me with a critical eye. "Red hair. House Ars, then." She ran a finger along my jawline slowly, lightly. It would have

been a comforting touch if not for the silver gauntlet that dug into my skin. "Where is your master?" She pressed the tip of her gauntlet into my neck. "We really are in a terrible hurry." A sudden blast of cold filled the room, and a flurry of ice and snow wrapped around her, pushing her away from me. I felt the ice against my skin and recognized its chill immediately. Ciaran's Dragongift.

"I heard you were looking for me." As the snowflakes settled to the ground, I made out his form standing in the doorway. His eyes glowed a brilliant blue. "Assassins, are you? Who sent you?"

The woman stood and smiled. Another inviting smile that covered a killer intent with the thinnest of veneer. "Hello, High King Ciaran," she cooed.

"Future," he corrected on reflex.

"More like never," she retorted. She and the man in black armor drew their swords simultaneously and lunged for my brother.

Chapter 06

Ice surged across the floor towards the two assassins. The man in black armor hesitated for a split second, but that's all it took. Ciaran was in front of him immediately. With two swift, precise punches, Ciaran knocked him back. He summoned his Dragongift and froze the man's arm to the wall in a thick layer of ice. The woman descended on him as he did. He ducked barely in time, and her sword clanged against the stone wall.

The guard who was being interrogated earlier shifted and groaned. Still alive! I scrambled over to him. "Steady there," I whispered. "I'm going to get you out of here." He did his best to stagger to his feet, but I suddenly found myself overwhelmed by his weight. Behind us, I heard the clash of Ciaran's sword against

the assassin's. I half walked-half dragged the guard out of the guardhouse and lay him on the riverbank outside. "Are you okay?" I asked, peering over him. Underneath us, a thin layer of frost crept across the ground from the guardhouse. Ciaran's Dragongift had been lauded as one of the strongest the Kingdom had seen in ages, but even that much was a lot for him.

"You're bleeding," the guard pointed at my hand. A thin line of blood ran down the side of my clenched fist. I had been holding onto Ciaran's ring so tightly that one of the claws had cut into my skin. I cursed and tore a ribbon from my dress. I strung the ring on it and looped it around my neck, ignoring the guard's shocked stare as I did. I turned back to the guard house, but a blast of hot air pushed me to the ground. The assassins burst through the front door. Both were covered in blood and sweat. Ciaran followed close

behind. Chilled condensation hung thick in the air around him. His eyes glowed blue as he summoned another blast from his Dragongift.

"Not so fast," the man in black armor's hand lashed out, and he grabbed me by the arm. He yanked me to my feet and held me like a shield between him and Ciaran. "One more, and I'll cut her open." The glow in Ciaran's eyes faded. The man laughed. "I thought so." He twisted my arm and began to drag me towards the river. "Now back into the guardhouse, if you want her to live," he commanded. Ciaran glanced from him to me, then took a slow step backwards. I flexed my fingers and began to reach for my Dragongift. Only royals were born with a Dragongift, so they probably weren't expecting anything from me. I didn't have the depth of Ciaran's ability, but if I caught them by surprise, we might gain the upper hand.

"I'm not sure what you're planning, darling," the woman in the silver armor pointed her sword at my throat. "But it's not smart idea." Ciaran took advantage of the distraction and lunged forward. He swung his sword at her. She reacted immediately and blocked his blow.

"Move again, and she dies," the man in armor yelled, pressing his blade against my side. Ciaran hesitated for a moment, but a moment was all the woman needed. Her eyes suddenly flashed yellow and she summoned a blast of fire. I felt my breath leave my body. How did this stranger have a Dragongift? Ciaran tried to repel her attack, but he was a second too late. The fire found its mark, searing deep into his chest. He stumbled backwards into the guardhouse. She wasted no time summoning another blast of fire that enveloped the entire building.

"Ciaran!" I screamed. The man in armor leveled a curious eye at me.

The guardhouse began to crumble into ashes. "Let's go," the woman turned to her partner.

"We're taking her with us," the man in black armor said.

The woman shrugged. "If you say so."

The man in armor dragged me to the river. "Hold your breath," he commanded, as if I didn't already have a very clear idea what his plans were. I barely had enough time to gasp for air before the two of us plunged into the icy rapids.

Chapter 07

The river carried us swiftly away from the tournament grounds. From the way the water twisted around us, it was clear that the man in armor was using a Dragongift to direct the flow. My body and my mind were numb from the freezing waters, but I still sensed the pull he had on the river. After what seemed like an eternity, we emerged from the waters and he deposited me rather unceremoniously in a heap at the water's edge. I lay shivering on the ground, desperately trying to regain feeling in my body. "Poor child." The woman emerged from the river as soaked as I was, but she seemed unbothered by the cold. Her body glowed a faint orange hue and within seconds she was dry. She placed her hand on me and rubbed my shoulder gently. Warmth surged through my veins, and for a

brief moment, I felt as if I was in the safest place in the world. Only the memory of her blasting fire at my brother shook me out of my reverie.

"Haemon, why did we bring her?" she asked the man in the armor.

"I was wondering the same thing," a new voice joined in. A man with oily black hair and an unpleasant frown stood near the river. He had clearly been waiting for these two. His voice was nasal and thin, and he carried himself like someone who thought himself very important. He reminded me of the sort of people who had suddenly shown up to be Ciaran's friends once he was announced as the future High King. "Haemon. Milena." He sniffed. "I thought the job was to dispose of the future High King and Queen. Not..." he looked at me with some skepticism. "Collect random children."

"And we did our job, Quis," Haemon replied calmly. "But she called out to the future High King in a familiar manner. This girl probably holds more knowledge about the Houses than we do. We can use her to plan the next step."

Quis' face turned red with anger. "I have enough expertise about the Houses for everyone. We don't need anyone else. I order you to kill her."

Haemon arched an eyebrow. "Order? We don't serve you."

"No, but I AM in charge of this mission," Quis said.

"We don't kill for free," Haemon retorted. "Would your master be pleased to see you incur additional costs on this trip?"

"I-" Quis hesitated.

"Oh, Quis," Milena smiled. Her voice was like honey. "Osir will be here soon. I'm sure we can settle the matter then."

Quis' bravado faltered. "Osir. Yes, well..." He puffed his chest up in an attempt to hide his discomfort. "I suppose I can try to extract some kind of information from her." He gestured to the cluster of trees behind him. "Provisions are in the tent."

"Good," Haemon said. "Because I'm starving. Bring the girl in, will you?"

Haemon and Milena disappeared into the forest without another word. Quis turned to me and scowled. "Well? I'm not going to carry you." I weighed my options. Nowhere to run, and no idea where I was. For now, I'd have to behave.

"Coming," I mumbled. I struggled to my feet, and followed Quis into the woods. The forest was a wild

tangle of trees and undergrowth - thicker than any I'd seen before. To the left, I noticed the bark on several trees had been scratched away - a sign that some animal probably had a den nearby. None of the marks were fresh, though, so whatever creature made them was probably long gone. I scanned the forest for signs of the den and noticed a sloped area that stood above the rest of the forest floor. It was probably there. I made a note of its location for further use.

"Stop dawdling," Quis grabbed my shoulder. He glared down at me, and caught his breath. "What's this?" I watched the expression on his face cycle through several emotions. With horror, I realized that the ribbon bearing Ciaran's ring was caught in my hair. Quis knelt in front of me and ran his fingers through my hair. I winced as his bony fingers stuck on a tangle. He finally managed to extract the ribbon and

the ring that hung on it. He rubbed the deep blue stone carefully, and I could see his mind processing the new information. Without warning, he looked up and locked eyes with mine. "What a delightful surprise," he said. A slow smile crept across his face. "Haemon was right - we CAN use you." I cringed at the feel of his hot breath against my face, but I tried not to look away.

"Quis! What are you doing?" Haemon moved so softly through the trees that neither of us had heard his approach.

Quis took one last look into my eyes before shoving Ciaran's ring back into my tangle of hair and pushing me over. "It's nothing," he snapped. I stared in surprise. Quis was keeping a secret? It was obvious that these three were far from harmonious, but I didn't imagine the divide between them was that wide. Maybe I could use that to my advantage. I quickly

tucked the ring under my blouse as Quis lifted me roughly by the arm. He dragged me into an open clearing where a modest tent had been set up.

"Get inside." He thrust me at the tent's entrance. I stumbled in and settled down for a night with my captors.

Chapter 08

The tent was drier and warmer than I expected. Haemon and Milena had already helped themselves to a generous portion of food. I didn't have much time to observe the surroundings before Quis grabbed my shoulder and tossed me into a corner.

"You don't have to treat her so poorly," Milena said.

"I shouldn't have to treat her at all," Quis grumbled. He tore a loaf of bread in half and tossed it at me. "There. Eat that."

I accepted it and nodded at him. "Thank you." I wasn't feeling that grateful, but if there was ever a time to exercise diplomacy, this was probably it. I went over the checklist in my head. Start by remembering everyone's name. The man in black armor was

Haemon. The woman in silver armor was Milena. And the annoying man bossing them around was Quis. Haemon and Milena were obviously fighters. They carried themselves like soldiers, but I didn't recognize them from any House. More troubling, both of them seemed to have a Dragongift, which was supposed to be a product of royal blood only. I watched Quis carefully. Did he have a Dragongift as well? I hadn't seen him display one yet. He seemed like the sort of person who would show it off at every occasion, so I hesitantly guessed that he did not. For some reason, they hadn't bothered to tie me up or lock me away. That would work to my advantage - I just had to wait for the right moment.

"I trust there were no other..." Quis glanced at me.
"...Complications?"

"We handled it." Haemon leveled a cool gaze at Quis. "Although if you had been there, you wouldn't have to ask."

Quis's body stiffened. "You know I can't risk being recognized."

"Ah yes, because your master is such an important figure in the Seven Houses," Haemon's voice dripped with cynicism. My ears perked up. Quis was part of the Seven Houses? But I didn't recognize him at all.

Milena filled a cup with water and approached me. "You must be thirsty." I accepted it and downed the entire drink in one go. She waited until I had finished before she spoke again. "I was hoping we might chat. Just the two of us." Like I wanted to talk to the person who murdered my brother. I took a slow breath and nodded. It was all I could manage. She smiled and placed a comforting hand on my arm. "You're from

House Ars, yes?" I nodded. "It seems you and High King Ciaran were close. Is he a friend?" Something in my expression must have given away my feelings. "Oh sweetie, I'm sorry you're so sad about what happened."

"What happened!?" I couldn't withhold a response any longer. "What happened is that you murdered him!" I snapped. "I'm not going to talk to you!"

Milena's cheerful smile disappeared in an instant. Her eyes glowed yellow, and her grip on my arm tightened. I winced as her gauntlet dug into my skin. "Is this how you repay my kindness?" she asked. Her voice had lost its honey. It sounded like iron hammered in fire. "I did what was best for everyone, and you will not question me." Heat raced from her hand and up my arm. I tried not to show any of my pain, but tears began to well up in my eyes. Milena's expression suddenly softened. "Oh, my poor child,"

She released her grip on me and dropped to one knee. She inspected the area where she had held me. A red mark was seared into my arm. "I'm so sorry, it's just that you upset me so much, I couldn't control myself. Forgive me?"

"I-" I swallowed and looked at her gauntlet. It still radiated heat. "I forgive you," I said.

"Good girl," she patted me fondly on the head. "Quis! Our poor guest has hurt herself. Bring over some bandages, will you?"

Quis spat on the ground. "Stop treating me like an errand boy." He straightened his back in an attempt to look bigger. "Need I remind you that I've been put in charge?"

"Oh yeah?" I snapped, turning the sting of my pain on him. "By whom?"

He stared at me in shock, but quickly regained his composure. "Someone very important. It's none of your business."

I turned to Milena, "You want to know if Ciaran and I were close? I traveled with him everywhere. And I have been to every House in the Kingdom, but I have never once seen him. He's lying to you."

"I am NOT!" Quis sputtered.

"What did he promise you?" I pressed. "Money? Power? Political favors? From his very important benefactor? It's not coming."

"She's lying!" Quis screamed. "She's trying to save herself." He was right about the second part, but they didn't have to know that.

"Then what?" Haemon eyed Quis with skepticism. "You've been evasive about the issue since the beginning. I think it's time we discussed our business

more in-depth." He stood and placed a hand on his sword hilt. Milena followed suit. Quis took a tentative step away from them, and they both advanced on him. I leapt at the opportunity. I scrambled to my feet and bolted for the tent entrance.

"You idiots!" Quis' voice echoed through the clearing. "She played you!" I didn't bother to look over my shoulder. The head start wasn't much, and I didn't want to waste it.

If I could just make it to the forest, I was confident that I'd be able to find the den and hide in there. My feet pounded on the dirt. The trees were just within reach! A shadow stretched along the ground as I ran across the clearing. I didn't even have enough time to think it strange before I was jerked backwards by an unseen force. My feet scraped along the ground for a second before I felt myself hoisted aloft. The air turned

colder with each second. With some effort, I managed to look over my shoulder to see what was holding me. My breath caught in my throat. A sleek narrow face studded with deep blue scales. Large, unblinking yellow eyes. I dangled helplessly in the air, held high by a giant pair of claws. The creature opened its mouth to reveal rows of polished teeth, each one perfectly sharp. My last thought before death was "Princess Elaina would be so smug if she knew dragons exist."

Chapter 09

Okay, so it wasn't my last living thought, but I didn't know that at the time. And I had kind of hoped my final thought would be a little more insightful. The dragon held me aloft and inspected me with a sense of bored displeasure. It released a hissing sound, and I heard a faint a whisper at the edge of my mind. Whatever it was saying, Haemon and Milena seemed to understand.

"At the trial. Used her to escape." Haemon replied. "We're going to use her to plan our next assignment."

The dragon huffed. If a shrug could make a sound, that would be it.

"I told them to kill her," Quis spoke up. "They told me it would cost extra."

The dragon's chest heaved up and down and a low rumble shook the air. Was it laughing? Another strange whispering hiss. Something about the way it looked at me told me I wasn't going to find its joke funny. Too late, I realized why they hadn't bothered to restrain me. With the dragon outside, any hope of escape I might have had was gone. The dragon tossed me into the tent without ceremony.

Milena approached and knelt in front of me. Her voice was calm and even. "You're not going to try to leave me, are you?" I glanced up as the dragon situated itself in the entrance. Its body blocked the doorway entirely. I shook my head. A radiant smile spread across Milena's face. "Good. You'd make me so upset if you did."

"Osir," Haemon spoke to the dragon. "What's our next assignment?"

The dragon rumbled. Its scales rippled like the surface of a stormy ocean. Again, I sensed words were being spoken, but I understood none of them.

"Interesting," Haemon mused. "And what is House Fortitudo?"

Osir hissed again. More Dragonspeak. Milena laughed. "Does this mean we'll finally get to meet our patron?"

My ears perked up. The person pulling the strings was at House Fortitudo? The dragon angled its head at me and snorted.

"Of course," Milena said. She sat beside me on the floor. "Dear, we have some questions."

I took a deep breath. "Yes?"

"Your master must have visited House Fortitudo, yes?" I nodded. "And what is the best way to get there from here?"

I hesitated before responding. "I... have no idea where we are."

Haemon and Milena exchanged glances. Finally, Haemon spoke. "Quis."

Quis' expression soured. "We're in the Mourning Mountains." Immediately I understood why they had chosen this place. The Mourning Mountains were completely uninhabited. Everyone in the Kingdom whispered rumors of monsters that whisked people away. Seeing Osir lounging across the entrance to the tent, I realized maybe not so much of a rumor after all. The river that circled the Kingdom cut through the mountains, but even most boatmen were afraid to use that stretch of waterway for travel. I wasn't familiar with the area. No one was. But I had to guess.

"Well..." I chose my words carefully. "House Fortitudo is on the south end of the Great Sea, so you could sail across to get there."

"Nice try, girl!" Quis snapped. "The storms this time of year would destroy us!" There was some truth to what Quis spoke. Spring was an especially turbulent time on the Great Sea. Ciaran would have been able to guide a ship through it with his Dragongift, but most sailors refused to sail in the spring. I couldn't tell if Haemon's Dragongift would be strong enough to take a ship through, but I realized that Quis probably hadn't even thought of it as an option. Haemon and Milena clearly had no idea about the terrain at all. I would have to take advantage of their gap in knowledge.

"Y-you're right," I said. "Sorry. In spring, you'd have to go around the east side of the Great Sea."

There's a road. When you get to the place where the Mourning Mountains meet the territory of House Mentis, you'll find a highway. It's used mostly for transporting food and livestock, but it connects every territory. It'll take you about ten days to get there."

Osir snorted and rumbled a few times. "Then it's settled," Milena said. "We'll take the highway."

"And what about her?" Haemon nodded his head in my direction.

Quis shrugged. "We'll decide that in the morning."

Chapter 10

Darkness had already swallowed the night whole, leaving me with little time to plan my escape. The dragon still lay stretched out across the tent's entrance, but its rhythmic breathing indicated it was asleep. I lay back and weighed my options. Morning would be breaking shortly. I wouldn't have the cover of night to hide me. But I knew they'd be on the move soon, and I couldn't be certain that they wanted to keep me around. Haemon had been assigned first watch. He and I hadn't traded any words since we got here, and after my attempted escape earlier, he'd clearly be on his guard. Quis brushed past me toward the forest.

"Going somewhere?" Haemon asked, although the tone in his voice indicated he didn't really care.

"Scouting," Quis huffed. "Someone's got to do it."

"I'm sure Osir already did," Haemon said. "But sure, whatever makes your very important master happy."

Quis exited the tent and I was again left with my thoughts. One less person to deal with. Was it a good time? No, Haemon was even more alert now that Quis was gone. I shut my eyes and executed one of my greatest talents - pretending to be asleep. My body was exhausted from the day, and I knew if I wasn't careful, pretend sleep would quickly become real sleep. I willed my breathing to slow, even as my heart rate picked up. The adrenaline would keep me awake, although I assumed I'd regret it later. I heard Quis return. Haemon said something to him, but I couldn't make out the words. The sky began to change from black to deep blue. Haemon went to sleep and Milena took over. From the color of the sky, I guessed that Quis

would be given the final watch. He would probably be easiest to escape from. I had no way of ascertaining if the dragon outside was still awake, but it was a risk I'd have to take. Dark blue gave way to a paler shade and the stars began to fade. Milena retired to bed and Quis took up the guard. I waited for Milena's breathing to slow, then I crept to the front of the tent. Quis' back was turned to me. No sign of the dragon.

I leapt to my feet with the intent to run out the entrance, but my legs buckled underneath me. A night of tense waiting had caused my muscles to seize up, and I stumbled directly into Quis. Quis stared at me, too stunned to form a sentence. I scanned the area. No sign of the dragon. I didn't hesitate. I scrambled back to my feet and sprinted across the clearing towards the wooded area. "What the-" Quis made a halfhearted attempt to grab me as I dashed past him, but I ducked

in time to evade his grasp and launched myself into the thicket. I only had the briefest head start, but I knew I was small enough that it would take them time to follow. I stooped under branches and wove my way through the bushes with as much speed as I could muster. Behind me, I heard someone moving, but I didn't bother to look back. I found the den and threw myself into the entrance. I scrambled back into the shadows of the den as quickly as I could. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I heard more movement outside. "She came this way!" Quis was shouting. He sounded angry. "Spread out! Haemon, north. Milena, west!" he commanded. "I'm heading east." I waited as the sound of their movement faded.

I let out a slow exhale. Part one of the escape, complete. I hadn't really spent a lot of time thinking about part two, but I was alive and that was a good

start. I weighed my options - leave now, or wait until later. I wasn't thrilled about the idea of leaving my comfortable hiding spot, but this was the only moment in time that I could be certain they were all moving away from me. I would have to risk it. I crept to the opening of the den and peered out. No sign of movement. I glanced up at the treetops and squinted as the sunlight filtered through the trees. Quis had ordered searches to the north, west, and east. Heading south was my best bet. I crept through the bushes as quickly as I dared, stopping occasionally to listen for anyone else. So far so good. The trees seemed to thin out up ahead. Maybe a road? I stepped out of the forest and yelped. Not a road. The forest ended abruptly, cut off by a sheer cliff that stretched further down than sight would allow.

"South wasn't such a good idea, was it?" A voice behind me. Quis.

I turned slowly and shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"I wonder why that was," Quis gloated. With some difficulty, he wrestled a dagger from his belt. "I should've done this from the beginning." He grabbed me by the shoulder and threw me to the ground. "Nothing personal," he said. Yeah, like that made it better.

Chapter 11

Quis raised the dagger above his head. A blur of gold and black appeared behind him. Metal clashed on metal as a girl I had never seen before leapt through the brush.

She was about Ciaran's age, dressed in leather armor with gold embellishments. Her skin was a deep brown, and her impossibly shiny black hair was tied up in a ponytail. In one hand, she carried a curved sword that shone the same gold color as her armor. "And who are you supposed to be?" Quis sneered.

"Pretty sure I should be the one asking that," she snapped back. He swung his dagger at her and she ducked with ease. He made another attempt, but again she dodged with little effort. Every move she made seemed more like a dance than a fight, and I found



myself enraptured by her. She delivered a swift punch to Quis' jaw. He crumpled the instant her fist met his face. She snatched up the dagger from his limp hand and threw it toward a shadow behind a tree. I heard the sound of Haemon cursing. He stepped out from the shadows, sword at the ready. A thin red line of blood ran along his cheekbone.

"Ani. Stay out of this," he said. Her only reply was an angry yell as she charged at Haemon. Metal clashed against metal as he swung at her, and the two locked blades. Haemon unsurprisingly proved to be more of a challenge than Quis. His larger body size gave him an immediate advantage, but the girl didn't back down. She moved quickly, parrying each of his attacks with her own. He clenched his fist and a swirl of frost formed around his hand. He aimed a punch at her, but she blocked it with her bare hands. Flames leapt from

her fingers and swirled around Haemon's arm. I felt my heart leap in my chest. Did she have a Dragongift too?

Too late, I heard the sound of bushes moving and tree branches snapping. "They have a dragon!" I screamed. Even as the words left my lips, Osir burst through the trees, claws bared. Milena followed close behind. The two warriors edged to the girl's left while the dragon closed in on the right. Her eyes flashed a sharp red color as she took stock of her situation. She turned to me, wrapped her arm around my waist, and slung me over her shoulder. She raced toward the cliff at full speed. "Wait, what-" The girl launched herself (and me) over the edge of the cliff. I saw the stunned faces of Quis, Haemon, and Milena as we sailed through the air, then nothing but an expanse of empty space between us and the trees below.

Chapter 12

The first sound I was aware of was my own screaming. The second was the dark-haired girl whistling. It was a high, clear, note that pierced through the air. A golden shape burst from the trees below and rose to meet us. The air around us rippled with heat as a golden dragon glided beneath us and caught us neatly on its back. The girl shouted over the sound of the rushing wind. "Hold on tight!" I grabbed the nearest spike and flattened myself against the dragon's back. The dragon drew its wings in and dove to the trees below, pulling up just in time to skim over the top of the foliage. We coasted along for a few minutes before it found a decent place to land. It crashed through the tree tops and landed on the forest floor with a gentle thud. The girl leapt from the

dragon's back and turned to extend her hand to me. It took a moment for me to pry my hand open, but I finally accepted her offer and slid down the side of the golden creature. "Are you hurt?" she asked. Numbly, I shook my head. She nodded. "My name is Ani."

I scanned the sky for any trace of another dragon. "Are those people going to come after us?"

"The Hunters? You're with us now. They won't risk it. Unless you have something particularly important they'd want?"

"Um..." I frowned. "I don't think so. They said they had plans. Something about going to House Fortitudo. I gave them directions. I doubt they needed me for anything else."

"And where is House Fortitudo?"

My jaw dropped. "First Haemon and Milena. Now you. How do you not know where the Houses are?"

Ani shrugged. "We're not from around here."

"Then where ARE you from?"

The dragon rumbled. A similar whisper to the one I had heard from Osir. Ani nodded in agreement, but again, I felt left out of the conversation.

"What's it saying?" I asked.

"You can hear it?" Ani looked surprised.

I crossed my arms. "Of course I can hear it. And I can almost make out words, but not exactly. Why?"

Ani leaned closer to inspect me. "Do you have a Dragongift?"

I gulped. Given away that quickly, huh? "I... sort of." I had never managed to get my Dragongift to do anything useful, so it might as well not exist.

"And are you familiar with the history of the Dragongift?"

"Um..." I strained to remember the old fables. I had dismissed them as pointless stories, but I really wished I had paid closer attention. "At the start of the world, Ocean Dragons and Sky Dragons warred with each other over who would rule the land. They finally made peace with each other, and as a sign of their treaty, they created humans who would live on the land. The leaders were imbued with the Dragongift. Those granted ocean control the water, and those granted sky control fire. And thus the Dragongift has been passed down for generations as a sign of the right to rule."

The dragon's chest heaved up and down in quick spurts. It was clearly laughing. I did my best to hide my annoyance. Ani was much kinder to my plight. "That's a little bit different from how it happened," she said. "There was a time when humans and dragons walked

the land together. But they could not understand each other, because dragons speak through nature. So dragons gifted human leaders the ability to speak the same language as them. Over the years, the power's changed, though. Diluted. It seems the only thing left of it is the fighting prowess." Ani and the dragon exchanged looks. Another conversation passed between them. Ani turned to me. "Sekh is willing to give you a Dragongift so you can speak with us. It might hurt, though."

I swallowed. "Right, uh... that sounds fine. What do I have to do?"

Ani held her hand out to me. "Nothing, but you can hold onto my hand if you want."

I took it hesitantly. "Okay..."

The dragon stepped forward and touched its forehead to mine. Its golden wings stretched to the sky

and its eyes glowed yellow. That was all the warning I got before my body lit on fire.

Chapter 13

Heat rose up inside my head first, but it spread through my body in seconds. At first, I thought it was just a burning sensation inside of me, but I quickly became aware of flames racing down my skin. I didn't even dare breathe as the fire swirled around me. My chest heaved and my vision blurred. I shut my eyes, but the fire burned so strongly that I could still see the white light through my eyelids. Through the searing pain, I heard something calling for me. I strained my ears to make out the sound, but all I heard was the roaring of flames. But even as I struggled to listen, the roaring of the flames began to shift until it sounded like words. "Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you!" I tried to speak the words, but I heard only the sound of a crackling fire. The fire

subsided, and the bright light faded. I blinked a few times as I tried to adjust my vision. I looked down. I was still clutching Ani's hand. My muscles were so tight, I wasn't sure if I was capable of letting go. Slowly, I willed myself to uncurl one finger at a time. Ani's hand glowed a gentle red where our skin had made contact. I looked down at my hand and saw that mine glowed the same red. She didn't seem bothered by it, and within seconds, the glow had faded away - leaving no trace on her skin or mine. For some reason, I found myself disappointed by that fact. "What... was that?" I was speaking human words again, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I could hear the crackling flames again. Was that my voice?

"You've been very brave." The dragon stood over me. I could understand!

"Well done." Ani smiled at me. Something about her praise made me feel pleased with myself.

"And now, I think proper introductions are in order. I am Sekh. I am a sky dragon, and my gift is the sun's fire."

"And I'm Ani, Sekh's Dragoncynn."

"Dragoncynn?" The word sounded strange when I said it.

Ani nodded. "A dragon can choose to bond with a human for life. We are known as Dragoncynn.

"Dragoncynn..." I tried the word out again. And again, the sound of fire crackling in my mind. There was something inviting about it this time.

"And you?" Ani asked.

"Oh, right." I was still getting used to the feeling of flames in my chest every time I spoke. "Cally," I replied, using my brother's nickname for me. These

two had rescued me, but I wasn't entirely ready to give away all my information just yet. Sekh bowed its head low until its eyes were level with mine. "And Cally, are you a child human or an adult human?"

"Uh?" I glanced at Ani.

"Dragons have a bit of trouble telling our age, or anything about us, really," she explained.

I nodded. "Right. Um, I'm fourteen. So a child for now I guess?"

"Might I call you a girl child, a boy child, or..?"

"Anything, honestly. It's all the same to me."

"Understood. And what do you do here in the..."
The dragon hesitated. "Kingdom?"

It was my turn to hesitate. "Oh! Um..." I tried not to look suspicious, but I was pretty certain that was only making me look even more suspicious. I felt my

stomach tighten as I tried to search for a good answer.

"Uh... I really don't feel great..."

Ani was immediately at my side, a gentle hand resting on my back. "Take a deep breath." I should have been pleased that feigning sickness actually worked, but there wasn't any feigning about it. "She's reacting to the Dragongift."

Sekh bowed its head. "Normally it takes several months of training before someone is given a Dragongift. I had hoped the fact that you already bear one would have made the experience easier for you, but it seems that isn't the case. We do apologize for bringing this on you so suddenly, but the Hunters have already involved you. Our choices are few."

I nodded and grasped Ani's arm for support. The nausea was easier to handle as long as I tried not to think about it. "The Hunters..." I said, looking for a

new topic to concentrate on. "Who are they? For that matter, who are YOU? You said you're not from the Kingdom, but there's nothing beyond the Kingdom other than..." Even as I spoke the words, I found the answer to my own question. "You live in the Dark Beyond."

Ani smiled. "It's a much more ominous name than it deserves, but I suppose that's the point."

"What's the point?"

"The history between humans and dragons," she said. "I told you it was different from how you learned it, but I didn't tell you the whole story." She sat down and motioned for me to do the same. I sat beside her, and Sekh curled itself around us like a protective shield. The sun was just beginning to dip below the skyline, and the light that filtered through the trees lit Sekh's scales with a gentle orange glow.

"The dragons DID go to war. But not Ocean versus Sky," Ani said. "They were fighting over the fate of humans."

Chapter 14

"The dragons DID go to war. But not Ocean versus Sky," Ani said. "They were fighting over the fate of humans."

--

"What? Why?"

"Back in the day, humans and dragons shared the land. But some dragons believed humans were a pestilence on the land and should be exterminated," Ani said.

I glanced at Sekh. "Uh..."

"Stay your worry," Sekh sighed. "I'm a Preservationist."

"Right. Just checking."

Ani continued. "The war was long and disastrous. After years of bloodshed, an agreement was reached. A special area would be set aside for humans to live, away from dragons."

"The Kingdom is that area," I concluded. "We're living in some sort of... protected zone."

Sekh huffed and two narrow streams of smoke escaped its nostrils. "This one is smart."

Once I connected the first idea, the rest fell into place. "All the old stories - the leaders made them up. Made dragons out to be a fantasy. Made the Dragongift seem like a weapon instead of words."

"One might argue that words ARE weapons," Sekh said. "But yes. It was part of the agreement made with your leaders."

"Alright, but if that's the case, why does Ani live outside the Kingdom?"

"Despite our best efforts, sometimes humans leave the Preserve," Sekh explained.

Ani nodded. "Some seek adventure. Some simply get lost. Some..." she chose her words carefully. "Some have nowhere else to go." She quickly brushed aside her thoughts. "But whatever the reason, they discover the Dark Beyond is not so dark. And also that dragons are real."

"At which point," Sekh continued. "We can no longer allow them back in the Preserve. And so they live with us."

I frowned. "What about the Hunters?"

"Ah, yes," Sekh nodded. "Hunting humans in the Preserve is, of course, illegal, but that doesn't stop some dragons from doing it. They often use humans to help. If the Hunters come across a particularly strong

human, they offer them the chance to join the hunt instead of be killed."

"Not much of a choice," I grumbled.

"And that's where I come in," Ani said. "I'm an Agent. My job is to protect people from Hunters, all while maintaining the secrecy of the existence of dragons."

I understood most of the pieces, but something was still bothering me. "You've been talking about all this secrecy, but Sekh being here is liable to give away the secret any minute. So what's going on? What's such a big deal that you'd risk revealing the truth about dragons just to be here?"

Ani and Sekh exchanged glances again. They both looked hesitant to say any more. Finally, Sekh nodded, and Ani turned to me. "The truth is, we were hoping you'd be able to tell us."

"I'm not sure I can tell you anything," I shrugged.

"But what do you want to know?"

"Recently, we received word that the Hunters were moving through the Preserve in unexpected ways," Ani said.

"The Hunters? Haemon and Milena? And that dragon Osir?"

Sekh nodded. "They are some of the more prominent ones, yes."

"And Quis?" I added. "He seemed a little different from the other two."

"Oh, is that his name?" Ani asked. "He's certainly not a Hunter. Do you know what he was doing?"

I shook my head. "He wasn't with them when-" My breath caught in my throat. All the memories I had pushed aside came flooding back into my head. I saw Princess Helene lying in her room. I saw Ciaran

stumbling into a burning building. My heart raced in my chest and I could feel the icy grip of the water around me as Haemon pulled me away from from my brother.

"Cally!" Ani was immediately at my side, but she looked so blurry. I realized that my eyes were flooded with tears. I opened my mouth to speak, but all I felt was myself choking on my own tears. "It's okay," Ani whispered. "It's okay to cry." I threw my arms around her and buried my face in her shoulder. Any sense of dignity that I had tried to hold onto dissolved into a series of sobs.

Chapter 15

I don't know how long I cried, but by the time my tears had subsided, the sun sat high in the sky above us. My body felt heavy and empty at the same time. Ani stroked my hair gently, and hummed a low tune. Sekh padded off into the trees and returned in a few minutes with its tail looped around a small flask. It placed the flask beside me and curled up on the ground. "Drink, child," Sekh's voice crackled in my head. "You must replenish."

"Thank you." I managed to croak out a reply. I took a sip of water, then a gulp, then I threw my head back and poured water down my parched throat without any concern for decorum. I emptied the entire flask in seconds.

"How are you feeling?" Ani asked.

I shook the last few drops of water into my mouth.

"I... I'm okay. I think."

"Are you hungry?" I hadn't realized it until she asked, but upon being reminded that food is a thing, my body immediately demanded some. I nodded. "Then I'll cook something for you while you tell us what happened with the Hunters. Are you fine with that?"

"Yeah. I could use something to eat." I confessed.

Ani immediately began clearing aside dead leaves and brush from the ground. "Please start from the beginning. When you first saw the Hunters."

"It was at the Confirmation Tournament," I said.

Sekh raised a claw, "And what is a Confirmation Tournament?"

"Really?" I looked at Sekh, then Ani. "Right, you're not from around here." I took a deep breath and

exhaled slowly. "Okay, we'll do the quick version. The Kingdom is ruled by the Seven Houses, and the Seven Houses are lead by the High King and the High Queen. The High King and High Queen have equal ruling power. They must come from different Houses, and each must bear a different Dragongift, all to ensure that no one group holds too much power for too long. In addition to that, every ten years, a tournament is held to decide a new High King and High Queen. The Confirmation Tournament."

"Makes sense." Ani laid out some tinder and rubbed her hands together until they glowed red. She blew on them and sparks danced across her palms and into the small pile of leaves she had collected. They burst into flame. "And what did the Hunters do at this Confirmation Tournament?"

I felt my stomach lurch, but I willed myself to keep a calm expression. "Princess Helene of House Mentis, and Prince Ciaran of House Ars were in line to be the next High Court. The Hunters killed them both."

Sekh's head shot up. "Killed them? Are you sure?"

"I saw it myself. There's no mistake."

"The Hunters should know better than to interfere with such affairs." Sekh's chest rumbled and I sensed a fire churning.

"That's the thing," I said. "When they joined Quis afterwards, he said something about hiring them to do the job?"

Ani methodically laid out several stones inside the fire she had started. Her brow furrowed in concentration. "The Hunters have never been available for hire before. This doesn't make any sense."

"I agree," Sekh rumbled. "We'll have to discuss this with the others."

Ani nodded. "We'll head to the village tonight, then. But first: food."

Chapter 16

Ani handed me a leather pouch, "Would you go with Sekh and gather some ingredients?" Sekh was already stalking off into the forest.

"Oh, uh, sure." I scrambled to my feet and followed after the dragon.

Sekh's pace slowed as I approached. "Have you been foraging before?"

"I have no idea what we're looking for."

The dragon laughed. "So I can extrapolate that you didn't work in a kitchen." Sekh nodded at a cluster of flowers that grew at the base of a nearby tree. "See those little white blossoms? Cut off about a third of them." I followed Sekh's instructions and stored the blossoms in the pouch Ani had provided for me. We walked along in silence for a few moments, and I took

the time to examine the dragon carefully. Unlike Osir, Sekh had wings. They were golden and looked as fine as paper. Sunlight shone through them, giving them a soft glow. They looked delicate to me, but Sekh pushed past branches and sharp rocks without hesitation, and none of them left a single scratch. Sekh's body also seemed less muscular than Osir's. Softer.

"Hey, that other dragon I saw. The Hunter."

"That's Osir, an ocean dragon," Sekh replied. "If you were wondering about the wings."

"I was," I admitted. "How did you know?"

"You breathed out a bit of fire with your thoughts on it."

I touched my lips. They felt warm. "Oh. I hadn't noticed."

"It will take you some time to adjust," Sekh said. "Perhaps you should practice." Sekh nodded at

another cluster of foliage and I added it to our collection. "Tell me about your House."

"What?"

"You said the Preserve is split into seven Houses. Tell me about yours. And focus on your fire as you do."

"Ah," I nodded. I concentrated on the warmth inside me and willed it to burn at a steady rate. "I'm from House Ars. Our guiding principle is to lead through diplomacy."

"And what does that entail?"

"We believe that problems should be solved with discussion."

Sekh snorted. "Hardly. Nothing is solved with words."

I smiled in return. I had heard Ciaran parry this criticism a thousand times. "You're right, of course."

Discussion is meaningless unless everyone approaches in good faith with a desire to understand, and a willingness to share. And it is equally meaningless if it does not lead to action." I stopped to collect some mushrooms that Sekh pointed out. "But diplomacy must lead the way."

Sekh chortled. "Good speech. How long have you been practicing that one?"

"You like it? I've got more." I grinned. "My favorite is usually the closing line saying this is why we need all of the Seven Houses. Each rules with a different guiding principle, and we hope that together, we can maintain the lifeblood of the Kingdom and its people."

"You speak the words easily enough, but you do not believe them?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure," I confessed. "I was always taught that true diplomacy only flourishes in empathy,

but there are people even in House Ars who don't seem to act on that. They're diplomatic, but they seem more... manipulative and self-serving, you know? And they seem to get along just fine."

Sekh stopped to dig up a plant. The root was some sort of long white vegetable I hadn't seen before. I added it to the pouch. "This seems like enough for one meal," the dragon mused.

By the time we returned to the clearing, Ani had worked the fire down to white hot coals. I lay our bounty beside her and she accepted it with a smile. She pulled out a small paring knife and began to peel the root vegetables. "What, you're not going to use your sword?" I joked.

"Cooking is a sacred art," Ani glared at me. "I could never sully my cooking knife in battle."

A small plume of smoke escaped Sekh's nostrils. I took that to indicate giggling. "Ani's serious about everything, but she's especially serious about cooking." I watched in rapt fascination as Ani prepared and cooked each of the items we had collected. Her fingers flew over the hot coals, and she breathed her Dragongift into each move. She drew fire up around the vegetables to char them, then commanded the fire to subside so she could grill the mushrooms. Within minutes, the meal was ready, and I devoured it without reserve.

"Not bad, right?" Ani grinned as I polished off the last of the mushrooms.

"I've eaten lot of good food in a lot of good places," I said. "But nothing comes close to this."

"I can't take all the credit," she admitted. "You're also very hungry."

"I don't care. It's the best thing I've ever eaten."

Ani glowed. Literally. "I'm happy to hear that." She looked up at the sky and squinted. "Sunset in a few hours. That gives us some time to rest before it's dark enough for us to head out."

Sekh curled up on the ground beside me. "Then we'll take it where we can get it. Sleep, child. You'll need it."

Chapter 17

I awoke with an overwhelming wave of nausea. "Ugh..." I groaned and curled up into a tight ball on the ground. "I feel terrible."

"That'll be the side effects of your new Dragongift," Ani said. "Does it feel like your stomach is on fire?"

I nodded, miserable. "Is it always like this?"

"Breathe out a few times. It'll pass." I followed her advice. A few stray embers floated out from my mouth as I did. In the dark of the night, they glowed orange before fading into dust.

Sekh stood and stretched, wings pointed toward the sky. "Are we ready to go?"

I stumbled to my feet and allowed myself a few more slow breaths. "Yeah, I think so," I muttered.

Ani mounted the dragon first, and I followed suit, wrapping my arms around her torso as tightly as I dared. "Don't worry, I've got you," she whispered.

"And I've got you both," Sekh said before launching into the air.

After the initial rough patch of bursting through the treetops, the flight evened out. The fact that we weren't trying to escape the Hunters also improved the journey considerably. The moon was little more than a sliver of light, and the clouds that floated in the night sky gave us plenty of darkness to travel by. The Mourning Mountains were called such because they were dotted in waterfalls that appeared to be weeping at all times. As we wove our way through them, I was struck by their beauty. In the stillness of the night, they were the only thing that made any sound, and the rhythmic beat of the water pounded in my ears. Sekh skimmed past

one, and the three of us found ourselves doused in a light mist. Sekh and Ani immediately began to glow softly, letting the heat of their Dragongift evaporate the water off their bodies. I closed my eyes tight and attempted to mimic them, but to no success. It was an all-too-familiar disappointment, but I brushed the feeling away. I pressed my face against Ani's back and took in a deep breath. The water against my skin chilled me, but the wind soon cleared it off my body.

"There it is," Ani declared. I opened my eyes and peered into the darkness. I could barely make out the shape of the deep ravine that circled the Kingdom. We always believed the deep chasm was a natural split from the Dark Beyond, but looking at it from so high up, I realized it was a fence to keep us in.

Sekh landed softly at the edge of the ravine and Ani and I slid to the ground. "See you there," Sekh said before taking off back into the sky.

"Wait-" I stared as Sekh disappeared into the mountains.

Ani placed her hand on my shoulder. "Our entrance is over there." She gestured toward a small shape in the side of the mountain. At first glance, it appeared to be a pile of rocks, but upon further inspection, I saw the outline of a cleverly hidden door. The only thing leading to it was a narrow ledge cut from the rock, and there appeared to be a significant gap a few paces before the door. Ani saw my skeptical look. "You have to jump." She demonstrated the jump so effortlessly, it looked more like she was stepping over a crack in the street than leaping over a dark gaping ravine.

"R-right..." I swallowed my fear and took a running leap. As I sailed over the empty space, I made the mistake of looking down. Nothing but darkness. I landed in a heap on the other side, and immediately scrambled to my feet.

Ani placed a hand on my shoulder. "Never look down. Only forward to where you want to be," she said. I decided not to point out that this advice would have been better before my jump and not after. Ani pushed the door and it swung open more easily than I would have guessed. A tunnel was carved into the rock. Ani snapped her fingers and a small flame leapt up between her fingers. She raised her hand to illuminate the tunnel. "Shall we?" She lead the way, and I followed close behind. The tunnel stretched on deep into the mountain, splitting and twisting on itself as we went. I reached out and grabbed the edge of her shirt.

If I got lost in here, that would be the end of me. Ani strode through the tunnels without hesitation, finally stopping at a wooden door set in the stone. She knocked on the door and it swung open almost immediately.

Chapter 18

"My baby!" A woman with an impressive stature wrapped Ani up in an embrace and lifted her into the air. "How are you? Have you been eating right? How's the sword? Do you like the balance on the hilt?"

Ani laughed. "One question at a time, Yolante." She turned her head in my direction. "Also, this is Cally."

"Dragons above, how rude of me!" the woman deposited Ani inside the doorway and turned the full force of her hugging prowess on me. I suddenly found myself in the air, hoisted as easily as if I were a sack of dry leaves. "And what's your name, my love?"

"Cally..." I somehow managed to find enough air to squeak out my name.

"What a beautiful name," she declared, giving me one last squeeze before dropping me beside Ani. "And I am Yolathe. Welcome to my home." She gestured to the room cut into the mountain. It looked more like a marketplace than a home. The walls were lined with colorful fabrics, and rows of shelves overflowed with various pieces of armor. A modest kitchen was tucked into a far corner.

I turned to look at her and gasped. "You're-" I caught myself a word too late.

She grinned and flexed an arm. "Purple? Why, yes!" When I first saw her, I thought she was wearing gloves, but on closer inspection, I realized the bare skin on her hands was a deep purple. The color shifted to a more natural tan as it stretched up her arms, but a faint purple hue was present across all her skin. "It's a side effect of my job," she explained.

"Which is?"

"I make things!" she declared.

"Yolanthe's family specialized in custom weapons, armor, and related clothing," Ani added.

"When I was young, my job was to handle dying all the fabric and leather purple. Work in it long enough, and it gets so deep into your skin that it stays there." She turned to Ani. "But you didn't bring this child here to discuss dye." She paused and inspected me carefully. "Concerning the village..."

"Cally is aware. I rescued her from the Hunters," Ani said. "It seems they're planning something for the Preserve."

Yolanthe sighed. "I see. I'll call the others, then. In the meantime, get something to eat. Both of you."

Ani nodded. "We'll meet you in the center atrium at the third bell." Yolanthe disappeared down a tunnel

in the back of her home, and Ani immediately set to work putting together a meal for us. She moved through the kitchen with confidence, pulling jars off the shelf without checking their labels.

"Is this your home?" I asked.

"The road is my home," Ani said. She stirred something into a pot of water on the stove. "But I sleep here sometimes, yes." Ani tossed a handful of herbs into the pot and turned her attention to chopping some vegetables.

"And Yolante. She's your... mother..?" I knew it was wrong before I said it, but I couldn't think of a more polite way to ask.

"She's everyone's mother, I think," Ani laughed. "But we're not blood-related, if that's what you're asking." She tasted the soup in front of her and

promptly added a healthy pinch of salt to the mixture.

"Here, try this," she said, offering a spoon to me.

I accepted the spoon with a laugh. "Are you sure you're not the mom here?"

"Dragons above, I hope not," she said. "What do you think? More pepper maybe?" She reached for a pepper mill without waiting for my opinion.

A dragon with a slim build and pale blue scales approached. The air chilled as it grew closer. "Nua," Ani waved a ladle in greeting.

"Ani. Well met," the dragon replied in a clipped tone. "I don't suppose you've heard from Lamont." The dragon's voice was level, but I sensed eagerness hiding behind the controlled tone.

Ani rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips. "You know him. As capricious as ever. I did find a message he left for me."

Nua turned to examine me, "Yes, I see. And this moon child is..?"

"Cally."

"Well met, Cally. Don't go causing any trouble," Nua warned, before stalking off into the tunnels.

I frowned at the retreating figure. "I wasn't planning on it."

"Don't let it get to you," Ani said. "Nua's a bit uptight, and it doesn't help that Lamont is a troublemaker."

"Is that Nua's Dragoncynn?" I asked.

"Yes. He's an Agent, like me. Nua worries about him when he's gone, but will never admit it." Ani sighed. "I honestly can't figure out how the two of them ever bonded." She placed a bowl of stew in front of me and I attacked it with gusto.

"Hey, I know I said the meal you cooked earlier was the best thing I'd ever had," I said. "But this is even better."

Ani laughed. "You're trying to flatter me."

"No, I'm bad at that sort of thing. I really mean it," I said as I licked my spoon. "I dunno, it just feels... good." I stared down at the empty bowl. "Oh, I'm sorry. I really should have paced myself, huh?"

The sound of a bell ringing echoed through the tunnel. Ani looked up, then at me. "Actually, it seems your timing is perfect. The meeting is about to begin."

Chapter 19

Ani took me down another series of complicated tunnels that grew lighter as we walked along. The tunnels finally opened out, and I stared, mouth agape, as I took in the sight. When Ani mentioned an atrium, I had assumed we'd be in a building. But the atrium was the mountain itself. Rocky slopes stretched up around us, and opened to reveal the clear night sky. In front of us a lush field of grass ran along the edge of the mountains. A narrow stream of water wound its way through the field like a road. Doors had been carved into the side of the mountain. More homes, I assumed. In the center of it all, a tall open-air building cut from stone. Steps had been hewn into one side, and the stream twisted into it from another. A large bell tower sat on top of the building. I assumed that was the bell

we had heard. The palace I grew up in suddenly seemed small in comparison to this place.

"Ani!" a small girl with stunning blue hair bounded up to us and leapt into Ani's arms.

"Vina!" Ani wrapped her arms around the child and embraced her. "It's late. Shouldn't you be asleep?"

The girl shook her head vigorously. "They said I could come say hi!"

"Right." Ani grinned. "And have you been behaving?"

"Uh huh!" The girl bounced from her arms and raised her hands. "And I've been practicing!" Her eyes glowed blue briefly and a quick burst of fog swirled from her hands.

"Good job!" Ani grinned. She turned to me. "Vina, I'd like you to meet Cally. Cally is from the Preserve."

I waved awkwardly, "Uh, hey. I like your hair."

Vina beamed and tugged at a strand of her blue locks. "Thank you! Yolathe colored it for me so I can look like Xi!"

"What is Xi?" I asked.

"I am." A dragon with brilliant blue scales approached. Another ocean dragon I assumed, but the air didn't feel nearly as frosty as it did with Nua. Xi regarded me with an enthusiastic air. "A moon child! I am delighted to meet someone born in the Preserve. There are so many questions I have about how you live! I do hope we'll have time to talk later."

Vina buried her face in Xi's scales and sighed contentedly. "Can we go swimming again?" she asked.

Xi nodded obligingly. "Of course. But we have an important meeting to attend to first. You can stay and listen if you want."



"Okay!" Vina beamed. Xi slipped into the stream and disappeared in the swirl of the water. Vina took my hand in hers and tugged. "This way!" she declared and pointed at the staircase. "That's our entrance." Ani followed behind us as we ascended the steps. "Cally, are you going to live here with us?" Vina beamed. "We can play together if you want!"

"That's a very kind offer," I stifled a laugh. "But I don't think I'll be staying for very long."

Vina pouted. "Oh, you're gonna leave like Ani and Lamont always do."

Ani scooped Vina up in her arms and hugged her. "We have work to do, little one. You know that."

"Yeaaaaahh..." Vina made a big show of sighing. She wriggled free from Ani's arms and raced into the building.

"Nice kid," I said.

Ani sighed. "She's getting bigger every day. It's good to see her happy." We entered the building, and I saw that Sekh had already arrived. Next to Sekh sat Nua and Xi.

Sekh made eye contact with me. "Good to see we're all here."

Xi nodded at a row of benches clearly designed to seat humans. "Please make yourself comfortable." Ani sat down. I tried to sit beside her, but Vina squeezed herself in between the two of us.

"Now," Nua looked at Ani first, then me. "Sekh has informed us that the Hunters assassinated the two who had been chosen as High King and High Queen."

I nodded. "That's correct."

"What did they do after?"

"I heard them discuss a client. And they said they had to visit House Fortitudo. It's in the south end of the Kingdom, um... Preserve, I mean."

"And who would benefit most from this assassination?" Nua asked.

"That's hard to say." It was a question I had been asking myself the past few nights. "With Princess Helene gone, the role of High Queen will once again be open. But there are so many possible candidates. I don't think any of them can guarantee she'd be the one chosen."

Xi nodded. "And the High King? Who would be next in line?"

"Um... that's a little more complicated. The role would probably fall to Prince Warren of House Fortitudo as an emergency exception."

Xi was immediately curious. "Why an exception?"

"The current High King, Jacobi, is from House Fortitudo. The rules state that no House can rule twice in a row. But with so few eligible candidates, I think he'd be next in line."

"How clever! The humans' system includes exceptions for edge cases," Xi's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Perhaps Warren is the one who hired them."

"But how?" Nua countered. "He shouldn't even be cognizant of their existence."

Xi turned back to me. "Did the Hunters say anything about their plans?"

"No." I shook my head. "But Quis mentioned that he represents someone very high up in the Seven Houses."

"This Prince Warren would certainly fit that description," Nua said.

Sekh had been silent the entire time. "Cally, you said there were very few eligible candidates for High King. Am I to assume someone other than this Warren could gain the throne?"

"Uh, there is someone..." I stammered. "But he doesn't want the position."

"It might not be a matter of wanting," Xi said. "Especially if we are to maintain order in the Preserve. He might be useful to our cause. Who is next in line to be High King?"

I took a deep breath before replying. "Me. I'm the second Prince of House Ars."

Chapter 20

I had expected a bigger reaction, but none of the dragons seems especially perturbed. In fact, they all seemed pleased. "How wonderful!" Xi said, eyes glimmering. "I have so many questions about the governing structure in the Preserve! What is-"

Nua coughed sharply. "Maybe later?"

"Ah- of course," Xi's line of thought turned back to the situation at hand. "I propose we install Cally as the next leader. Nua, is Lamont positioned to be of aid in this endeavor?"

"No no no," I shook my head vigorously. "My brother and I were the only ones eligible this cycle, and I forfeited to him immediately. I do not want this position."

Nua huffed out a small puff of icy air. "I agree with Cally. I don't believe that should be our first play."

I tried to see Ani's face without making myself obvious, but she was too far out of my line of sight. I felt a small tug on my sleeve. Vina. She tilted her head up to face me, and I leaned forward to hear her whisper, "Cally, are you really a prince?"

"I am," I whispered back.

She squinted and scanned me slowly. "But I thought you were a girl."

"I'm that too," I said.

"Should I call you a boy?"

I laughed, "If you want to. Dragons below, most of the Kingdom certainly does."

"Are you a boy right now?" she asked.

"That's a complicated question," I said. "Sometimes it goes more one way or the other, but I'm pretty much always both."

Vina took a moment to process the information before nodding sagely. "Okay." She scrambled off, found a seat on the ground near the dragons, and began to play with Xi's tail.

"And does Cally find this amenable?" Nua's voice interrupted my thoughts.

I looked up at the trio of dragons and blushed. "Sorry, I wasn't listening."

I'm not 100% certain about dragon physiology, but I'm pretty sure Nua gave me a full-on eye roll. "We were saying," Nua spoke through an exaggerated sigh. "That without knowing the Hunters' full intentions, we think the best course of action would be to journey to House Fortitudo. If Prince Warren is scheming as we

suspect, you will be able to ascertain it. If the Hunters are there for a different purpose, you will be well positioned to stop it."

"That makes sense," I agreed. "But they've got a head start on us. Several days, in fact."

"Is there no way to head them off?" Xi asked.

Sekh lifted a wing. "If Cally drew a map, I'd be able to fly there. But the height I'd need to soar at to remain undetected would make carrying human passengers impossible."

"There is... one other way," I offered. Three pairs of dragon eyes were immediately on me. "The Great Sea. If we took a ship across it, we'd arrive there at least a day sooner."

"Then we have a two-pronged solution." Xi seemed delighted. "Sekh will take the sky path, while you and Ani go by sea."

"Uh, one problem though," I added. "The storms this time of year, uh... no one gets across unless they have an unusually strong Dragongift from the ocean."

Nua stared down at me. "You have a Dragongift from the ocean, do you not?"

I winced. "Gotta be honest, it's not that great."

"Then you have tomorrow to train with Ani before you leave," Nua said. "Best of luck, child."

Chapter 21

With the matter settled, the three dragons convened their meeting. Nua disappeared into the stream immediately, followed by Xi. Vina, still clinging to Xi's tail, went with them. Sekh padded over to us and sat down.

"So uh," I turned to Ani. "You didn't talk much."

"It was your story," she replied. "I didn't want to interrupt." She smiled, a sort of crooked half-grin. "Also, I hate public speaking. Once people - or dragons - are looking at me, I'd rather be anywhere else." She wrapped her arm around my shoulder and gave me a quick hug. "You were very brave. I'm proud of you."

"By the way, I'm sorry."

Ani and Sekh stared at me. "Why?"

"Um, Diplomacy Rule Number One. When in doubt, open with an apology."

Ani arched an eyebrow. "But what are you apologizing for?"

"Lying about my identity?"

Ani looked even more confused than before. "You mean hiding the fact that you're royalty? You made it clear that you weren't comfortable discussing your life. I figured you'd talk about it when you were ready."

Sekh nodded an affirmation. "And without knowing if we were friend or foe, hiding your allegiance was a wise move."

Ani gave me another hug before standing up. "Now, let's get back to Yolante's place."

I followed her down the steps. "Why? I thought we were going to train."

"We will," she promised. "But there's no telling what we'll find waiting for us once we're back in the Preserve. I want to get some armor made for you."

"Oh." Ciaran had a custom suit of armor. He let me try his helmet on once, and it took less than two seconds for me to walk directly into the nearest wall. The idea of armor didn't seem that great, but I decided not to complain. Ani lead me through the tunnels back to Yolanthé's place, and a couple of the turns even looked familiar to me. It was a weird thing to feel proud of, but I felt proud that I recognized them.

"How are my babies doing?" Yolanthé greeted us both with an enormous hug as if we'd been gone for years.

"We had a productive discussion," Ani said.

"And what has the council decided?" Yolanthé asked.

"We'll be heading back into the Preserve tomorrow," said Ani. "But first, Cally needs some armor."

Yolanthe turned an appraising eye on me. "There isn't enough time to make anything from scratch, but I'm sure I have some pieces I can modify," she mused. She pulled out a long ribbon from a nearby drawer. It had small marks stitched into it at even intervals. "Come here, I need to measure you."

"Right." I took a tentative step forward. Yolanthe was immediately at my side. She placed the ribbon against my arm, then scribbled down some numbers on a sheet of paper. She did the same for my other arm. Then my legs. With the speed of someone who had practiced these gestures a thousand times, she moved quickly up my waist, hips, torso, and neck. She scrawled a few more numbers onto her paper.

"Your skirt has a lot of layers to it. Is most of your wardrobe like this?" she asked.

"Um, about half, I think." I suddenly felt very self-conscious. "The rest is breeches."

"Then I'll make something that can be adjusted to fit anything you wear," she replied. She inspected the numbers on her paper and nodded. "I think I have something I can use." Yolante disappeared into the network of tunnels, mumbling to herself as she did.

"Now," Ani turned to me. "It's the middle of the night, and you must be exhausted. We haven't had a moment's rest since we arrived."

"I didn't want to say anything," I confessed. "But yes. I could really use some sleep."

Ani lead me to a pile of cushions in the corner of the cave. From the look of it, this was her usual spot any time she returned to the village. I fell into the

nearest heap of pillows and fell asleep immediately. It was the best sleep I had ever had.

Chapter 22

Morning came cruelly soon. I expected we'd begin training immediately, but the day was a whirlwind of distractions. Ani made breakfast, then Yolenthe stopped by to take more measurements. Both Xi and Nua came by to ask Ani questions about her time in the Preserve. Yolenthe showed up again, this time with several different shades of fabric. She held each one against my skin before adding even more notes to her papers. Then Sekh came by to request that I draw a map of the Kingdom and point out how to get to House Fortitudo. Vina also showed up occasionally to demand hugs. We acquiesced each time. Then it was time for lunch, and Ani made that too. By the time we found ourselves out in the practice field, it was already

late afternoon and I was picturing myself drowning in the Great Sea the minute we set sail.

"Choose a sword," Ani said. She gestured to a rack of wooden swords. I sorted through them and came upon one that resembled the kind I trained with at home. I lifted it off the rack and gave it a few practice swings. The weight was familiar in my hands. "No," Ani said.

"What?" I frowned and swung the sword again. My form couldn't be THAT bad. "This is the one they always made me train with." Ani picked out a significantly shorter blade and handed it to me. I examined it, feeling a bit deflated. It was longer than a dagger, but didn't have the reach of the broadswords I had trained with.

"You need a blade that will compliment your body," she said. "Like this dirk. If anyone told you to

use that other sword, they weren't looking out for your best interests."

"I don't understand," I said. I gave the new blade an experimental swing. It moved easily. I blinked, surprised.

Ani examined my posture with a critical eye. "Who trained you? Was there another student?"

"Um, my brother, yeah. How did you know?"

"Your teachers let you down," she said. "Everything you've learned was made for someone with a different build. Let me guess, your teachers spent the bulk of their time with your brother, leaving you to try to pick up what you could. Perhaps they told you that once you grew up, the sword would be perfect for you, so you should start training with it now."

I nodded again. That was exactly what they'd told me. "They said I'd grow into it."

She sighed. "Everyone grows, but never into the same thing. Match the weapon to who you are now, then change it as you change." She selected another sword from the rack – one with a similar size and shape to the one she carried. "Now. Attack me." I moved forward with a series of strikes from my training. She parried each one as calmly as my instructors had, but unlike them, she issued no commands. Instead, she simply observed. "And now defend," she said. She immediately switched to attack, and I had the merest fraction of a second to block her blow. To my surprise, I moved faster than I expected. In fact, blocking her attacks was easier than it ever had been during practice, but it was clear that she was pressing me harder than my instructors had. Again, she remained silent. After I parried a few more strikes,

she stopped and sheathed her sword. "Thoughts?" she asked.

I stared down at the wooden dirk in my hand. "It..." I struggled to find the right words. "It moves with me. I've never had a sword do that before."

"Probably because you were too busy trying to maintain your balance correctly," Ani mused. "As for technique, your form is good if not a little stiff, and your instinct isn't too bad," she said. "But-"

"But I'm not confident enough," I interjected. It was the same criticism every instructor had ever given me.

"So you're aware."

"Knowing what's wrong with me and fixing it are two different things," I protested. "You can't just tell someone to be more confident, like, oh wow I hadn't

considered believing in myself before. Thanks for the suggestion!"

Ani arched an eyebrow. "I haven't said anything yet."

"Yeah, it's just..." I swung the dirk at the air. "Sorry. I just get tired of hearing it. You can't be good unless you're confident, but there's no way I can be confident if I'm not good."

"And why do you think you're not good?" Ani asked.

"It's just, my brother was always better than me, you know?" The truth spilled from my mouth faster than I expected it to. "Everyone's always impressed by him, and I can never measure up."

"So?"

"What do you mean, so?"

"You're telling me someone's better than you, so there's no point in trying." Ani placed her sword back on the rack and folded her arms across her chest. "Or am I hearing you wrong?"

"Why are we even doing this?" I fumed. "I thought we were supposed to be training my Dragongift."

"We'll get to that," Ani said.

"We only have a day for me to be as strong as Ciaran was after years of practice. This is pointless!" I threw my sword on the ground and stalked off.

Chapter 23

I marched across the grass with no clear goal in mind. Up ahead, the meeting hall loomed empty and imposing. On impulse, I raced to the top of the steps. By the time I reached the top, my lungs were at their limit. I lay down and rolled over to face the sky.

"Cally!" Sekh peered over at me. "What brings you here, child?"

"Oh, I didn't realize you were here. Sorry to bother you."

"No bother," Sekh replied before finding a comfortable perch at the top of the stairs. "Sit with me."

It took a few more deep breathes before I had the energy to sit up. I found a place beside the dragon and

stared out across the atrium. The sunlight bathed the field with a golden glow, and I breathed out slowly.

"Did you want to talk?" Sekh asked.

"I got in a fight with Ani!" I blurted out immediately.

Sekh wrapped a wing around me. "Oh, I see. Well, I'm here."

I allowed myself to soak up the dragon's warmth before speaking. "I was always kind of annoyed when my tutors pointed out everything I did wrong," I said. "But when Ani does it, I feel..." I sighed. "I don't know. It's worse somehow. When I'm with her, every single flaw just matters so much. I feel like she can see everything that's ever been wrong with me."

Sekh nodded. "She certainly does cut to the chase, doesn't she?"

"She's right, though." I drew my legs up to my chest and rested my chin on my knees. "I'll never be good at anything if I can't be more confident. She said that I'm basically giving up."

"Ah, I see," a sense of understanding filled Sekh's voice.

"See what?"

Sekh was silent for a moment, as if pondering what to say next. "Ani's family was killed by Hunters."

I turned and stared. "Should I be hearing this?"

"She doesn't mind. She'll never tell you herself because she thinks it sounds like she's asking for pity, but you need to hear it."

I nodded. "If you say so."

"Her parents were killed swiftly and without warning. She was rescued by one of our Agents, and they ran for the safety of our village. Ani gave up

partway through the journey. The grief of her parents' death, the physical and mental exhaustion from running. All of it was too much. She gave up, and the Hunters caught up with them. Our Agent leapt into battle to save her. Ani's the only one who made it back alive."

My chest tightened up as the words hit me. "She blames herself for the Agent's death, doesn't she?"

"You understand her well. She was younger than you are now, but she still won't forgive herself for what happened." Sekh smiled sadly. "So when she pushes you, or tells you to never give up, she's doing it so you don't live with the regret that she bears."

"But it's obviously not her fault!" I protested. "Blame the Hunters who killed the Agent!"

"Truly child, you think I haven't told her that?" the dragon laughed, but it sounded closer to crying. "You

think we haven't all told her that?" Sekh was silent for a moment. "Ani promised herself that she'd never give up again, and she made good on that promise immediately. She found her way to the village on her own. Jumped the chasm on her own. Walked through the tunnel in the dark on her own."

I nodded. "Yeah, that sounds like her."

"But there's danger in that too," Sekh said. "She made herself strong, but no one is invincible. If she keeps pushing you, she'll eventually push you away. And if she keeps pushing herself like this, one day she will fall."

I swallowed slowly. "I don't think I can be strong enough to catch her," I said.

"I'm not asking you to catch her. That's not your responsibility. I don't think even I'd be able to catch her." Sekh's body radiated a soft golden color. The

heat felt comforting, and I leaned into it. "The only thing I can offer that girl is my love. As for you, you make your own choices. And one day you'll find your own confidence." The dragon nodded down the stairs. Ani was approaching up the steps. We made eye contact, and she stopped. Sekh smiled and stood up. "I think I'll leave you two to talk."

Chapter 24

Ani approached hesitantly. She stopped a few steps short of me. "Cally."

I waved at her in an attempt to look approachable. "Hey."

"I'm sorry." She bowed her head.

I stared. "What?"

She lifted her eyes. A half-smile was on her face. It looked scared and hopeful all at once. "The Number One Rule of diplomacy: when in doubt, apologize first, right?"

I threw back my head and laughed, "You're amazing, you know that?" I stretched my legs out on the stairs and looked up at the sky. The sun was beginning to dip below the mountaintops, and the brilliant rays of sunset covered the valley in orange

light. "I'm supposed to be the diplomat and reach out to you, and here you are learning the rules faster than I can." I nodded at the step beside me and she sat down. "It's actually not the first rule of diplomacy," I said.

She turned to me, the half-smile still on her face. "No?"

"There isn't one," I confessed. "It's my rule. But Ciaran's number one rule was to never say sorry where a thank you would suffice." I turned to her. "So thank you."

"For?"

"Uh, putting up with me, mostly. I'm kind of overwhelmed by all of this." I laughed. "That was a lie. I'm VERY overwhelmed by all of this." I reached up and touched Ciaran's ring, still tucked safely under my dress. It hung heavy around my neck, but it felt solid.

The only thing in my life that hadn't changed. "Sekh told me about your family."

Ani expression became perfectly neutral. "I figured."

"When you saved me from the Hunters, Haemon recognized you. Did he-"

Ani shook her head. "No, but he was there. Osir killed my parents. And the Agent who rescued me. I don't really enjoy talking about it."

I swallowed and took a moment to sort my words out. All the diplomacy classes I had taken told me that understanding and comfort were paramount, but every phrase I ever practiced felt so useless. "I'm sorry," I said. As if that made anything better.

The crooked half-smile returned to her face. "Thanks."

I pulled the ring out, in an attempt to find something else to do. The blue stone glimmered in the fading light. Ani inspected it with curiosity. "What is that?"

"A dragon claw ring. It's my brother's," I replied. "It symbolizes the right to rule. The current member of the High Court passes it on to the next one."

"I thought your brother wasn't crowned High King yet."

I nodded. "It's symbolic. There's actually a set. For the one who bears an Ocean Dragongift, a silver crown, and two rings. The first ring has a blue stone in it, and it is handed off as soon as a successor is chosen. High Queen Ionar gave it to my brother. She'll pass on her crown when the right of rule officially changes hands."

Ani nodded. "You said there were two rings?"

I shrugged. "There's supposedly a second one somewhere. They say it's plain silver with no stone in it, but it was lost years ago."

"What about whoever bears a Sky Dragongift?"

"Same thing, just with gold and a red stone. In this case, the High King Jacobi would have passed his on to Princess Helene. I'm not sure who it will go to now." I held my ring up to the light. In the reddish glow of the sunset, the stone looked nearly black.

"Impressive," Ani remarked. "It looks like a true dragon's claw. I wonder if the original metalsmith had a real dragon to model it off of."

"Huh." I turned it around in my hands. "It does, doesn't it?" I frowned. "Anyway..." I tucked the ring back underneath my dress. "Um, I guess we should finish training, huh?"

"We'll train on the road," Ani said. "If we want to reach House Fortitudo before the Hunters, we'll have to return to the Preserve tonight."

Chapter 25

Ani and I returned to Yolante's home. I tried not to berate myself, but I felt like I hadn't learned anything about my Dragongift, and the idea of crossing the Great Sea was becoming increasingly terrifying. Thankfully, Yolante was there, and the armor she presented me with lifted my spirits a little. Unlike Ciaran's chain mail and metal plating, Yolante had opted to give me a lightweight leather breastplate. "Now, the torso is going to be your biggest problem, mobility-wise," she explained. "Your sleeves are tight enough as is, so I opted to make the breastplate without anything on your shoulder. The arm guards are separate to keep you moving." She began to methodically strap an arm guard onto me. "These used to be Ani's, in fact." My heart leapt at her

declaration, and I wondered how many fights they had seen. Yolante gathered up my skirt in her hands. "All the layers here will actually help divert a sword from finding its mark, so these shin guards are mostly just in case. If you wear breeches with boots, you can turn the shin guards like so and tie them up here to guard your thighs instead." She sighed. "I wish I could have done more, but it'll have to do for now." She strapped a belt with a leather sheath around my waist and stepped back to admire her handiwork. "Oh my baby, I do hate how dangerous this is for you," she sighed.

"That's the job," Ani said and she adjusted the straps on her own armor. "But you keep us safe."

Yolante gave each of us another hug. "I wish I could keep you safer," she said. "Now may the blessings of the dragons be on you."

And with that, Ani and I headed back into the tunnels. Sekh was waiting for us at the fissure. I nodded a greeting. "Sekh."

"May my fire keep you warm when nights are cold," Sekh replied.

Ani pressed her forehead to Sekh's, and a quiet moment passed between the two of them. "I'll see you soon," she promised. She leapt across the fissure with her usual effortless grace. I had to take a running jump, but at least I did it without hesitating. I took that as a victory. After one last nod at the two of us, Sekh launched into the sky and disappeared into the clouds. Ani guided me through the brush. In the twilight, it was hard to make out anything, but she navigated her way with calm familiarity.

"You do this a lot, don't you?" I asked.

"I do."

"On your own?"

"Usually," Ani replied. "Sekh only enters the Preserve when there's an emergency."

"Don't you ever get lonely? Or wish you had another person to do this with?"

Ani looked confused. "Not particularly, no." She stopped and examined me. I'm not sure what expression I was making, but she seemed to pick up on my disappointment. "I am glad to have you here, Cally. Please don't feel otherwise." She turned back to the forest. "Now, how do you recommend going about this?" she asked.

"Well, I doubt we can just knock on the door of Castle Fortitudo and accuse Prince Warren of staging a coup," I said, gratefully accepting the change of subject. "We should probably try to hide our identities."

"As what?" Ani asked. "To be clear, I'm quite terrible at playing roles." She marched through the trees along some path invisible to me. I picked my way carefully through the bushes behind her. "So any story you come up with for me, make sure I'm a mercenary or a hired guard or something similar."

"Sure," I said. As if I was any better at playing roles. "Hey, I was wondering something."

"Yes?"

"What's a moon child?" I asked. "The dragons called me that a couple times, but I was too embarrassed to ask them what they meant."

"Oh," Ani grinned. "That's a term they use to refer to anyone who has both an Ocean Dragongift and a Sky Dragongift." She stopped to survey the land for a moment before choosing a direction and pressing on.

"Because the moon pulls on the ocean and reflects the sun, you see? It means you're both."

"They have a term for it? How often does this come up?" I asked.

Ani shrugged. "Honestly, I couldn't say. But Xi has a wealth of knowledge about the Dragongift and Dragoncynn, so next time you come to the village-" Ani suddenly froze in her tracks.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

She reached for her blade. "Bloodlust."

"What?"

"I sense a killing intent."

Chapter 26

"I sense a killing intent," Ani said, creeping forward. She pointed to the tree line. "There. Someone's in trouble." I peered over Ani's shoulder. A man stood in the clearing. His bright white hair practically glowed in the pale purple light of the setting sun. It stood out against his dark skin. He was burdened down by a bundle slung over his back, but his biggest problem was the three men surrounding him. They circled the traveler, smugly sizing him up. Each of them bore a knife and a menacing grin. He, in turn, expressed little more than mild disappointment.

"What do you think?" one of the robbers called to his friends. "Should we cut him open?"

"Better not," another robber shouted back. "It would be such a pain to clean up the mess. Better

strangle him instead!" The three robbers laughed uproariously. The traveler's disappointed expression shifted to boredom.

"Should we help him?" I whispered to Ani. "He doesn't seem to have any way to defend himself."

She tilted her head. "Agents don't interfere in the actions of those who live in the Preserve."

"Well I'm not an Agent," I huffed. "And I want to help."

She raised an eyebrow. "I was going to add that, since you live here, I'd follow your lead."

"Oh. Well." I unsheathed my dirk. "Uh, here I go, then. I guess."

I stepped into the clearing with my blade at the ready. "Excuse me," I called out. "I couldn't help but notice the four of you seem to have a disagreement.

I'm something of an arbitrator myself. Might I offer some assistance?"

The first man glared at me. His tunic was a deep green, so in my head, I named him Green. "Fancy words for a girl your age. But this is none of your concern." The two other men - Orange and Grey, based on their tunics - scoffed at me, but didn't say anything. Okay, so Green was in charge.

"Surely we can come to an arrangement," I said. "What seems to be the problem?"

Green cackled. "The problem is we're a bit low on money, and our good snow-haired friend here isn't helping us out."

I turned to the traveler, "Uh... are you friends with these guys?"

His expression barely flickered, but it was clear he thought I was an idiot. "No." Okay.

I turned back to Green. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you and your friends to leave this man alone."

The three of them burst out laughing. "And what if we say no?" Orange sneered.

"You gonna use that sword for something?" Grey asked.

I inhaled slowly and exhaled, letting my inner heat dance on my voice. "After you," my voice crackled with fire.

Grey lifted his dagger over his head and raced toward me. He didn't get close enough to even attempt a shot. Ani charged from the trees, her blade flashing in the last rays of sunlight. With a deft move, she struck the dagger from his hand. Another punch, and he was on the ground. Green and Orange charged at her, but

the fight was over before they knew it. Two more strikes, and she disarmed them as well.

"Your move," Ani spoke quietly, but there was an edge in her voice. "Choose wisely."

Grey and Orange disappeared first, leaving Green alone and weaponless. I sheathed my dirk and collected their weapons from the ground. I approached Green slowly and offered him the weapons. "Here." Green glared at me, snatched the daggers from my hands, and disappeared into the forest after his friends.

"What was that for?" Ani asked. She kept her sword drawn until she was satisfied that the thieves wouldn't return.

I shrugged. "Just being diplomatic."

"Right," she laughed. "Because that won't be a problem for us later." Ani turned to the traveler and

frowned. "You. Do you have a death wish or something?"

"No, but I don't particularly have a life wish, either." He shrugged. "It's nice of you to save my life, though. Dying at the hand of a few robbers looking for loose change would have been pretty disappointing."

"Then why didn't you fight back?" I asked.

He shrugged again. It seemed to be his signature move. "I was curious to see what they'd do. Besides, when it's your time to go, no use fighting it."

"That's kind of a sad outlook," I said.

"Give it a minute. I'll probably say something sadder," he sighed.

Ani looked unimpressed. "Well, take care," she said.

"Wait," the traveler held up a hand. "I at least owe you something for saving my life. Where are you headed?"

Ani and I exchanged looks. "Um, south," I said. "We're hoping to find the nearest port town, actually."

The traveler nodded. "I am too. At least allow me to guide you to there. I really can't abide being indebted to someone."

"Uh," I glanced at Ani, and she nodded. "Sure. Lead the way."

Chapter 27

"My name is Rain," the traveler said as he wound his way through the trees. "And this," he gave the strange bundle on his back a fond pat. "This is Sunshine."

"Sunshine is..." I estimated the size of his bag. "A pet?"

He sighed, "Sunshine is a wheel fiddle."

"Oh, an instrument! May I see?" I asked. Diplomacy was a lot harder with someone who seemed deeply uninterested in talking, but I was determined to at least try.

Surprisingly, he acquiesced. He unslung the bag from his shoulder and opened it. Sunshine was a beautiful stringed instrument made of wood that shone a brilliant red. On one end of the instrument was a

handle that looked like a crank. The crank was attached to a wheel that touched the strings stretched across the body of the instrument. A series of buttons ran along the side. It was a strange instrument, and wholly unlike anything I had seen before. Rain turned the crank and the wheel spun against one of the strings. A single note droned out into the trees. It echoed through the forest a little louder than any of us liked. He immediately returned the instrument to its bag. "And that's Sunshine," he said.

I smiled. "You're a bard, then. How wonderful."

"Is it?" he asked. I bit my lip. This guy was being difficult on purpose. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ani's face had taken on a stoic expression.

Most of the city was dark by the time we arrived, but one building still had life in it. A tavern with an old wooden sign that hung over the door. A faded painting

of a goat playing a fiddle adorned the sign along with neatly printed letters: The Drunken Goat.

Rain pointed at the building. "Shall we spend the night there?"

"Our coffers don't exactly run deep," I said, offering an apologetic smile to Rain.

"Mine don't run at all," he sighed mournfully. "But that's neither here nor there. Food and a night under a roof is the least I can offer you for saving my life." Ani and I exchanged glances. Rain caught our silent exchange. "I can tell you're skeptical, but this is the part I'm good at," he said. Without waiting for a reply, he turned and opened the door to The Drunken Goat. The street lit up with the golden glow of fire, and the sound of talking spilled out into the empty night. Rain lifted Sunshine off his shoulder and carried her into the tavern with great fanfare. I followed with significantly

less, and Ani slipped in like a shadow as the door swung shut. "Friends!" Rain shouted to the room. Silence settled across the room as everyone's gaze fell on him. "I bring music! The songs will flow as freely as the ale!" He reached down and adjusted two of Sunshine's strings. He turned the wheel and the instrument hummed to life, blaring a chord into the room. He immediately launched into a rowdy song about drinking all night. His voice had a powerful nasal twang, and he shouted the lyrics with gusto. The patrons cheered enthusiastically as Rain danced from one table to the next, his fingers flying nimbly across Sunshine. Calls for more drinks at every table sent the tavern master and his hired help rushing to keep up with demand. Ani found herself a corner out of the way, but I grew increasingly intrigued by Rain's performance. Rain found enough time at each table to

take a swig of ale from a willing patron's mug before moving on, and as his ability to sing went down, his volume went up. Even so, his zeal for the music was infectious, and the patrons merely called for more as the night wound on. Most intriguing, I saw him actually smile – a sight so surprising that I wondered if I had gotten drunk simply by watching him. He laughed and joked among the ever-increasing crowd, never pausing between drinks and songs. I had never seen anyone command the attention of a room like him – save for Ciaran. But Ciaran owned the room through quiet and refined power. Something about him demanded that people pay attention. In contrast, Rain was neither quiet nor refined (if his lyrics were any indication), and everyone in the room seemed to beg for his attention instead. The night wound on, and

eventually the barkeep sent the reluctant patrons home.

Rain took a few awkward stumbles around the room. "Steady there," Ani appeared from the shadows and caught Rain on her shoulder. "That was quite the performance," she said.

"Indeed," the master of the tavern approached. "This is the most money I've made in months!" he declared with a hearty slap on Rain's back.

"Urgh!" Rain's chest lurched and he clapped a hand to his mouth. "I need to lie down."

"I'm surprised you lasted as long as you did," the tavern master mused. "You drank so deeply from every tankard you stopped at, it's a wonder you're still with us."

"You wouldn't happen to have a place we can spend the night, um... I'm afraid I didn't catch your name." I offered up my most innocent smile.

The tavern master nodded. "The name's Thryll. There's a room upstairs if your friend can make it up there. And I'll add food for all three of you if he agrees to perform again tomorrow."

"Deal," Rain burped. He thrust his hand toward Thryll in what I assume was meant to be a handshake, but he found himself waving at empty air instead.

"Let's get you upstairs, huh?" I smiled, hoping he wouldn't embarrass himself any more than he already had. Ani did most of the heavy lifting, despite my proclamation that "we" would be helping him. We opened the door to the room. Only one bed. Rain lurched toward it, placed a hand on the frame, and promptly fell on the ground beside it.

Ani and I looked at each other. She shrugged.

"Looks like the bed's yours."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's not really my thing. Just don't step on him, I guess."

Chapter 28

By the time I woke up, Ani was gone. I looked down at the floor beside the bed. Rain was still lying in a heap on the ground. Sometime during the night, Ani had taken pity on him and tucked a roll of clothing under his head as a makeshift pillow. I got dressed as quickly as possible, stopping only to check that Ciaran's ring remained safely hidden away. As I made my way down the staircase, I heard cheerful voices. The smell of food wafted through the tavern, and I followed it to the kitchen. Ani stood in the kitchen stirring something in a pot while Thryll kept an eye on a stove filled with racks of bread loaves. "Good morning," I said, offering a cheerful smile.

"Good morning, lass," the tavern master returned the smile. "Your friend here is proving to be a useful

hand in the kitchen. I don't suppose I've a chance of convincing all of you to stay on longer?"

I laughed. "It's a tempting offer, Thryll, but I'm afraid we have pressing business."

"And what would that be?"

"Ah, it's a family matter," I forged a half-lie to keep from sounding too suspicious. "Anyway, I have to go to the dock today. Which way?"

Ani pointed a wooden spoon at me. "Not until you've eaten." She gave the contents of her pot another stir before dishing out some of it into a bowl. I accepted the bowl and spoon she offered me and dug in. It was a vegetable pottage accented with fish and a surprisingly strong spice.

"What's this flavor?" I asked, surprised.

"Oh the spice blend?" Thryll feigned modesty. "A cousin of mine does trading all around the Great Sea. He always gives me the best deal on rare spices."

Ani grinned and gave the pot in front of her another stir. "Thryll has been very generous in letting me use it. It's not an ingredient I get to try often."

The spices added an inviting heat to the dish that I had never thought possible of pottage. I polished the bowl off within minutes. "By the way, Thryll," I said, attempting a casual tone. "You mentioned your cousin sails. I don't suppose he'd be on a ship heading south on the Great Sea right now?"

Thryll scoffed. "At this time of year? Good luck finding anyone foolhardy enough to try that." He stopped to remove the lowest rack of bread on the oven. "Although..." he mused. "Perhaps the Azure Rovers would be willing."

"Who are they?" I asked.

"A crew with a ship, of course," he replied. "Some of them stop by the Drunken Goat when they're in town. I saw a few last night. If you head to the docks now, you might find their captain."

"Right. How will I know what to look for?"

Thryll laughed. "They're named the Azure Rovers. I think it'll be easy for you to find them."

"Which way to the docks, then?" I asked.

"Head down the street toward the sun," Thryll said. "Turn right at the well. You'll be able to see the sea in no time at all."

"Thanks!" I headed out the front door, stopping briefly to check that my armor was laced up correctly. I strolled down the road, doing my best to remain inconspicuous. It was a pleasant day, and the act of walking in the sunlight felt healing. Thryll's directions,

though vague, were useful. I found the sea without a problem. A sea wall stretched beyond my line of sight, and it was littered with docks and jetties. Boats and ships of every size floated in the water, and the whole area was alive with people. Fisherman, dock workers, sailors. I slowed my walk and scanned the crowd for someone that looked like an Azure Rover. Thryll had implied it would be obvious, but nothing jumped out at me. I had all but given up my search when I heard a loud, clear voice echo across the docks.

"Make way for the Queen!"

Chapter 29

I immediately ducked behind a nearby crate. The queen? My heart raced. Which queen? Had the Seven Houses chosen a new High Queen so quickly? Or was it High Queen Ionar? Either way, I was in danger of being recognized. I allowed myself to peek around the corner of the crate. A woman strode calmly along the sea wall. A streak of her hair had been dyed blue, and it stood out against her deep brown tresses. She was dressed for sailing in a brilliant navy coat, but the most conspicuous thing she wore was a silver circlet that resembled a crown. Was this the queen they were referring to? The two women following behind her certainly treated her like royalty. The one to her left was blonde, save for the streak of blue dye that matched the Queen's. I glanced at the third woman.

Sandy brown with a similar stripe of blue dyed into it. I suddenly understood what Thryll had meant. The queen's path was a straight one - every person on the wall moved out of the way for her. And she was about to pass by my hiding place. I gave myself a moment to compose my thoughts, then stepped into her path with as much courage as I could muster. She didn't change her course. I didn't move. The blonde woman stepped forward and grabbed my shoulder. "Didn't you hear us?" she spoke to me through clenched teeth. "Make way for the Queen."

"I did hear you," I said. "And I apologize for the trouble. But I would beg an audience with the captain of the Azure Rovers."

The woman holding me grinned. She released her grip on my shoulder and stepped back. "Queen Majorelle, this one wants an audience."

The woman with the silver circlet inspected me with a discerning eye. "And what is your name?"

"Cally. Um, Your Majesty."

"And what is your request, Cally?"

"I need safe passage for myself and a friend. Across the Great Sea to House Fortitudo."

Majorelle's expression remained unmoving, but I sensed a shift in her demeanor. "The Great Sea is treacherous this time of year," she said. "What can you offer me that would cause me to risk the lives of myself and my crew?"

"I have something that would be of great value to all of you," I said. "But secrecy is of utmost importance, and I don't trust all the prying eyes here," I gestured at the docks. Sure enough, most of the people in the area were casting furtive glances our way. Some had dropped all pretense and were simply

staring. "If you would meet me tonight at The Drunken Goat, I will make it worth your while."

Majorelle remained nonplussed. "I will stop at The Drunken Goat tonight, and you will buy me a drink. You have until I finish drinking to convince me." She didn't wait for my reply. With a confident stride, she pushed past me and continued her walk along the sea wall.

As soon as she had passed, I turned and ran back to the tavern. I burst into the kitchen and found Ani in the middle of chopping vegetables. "Cally!" she smiled as soon as I entered. A piece of me felt warmed by that. "How'd it go?"

"Well, I found the captain of the Azure Rovers," I said. "She agreed to come here tonight to talk business."

Thryll appeared from around the corner, a barrel slung over one shoulder. "Queen Majorelle is coming here tonight?" he gaped. "You really do bring good fortune to this place," he said. "I will be very sad to see you go."

"And will she be taking us on her ship?" Ani asked.

"Not sure yet," I confessed. "I told her I'd give her my offer tonight."

Ani nodded. "Sounds good. What will you be offering her?"

"That's the thing," I said with a nervous laugh. "I'm not sure yet."

Chapter 30

Night fell a lot faster than I hoped. As the sun began to set, Rain stumbled downstairs, groggy and grumpy. He collapsed into a chair and moaned. He pulled a small pouch from his side and removed an unappealing-looking brown sphere. Ani wrinkled her nose. "What is that?" she asked. "It looks terrible."

Rain threw back the pill in a single gulp before turning to give Ani an exaggerated eye roll. "Poison. So I can get away from dumb questions," he said as he returned pouch to his side. "It's for the headache. Obviously."

Ani immediately poured him a tankard of a strange green liquid she'd been tending to all day. "Try this instead."

He took a sip and winced. "Really?" he asked.
"This tastes terrible."

Ani slammed down a second tankard filled with water. "This one too," she said.

Rain sighed and took another sip of the green concoction. "I'm only drinking this because it seems like you'll probably kill me if I don't."

Ani smirked. "I thought you didn't have a life wish."

Rain shrugged. "I don't particularly have a death wish, either."

Thryll rushed past me and raced up the stairs. He returned shortly with a new shirt on. "Do I look presentable?" he asked.

"Of course," I said. "Why?"

"The queen is coming!" he said. "If she declares this place a favorite, it'll mean good business for years!" He

scurried into the kitchen and attempted to distract himself with busywork, but it was clear that he was nervous. Rain finished his first drink, and started on the water. With a final showy gulp, he turned and sighed loudly in Ani's direction.

She nodded. "Good enough." A few patrons entered the tavern, and Thryll immediately busied himself with tending to them. Ani quickly disappeared into a shadowy corner, and I found a seat at a table in the back of the tavern. The table was the only one set apart from the others. It afforded a good view of the rest of the tavern, but was far enough away that conversation wouldn't be heard. Thryll had told me earlier that it was usually for him or anyone he had hired, but he was willing to reserve it for the queen tonight. Given his excitement, I was starting to regret the endeavor. If I failed at this negotiation, he'd be

devastated. At his table, Rain began to tune Sunshine. He played a few experimental notes and went back to tuning. A few more guests trickled in. Rain launched into an energetic song about going on a long journey, but I barely registered it. My mind was too focused on what I'd say. As the tavern filled up, I noticed a handful of patrons scattered about with familiar blue streaks in their hair, but still no sign of the queen. News of Rain must have traveled quickly, because the crowd was even larger than it had been the night before. Rain, for his part, was happy to oblige the ever-growing audience. To my dismay, he also continued to help himself to everyone's drinks as he danced around the room. The night stretched on, and still no sign of the leader of the Azure Rovers. Guests finished off their drinks and traded farewells. The tavern lay

mostly quiet, with only a handful of patrons choosing to hang around to watch Rain.

"You reserved a table for me? How thoughtful." I leapt at the sound of a deep voice over my shoulder. I spun around to see Majorelle leading casually against the wall. The back door to the tavern hung open. Outside, the two women who had accompanied her earlier blocked any entry. Inwardly, I cursed. We hadn't even started talking, and she already had me on the defensive.

I broke out my most charming smile and offered her a chair. "I thought you'd be more comfortable that way."

"Hm," her eyes narrowed and she scanned the room before accepting the seat. She leaned forward and intertwined her fingers. "Well then, Cally. I'm listening."

Chapter 31

"Shall we start with that drink I owe you?" I asked, keeping my expression as pleasant as possible.

Majorelle leaned back in her chair and waved her hand dismissively. "No need. Turns out I'm not that thirsty today." I bit back another curse. So that was her game. She was trying to gain the upper hand by throwing off my expectations. I was a bit ashamed to admit that it had worked, but at least I knew what she was playing. I opened my mouth to speak, but she held her hand up to stop me. "Oh, and before you begin, I should say that neither I nor my crew need money."

I smiled. A genuine one this time. I knew this move was also meant to shake me, but this time I expected it. I was onto her. "Of course," I replied. "If you could be bought off so easily, you wouldn't be the kind of crew I

wanted anyway." Her lip twitched. Slightly, almost imperceptibly. But just enough to know that I had parried her successfully. It wasn't enough to gain the upper hand, but at least I was still in the fight. "I have something of greater value in mind." I didn't, but she didn't have to know.

"Before we discuss what I might get out of this," she said. "Let's talk about what I'm putting into it." Ouch. Another smart move. A good negotiation always dangled the reward first, but she had pushed me into discussing the cost upfront. On the bright side, I at least actually knew what that would be.

"I need to get to House Fortitudo. As quickly as possible."

"You and this friend you mentioned earlier?"

"Uh..." I looked around the tavern for Ani, but she was nowhere to be found. My gaze settled on Rain. He

was currently singing a very sad song about a man in love with the sea. Several of the Azure Rovers were singing along.

Majorelle traced my line of sight. "Him?" she tilted her head at Rain.

"Oh! Um..."

A hint of a smile played on the crook of her mouth. "My crew seem to be enjoying his music, and he's pleasing to the eye. I think my crew would be happy to have him around, and anything that makes them happy makes me happy."

I nodded eagerly. "Yes! Him. He'd be coming with me!" I hesitated. "And... one other friend."

Majorelle smirked. "Already raising the requirements, and I haven't yet agreed to your proposition."

I didn't back down. "Better than changing the terms after, yes? I like to be up front about my intentions."

"Very well," she said. "You, that fellow, and a mystery friend. South to House Fortitudo. And how quick are you thinking?"

The Hunters had a four day head start on us. If we wanted to arrive ahead of them... "Four days. At the very most."

Majorelle tapped her finger on the table in a quick rhythm. "Four days? I won't say it's impossible, but that will take a lot out of me and my crew. What makes you important enough that we should bother?"

"Nothing," I replied, leveling an even gaze at her. "But my mission is of value to the entire Kingdom."

Majorelle threw back her head and laughed. "Really, child? And what makes you think I or any of

my crew care even a little bit about the Kingdom?"
She leaned forward and rested her chin in one hand.
"Or hasn't anyone told you? We're pirates."

Chapter 32

Pirates. Right. I really should have guessed that one from the beginning. I'm not sure what expression I was making, but whatever it was, I had given away my position entirely. Majorelle stood up from the table and headed for the exit. "Don't waste my time again."

"Wait!" I chased her out the door only to be met by two long, silver blades glimmering in the moonlight. The women who accompanied Majorelle each had a dangerously sharp sword, and I wasn't too thrilled about the direction they were pointing. A flash of gold, and Ani was suddenly upon them. Blade clashed on blade. Neither of the women had enough time to react. Ani disarmed them both. The blonde aimed a punch at her. Ani dodged, but not quite fast enough. The blonde's fist scraped against her shoulder, knocking her

off balance. The brunette immediately took advantage of the situation and grabbed Ani's wrist, twisting it until she dropped her sword. Ani didn't hesitate. She spun around and slammed her knee directly into the brunette's stomach. The woman staggered back, giving Ani enough time to retrieve her sword. The blonde had also managed to get her sword back, but Ani bore down on her before she had the chance to stand up.

"Enough!" Majorelle's voice echoed through the night. Ani and the blonde woman froze in place. Majorelle held her hand up, and both the women at her command immediately sheathed their swords. Ani glanced at me. I nodded, and she lowered her blade, but didn't bother to put it away. Majorelle looked Ani up and down carefully before turning to me. "This is your mysterious other friend, I'm guessing?"

"That'd be her, yes."

"I like her."

"I do too."

Majorelle drew herself up to her full height. "If we give you and your friends passage to House Fortitudo, what's in it for us?"

All eyes turned on me. I swallowed slowly, willing my mouth to be less dry. Finally, I found my voice. "Freedom."

Majorelle's eyes narrowed "Oh? We're pirates. We do what we want. Does that not constitute freedom already?"

"Your actions have consequences, though," I countered. "The Seven Houses aren't fond of piracy. Surely you've had to fight off the royal navy on many an occasion. Not to mention, other pirates who also sail these waters."

"And if we have?" she asked.

"I'd like to hire you. As privateers. You can raid as many pirate ships as you like. Keep all the loot. Leave the navy alone, and they'll do the same for you."

Majorelle scoffed. "And how is that freedom? Being at the beck and call of the Seven Houses?"

"But you wouldn't be," I said. "You're not navy. You simply do as you have done before, but the military no longer pursues you."

"What about all the merchant ships?" she retorted. "We leave those alone too?"

"I saw how everyone treated you on the docks today. Fear. But mostly respect. The proprietor of this very tavern was excited to have you visit." I smiled. "I assume by now, you simply collect protection money from most merchants, rather than raid them. You probably even make good on it by fighting off other pirates." Majorelle's lip twitched. My guess must have

been correct. "If merchants want to continue to pay you for your services, we'll allow it."

"And who is this we?" Majorelle folded her arms across her chest. "You're making a pretty big promise for such a little girl."

Ani and I locked eyes. I nodded, and she nodded in return. I reached for the ribbon around my neck and pulled out Ciaran's ring. "I'm here as an official representative of the High King," I said. "Anything I say is law."

Majorelle's eyes widened. In two quick strides, she stood in front of me. The blue gem took on a deep brilliance in the darkness. "Dragons below, that's unexpected," she said under her breath as she stared at the ring. She immediately shook herself out of her reverie and regained her composure. "My ship does not take on passengers," she said. "However, if three

people wanted to join my crew for a time, we'd be sailing for House Fortitudo tomorrow morning as soon as the sun rises."

Chapter 33

"How did it go?" Thryll rushed me as soon as I entered the tavern. "She doesn't... hate this place, does she? She didn't even have a drink!"

"It's okay," I offered the tavern master a reassuring smile. "She doesn't hate this place."

"Oh good," Thryll breathed a sigh of relief. He turned back to the bar where several of the hired help had halted their work to stare at us. "She doesn't hate us!" he declared, and they all let out a cheer. As Thryll headed back to bid goodnight to his remaining customers, Ani pulled me aside.

"Good work," she said.

"You think so?" I heard my voice squeak. "Because I was terrified the whole time. I mean, I'm supposed to

be trained for this sort of thing, but that was the first time I've ever had to do it."

"She mentioned three crew members," Ani said "Who is our third?"

"Oh, uh... wow, funny story about that one," I grimaced. "Rain?"

Ani looked skeptical. "Why?"

"Majorelle said he'd be good for morale since he plays music. And he's attractive."

Ani glanced in his direction. "Oh, is he?"

"Did you see everyone watching him tonight? I bet half of them have fallen in love already."

Ani looked puzzled. "Why? They don't know him."

"Uh... I don't know how to answer that," I said.

"Is Rain aware of his travel plans?"

"He will be," I attempted a laugh, but it came out as a small whine. "Once I tell him."

"Well now's your chance," Ani said, looking over my shoulder. Rain had finished singing, and was stumbling toward the staircase. He gave the first step an experimental kick and decided it wasn't worth the trouble.

I raced over to him and put a hand on his back. "Hey there, Rain. How... are you?" I reached for his instrument, and he immediately pulled away from me.

"No!" he slurred. "No touching Sunshine! Only me!" I wasn't sure if he meant he was the only one who could touch Sunshine, or if I could only touch him, but I figured I'd ask later.

"Rain," I tried again. "When we met you earlier, you said you were looking for a port town. Were you heading somewhere in particular?" He nodded vigorously. I waited, but he didn't say anything. "And where did you want to go?"

He crinkled his nose up, as if deep in thought. Finally he managed to speak. "South," he nodded confirmation of his own statement. "Warmer down south. Better for making money."

I couldn't believe my ears. "Well, I've got great news!" I exclaimed. "I found a ship going south tomorrow morning! And you can come with us!"

Rain turned to me with a hint of tears in his eyes. "I can come?" He wrapped me up in a sloppy hug. "I love you so much Cally. You're so good."

"Ahaha, just lucky," I said as I attempted to crawl out of his embrace. "But we leave before the sun rises, so you have to go to bed now."

Rain grinned a slow, sleepy smile. "Bed. Alright." With great effort, he managed to drag himself up the stairs and to our room. He fell asleep on the floor, clutching at the makeshift pillow Ani had left for him.

"Waking him up before the sun rises is going to be a problem." Ani stood behind me and gave his sleeping form an appraising look.

"We'll figure that out when we get there," I said. "We're just lucky he was heading in the same direction."

"What would you have done if he wasn't going south?" Ani asked.

I shrugged. "No idea. Honestly, I'm just making this up as I go."

She laughed and settled into a nearby chair for the night. "Aren't we all?"

I crawled into bed and attempted to find a comfortable position for myself. "Yeah, I guess so," I sighed. Ani flicked her hand in the direction of the sole candle in our room, and the fire immediately sputtered

out. The room fell into darkness, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Chapter 34

Ani carried Rain to the docks the next morning. We attempted to wake him, but between the sleep deprivation and the hangover, he wasn't even capable of standing up straight. I cradled Sunshine in my arms as tenderly as if it were a newborn babe. Over my shoulder, I carried a small satchel of spices that Thryll had been generous enough to give Ani. He had also included a bottle of a very expensive wine. A gift for the queen, according to him. I guess he still wanted to make a good impression.

"I'm surprised you made it," A voice boomed down on us. I looked up to see Majorelle standing on the bow of a ship. "*The Azure Rover*," was painted on the side in brilliant blue letters.

I waved. "Can't say it was easy. My friend got into a fight last night, and I wasn't sure we were going to get out alive."

Majorelle smirked. "What an interesting coincidence. A similar thing happened to a couple of my friends." She indicated a plank that extended from her ship to the dock. "Welcome aboard."

Ani hoisted Rain over her shoulder and carried him onto the ship. I followed, still clutching at Sunshine. We were greeted at the top by Majorelle's bodyguards. "Are you going to check us for weapons?" I asked.

Majorelle laughed. "Dragons below, I hope you're carrying. None of my crew should be unarmed." She nodded at her bodyguards. "Take those two for initiation." She turned to me. "And you, young Cally. Come with me."

I followed Majorelle across the deck to a cabin that I assumed was the captain's. The place was minimally furnished, but everything she had on display was clearly of fine quality. She struck a flint and lit one of the lamps on the wall. It flickered to life, and she shut the door. Outside, I heard muffled voices calling to each other. The floorboards tilted under my feet, and I guessed that the ship was setting sail. "Oh!" I pulled out the bottle of wine from my bag. "This is a gift. From Thryll, the owner of the Drunken Goat. He sends his regards."

Majorelle accepted it from me and examined it briefly before placing it on a nearby desk. "Where's your ring?" she asked.

"I'm sorry?"

She took a step towards me. She was taller than I remembered from last night. "The ring. You showed

me a ring last night that appeared to belong to the High Court, but it was dark, and I didn't get to examine it. You will show it to me now."

"Right!" I tugged at the ribbon around my neck and pulled the ring out from under my armor. "I think you'll find it's the real thing."

Majorelle dropped to one knee, bringing her eye level to mine. She pulled a small loupe from one of her many pockets and held the ring up to inspect it. "It's beautiful," she murmured to herself. She turned the ring slowly in her hands, examining every facet of the gem. Finally she seemed satisfied. "It's the real thing," she declared. Before I had time to reply, she flipped a small dagger from her belt and sliced at the ribbon. It snapped in two.

"Hey!" I grabbed for the ring, but she was too quick. She stood up and held it out of my reach.

"I'll be keeping this for now." She placed the ring in one of her pockets along with the loupe. "You don't mind, I'm sure," she gloated.

"That doesn't belong to you!" My hand hovered over the hilt of my dirk, but I already knew that attacking her on her own ship was a bad idea.

Majorelle flipped the dagger in her hand once before using it to open Thryll's wine. She poured herself a glass and took a slow, deliberate sip. "Maybe the previous owner should have been more careful with it. If they gave it away to you so carelessly, I can't imagine they deserve to have it at all." She swirled the wine in the glass and gave it an appraising eye. "Oh, this is good." She reached over my shoulder and opened the door to her cabin. "Run along, now."

Chapter 35

I marched across the deck, fuming. Mad at Majorelle for taking my ring, but mostly mad at myself for letting her take it. The ship rocked slowly under my feet and I saw that my earlier guess was correct. We had set sail while I was in her cabin. She had clearly planned this. And now we were sailing on the sea where she had every advantage, and I had nothing. I clutched Sunshine close to hide my face. It wouldn't do any good if someone saw my expression.

"Cally!" Ani appeared from below deck and rushed to my side. She grabbed my arm, and pulled me behind a nearby mast. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," I gritted my teeth.

"Because you're glowing..." she added. I glanced down at my arms. Sure enough, they were glowing red.

"Dragons below!" I cursed. Ani's grip on my arm tightened, and I felt the fire rush from my body into hers. Within seconds, my body had cooled, and the glow subsided. "That's never happened before," I said.

"It's a side effect of the Sky Dragongift," she explained.

"Please tell me I'm not going to set anything on fire if I get too angry," I pleaded. I examined Sunshine for damage, but the wheel fiddle seemed fine.

"The Dragongift is just a language," Ani assured me. "When you don't have the right words to express something, it tries to manifest in other ways. Your mind is searching for another way to communicate."

"Oh," I nodded. "My brother sometimes did that. He would make frost. Especially when he really wanted to say something, but he was too smart to say it out loud."

Ani grinned. "Ocean Dragongift, yeah? Vina has something similar, but she usually just fills the room with fog." I allowed myself a small chuckle at the imagery. "So what happened?" Ani asked.

I clenched my teeth. "The good queen Majorelle took my ring."

"I see," Ani's body stiffened. She peered around the mast at the cabin and rested her hand on the hilt of her sword. "And she's in there?"

"Hey, she's got the advantage here!" I whispered as loudly as I could. "We can't just march in there and take it back! They'll kill us!"

"You can't be certain..." Ani said thoughtfully. "I think I could beat everyone on this ship."

"Yeah, I don't doubt that," I said, "But we'll never make it to House Fortitudo if you kill off the entire crew!"

Ani laughed and held both her hands up. "I was joking." Huh, a joke. That was new. I felt my shoulders relax. "We'll keep an eye on her, though. Don't worry. We'll get your ring back." She led me back onto the deck. "But in the meantime, I've been sent to bring you to your initiation."

I gulped. "Sounds ominous."

"It's not as bad as you think," she assured me. I followed Ani down a staircase and through a hallway until we came to a room at the end. Rain slumped in a chair, still fast asleep. Majorelle's brunette bodyguard was doing her best to brush his hair while the blonde

one mixed something in a stone bowl. "That's Une," Ani said indicating the brunette. "And that's Dahlia," she pointed at the blonde. "Une typically handles most of the business, and Dahlia is an enforcer. I think we're going to get along great."

Une rubbed her stomach and grimaced. "Yeah, she says that after she kicks me."

"I won't kick you anymore," Ani promised. "We're on the same side now."

"Not quite yet," Une smirked. "Get in the chair. Let's do this."

Chapter 36

As it turns out, initiation was simply adding a blue streak of dye to our hair. Ani's took nearly no time at all, although the blue barely stood out against her jet black hair. Adding the dye to my hair took significantly longer. My hair was a mess of red knots and tangles, and Dahlia and Une had to wrestle with it for quite a bit before they managed to comb out a useable section. Applying enough of the dye between all the curls also took a serious effort. Rain's, however, took the longest, as Une had to hold him up and angle him sideways while he slept. At least the dye took immediately to his silver-white hair. As soon as they finished, Une and Dahlia ushered us above deck and ordered us to wait for them on a small bench.

A light breeze sent a spray of sea water over the railing. Rain awoke from his slumber with a groan. He blinked slowly and sighed. "Have I been kidnapped? Because no one's gonna pay any kind of ransom for me."

"You're on *The Azure Rover* traveling south, like you wanted to," I told him in my most chipper voice. I didn't need Dahila and Une guessing that he wasn't part of my original plan. The ship rocked to the side as if to prove we were at sea. Rain's hand flew to his mouth.

"Urk!" He fumbled around until he found his side pouch with the unpleasant brown pills. He shoved one into his mouth and swallowed. "I may have made some poor choices last night," he groaned. The ship rocked again, and a small gurgle escaped his lips. He looked

up at me and his eyes widened in horror. "Sunshine!" He snatched the wheel fiddle from my hands.

"It's okay! I was just holding it for you," I promised. Rain didn't seem very convinced. He immediately examined the instrument for any damage, and gave the crank a few experimental turns to make sure everything sounded fine.

Une approached as he did. "You any good with that?"

Rain spun the wheel one more time and it blared its usual loud chord. "I'm not BAD with it," he replied.

"That's not an answer," she said.

He shrugged. "Sure it is. It's just not one you like."

"I guess we'll find out tonight," she said. "But until then..." A smirk spread across her face as she handed each of us a mop. "New crew members get to swab the deck. Aren't you lucky?" I accepted the mop and gave

it an experimental push. I'd been on enough ships to have a vague idea of what to do, but swabbing the deck had always been someone else's job. "It's not gonna do you any good without water," Une laughed. She pointed to two buckets resting neatly under the bench. "Draw it from the sea. And don't be frugal. There's plenty to go around." With another laugh, Une marched off.

Surprisingly, Rain was the first to move. "Let's get this over with," he sighed, rolling up his sleeves. He collected a bucket and lowered it over the ship's railing into the sea. He hauled the bucket up, dunked his mop in the water, and immediately set to work.

"You know how to do this?" I asked, surprised.

He would have rolled his eyes at me if he had the energy. "You think I've never been on a ship before?" he asked. As if on reflex, he reached up and touched

his left earlobe. I hadn't noticed before, but he had three piercings in his ears - two on the left, and one on the right. Each piercing bore a simple silver hoop earring. I was curious to learn more, but he had already turned away.

"Let's divide the work," Ani said. She grabbed the second bucket. "Rain, you stay here. Cally and I will start at the other end of the ship. We'll meet in the middle."

"With two of you and one of me, we'd better not be meeting in the middle," Rain grumbled.

"Meet you two thirds of the way," I said in an attempt to pacify him. I chased after Ani without giving him a chance to reply. She had already started swabbing the quarterdeck. "What's up?" I asked as soon as I reached her. "Why did you want to split up like that?"

"We don't have long," Ani said, keeping her eyes focused on her mop. "So it's time to resume your training."

Chapter 37

"Training?" I glanced around as furtively as possible. "Here? Now?" My mind flashed back to training sessions with Ciaran: raging rivers and empty fields as far from people as we could manage, all for the safety of others. Training sessions were a dangerous affair of ice and water as Ciaran learned to control his Dragongift. "Might be a little conspicuous, don't you think?"

Ani didn't look up. *"It won't be a problem,"* she said. My brain felt fuzzy for a moment, and I felt embers start to glow in the back of my mind. *"But you should probably do some work so that no one has any questions."* I realized that her lips remained unmoving as she spoke. A thin wisp of smoke escaped her lips. She was speaking using only her Dragongift!

I willed the fire in my lungs to come alive. "I didn't know this was a thing," I said. I winced at the sound of my voice.

She smiled. *"Remember earlier when you were glowing? You wanted to say something, but you were holding it back."*

I nodded. "In my mind, I could hear myself saying everything I wanted to tell Majorelle." I still had to form the words with my mouth, but I felt something warm in my lungs and the familiar crackle of fire in in my head. *"I wanted to tell her that I'm not impressed by her self-titled queenship and that if she fell into the sea right now, the only thing I'd miss would be the ring."*

Ani burst out laughing. *"I've never seen you like this before."*

I blushed. Or was I glowing again? *"Sorry. I don't really get mad when anyone does things to me, but mess with*

anyone I care about, and it's a different story. She insulted Ciaran and took his ring."

Ani turned and rested her hands on her mop handle. She regarded me thoughtfully. It seemed like she was choosing her words with care. *"We'll get it back. I promise."*

"Yeah, I know," I sighed and a handful of sparks floated from my mouth. *"How is talking like this supposed to train me, anyway?"*

"Tell me what you've learned about the Dragongift. How were you taught to control it?" Ani asked.

"Well," I mused. *"The way my teachers said it, it's a weapon. In the case of an ocean Dragongift, you can hold water in your hands the same way you hold a sword."*

"I thought as much," Ani said. *"That's why I wanted to see how you used a weapon. I thought it would be a good starting point."*

"For me, probably not," I confessed. "They told me to picture a blade. Or a whip. Or an arrow. That if I could see the shape of what I wanted clearly in my mind, the water would respond to me and take on that form. It rarely did. I've never been able to do much more than push it around a little. And I definitely can't make it take solid shape like ice or anything." I shrugged and moved on to swabbing another portion of the deck. "But Sekh said that the Dragongift is words, not weapons. So I've been doing it wrong this whole time anyway, right?"

"It's words for them," Ani replied. "But I like to think of it as intent. Learn how to convert your intent into reality, and you'll have control of your Dragongift."

I wobbled a bit and leaned on my mop for support. How was I so tired already? Focusing all my thoughts into speaking purely in fire was more exhausting than I expected.

"And here I thought I was the hungover one." I looked up. Rain stood in front of me, arms hanging at his side. He looked bored. "Took you long enough." I glanced at the deck and realized I had made it to the two thirds point.

"At least I kept my promise," I replied, trying to mask how tired I felt.

He shrugged. "Sure."

"Finished already?" Ani joined us, mop in one hand and bucket in the other. "I don't suppose you saw where Une went."

Rain shrugged. "No idea. I'm sure she'll pop up again with more work whenever she's ready." He unslung Sunshine from his shoulder and began tuning it. "But until then, I have plans."

"Yeah, so do I," I said. I made my way to the nearest bench and collapsed on it.

Chapter 38

The rest of the day was smooth sailing. Literally. The sun shone on us with a pleasant warmth, and the brilliant blue sky gave no hint of the storms that the Great Sea was so famous for. Ani found her way to the galley and immediately ingratiated herself to the chief cook - a stoic fellow who probably had a name, but was known by everyone as "Buck." I attempted to control my Sky Dragongift again, and found myself unable to stand. I lay on the bench on the deck to catch my breath, and stared up at the sparse white clouds that dotted the sky. I wondered if Sekh was up there, speeding ahead of us to House Fortitudo. I hoped the map I had drawn would be enough. Rain spent most of the afternoon playing his wheel fiddle, and by the time dinner rolled around, he had garnered

an impressive fanbase. Dinner itself was a simple affair of dried vegetables and hard tack, punctuated with some unusually good meat. Rain opted to play Sunshine more after dinner, and the crew didn't complain. In the shadows, I saw Majorelle watching with a satisfied look on her face. I approached, doing my best to look friendly. "Anything that makes your crew happy, yeah?"

She smirked at the sound of her own words echoed back to her. "They work hard. They deserve to be happy."

"They work hard pirating, you mean."

"I think you mean privateering."

I laughed. "I do." I scanned her multitude of pockets on her clothing. Ciaran's ring was definitely in there somewhere.

"Don't bother," she said, reading my intention immediately.

I held up my hands. "I wouldn't dream of it," I said. "And speaking of dreaming, I'm heading bed."

"I'm sure you are." Truthfully, I really was too tired to start any trouble. My arms and back throbbed slightly from swabbing the deck, but the biggest weight on me sat inside my chest. Back when I had trained my Ocean Dragongift, it had felt as if I was pushing against a wall with no hope of moving it. The exercise had been more annoying than anything else. This time, though, I felt as if I had actually managed to lift and carry the wall. And I was absolutely ready for sleep. Une reluctantly took a break from listening to Rain play to take me below deck where I'd be sleeping. None of the cabins were available, so I wound up in a hammock in what looked to be a stable. I didn't care. I

fell asleep, rocked by the movement of the ship, and lulled to my dreams by the distant sound of Rain's music.

Morning arrived, and I somehow succeeded in dragging myself out of my hammock. As I entered the hallway, a door to my left swung open and Rain shuffled out. He yawned and rubbed a bit of sleep from his eyes before noticing me. He nodded at me. "Cally." He popped one of his small brown pills into his mouth and chewed it with some distaste.

"Did you really drink that much last night?" I asked.

"No, I just enjoy how bitter this is." He rolled his eyes. At least the hangover hadn't changed his personality.

We headed up the stairs to find Une waiting for us - a grin on her face, and two mops in her hands. "You know where to find the buckets," she said. I looked across the deck to see Ani had already begun swabbing the deck. I quickly joined her.

"You're up early," I said.

"I went to visit Buck," she replied. "He has the most fascinating method for cooking using smoke from various trees to add specific flavors. I intend to learn as much as I can before we part ways." She took a slow breath, and my head suddenly felt warm. Was she about to use her Dragongift? *"Are you ready to train more?"*

I felt a small thrill of victory. I had managed to sense her Dragongift. *"I'll try, but yesterday was really hard."* My head pounded, but I managed to reply in kind.

"Does it hurt?"

"A lot," I confessed. *"But just now, I sensed your intent. That's good, right?"*

She smiled. *"That's excellent! Well done."* My heart leapt with joy at her praise.

"It's thanks to your teaching," I said, forcing myself to be modest. Even so, I felt a surge of pride. It was such a small accomplishment, but it was more than I had ever done, and none of my teachers had ever complimented me before. *"But how this is going to help my Ocean Dragongift?"*

"Why don't you try it?" Ani suggested. *"Speak through your Ocean Dragongift."*

I hesitated. Sekh's Dragongift was so easy to use. It sat at the front of my thoughts and I embraced it with pleasure. The Ocean Dragongift, on the other hand... it was shameful to even try. But I didn't want to

disappoint Ani. I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of the sea around me. I let the echoes of water reverberate through my mind until I found the same sound in my head. "I..." A flurry of snow filled my chest, but it wasn't enough. I was channeling my Ocean Dragongift, but I couldn't speak through it. "I-" I attempted it again, but again no luck. I looked up. "Uh oh."

"What's wrong?" Ani asked, also dropping her use of Dragongift.

Dahlia was marching towards us. Her expression was grim. "That can't be good," I mused.

"Ani, report to Une, now," she commanded. "And Cally, the queen wants you in her quarters."

"Uh... why?" Ani arched an eyebrow. I couldn't tell if it was our recent exercises, or if I was just getting

to know her better, but I sensed she was ready for a fight.

Dahlia jerked her head upwards. The clouds above us were a pleasant puffy white, but they were piled upon each other like stacks of books about to tumble over. As the sky stretched southward, they grew a much darker shade. "It's for your own safety," she said. "There's a storm coming."

Chapter 39

Une marched across the deck shouting out quick commands. The crew obeyed her with equal quickness. Several of the sailors had already begun tying down cargo and lowering the sails on the back of the ship. I noticed Rain was among them, tying knots with surprising competence. I made my way to the cabin where Majorelle waited. "Ah, young Cally," she smiled as soon as I entered. "I have a very important job for you." Majorelle motioned to an open trunk. "Collect all my things and lock them in there, will you?"

"What?" I was incredulous.

"Everything not nailed to the floor," she said. "Including the paintings on the wall." She patted one

of her pockets and smirked at me. "Don't worry, though. The most important things are still with me."

"And what would the purpose of this be?" I asked.

"There's a storm coming, dear." She smirked. "I'd hate for any of my valuables to fall or be damaged," she said. With a smirk, she strode out of the room, leaving me to pack her things. I sorted through them grudgingly. Most of it was art. Her collection of paintings was exquisite, including a few pieces that had famously been missing for years. I couldn't help but be a little impressed. I stopped for a moment to examine a small painted portrait she kept on her desk. The artist was clearly talented, but the brush strokes were unrefined. A strangely rough piece, considering the rest of her collection. Even more curious, the subject of the painting was familiar to me. I wasn't entirely sure, but I felt as if I had met this man before. The ship lurched

and the floor buckled under me. I hurriedly placed the portrait in the trunk with the other paintings and fastened it shut. I shoved the trunk under her berth and headed out onto the deck. The ship pitched, and I stumbled forward, barely catching myself on a railing. The sky had turned dark, and a few drops of icy cold water drizzled across my face. I scrambled across the deck to the bow where Majorelle stood. The wind raced across the water and the waves swelled up. The ship began to creak as the sea tossed it to and fro. Around me, any remaining crew members hurried to secure themselves to safety lines. "Cally!" Majorelle looked surprised when I approached her. "What are you doing here?"

"I did what you asked," I said. "What next?"

"You were supposed to stay in my cabin where it was safe," she said. Oops. The light rain suddenly

turned into a downpour, as if the ship had found its way under a waterfall. Light flashed above us, and the crack of thunder whipped through the air. We were in the center of the storm now. "Never mind," she said. "Grab a line and hold on." I found the nearest safety line and tied it around my waist. As I finished the knot, the ship lurched, and I flew forward. The line pulled taut, and I gasped as the air was driven from my lungs. The ship rolled again, and me with it. Majorelle's knees bent and she somehow managed to keep her balance. One more wave like that, and we'd be capsized. Majorelle adjusted the silver circlet in her hair. "Watch closely, young Cally," she called over the sound of the wind. "This is why they call me the queen." She stretched her hands out to the sea, as if reaching for something, and with a primal scream, slammed her foot down on the deck. The waves moved

with her, parting like soldiers greeting their queen. Water stretched up around *The Azure Rover*, but she willed it to spin away from the ship.

"Dragons below," I breathed. My voice was lost in the sound of wind and thunder. "You have a Dragongift." Lines of concentration etched deep into Majorelle's face as she used her Dragongift to push back against the sea. The rain beat down on the deck, soaking us through, but she didn't even seem to notice it. Another swell of water to the left. She thrust her hand into the air and forced it back with another yell. We cut through the storm, one bumpy wave at a time. Even as the sea threatened to swallow the ship, Majorelle managed to keep it afloat. Another surge from the sea. Another push from Majorelle. I stared in awe and horror as we made our way across the water, one narrow miss at a time. Another wave, this one

larger than the rest. Majorelle pushed back, but I saw her legs begin to wobble under the pressure. I felt a strange tug in the back of my mind. I spun around to see another wave rise above the ship.

"Majorelle!" I shouted a warning, but my voice disappeared into the storm. The wave bore down on us with alarming speed. I shut my eyes and reached for my Ocean Dragongift. "Please work please work please work," I begged as I pulled at the thread in my mind. The thread that had never been able to do more than move a puddle. The thread that had never been as good as Ciaran's. The thread that I had buried out of shame. Ani's advice echoed in my mind. "Intent, intent, intent," I chanted to myself. And with a desperate howl, I thrust my hands toward the oncoming wave.

Chapter 40

I woke up with a very unpleasant headache. I opened my eyes slowly and discovered that I was not, in fact, dead. That was a positive. I felt a slow rocking movement underneath me. We were still at sea, but the storm had clearly passed. I took in my surroundings. Majorelle's cabin. She had already hung her paintings back up. I tried to sit up and immediately winced in pain. "Ow!"

"Lie still, young Cally." Majorelle's voice. "You overexerted yourself out there."

"The storm," I groaned. "There was another wave. I had to stop it."

"And stop it you did," she said. Her voice was curiously flat. "You seem to have left out a few details about who you are."

I sighed. Diplomacy time. "I apologize for the deception," I said. I glanced at her. Even moving my eyes hurt. "But if we're being fair, you seem to have been hiding something too." Oops. Diplomacy time over.

Her lip twitched slightly. "That is fair. More fair than my father, I can tell you that." I glanced at the portrait on her desk and groaned.

"That's where I've seen him before," I said. "He's the king of House Iustitia."

"Oh, you've met my father?" Majorelle smirked.

"Yeah, but he was a lot older than he is in that portrait," I said. "Who painted it?"

"My mother," she said. "An aspiring painter. But not a royal. She caught his eye one day, and they fell in love. At least, that's what she thought." Her expression grew bitter. "As soon as he found out she was

pregnant, he sent her away. She was heartbroken. I think it was the grief that killed her in the end." Majorelle picked up the portrait and traced her finger along the edge of it. "This is the only painting of hers I have left."

"I'm sorry," I said. "What he did to her... and to you... wasn't fair."

"No, it wasn't," Majorelle shrugged and placed the portrait back on her desk. "But who expects House Iustitia to be fair?" I didn't miss the sarcasm in her voice. House Iustitia was supposed to rule with justice as its guiding principle. She turned to me. "With your red hair and your ring, I should have guessed your identity sooner. You're the missing prince."

"Missing? But I know where I am, just fine," I tried to maintain a facade of indifference, but I felt a surge of panic in the back of my mind.

"The entire Kingdom is talking about you. Rumor has it you were kidnapped."

"I was," I sighed. No sense in hiding the truth at this point. "But I got away."

Majorelle eyed me carefully. "You think Prince Warren has something to do with it. That's why you're in a hurry to reach House Fortitudo." I wasn't surprised that she had figured it out. "Is that why you're disguised as a girl?" she asked.

"I'm disguised as a servant, but I AM a girl," I said. "And a boy. It's complicated. Sorry."

She waved off my apology. "You're not the first person I've sailed with who isn't strictly male or female. There's no need to apologize for who you are." Majorelle fell silent. She was choosing her next words with care. "I should extend my condolences to you," she finally spoke. "Prince Ciaran seemed like a fine

young man, and I was sorry to hear of his passing. Your brother would have made a great High King."

My chest tightened up, and I felt my eyes begin to well up with tears. "He would have," I said, willing myself not to cry. I let out an attempt at a laugh. It sounded more like a wheeze, and it really hurt. "That storm we went through? It would've been no problem for him," I said. "But I passed out after one wave."

"Passed out or not," Majorelle said, "You saved all of us."

I shook my head. That hurt too. Ugh. "You did most of the work, though."

"I did," she admitted coolly. "But one ill-timed moment would have been the death of everyone. And you came through in that moment. You need to accept it as a victory."

"Eh, I'll think about it," I said, mentally shrugging. I didn't dare shrug for real, because that would have hurt too. "Where did you learn how to control your Dragongift?" I asked, quickly changing the subject. "I don't imagine you trained under anyone."

"You guess correctly," she replied. "Everything I'm capable of, I taught myself. I didn't have access to the teachers you did."

"Not like they did me any good," I sighed. "You learned more on your own than I ever did under official tutelage." I stared at the paintings that lined the walls of her cabin. Stunning works of art, all hidden from the world.

"Do you want to learn?" Majorelle's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Learn what?" I asked.

"How to control your Dragongift, of course," she replied curtly. "I could always use a second on board. To avoid near misses like today."

"You'd really train me?" I asked.

"The safety of my crew is paramount," Majorelle said. "I'd do anything for them." She paused for a moment to consider her words. "Also, the storm blew us off course. We're a day behind schedule now. Another event like that, and we'll miss your deadline entirely."

I nodded and immediately regretting choosing to move. "Ow." I nodded again, but slowly this time. "Yes. Please."

Majorelle stood up. "Excellent. Then we begin tomorrow morning."

Chapter 41

The sky was dark when I left Majorelle's cabin. Most of the clouds had disappeared, leaving no trace of the storm. I must have been out for hours. I stumbled across the deck and downstairs to my hammock. Ani had set up another hammock beside mine at some point, and she swung in it, looking much more tense than anyone in a hammock should look. She leapt to her feet as soon as she saw me. "Cally!" She ran to me and embraced me. *"I'm so sorry. I should have been there,"* she said. The warmth of her voice made my heart swell.

"Hey, I didn't die. So it's probably okay."

"What did Majorelle say?" Ani asked. "I tried to get in there, but Dahlia stopped me." Her eyes narrowed.

"I briefly considered stabbing her, but I decided to try diplomacy like you do."

I laughed, and my ribs immediately protested. "I think my identity is safe with her," I said. "And she's offered to train me in using my Ocean Dragongift."

"That's excellent!" Ani declared.

"You don't mind?" I asked. I had been a little afraid that Ani would be disappointed I'd found a new tutor.

"With two teachers of different specialties, that's twice as much training!" She smiled. "You're going to learn so much!" I winced. Of course. Her enthusiasm for self-improvement encouraged me a little, but my sore body was not nearly as excited. "But first," she retrieved a bundle from her hammock. "Food."

"Oh, Ani," I felt tears well up in my eyes. "You're amazing." I scarfed down the selection of aged cheese and pickled vegetables that she had set aside for me,

pausing only to breathe. As soon as I finished eating, I clambered into my hammock and fell asleep.

Ani was gone by the time I woke up. No surprise. I eased myself out of the hammock, trying very hard to ignore the fact that every muscle in my body was screaming in pain. I headed into the hallway. A door at the far end opened, and Rain exited. He fumbled with the pouch at his side and pulled out another brown pill. He winced as he chewed on the bitter sphere. We made eye contact and he greeted me with a single nod of his head. "Cally." I nodded in return, and we made the arduous trek up the staircase. Une waited at the top, but she only had one mop with her.

She handed it to Rain. "You know what to do," she said. "And you," she turned to me. "The queen is waiting for you."

Majorelle stood at the bow of the ship, gazing out at the sea. I approached her. "We're training? Out here in the open?"

She shrugged. "The crew won't care. If any of them notice, they'll probably assume you're an illegitimate child, like me."

"Yeah, that makes sense." I stretched. "So where do we start? Breathing exercises? Shaping water?"

Majorelle smirked. Something in her expression made me regret asking. "Actually, I was thinking that I'd return this to you." She reached into one of her many pockets and pulled out Ciaran's ring. It glinted in the morning sun, bold and blue. "You did want this back, didn't you?"

"Yes?" I responded hesitantly. There had to be a catch.

"Then all you have to do is get it," she said coolly. She turned and threw the ring overboard. "Good luck."

Chapter 42

"Dragons below!" I cursed and ran to the railing. I stared at the expanse of seawater that stretched out in front of the *Azure Rover*. Ciaran's ring had already disappeared into the dark waters. I reached my hand out and willed the water to rise, but the waves stubbornly refused to respond.

"Hm, it's falling quickly," Majorelle said. She shut her eyes. "Oh no, there's a fish coming. Hope it doesn't swallow the ring." She smirked.

"Intent," I muttered under my breath. The water shifted in response and for a moment, I felt the weight of the ring. It bobbed up briefly before slipping out of my grasp. I slowed my breathing and tried again. Again, I felt the ring for a brief moment before losing it. I bit back another curse. It was the same as it always

had been. The same futile efforts I always made. I gritted my teeth. This time, I wasn't going to give up. I glanced at Majorelle out of the corner of my eye. Her eyes were still shut. I realized that she was using her Dragongift to keep the ring from sinking all the way to the bottom of the sea. She held it barely within my reach, but every time I grasped it, she let go, and it sunk immediately.

"You must will the water to obey you, young Cally," she said, somehow sensing my revelation. "Don't lose."

"What do you think I'm trying to do?" I groaned. "I can't win against the sea!"

"Exactly!" Majorelle crowed. "You can't win against the sea!"

"And that's supposed to be helpful?" I shouted back at her.

"It's the only answer," she retorted. I tried for the ring again, but as soon as I had it in my grasp, she released it from her hold and it sank out of my reach. I desperately grabbed for it again, but to no avail. "That's enough for now," she said. She flicked her wrist, and the ring shot from the waters into her hand. "We'll try again tomorrow." She polished the ring on her shirt and tucked it back into her pocket. "But until then, consider this."

"What?" I tried not to sound cranky, but I was definitely very cranky.

"When the wave came upon us yesterday, were you thinking about the Great Sea?"

"I don't understand the question."

"Bring me the answer tomorrow," she said, ignoring my protest. "In the meantime, looks like your friends need some help swabbing the deck."

With a groan, I dragged myself over to Ani and began swabbing the deck beside her. *"How did it go?"* she asked.

"Terribly," I replied, using my Dragongift on reflex. I was surprised to find that it came to me easily. *"I like training with you more."*

Ani grinned. *"Let's do something a little different and try some physical training today,"* she said, deflecting the compliment. *"Here. Try this,"* she said. She lifted her mop and flipped it over casually as if spinning a fighting staff.

"Uh..." I lifted my mop and mimicked the motion, only to wind up with a faceful of sea water.

"Like this." She placed a hand on my elbow and lowered it. *"Now picture the motion before you do it. As with all things, this is about intent."* I nodded and allowed her touch to guide me through the movement. It was slow

and unsteady, but at least I got it right. I tried the move again, this time a little faster.

"Nice form." A sharp voice behind us. I spun around to see Dahlia standing, arms crossed, and a perturbed look on her face.

"Thanks," I said.

"I meant Ani," she replied. Ouch. "You looking for a sparring partner?" she asked.

"I wouldn't be against it. Who did you have in mind?" Ani asked.

Dahlia's expression tightened and I detected a faint blush on her cheeks. "Me. No one else in this crew provides a challenge for me anymore." She paused. "Except the queen, but you don't fight the queen."

"I'd be happy to spar with you," Ani said. "But I need to finish Cally's training session first. After this?"

"I accept," Dahlia replied before stalking off.

"Huh. I think she likes you," I mused.

"Why would she like me? She seems upset." Ani replied.

"Uh, never mind." I laughed. *"Let's finish training, shall we?"*

Chapter 43

Ani and I trained for another hour, swabbing the deck and spinning our mops as we did. By the time we finished, my arms felt like they were on fire. Given the fact that we had been speaking in Dragongift the entire time, a part of me worried the fire might be literal. I managed to drag myself to a nearby bench where Rain sat playing a tune to himself, but I didn't have the energy to actually sit up straight, so I lay down beside him and rolled onto my back with a groan.

"I didn't realize it was exhausting being in a pretend fight with nobody." Rain barely bothered to glance down at me.

"I wanna die," I wheezed.

"That's the spirit," he said dryly.

"Wow, thanks for the sympathy."

"Oh, was that what you were asking for?" He spun the wheel on his fiddle and played a dramatically sad tune. I lay silent, listening to Sunshine. My body hurt everywhere, and I felt mentally and emotionally drained, but the music actually did help a little. I counted the days on my fingers. Four day journey originally, plus one more day from the storm. And we'd already done two. Three more days of this? By the time we arrived at House Fortitudo, I'd be too exhausted to stop the Hunters. I angled my head to the side to watch Ani and Dahlia sparring. They each had a wooden sword, and they seemed pretty equally matched. How did Ani have that much energy? Rain followed my line of sight. "She's pretty good."

"Which one?" I asked.

"Ani. She moves like a teacher: Allowing a student to strike, and giving just enough in return." His fingers

played out another tune on Sunshine. "How can you afford her?"

"What?"

Rain shrugged. "Bodyguards like that don't come cheap. In fact, she could be a knight if she wanted to. Work for royalty, maybe." His voice carried a hint of a suggestion on it, and I didn't like it. However, I knew that denying it would only raise his suspicions. I decided to buy some time.

"When did you notice?" I asked.

"That she can fight?" He scoffed. "When you first stopped those highwaymen from robbing me. You wouldn't think it from seeing them fight her, but those three are actually pretty capable. They're famous in that area." I made a mental note to return sometime to check on them. "As for you," Rain added. "Still can't figure you out. Your hair color implies you're from

House Ars, but you don't act like a royal. Not sure what you're about." I took a moment to compose my thoughts and pick out which truths I was willing to share.

"Can you keep a secret?" I asked.

Rain shrugged again. The man's shoulders did more talking than he did. "Who would I tell?"

"You're right about me. I'm one of the distant cousins of House Ars. By now, you've heard what happened at the Confirmation Tournament."

"Yes, the entire Kingdom's in a panic," Rain replied, his voice level. "No one has any inkling who the next High Court will be."

"Exactly," I said. "The Council of the Seven Houses has sent out spies to investigate who would be best suited for the High Court. One investigator, and one royal knight as protection." There was no such

thing as the Council of the Seven Houses, but it sounded official enough.

"I see," Rain said. "If you're heading south on the Great Sea, I can only assume you've been assigned to investigate Prince Warren. You're awfully young. How do you intend to get close to him?" I pursed my lips. I'd been mulling that problem over quite a bit to no success. Rain must have read my expression. "I can get you into House Fortitudo."

"You?" I didn't bother to hide the incredulity in my voice.

"Sure, why not?" he shrugged. "It can't be that hard."

"Well, if you're so confident," I said. "That's less for me to worry about." With some effort, I managed to stand up. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to attempt to make it to my hammock."

Chapter 44

I wobbled my way below deck and somehow managed to clamber up into my hammock. Every muscle in my body complained as I swung back and forth, but there wasn't a lot I could do about it. As I drifted to sleep, I allowed my mind to float into the sea. I spread my thoughts out into the waves around me. No push. No pull. No attempt at shaping weapons or anything. I simply bobbed in the waves. The water, in response, cushioned me gently and carried me adrift. It was a soothing experience as I allowed the sea to direct me, and I found myself lulled into sleep almost immediately.

I woke to the sound of Ani climbing into the hammock beside me. No, not the sound. She was too

stealthy for that. The motion? I wasn't sure how to explain it, but the waters that my mind floated in seemed to shift in response to her presence. The rest of the ship sat quiet and dark. I reached for my Sky Dragongift. *"Ani?"*

"Cally. I didn't mean to wake you." In the darkness, a faint hint of embers floated from her mouth. Ani's face lit a beautiful orange as she spoke.

"No, it's not your fault." I assured her. *"I was thinking about something Majorelle said."* Sparks floated from my mouth and faded immediately.

"I brought you some food."

"You really are the greatest person ever." I gratefully accepted the bundle of food she had packed for me. Dried vegetables and hard tack, but after only a couple days at sea, my stomach welcomed it without protest.

Ani waited patiently for me to finish eating before she spoke. *"What did Majorelle say?"*

I kicked my legs forward and swung in the hammock. *"During the storm, I managed to push a wave back. I don't know how I did it. She asked me if I was thinking about the Great Sea when it happened. I don't understand the question. I mean, obviously I was."*

Ani watched me swing back and forth. *"Are you thinking about the sun right now?"*

"What?" I kicked my legs harder. *"Of course not. I'm just thinking about what I want to say. Like you taught me."*

Ani nodded. *"And?"*

I halted my swinging. *"Oh."* I exhaled slowly, watching as each individual spark floated from my mouth and disappeared into the dark of the night. I leapt to my feet, wobbled, and managed to catch myself. "I need a moment," I said.

Ani smiled knowingly. "Take as much time as you need."

I stepped out into the hallway and made my way above deck. The sky stretched above me, cloudless and dotted with stars. The deck was eerily still. I could hear quiet footsteps in the dark, the only hint of the crew members who worked at night. My muscles were still sore, but my body felt strangely light. As if I were floating in the water. My mind flashed back to the storm. The wave had risen above me and filled my vision. For a split second, it was the only thing that existed to me. I wasn't thinking about the Great Sea. I was thinking about that single wave. My teachers had tried to force me to move rivers. To exert my will over everything in the area. I never was able to, because I was never meant to. Of course I couldn't overcome the sea. In contrast, Ani had taught me to focus only on

what I actually had control over. Because I couldn't overcome the sun, either. My Sky Dragongift was still nascent, but it was easier to hold onto for that very reason. And now I would face my Ocean Dragongift in the same way. I walked to the railing and looked out into the dark waters and lapped up against the edge of the ship. I reached my hand out to the surface of the water, and took in a deep breath. "Okay," I whispered. "Come to me."

Chapter 45

Majorelle found me waiting for her at the bow of the *Azure Rover* the next morning. A smile broke out across her face as soon as she saw me. "I see you've found your answer," she said.

I flexed my fingers experimentally and breathed in the sea air. "It's actually really obvious."

"Don't explain it to me," Majorelle held her hand up to silence me. "Show me."

She pulled out Ciaran's ring and took a moment to examine it. "Don't let it touch the surface." She tossed it overboard, but this time I was ready. I followed the ring's arc with my eye and reached my hand out. I focused on a single droplet of water in the sea and pulled at it with my mind. It lifted into the air without any struggle. I pulled at another droplet, and it

followed instantly. I gathered more in my mind, shaping them into a narrow thread. They spun up from the sea obediently, forming into an orb of water. I directed the orb to envelope the ring as it fell. It splashed into my sphere with little fanfare. And that's where things started getting difficult. The weight of the water pushed against my mind. I knew that the ring itself would simply fall through my sphere if I didn't act. I drew my hand into a fist and sucked my breath in. The orb began to freeze around the edges, forming a delicate icy globe that encapsulated everything inside of it. Ciaran's ring bobbed around in the water inside. My head started to pound. I breathed out slowly and pulled my fist toward my chest, willing the ice sphere to follow. It did for a moment, but I faltered, and the entire thing slipped from my grasp. The ice sphere with Ciaran's ring plunged downward. Majorelle didn't

hesitate. She flicked her index finger in the air, and the sphere reversed direction and flew to her hand immediately. "Not bad," she said.

"Not enough," I panted.

"No one expects you to be enough on the first try," she replied. She paused to reconsider her statement. "Perhaps some people do. I keep forgetting to account for how many idiots there are in the world." Another flick of her finger, and the ice melted. The seawater crashed to the deck, leaving Ciaran's ring in her hand. She tucked the ring back into her pocket. "Oh, and look at that." She pointed at the seawater running along the deck at her feet. "Looks like you've got a head start on swabbing the deck." She grinned. "In fact, I'm telling Une that you don't get a mop today. Work on your Dragongift, will you?"

I trudged across the deck, doing my best to ignore the soreness of my muscles and the throbbing headache that wrapped around my skull. The adrenaline had kept me going all night, but it was wearing off pretty quickly.

"Cally!" Ani approached me, carrying two ceramic mugs. "I've been looking for you!" She handed me one of the mugs and I downed the drink without stopping to ask what was in it. Turns out it was a delicious piping-hot bone broth. My sore body welcomed it in greedily. "How did it go?" Ani asked.

"I did it!" I declared. "It wasn't much, but I did it!"

"Well done! I'm so proud of you!" Ani smiled, and it was the most radiant thing I'd ever seen.

"It's no big deal," I attempted modesty, but I noticed my skin had a faint glow. Stupid Dragongift giving away my feelings. If Ani noticed, she didn't say

anything. "Majorelle wants me to keep training for the rest of the day."

"Actually, change of plans." Une approached us, a taut look on her face.

"Why? What's wrong?" I asked.

She nodded at the horizon. A tiny speck floated on the water in the distance, lit by the glow of the rising sun. "See that? It's one of Fortitudo's naval ships. They've spotted us."

"Dragons below," I cursed. "They'll attack us without hesitation."

Une shrugged. "Pirate life." She turned and regarded me with a discerning eye. "But my Queen says that you can't risk being caught in the fight. So we're getting you off the ship now."

Chapter 46

Ani and I raced below deck to collect our few belongings. "Where's Rain?" I asked as I dashed back into the hallway.

As if in answer to my question, a door to my right swung open, and Rain groggily ambled out. "What are you yelling about?" he moaned, reaching for his pouch of unpleasant medicinal spheres.

"Naval ship is on its way," I said, grabbing his arm. "We can't be here when they arrive. It'll blow my cover, if I even manage to live that long."

"Yeah, I guess that'd be a problem," he sighed as he shoved one of the pungent pills into his mouth. "What's the plan?"

"Not sure," Ani ran past us. "But don't be slow." I followed on Ani's heels up the stairs to where Une and Dahlia waited.

"This way," Une said, gesturing us toward the stern. Queen Majorelle stood at the railing. She spun her fingers in the air, as if weaving invisible thread. I peered overboard and saw that she was fashioning a small boat for us out of ice.

"You'll have to hold it together with your Dragongift," Majorelle said. "But we can't afford to lose any of our own boats."

I nodded. "I understand. Thank you." I glanced up at the horizon. The small speck I had seen earlier was a decidedly larger speck now. Rain joined us, looking very much awake. Sunshine was strapped securely to his back. Une lowered a rope over the side of the ship. I nodded at Rain, and he hoisted himself over the

railing first. He slid down the rope with a surprising amount of ease.

Ani moved to follow him, but Dahlia stopped her. "This is for you," she said, presenting Ani with a wooden board. "I noticed you spent a lot of time in the galley learning about smoking meat. I managed to convince Buck to give up one of his planks. I'm sorry it's not much."

"Oh, you didn't have to," Ani accepted it with a somewhat perplexed expression. And with that, she was over the railing and climbing down the rope. Dahlia looked disappointed.

"It's not you," I tried to assure her. "I haven't known Ani for long, but I don't think she has much interest."

"In women?"

"In anyone."

Dahlia sighed. "I understand."

Majorelle reached into her pocket and pulled out a sturdy silver chain. Ciaran's ring hung from it, glistening in the morning light. "Here, young one," she said. "I've put it on a chain so no one of ill repute can cut it from you again." She looped the chain over my head. "Now stay alive long enough to enact your promise," she said.

"You stay alive too," I replied.

She smirked. "That is the plan, yes. Now go." I climbed down the rope as quickly as possible and landed with an undignified grunt on Majorelle's ice boat. The power of her Dragongift thrummed all around me, holding the boat together. I looked up and saluted. She nodded in return, and I felt her Dragongift give the boat one strong push seaward before she withdrew her will. The boat rocked for a

moment as I gathered up my strength. I focused on the small ice vessel, urging it to move as quickly as possible. The *Azure Rover* pulled away from us. Slowly, at first, but picking up speed as it went. On the horizon, the naval ship's silhouette loomed ever larger. And the three of us floated, alone in the Great Sea, buoyed only by a tiny boat made of ice and held together by my will.

Chapter 47

"I never thought I'd die from drowning in an ice boat alongside a secret envoy and a knight, but at least it's not boring," Rain sighed. He unslung Sunshine from over his shoulder and began to play a funeral dirge.

"We're not dead yet," I spoke through clenched teeth. It was taking a lot of concentration to guide the boat.

"We will be if we keep going north instead of south where House Fortitudo is." Rain nodded at the sun, indicating that we were going in the wrong direction. I immediately changed course. The tiny boat lurched under us.

"Sorry," I called out. Neither of them seemed too upset.

"How long until we reach land?" Ani asked.

"Given the storm and the fact that we're in a boat this tiny, I'd say three days." Rain spread his cloak down on the ice and lay on his back. He turned his gaze skyward and plucked out another morose tune. "If we're lucky."

"I don't think I can stay awake for that long," I said. My body was already strained to its limit.

Ani frowned and inspected the boat. It was a sturdy structure that floated easily, and Majorelle had been good enough to give it a hull that cut neatly through the water. Other than that, it didn't have much going for it. "Cally, can you make a mast?"

I furrowed my brow. "Maybe?" I spread my thoughts from the boat into the water around us. The boat itself seemed pretty responsive, but the water was

being a little more stubborn. "The Great Sea is saltwater. It doesn't freeze as easily. Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking if we set up a sail, we might be able to catch the wind and use it to move faster," Ani explained.

Rain sat upright. "That's not a bad idea." He ran his hands along his cloak. "It would be far from perfect, but better than nothing." He stood and pointed at a spot on the boat's icy deck. "You'll want to put it here," he said. He stretched an arm upward. "And make it reach this high." I followed his directions, slowly and painstakingly drawing water from the sea until the boat had a mast and boom to his specifications. He lashed his coat to the mast and gave it a tug. Wind filled the makeshift sail and the boat sped forward. We skimmed over the waves and bounced a few times before settling down, but Rain

somehow managed to control the sail and our direction. "Could be worse," he said hesitantly. "We'll see how long it holds out, but this should cut our travel time in half." I counted out the days in my head. We'd arrive the same day as the Hunters. It wasn't ideal, but it would have to be enough. "You should sleep," Rain said, watching my expression closely.

"What? But you need me to hold this thing together," I protested.

He shrugged. "It won't fall apart immediately. Would rather have you rested in case something bad comes up. I can steer for now."

"Are you sure?" I bit my lip.

Ani placed her hand on my shoulder. "I agree with Rain. It'll be no good if you overwork yourself."

My eyes were already drooping, and my body begged me to give in. "Fine," I finally conceded. "But wake me immediately if anything happens, okay?"

"Yeah, because I'm definitely going to let us all die, just so you can take a nap." Rain rolled his eyes. I wanted to come up with a witty retort, but sleep had already claimed me.

Chapter 48

I dreamt for the first time in over a week. I dreamt of a time when I was much younger and I was first allowed to visit the High Court. Ciaran had been many times, but our stewards had finally decided it was time for me to be presented to the world. They dressed me up in the nicest outfit I had, and brushed out my stubborn red curls until they finally were willing to be braided back. I was every bit the picture of a perfect prince. When we arrived at the High Court, High Queen Ionar greeted us at the entrance and I suddenly felt like the plainest person in the world. High Queen Ionar looked so at home in her resplendent finery: jeweled gown the color of the sea, and silver crown set upon her head. Her hair fell in curls like waves around her, and not the usual mess I had to deal with. I may

have been dressed like royalty, but she WAS royalty. My heart raced. I didn't understand the feeling at the time, but a part of me yearned to be like her. She knew Ciaran by name and seemed at ease with him. I struggled to keep up with them as we walked down the hallway together. The marble floor stretched out in front of us far beyond my vision, and the hall was lined with columns that seemed to reach up to the sky. I thought perhaps if I could just be closer... I walked faster, but no matter how fast I walked, I couldn't catch up with her or Ciaran. As they pulled away from me, I felt more and more like a child. My brother, on the other hand, looked more adult and more mature with every passing second. Our stewards had always said that one of us would be the next High King, but as I saw how calmly Ciaran carried himself and how easily High Queen Ionar accepted him, I already knew that

she'd be passing the crown on to him. I started running, but they still outpaced me. "Ciaran, wait!" I screamed my brother's name. He turned around to face me, and suddenly we were in the guardhouse surrounded by flames. I felt the heat sear into my skin. Beyond the smoke, I could barely make out the silhouettes of Haemon, Milena, and Quis watching. Their outlines shimmered in the inferno.

"Cally." Ciaran smiled at me and I felt my heart twist up in my chest. Around us, the building began to collapse, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Brother, please run," I tried to speak, but my voice had completely disappeared.

Ciaran approached calmly, even as the fire raged around us. He knelt in front of me and touched his forehead to mine. A soft burst of his Dragongift passed

between us. A brief flash of ice in the heat. "I love you, Cally."

"I don't know why," I sobbed, finding my voice again. "I'm not worth anything."

He shook his head and pulled me into a tight embrace. "You are worth everything to me," he said.

"Please run..." I begged as flames leapt up in the guardhouse. The sound of something snapping. I looked up in time to see the roof collapse on us.

Chapter 49

I awoke with a start. Ani was kneeling beside me. "Cally, are you okay?" she asked. Lines of concern etched into her brow. "You were using your Dragongift while you slept."

"Dragons below," I cursed. "I didn't melt the boat, did I?"

She inclined her head to the side. "Other way around, actually." I looked up and saw that the boat had increased in size. Pieces of ice jutted haphazardly in every direction. The sleek design Majorelle had put together was lost amidst a random assortment of icy shapes. Rain sat in the bow, watching me with probing eyes. His cloak hung off a slab of ice that probably used to be the mast.

"Sorry," I muttered. As I sat up, I realized my entire body was covered in a light coat of frost. "How long was I asleep?"

"Two days," Rain said. "We made pretty good time for most of it." He gestured at the strange shape we now floated on. "Until all this."

"Yeah, sorry again," I sighed. "How far away are we?"

"Nearly there," Rain pointed at the night sky. The stars shone like beacons. "In fact, if I'm reading the sky correctly, that weird dark shape on the horizon is House Fortitudo."

I flexed my fingers and reached for my Ocean Dragongift. "I think I can guide us there," I said. Two days of sleep had helped immensely, nightmares notwithstanding.

"And show up on the shore of House Fortitudo in a giant ice boat while still wearing the mark of the Azure Rovers?" Rain arched an eyebrow.

I ran my fingers through my hair and tugged at the blue streak of dye. "Oh right." I peered over the edge of the boat and stared at the silhouette of House Fortitudo. "I can navigate us to that outcropping there," I pointed at a slab of rock that jutted out into the sea. "We can land undetected in the dark and walk the rest of the way." I paused. "After we wash out the blue dye."

Rain shrugged. "Works for me."

Ani nodded in agreement. "Take us there, Cally." I felt a sudden rush of thrill that Ani trusted me, along with a pressing weight of worry that I'd let her down. I pushed the feeling away and began to navigate the boat to the rocky shore. My Ocean Dragongift came to

me immediately, but the oddly-shaped boat did not move across the waves as easily as I had hoped. We bobbed awkwardly through the water in silence. I sent my thoughts through the ice and shaved away the front of the boat in an attempt to make it sleeker. Unfortunately, I lacked Majorelle's knowledge on how to build a boat well, so the benefit was very small. It was enough to get us to the outcropping with some coaxing from my Ocean Dragongift. Sadly, it was not enough to keep the boat from tipping over and emptying us out onto the rocky shore. Ani leapt to her feet immediately and set to checking her armor and equipment.

Rain retrieved his cloak from the mast and slung it across his shoulders. "You should probably hide that," he said, gesturing toward the boat. "Someone might find it."

"Good idea." I placed my hand on the hull and breathed out slowly, willing the ice to lose its form. The boat responded to my thoughts and immediately melted back into seawater. The water splashed across the rocks, leaving behind no hint of the boat that once was. Rivulets of water made their way back to the sea. I counted the days in my head. The Hunters wouldn't be arriving until tomorrow. The night sky was dark and morning was hours away. We still had a chance.

Chapter 50

It was morning by the time we arrived at House Fortitudo. We had washed our hair thoroughly to remove all traces of blue. I had also done my best to organize my clothing into a presentable state, but I still felt like I wasn't dressed well enough to be visiting a House. Neither Ani nor Rain seemed nearly as concerned. All Houses had a tradition of listening to entreaties for the first hour of the day. Several others had arrived before us, so by the time we were called, the hour was nearly up. A guard led us into the main hall for our audience with the head of the House. Prince Warren sat on the throne. I briefly wondered where his older brother High King Jacobi was, but I realized that he was probably still at the High Court

holding the position that Princess Helene was supposed to have taken.

"Welcome," Prince Warren spoke. He sounded polite, but distant. The expression on his face was unreadable, but something about his body language was tense. "And what request would you make of House Fortitudo today?"

Rain bowed so deeply I wondered if his forehead would touch the ground. "I am a bard, my good prince. It would be my honor to supply your halls with music in exchange for food and a night's sleep." He tilted his head towards is. "And for my companions as well."

Prince Warren sighed and a pitying smile crept across his face. "We have musicians for that already. Perhaps your music would be better suited for a nearby tavern?" I held my expression in place, but internally, I

cringed. Rain's music was lively and fun, but his bawdy songs and sharp voice wouldn't be likely to impress anyone here. I shouldn't have expected him to have a working plan.

Rain nodded. "I understand," he said. "We shall take our leave, but please allow me one song as thanks for granting us a moment of your time." He didn't wait for permission. He reached down and lifted Sunshine's third string to the wheel. I had never seen him use that one before. He turned the wheel, and a low, powerful note echoed off the stone walls. It immediately invoked a sense of loneliness. The courtiers in the room shifted uncomfortably, but they were all too polite to stop him. The melody he chose was a surprisingly complicated series of notes, and Ani and I exchanged surprised glances. We had never seen Rain play anything like this before. Uncomfortable stares turned into curious

gazes, and soon became impressed faces as the haunting melody reverberated through the room. Rain took in a slow breath and began to sing. I gasped. His voice held a warmth that was almost palpable. Gone was the harsh twang of his voice shout-singing silly lyrics. Instead, his voice swelled with a power and beauty that I didn't think was possible. So hypnotic was the sound, that I barely even registered the lyrics of his song. I felt myself drawn to him like a flower turning its face toward the sun. Around the room, everyone else seemed as transfixed as me. The song came to an end too soon, and the silence in the room seemed almost cruel. Across the room, Prince Warren blinked slowly, as if awakening from a reverie. A smile broke out across the prince's face. "It seems I misjudged you. I am holding a celebration dinner tomorrow. If you are



willing to provide music, you and your friends may stay the night."

Prince Warren signaled for a guard to lead us to our quarters. The guard took us down a series of halls to a room that I had never been to before. From my last visit to House Fortitudo, I remembered the guest rooms were in the center of the building. We were on the north side facing the sea. I looked at the unassuming decor and realized this must be where the servants slept. I felt like a fool for not figuring it out sooner. Still, servants meant gossip, and I was definitely here for the gossip. I turned to the guard to ask a question, but Ani got ahead of me.

"By the way, Prince Warren mentioned a dinner tonight. I don't suppose the kitchen of the House would like some help?"

The guard nodded. "I'm sure you could ask. Would you like me to take you there?"

"I would," she said. She angled her head away from the guard and winked at me. My heart raced for a second. I wasn't sure if it was because our Dragongifts were connected or not, but without me saying anything, Ani had already made an opening for me to explore unfettered.

The guard led her down the hallway, and I turned to Rain. "Are you-" Rain lay sprawled in an undignified heap on the floor of our room, already asleep. "Alright, that works." I said to no one in particular. I headed down the hallway in the opposite direction that Ani and the guard had gone. I didn't have any destination in mind, so I simply took whichever turn seemed interesting to me. Before long, I found myself in an area with significantly fancier

decorations. Closer to where the royals live, I assumed. As I rounded another corner, I bumped into someone. "Oh, sorry," I said on reflex. I looked up to see who I had walked into, and I felt my breath leave my body. Dark, slicked hair. Severe cheekbones, and an unpleasant scowl. Quis! Even as I pieced together who I was looking at, he was doing the same.

Recognition flickered in his eyes, and he turned and ran.

Chapter 51

I chased after Quis immediately, worried that his longer strides would give him the advantage. Quis, for his part, wasn't making very good use of his head start. He stumbled down the hallway, hesitated at the first turn, and finally dashed into a side room. I threw myself against the door before he had a chance to block it, and burst into the room behind him. I slammed the door shut. "Nowhere to go," I growled.

"You don't scare me," he shot back, but I noticed that he had chosen to put as much space between us as possible.

I ran my hand along the hilt of my dirk. "No, I'm sure I don't scare you," I said calmly. "But I'm not alone. You remember my friend, yes? The one with the golden sword."

He swallowed slowly. "She's here? Where?"

"Closer than you think," I bluffed. I honestly had no idea where either of us were at this point. "But right now it's just us, and I have a few questions."

He backed away and allowed himself to glance out the window that faced the courtyard. We were several stories up, and I wondered if he was contemplating jumping. He must have decided that it wasn't worth the risk, because he moved away and instead opted to shove a chair in front of him. "Ask away, but it won't do you any good," he spat. "It's much too late for you and everyone else here!"

"And what does that mean?"

"The Hunters will take House Fortitudo for their own. And neither you nor your friend with the sword can stop them," he gloated. So Haemon and Milena were here. "Unless you have a dragon," he added with

a smug grin. And Osir. I did my best to hide my reaction. I hoped Sekh had made it here by now, but there was no way to know.

"Who hired you?" I pressed. "You said you have an important master." The door behind me swung open.

"Oh, Quis. You're already here." Prince Warren stood in the hallway. Sunlight shone behind him, lining his visage in shadow. I turned back to the room we were in. It was a luxuriously furnished space, and too late I realized we were in Prince Warren's private study. He turned his eyes on me. "And what are you doing here?"

Quis spoke before I could. "The child is merely lost!" he declared. He crossed the room in a few quick strides and placed his hand on my shoulder. I tried not to flinch as his fingers dug into my skin. He leaned

forward and whispered into my ear "As lost as the prince of House Ars, I'd wager."

I forced a smile and nodded. "Apologies, Prince Warren. I just wanted to explore."

"Next time ask someone to show you around," Prince Warren replied. He didn't sound impressed. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

Quis shoved me out of the study. "Yes, run along child. As quick as you can, now." He shut the door firmly behind him. I turned and sprinted down the hall, doing my best to remember the series of turns I had taken to get here. The decor began to change, and I recognized a few of the rooms I passed. I soon found myself in the hallway the guard had first taken us to. At the end of the corridor, the hall spit into two. Which way had Ani gone?

I reached for my Sky Dragongift and sent a burst of fire into the air. *"Ani!"* I didn't hear any words in response, but my body felt a pull to the left. I followed the instinct and found myself at the top of a set of stairs. I raced down the steps two at a time, and skidded to a halt at the sight of Ani racing up the stairs to meet me.

"Cally!" A burst of flame swirled around her. *"Did you call me?"*

"I did," I panted, turning to run back up the stairs. *"The Hunters are here! With Osir!"*

Ani immediately unsheathed her sword. *"Where? Did you see them?"*

"No," I turned back into the hallway and headed for our room. *"But I saw Quis. He said House Fortitudo was going to fall."*

"Did he say when?" Ani's body began to glow.

"No, but-" the ground beneath us shook, and we heard the sound of the sea crashing against the north wall of House Fortitudo. I pulled out my dirk. *"Best guess? It's happening now."*

Chapter 52

I ran into our quarters and looked out the window. A wall of ice enveloped the north side of House Fortitudo. Waves from the Great Sea surged against the castle, and we could hear the stone walls groan under the weight. "Osir," Ani hissed.

Rain sat up slowly and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "What's going on?" he mumbled. He looked out the window and his eyes widened. "Dragons below..." he whispered.

"Rain!" I grabbed the bard's arm. "The House is under attack! Head to the south side and sound the alarm!"

Rain shook himself out of his stupor and nodded. "Right." He leapt to his feet and dashed from the room.

"What now?" I turned to Ani.

"The Hunters are probably already inside," she said. "Find them." She turned and ran down the hall toward the kitchen.

"How?"

"Same way you found me!" she called over her shoulder. I stood alone in the room listening to the creak of the ice against the building.

I closed my eyes and took a breath. I wasn't exactly certain how I had found her. My Sky Dragongift had connected automatically. I exhaled a flame. "*Find Milena,*" I whispered. I felt a pull in my gut followed by a sudden sickening lurch. I remembered the feel of Milena's fire as she seared a mark into my skin. That was her alright. I steeled myself and followed the pull. My Dragongift led me back through the twisting hallways I had wandered earlier. As I grew closer, I felt

a pounding of flame in the back of my mind. Up ahead, I saw the guard who had first taken us to our quarters. He looked confused.

"What's going on?" he demanded as I ran up to him. "Your friend said we're under attack."

"We are," I confirmed. "What's your name?"

"Kora."

"Kora, where in the castle would you go to kill the most people possible?" I asked.

"Uh," he looked confused. "The courtyard, probably."

"Take me there."

He nodded, and motioned to a small set of stairs. "This way." I followed Kora through a series of narrow corridors until we burst out into the courtyard. We both stared in shock at the scene before us. The ice sheet had climbed up the north wall and now crept

across the sky, threatening to eclipse the sun and encase the entire castle in its frozen embrace. The courtyard was ablaze with fire. Bodies lay strewn across the ground, and dark clouds of smoke billowed around a central figure: Milena. Her silver armor somehow seemed untarnished. "Dragons above," Kora swore. "Did she do all this?"

"Careful," I warned Kora. "She has a Sky Dragongift."

Kora pulled out a crossbow that he kept at his side. "Noted." He took aim and let an arrow fly. Milena glanced in our direction and the arrow burst into flame, landing harmlessly on her as little more than a pile of ashes.

"That's no way to greet a guest," she cooed. Kora responded with another arrow, and she burned that one as easily as the last. "But now you've made me

angry," she said. Her eyes flashed yellow and she flicked her hand out. A burst of flame raced across the courtyard toward Kora.

"Stop!" I leapt in front of the guard and pushed her fire back with my will.

"What-" she stared at me, mouth agape. Kora took the moment to fire off another arrow. It managed to graze her forearm, leaving a thin red line of blood. "How dare you!" she screamed, and summoned a wall of fire. I pushed it back, but her anger overtook me and I stumbled back. Behind me, I heard Kora groan. The fire must have hit him too. The flames parted and Milena strode through. Her eyes widened in recognition when she saw me. "Oh, that's fun." She smirked. "Are you a Dragoncynn now? Did Ani and Sekh take you in like a little lost child?" She grabbed my shoulder and shoved me to the ground. My dirk fell

from my hand. "Your Dragongift is still too young to best mine," she hissed. Her body lit up red. "Let me show you the difference between you and I."

Chapter 53

It took me a second to recognize the screaming I heard as my own. Milena poured her fire into my bones, and with it her hatred and her gleeful malice. I pushed back with as much strength as I could summon, but she overpowered me with ease. My vision began to blur as I burned from the inside.

"Cally, hang on," a voice came to me through the inferno. And suddenly the fire was gone. My vision slowly came back into focus and I saw Ani bearing down on Milena, sword in one hand, and fire in the other. Ani's golden blade crashed into Milena's silver one, and Milena shot back with several bursts of flames. Ani brushed each one off, pressing forward without hesitation. I looked down at my body. My Dragongift had protected me from burning, but I was

covered in soot and sweat. Kora! I spun around and searched for the guard. He lay on the ground groaning. His metal armor had deflected Milena's initial blast, but the heat of wearing it was now searing his skin. I tore off his breastplate as quickly as possible, and I saw his body relax as soon as I did. His crossbow lay on the ground beside him. I loaded an arrow into it and pointed it at Milena. She and Ani darted across the courtyard, clashing blades and shooting fire in turns. Milena's armor left very few spaces open. I slowed my breathing as I waited for the right moment. Ani's movements were as fluid as ever, but Milena's were a relentless barrage of powerful hits - each one overflowing with fury. It was impossible to tell how she was going to move. The courtyard shimmered in the heat, and smoke obscured my sight. I looked up and saw that the ice ceiling was almost complete. We were

nearly sealed in. If we didn't die from the fire, we would die from the smoke. I turned my attention back to Ani and Milena. Neither of them seemed to have the upper hand. Milena brought her sword down, and Ani swung to the side to dodge it. Her foot caught on a stone and she wobbled. Milena saw an opening, but so did I. She leapt towards Ani as I let the arrow fly. It found its mark in a joint on her armor, burying itself in her outer thigh. Milena screamed - pain mingled with fury. She stumbled forward and fell to one knee. Ani wasted no time in disarming her. Milena's sword flashed brilliant silver as it sailed through the air and clattered harmlessly on the courtyard ground. She attempted to reach for it, but found herself face-to-face with the tip of Ani's sword. She glared at Ani, but said nothing.

I let out a sigh of relief and ran to meet Ani. "*Glad you could make it.*" I said.

"*Sorry for the wait,*" Ani replied. "*I sent the workers from the kitchen to try to slow down the ice.*" I glanced up at the ramparts that surrounded the courtyard. The ice ceiling had nearly reached the south wall, but on the east end, clusters of people poured what appeared to be hot oil on the stone walkway. They worked in teams, pouring oil, then retreating behind the safety of wooden barrels repurposed as shields. The ice hissed and shattered every time it touched the hot, oil-slicked stones. Among the clouds of steam, I made out the silhouette of Rain leading a small group of soldiers on the west end. Each carried a small axe in one hand and a torch in the other. It was a desperate effort, but it appeared to be working. We still weren't sealed off

completely, and the ice wasn't making any more gains.

"Did you find Haemon and Osir?" Ani asked.

"Not yet," I said.

Ani turned her sword slowly under Milena's neck.

"Where are they?"

"Die," Milena hissed. She inhaled and summoned a column of fire that engulfed the three of us in its blast. Ani and I immediately pushed the inferno back, but when the flames subsided, Milena had disappeared. A trail of uneven steps lined in soot and blood led to the front gate.

"Should we follow her? Or look for the others?" I asked. An icy chill ran through the air and the dark silhouette of a dragon appeared in the smoke that billowed around us. I sighed. "Well, I think I found Osir."

Chapter 54

Osir stalked through the flames, blue scales shimmering like the ocean surging against the shore. "I hate pests," the dragon hissed, turning its gaze on Ani. "And you're the worst of them. You may have escaped from me years ago, but today is the day I finally crush you."

Ani readied herself into a fighting stance and pointed her sword at Osir. "You can try." With a casual flick of the claw, Osir sent a surge of ice across the courtyard. Ice crept up Ani's leg and bound her to the ground. She struck it with her sword, but the ice held firm. Osir roared and leapt towards her, teeth bared. I reached for my Ocean Dragongift and dispersed my will through the ice. The ice melted and

Ani managed to break free and dodge Osir's attack in time. The dragon spun around.

"You!" An angry hiss that sounded like hail crashing against the ground.

"Me! Been a while, huh?" I waved and forced a smile onto my face. "Shall we dance?" Osir was not impressed. The well in the center of the courtyard rumbled and a surge of water burst forth, drenching me. I pushed back with my Ocean Dragongift, but it was all I could manage to keep the water at bay. No matter how hard I pushed, I couldn't turn the wave back on Osir. Ani took the opportunity to attack, but her sword barely made a scratch on the dragon's hardened scales. She was undeterred. She wrapped herself in flames and aimed another punch. The fire managed to singe Osir's scales and the dragon recoiled in pain.

"Give up, and I will make your deaths painless," Osir roared.

"That's a terrible offer," I retorted. I followed Ani's lead and reached for my Sky Dragongift. I blasted Osir with as much fire as I could summon. The damage was minimal, but at least it was something. Ani and I worked in turns to make sure that Osir was always under fire, but we barely seemed to be making a difference. I allowed myself a quick glance at the ramparts above and was pleased to see that the people there were actually managing to push the ice back. We weren't winning against Osir, but we were definitely providing a distraction. Osir seemed to notice as well. The dragon swung its tail towards me, and with it came a rush of water. I found myself instantly submerged in the deluge. My feet lifted off the ground and I was carried off by the wave. The water raced

around the courtyard and swept up Ani in its flow. I strained to push the water back, but the crushing weight pressed against me from all sides. I felt my lungs strain for air and my thoughts began to jumble up. I stretched my hand out, but I couldn't reach Ani. I made one last desperate attempt to swim towards her, to no avail. My vision was little more than a dark blur of shapes. But even as I felt life slip from my body, I saw a glimmer of light shine through the water. The sound of something shattering muffled and dampened by the wave I was caught up in. And suddenly I found myself released from my watery prison as if the bubble I was being held in had burst. I fell to the ground, gasping for air. At my side, I saw Ani coughing up water. And above us, the glorious sight of Sekh barreling through the ice ceiling.

Chapter 55

Osir barely had time to react before Sekh came crashing down, teeth bared and wings spread. "Stay out of this, Preservationist!" Osir hissed. Sekh ignored Osir's demand and sent a burst of flame across the courtyard. The slick stones sizzled with steam. Osir spun around, straining to see anything through the billowing white clouds. Sekh leapt through the steam with a roar. The Sky Dragon's claws hooked into the Ocean Dragon's side, and the two of them went tumbling. I scrambled out of the way just in time to dodge them as they rolled across the courtyard. I stumbled over to Ani.

"Are you okay?" I gasped.

She nodded and rubbed her head. "Where's my sword?" I found it on the ground nearby and handed it

to her. "Thank you." She stood and scanned the scene in front of her. Sekh and Osir were still tangled in battle, wrestling through clouds of steam and across broken debris. "When dragons fight, it's best to get out of the way," she advised. We raced to the nearest door where I stumbled over Kora.

"Kora!" I knelt and slung his arm over my shoulder. "Let's get you out of here."

The guard numbly allowed me to drag him to his feet. "What..." He pointed at the dragons.

"Yeah, sorry to spring it on you like this, but dragons are real. The good news is not all of them want us dead. You can extrapolate the bad news from that. Don't feel bad; I reacted the same way," I said before forcing him into the relative safety of the nearest entryway. "What next?" I asked Ani.

"Where's Haemon?" she asked.

I closed my eyes and sent my Ocean Dragongift into the air. I wasn't as familiar with Haemon, but I assumed there weren't any other people in the castle with an Ocean Dragongift. I searched through the castle until I felt the force of waves pushing back against me. "Prince Warren's study!" I turned and ran down the corridor with Ani following close at my heels. The stones around us trembled with the weight of the two dragons fighting in the courtyard. Furniture fell in our path, and rubble shook free from the ceiling. We dodged it as well as we could, but it slowed our journey considerably. "There!" I pointed at the door that led to Prince Warren's study. Ani immediately cloaked herself in fire and kicked the door in. She burst into the room and went straight for Haemon. He had only enough time to raise his arm in self-defense before she brought her sword down on him. The sound of metal

on metal rang out in the tiny room as he stumbled back from the force. A huge dent in his armor glowed orange where her blade had connected with him. He swung his sword at her, and she dodged his attack. I took a moment to scan the rest of the room. Prince Warren and Quis stood at the far end, mouths agape. Whatever they were doing earlier, they certainly hadn't expected Ani. She currently had the upper hand against Haemon. His eyes darted around the room until they landed on me. He leapt toward me and snatched me up in his arms.

"Don't move, or the girl dies," he warned. Ani hesitated, but I didn't.

"Not this time," I hissed. I summoned my Sky Dragongift and shot a burst of flames into the air.

"Agh-!" Haemon released me as I sent a stream of fire racing down his armor. I spun out of his grasp and

aimed another blast at him. He deflected it with his sword, but that gave Ani the opening she needed. With a swing of her blade, she disarmed Haemon. His sword clattered harmlessly on the stone floor. Another firey punch, and he fell to the ground beside his weapon. He groaned, but didn't get back up.

I allowed myself a sigh of relief, but the relief was short-lived. The castle shook again. I raced to the window in time to see Osir punch a claw through Sekh's throat.

Chapter 56

"Sekh!" I screamed. Somewhere inside of me, I felt my fire flicker and dim as if a strong gust of wind was blowing through me. Ani winced and I realized she felt it too. Osir dragged a talon across Sekh's throat. Fire burst from Sekh's open wound. Osir aimed another strike at Sekh, but Sekh rolled to the side just in time. The Sky Dragon stood slowly, body quivering with pain. Osir left no time for Sekh to recover. Water across the courtyard spun up into the air to form icy lances. The first one pierced Sekh's wing. Sekh managed to bat the second one aside, but it was clear that the Sky Dragon was losing strength. Sekh's body began to glow red, and I heard Ani gasp. "What?" I turned to her. "What's happening?"

She clenched her fist and steeled her eyes. "Don't look away, Cally." At the sight of Sekh's glowing body, Osir took a hesitant step back. Sekh leapt forward, claws open, and sparks flying. The Sky Dragon transformed into a whirlwind of fire and fury that enveloped the Ocean Dragon. Osir desperately tried to escape the flames, but there was nowhere to go. The Ocean Dragon's body glowed blue and disappeared into the flames. The fire churned, water hissed into steam, and both dragons disappeared into the air, leaving behind nothing but an uncertain silence. I felt my body begin to tremble.

"Sekh..." I could barely hear my own voice.

Ani placed her hand on my shoulder. "Returned to the earth, and brought Osir along."

Tears welled up in my eyes. "I don't understand..."

"It's okay," Ani wrapped her arms around me. "I'm here."

"I-" I gasped at the sight of Haemon behind us. He had woken up, and he ran toward us with his sword held aloft. "Ani!" Ani spun around, but she wasn't quick enough. Haemon had the advantage. He brought his sword down on her, but stopped short and lurched to the side. As he turned, I saw an arrow embedded deep in his arm. Behind him, an impressive-looking man with a longbow stood in the doorway. Silver threads speckled his brown hair, and the wrinkles etched into his face looked like each one represented a hard-won battle. His regal stance and confident expression told me immediately that he was royalty of some sort.

"Looks like I arrived just in time." He smiled. A confident grin of someone accustomed to being the hero.

Prince Warren's face lit up. "Jacobi!" This man was High King Jacobi? He was older than I remembered, but I figured it was my fault for not remembering that the passage of time is a thing. Haemon for his part was not as impressed as I was. He yanked the arrow from his arm and threw it across the room.

"This isn't over," he growled before leaping out the window. I reached for him, but it was too late. He sailed through the air and thrust his arm forward. A wave of water surged forth from the well in the courtyard beneath and cushioned his descent. With a flick of his hand, he changed the direction of his fall and disappeared into the well. A cap of ice grew over the top of the well, sealing off anyone from following

him. I briefly considered melting the ice with my Dragongift, but I realized that I was still supposed to be incognito.

I turned back and scanned the room. "Where did Quis go?" I asked.

Prince Warren looked surprised. "He was right here..."

Ani's expression hardened. "Milena's gone too," she said grimly.

"It sounds like I have a lot to catch up on," High King Jacobi mused. "Starting with you two. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

Chapter 57

I let out a slow exhale. "We are..." My identity was still safe, but there was no good way to explain away what had just happened. On top of that, I still suspected that Prince Warren might be a conspirator. Ani and I exchanged uneasy glances. "...concerned citizens," I said.

High King Jacobi was not impressed. "You're going to have to do better than that," he said.

I hung my head. "I'm from one of the branches of House Ars. A very distant cousin. And this," I nodded at Ani, "is a mercenary I hired."

High King Jacobi folded his arms across his chest. "That still doesn't explain what you're doing here."

"I was at the Confirmation Tournament," I blurted out. It was easier when I was telling the truth. "That

man in the black armor you just shot. And another woman. I saw them there, and I suspected they were the ones who killed Helene and Ciaran." My voice choked a bit as I said my brother's name, but neither Jacobi nor Warren seemed to notice. "But I didn't know who to go to," I said. That part was also true.

High King Jacobi nodded sympathetically. "Of course. With the Queen of Ars' current condition, and both princes lost after the Confirmation Tournament, your House wouldn't have been able to back you up."

"So I hired a mercenary," I explained, pointing back at Ani. "And together we tracked them here."

"But there was fire," Prince Warren spoke up. "When you fought that man in the black armor. I saw you both using it."

"I'm as confused as you are," I said, desperately searching for an excuse. "Maybe it was you, Prince Warren?"

"What do you mean?" High King Jacobi looked perplexed.

"House Fortitudo has the blessings of the Sky Dragon," I said. "Perhaps Prince Warren's Dragongift somehow manifested itself around us while we fought. Like a form of protection." Both men looked skeptical, but neither offered a counter theory.

"And what about your friend?" Prince Warren asked. "The singer?"

"A bard we met along the way," I said. "We saved him from some bandits, and we decided having him around would make us less conspicuous."

"You've been very resourceful," High King Jacobi said thoughtfully. "But I suppose even distant cousins

of House Ars are skilled in the art of making friends." He smiled, and it felt as if the room itself grew lighter. "Either way, I thank you for your service. It's only thanks to you that House Fortitudo has been kept safe and my brother alive." He sighed. "I do apologize for not arriving sooner. My ship was supposed to be here yesterday, but we ran into some pirates on the journey back."

I attempted to plaster a look of concern on my face. "That sounds terrible. Not too much trouble, I hope?"

He waved off my concern. "A bit of a skirmish, but we were interrupted by a storm. We drove the pirates into it, after which I can only assume they sank."

I nodded. "Yeah, that sounds probable." I paused for a moment as I tried to remember a question I had had earlier. Oh, there it was. "By the way," I said. "I

hope I'm not intruding, but what are YOU doing here, sir?"

"I don't understand the question," High King Jacobi replied. "I live here."

"But you're the High King. Shouldn't you be in the High Court?" I pressed.

"Ah, I see the confusion," he said. "You must have been very focused on your mission not to have heard the news. I am retired. My crown has been passed on to the new High Queen."

"They chose a new High Court already?"

"They have," High King- rather, just King Jacobi said. "And to that end, I bring great news, brother."

"What do you mean?" Prince Warren asked.

"The Seven Houses have decided that you shall be the next High King. Congratulations."

Chapter 58

"This banquet was meant to be a celebration," Prince Warren said. He stood at the head of the table, goblet held high. "And although yesterday we suffered great losses, tonight, we still celebrate." Throughout the dining hall, we raised our glasses as well. "We celebrate that although we came under attack, this House and its people remained true to its guiding principles of bravery and valor. We celebrate the lives of those who we lost as heroes. And we celebrate the return of my brother King Jacobi after ten years of loyal service to the Kingdom."

Jacobi stood beside Prince Warren and held his goblet up. "And, younger brother, we also celebrate you as the next High King. May the dragons of the sky turn the sun's light towards you." We echoed the

blessing and drank. Prince Warren nodded, and Rain began to play a lively song on Sunshine. The overall mood was one of relief, and Rain's music dissolved any tension that might have been left over. It would take House Fortitudo some time to rebuild, but tonight was a much-needed celebration. For our part, Ani and I stayed out of the spotlight as much as possible. We had politely requested that our contribution be kept out of public knowledge, and Warren and Jacobi had obliged.

Ani stood in the corner, doing her best to blend with the shadows. "I still don't like it," she muttered. "You're sure that Prince Warren knew Quis by name?"

"I mean, I think so," I said. "But that doesn't mean they were working together."

She sighed and scanned the room. "Someone on the inside betrayed House Fortitudo. The attack was

too well-coordinated. And that someone might be here right now."

"You're probably right," I confessed. "But it's not like I can just ask Prince Warren about Quis. We're already walking a razor's edge here after we both used our Sky Dragongifts in front of him."

"Do you think they didn't believe you?" Ani asked.

"In the Kingdom, only royals have a Dragongift. And members of House Ars only have the Ocean Dragongift. They can't accept that either of us would have a Sky Dragongift," I said. "But I don't want to push our luck. We need to lie low."

"Tell that to him," Ani scoffed and nodded at Rain. The bard was making his usual rounds, stopping to help himself to a drink from every cup he came across. His gait was sloppy, and his journey seemed to have no real destination in mind.

He wandered up to Warren and snatched the prince's cup from his hands. "To victory!" Rain cheered and thrust the goblet into the air. He stumbled a few paces and attempted to drink, but most of the wine didn't find a place in his mouth.

"I think that's enough," I raced over to him and gently removed the cup from his hands. "No more for tonight, okay?"

Rain pouted and squeezed my shoulders, "No! I can handle-" his complaint was cut off by a sharp burp and a quick heave. "I don't feel good," he reached for King Jacobi's shirt sleeve.

"Nope!" I dragged him away from Warren and Jacobi before he could do something unthinkable. "Let's take a walk. Some fresh air might be good," I said. He obediently followed me outside. The moon provided enough light for us to navigate the walkways,

but it still proved to be difficult for Rain. His steps were unsteady, and he put more weight on my shoulders than his own feet.

As we approached the edge of the sea, his eyes lit up. "Let's swim!" he cheered. Before I could stop him, he ran to a nearby dock with every intention to jump off the end. His plans were stymied by a sturdy rope used to tie a small boat to the mooring. His feet tangled in the ropes, and he fell with a resounding thud. "Stupid!" he screamed at the ropes, and immediately began untying them from the dock.

"Wait!" I raced toward him, but he made unexpectedly quick work of the rope. By the time I reached him, the small sailboat had been released into the Great Sea. It drifted away at a lazy pace, carried by the tide. I sighed. "Rain..."

"Don't do it again!" He shook his fist at the rope, ignoring the boat completely.

I sighed. "Yeah, time for bed, I think." I took him back inside and guided him through the halls to our room. Ani was waiting for me when we arrived. "Oh, hey," I said. "Is the party over already?"

She shrugged. "Prince Warren said he was going to retire to bed. Apparently he needs rest."

"I'll say," I exhaled. "Today was a lot."

Ani shook her head. "No, he said he needs it for tomorrow morning. The leaders of the Seven Houses are coming to House Fortitudo to crown him High King."

Chapter 59

"Tomorrow?" I gasped. "That's fast."

Ani nodded. "They want to get this over with as soon as possible, I'm sure," she said. "The Preserve appears to be under a great deal of duress." I lay Rain on the bed and covered him with a blanket. He muttered something under his breath about more drinks and groaned. "What are you going to do?" Ani asked.

I sat on my bed and pulled out Ciaran's ring. It glinted in the moonlight, as real and solid as ever. "I don't know," I said. I turned the ring slowly and stared at the blue gem. "What if..." I took a slow breath. "What if I just let him have it?"

"What?"

"What if I just let Prince Warren be the new High King?"

"He might be in league with the Hunters," Ani's brow furrowed.

"But we don't know that," I countered. "I can't understand why anyone would organize an attack on their own House," I said. "It makes no sense."

Ani nodded. "It doesn't. But it's my job to keep the Preserve safe from Hunters. I can't allow even the possibility of the Hunters taking over ruling this place."

I sighed. "You're right. But I'm exhausted. Can we talk about this more in the morning?"

Ani looked like she wanted to say more, but she stopped herself. "Sure," she said. "In the morning." She blew out the lone candle in our room. I crawled into bed and fell asleep almost immediately.

Something wasn't right. I sat bolt upright in bed and cocked my head to the side to listen. A slight wind echoed through the hallways. The Great Sea rolled gently against the north side of House Fortitudo. But... no rhythmic steps. No familiar thump of guards walking through the hallways on their rounds. I looked around the room. One of its occupants was missing. I leapt from my bed and raced down the hallway. My bare feet pounded against the stone floor. I winced a little at the pain, and redoubled my efforts. Down the plain corridors and into the fancier ones. Past Prince Warren's study and toward the sleeping quarters for the royals. In the dimly lit hallway, I could just make out the shapes of two guards, slumped to the floor. Beyond them, another figure moved silently toward a window. A familiar bundle was strapped to his back.

At the sound of my footsteps, the figure froze. He tilted his head back and glanced at me over his shoulder.

"Cally."

I slowed to a halt and did my best to disguise the fact that I was out of breath. "Rain."

"I expected you to be asleep." His voice was calm and measured.

I swallowed hard and nodded at the guards. "Are they dead?"

Rain sighed and would have rolled his eyes if he could have found the energy. "They should be fine come morning. I didn't give them enough to be lethal."

"Give them what?" I asked cautiously. "You weren't carrying anything..."

"I take poison every day." His voice was cold and flat. "I've built up a tolerance to it, but a single drop of my blood is enough to put someone to sleep."

"And Prince Warren? I suppose he received more than a drop?" Rain didn't bother to respond. We both already knew the answer. "Are you with the Hunters?"

"What?"

"Who hired you?"

"What kind of assassin would I be if I told you that?"

I tried another tack. "If you were just going to kill Prince Warren, why did you fight alongside us to protect the castle?"

Rain's eyes glimmered in the low light, and something resembling a smile crept across his face. "It does me no good to see a strategic position fall to an enemy force. I still live in the Kingdom, after all."

"You used me."

He shrugged. "We used each other. Call it even." He turned away and resumed his journey toward the

window. He opened it and reached out. A rope hung just within his reach. He gave it a test tug before swinging out the window with ease. I raced to the window and looked down. The boat he had loosed in a drunken stupor earlier was conveniently caught in a small nook against the castle walls. It bobbed back and forth in the water patiently.

I bit back a curse. "You hold your wine better than I expected," I said.

He didn't bother to look up at me. "Oh, I never drink." He paused for a moment, then loosened his grip, slid down the rope, and landed in the boat with a muffled thud. He immediately unfurled the sail on the boat and navigated it out into the open water. I tried to will the water to pull the boat back, but it was too far away and I was too exhausted. "A word of advice: I'd run, if I were you," he called up to me. "They'll

probably blame you for this." And with that, he turned his back to me and steered the boat into the dark waters. The last I saw of him was the soft golden glow of Sunshine at his side as he disappeared into the night.

Chapter 60

"Ani!" my body lit up with an orange glow as I raced back to our sleeping quarters. I didn't care if I woke anyone. It was too much of an emergency. I felt Ani's fire calling back to me. By the time I reached the room, she was awake and alert.

"Cally, what's wrong?"

"It's Prince Warren," I gasped. "He's dead. Assassinated."

Ani immediately began to pack her few belongings.

"Then we have to go."

I shook my head. "No, we're not running away. With Prince Warren gone, I have to stay."

Ani nodded. "Then what do we do next?"

"I'm not sure," I confessed. "But if someone wants Prince Warren dead that badly, we've got to find out why."

"How did he die?"

"Poison. In his drink tonight."

A light appeared behind me in the doorway. "Poison left by you, no doubt." King Jacobi stood in the hallway, a flame dancing on his fingers.

"King Jacobi!" I frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"Searching for my brother's killers," he replied. His voice was level. "I couldn't sleep tonight. Something felt wrong. And so I went for a walk, only to stumble upon two sleeping guards outside Warren's room." He fixed his gaze on me. "You took my brother's cup at the banquet tonight. That was when you poisoned him."

"No," I protested feebly. "Rain did it. He-"

Jacobi folded his arms across his chest. "Ah, so it was that singer? The one you claimed to use so you could travel undetected?"

I sighed. "He tricked us and ran away."

"And how can I be certain you're not tricking me now? How do I know you didn't use some poor bard as a cover, then dispose of him afterwards?" Jacobi glared.

"We would have run away a long time ago if that were the case," I said. "King Jacobi, please listen to reason. If someone is attacking House Fortitudo, you could be in danger."

Jacobi examined me carefully. "You may be right," he said. "Or you may be attempting to cover your tracks with false concern. Until I can sort things out,

I'm going to have to keep you locked in House Fortitudo's prison."

Ani's hand flew to the hilt of her sword. "You think we'd let you do that?" King Jacobi's Dragongift burned even brighter.

"I don't think you'll have much of a choice," he said. All the warmth was drained from his voice.

I held my hand up. "It's okay," I said. "We mean you no harm, so we won't resist. Lead the way." Ani and I stepped into the hallway to find several guards waiting for us just outside the door. I exhaled slowly. At least we had managed to avoid a fight. I was pretty sure Ani could take on all the guards at once, but it certainly wouldn't have been a good look for us. The guards escorted us down several flights of stairs to a rather unpleasant cell with a locked gate. One of the

guards unlocked the cell and Ani and I both entered without protest.

"The leaders of the Seven Houses will be here in the morning," Jacobi said. "We will decide what to do with you then." He and his soldiers left, leaving a single guard to watch over us in the darkness.

Chapter 61

I sighed and attempted to find a comfortable spot on the moldy stone floor. After some fruitless searching, I had to conclude that the cell had not been build for comfort. "Sorry about all of this," I said. "It's my fault for trusting Rain."

"I should have seen it," Ani said. "When we first met, I sensed a killing intent, but I thought it was the bandits. It must have been him."

I laughed. "We probably saved their lives, huh? There's an irony."

"At least we can assume Prince Warren wasn't behind the attack from the Hunters," Ani said.

I groaned. "I guess, but who, then? I was so sure that Quis was here to see him."

"Quis? That unsavory fellow with the black hair?"

The guard standing outside our cell injected himself into our conversation. I looked up in surprise.

"Kora! What are you doing here?"

"I volunteered. Everyone else was happy to let me do it, seeing as it's a very unpleasant hour." His eyes darted around the prison furtively before he leaned in to whisper. "I know you're not guilty. I saw the two of you fighting that dragon. You wouldn't have laid your lives on the line like that if you simply wanted to kill Prince Warren." He glanced at the entrance and lowered his voice even more. "And I know that fire I saw in the courtyard was yours."

"Oh, uh..." I looked to the side.

Kora laughed, but it sounded more tired than amused. "Please, it's been a very taxing day for me. Do me the honor of being truthful."

Ani shrugged. "There's no use hiding it, Cally." She snapped, and a small fire leapt up between her fingers. "Besides, we need his help."

I hung my head. "You're right." I turned back to Kora. "We both have a Sky Dragongift. It's a long story, but I promise I'll explain it when this is all over. What was that about Quis?"

"You think he's up to something, right?" Kora asked. "He's been an advisor to House Fortitudo for the past few years, and he always sort of skulked about and hid from visitors."

"Well, that explains why I didn't recognize him," I said. "Kind of a strange thing to do, though."

"He always had an air about him like he was afraid of getting caught. None of us know how he did it, but he somehow managed to work his way up to being King Jacobi's personal aide a couple months ago."

Kora wrinkled his nose. "We thought it was some sort of dumb political choice, but maybe it's worse than that."

My mind began to race. "But if King Jacobi is his master, then..." I shut my eyes and tried to piece together what was happening. "Jacobi sold out his own House? But he shot Haemon. I don't understand."

"Maybe to hide evidence of his betrayal," Ani suggested.

Kora looked troubled. "I don't want to suspect my master," he said. "But I don't want to suspect you, either."

"Then we find a way to verify the truth," Ani said.

I clambered to my feet and began to pace back and forth in the cell. "First I have to warn the other Houses."

Kora held his hand up to stop me. "I doubt they'd believe you," he said. "It's kind of your word against the former High King. No offense, but a distant cousin from a branch of House Ars isn't going to get much attention."

I bit my lip in frustration. Kora was right. "Then we play his game and beat him a it."

"How do you intend to do that?" Ani asked.

I turned to the guard. "Kora, can you let us out of here? I'm sorry, it's a lot to ask, but I have to prepare before morning gets here."

The guard pulled out a key and smiled. "Happy to help."

Chapter 62

The guest rooms for royals were exactly as I remembered them. I stared into a mirror and brushed my hair out slowly. The face that stared back at me was nearly unrecognizable. All my features were the same, but everything about me felt wearier. I peeled off the leather armor that Yolante had equipped me with. The weight of it had given me a sense of comfort, and I didn't like losing it. I undid the chain from around my neck and slipped the ring onto my finger. It was heavier than I remembered. When Ciaran wore it, it looked so right. On me, it seemed much too large. I twisted it nervously, hoping it would somehow find a position to fit, but no such luck. I gave up on the ring and dressed myself as quickly as possible. It had been a year since our last stay in House Fortitudo. I hoped

that at the very least, the clothes we left behind on the last visit would fit me. As luck would have it, they fit me even better than before. I remember complaining about how large my suit was on our last visit. Ciaran had promised I'd grow into it. My heart ached for the chance to tell him he was right. The more I thought about what was coming next, the harder it was to concentrate. I placed my hand on the door handle and stopped. My hand was shaking. "Ani?" I called out.

"Yes?"

"I can't open the door."

I felt the handle move in my hand and the door swung open slowly. Ani stood on the other side. "Are you okay?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm terrified." My entire body was trembling. "I never wanted this."

Ani knelt in front of me. "I know this is difficult. And I'm sorry that it's come to you in such a way." She took my hand in hers and sent a pulse of warmth through my body. "But I am by your side."

"Sun's coming up." Kora stuck his head in the doorway "I can hear them raising the front gate. The rest of the leaders of the Seven Houses must be arriving." He looked at me and his face paled. "Dragons above, you're the lost prince." His voice cracked. "How did I not see it before?"

"You weren't expected to," I assured him. I touched the ring on my hand and twisted it around my finger. Still not a good fit. I pushed the thought from my mind before it had a chance to consume me. "You said the leaders of the Seven Houses have arrived?" I took a breath and exhaled quickly. "I think it's time we greeted them."

Kora nodded. "This way, your majesty." The guard took us down a series of corridors that were familiar to me. Up ahead was the meeting room where the leaders of the Seven Houses would be meeting. The doors were shut, which meant the meeting had already begun. Two guards were posted outside. They immediately reached for their weapons, but Kora and Ani were faster. Ani disarmed the first one, and Kora pointed his sword at the second one's chest.

"Stand down," I said. Ani and Kora obliged. I turned to the two guards. "I know you're only doing your job, so I won't consider it an insult that you tried to attack me." I held up my hand to show off Ciaran's ring. Their eyes widened in recognition. "I'll be entering through here." I turned to Ani. "Do you think you can find another way in? Sneak in and cover me in case anything happens." Ani nodded and ducked into a

nearby shadow. I pressed my ear to the door and strained to listen to the conversation inside.

"I agree it's a dire proposition, but we live in dire times." King Jacobi's voice. "With such strange attacks coming from an unknown enemy, the new High Queen will need my expertise. I am simply suggesting that I take the position of High King until we can better understand the forces we are up against." Another voice replied. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but they sounded unimpressed. "That may be," King Jacobi said in response. "But what other options do we have?"

Aha. And there was the timing I needed. I waved at Kora. He and the two other guards immediately opened the doors for me to reveal a room made of carved marble and stone. At the far end was a long table where the leaders of the Seven Houses sat. Two

empty seats were set at the head of the table. For the High King and High Queen. To the immediate left and right of those seats sat King Jacobi and High Queen Ionar. Representatives from the other Houses lined the table, although I noticed that House Ars did not have anyone present. I didn't have much time to wonder where the stewards of House Ars were, though. All eyes turned toward the door as soon as it opened. With a final deep breath, I steeled my gaze and entered the room.

"Dragons above," King Jacobi swore. I allowed myself a small sense of satisfaction at his dismay.

"Fellow leaders of the Seven Houses," I spoke. My voice echoed off the marble walls and filled the room. "I am Prince Callan, and as the second son of House Ars, I claim my rightful position as the next High King."

Chapter 63

To their credit, the leaders of the Seven Houses managed to hide their shock very well. King Jacobi was unerringly calm on the surface, but the look in his eyes betrayed a much more panicked emotion. "As the second son of House Ars, I claim my rightful position as High King." I spoke with more confidence than I felt. My heart was pounding, but I didn't let my expression waver. The leaders remained silent. I could see each of them was waiting for someone else to act first.

"Prince Callan." King Jacobi was the first to speak. Of course. "You forfeited your position already."

"Circumstances have changed," I replied coolly. "That was a luxury afforded to me by my brother's standing. But as the only eligible candidate for High



King, I rescind my forfeit." I allowed a small smile to creep across my face. "Surely you'd like a vacation after ten years." King Jacobi was not amused. I hadn't expected him to be.

"What makes you think you're suitable for this position?" At the far end of the table sat the king of Iustitia. Majorelle's so-called father. My brain reminded me at the last second that his name was Brando.

"I am merely following the guidelines set in place by the esteemed Seven Houses, King Brando," I said. I wondered if he knew his daughter was Queen of the Pirates. I wondered if now was a good time to tell him. I decided to save that bit of knowledge for later. "Besides," I held up my hand to show off the Ocean Dragon ring. "Ciaran gave his ring to me willingly, and along with it, the right to rule."

"How can we know that's the truth?" High Queen Ionar spoke up finally. Her voice reverberated through the room like a song. "I willed that ring to your brother, but he never confided in me who he would will it to."

"Precisely!" Jacobi edged in, sensing a weak spot. "We only have your word for it. For all we know, you had him killed and took the ring for yourself!"

I felt my body heat up at the accusation. Fire leapt into my lungs and ice surged through my veins. If I said anything, I risked my already tenuous standing. If I said nothing, I was afraid my Dragongift would give it away. "A dangerous suggestion, Jacobi," I said, purposefully dropping his title. "I hope you have some evidence to back this up." He faltered for a second, but it was all I needed. "And speaking of brothers, my condolences on the loss of yours," I said. "An assassin,

yes? The timing can't be a coincidence. But why would I need Prince Warren gone when I'm already next in line for the throne?" I allowed the question to settle in the air. I could tell the other members of the court were uncomfortable.

"An apt question," a familiar voice rang out. I spun around to see Elaina enter the hall. A golden crown with blazing red rubies sat on her head. On her finger, the golden Sky Dragon ring. So she was the new High Queen. "I would apologize for my late arrival," she said. "But I suspect that you chose to start early without me."

"Elaina." I smiled and bowed slightly. "It has been some time."

She glided past me and took a seat at the head of the table. Only two weeks had passed since I last saw her, but the girl I remembered had disappeared. She

was High Queen Elaina now. "Prince Callan bears the Ocean Dragon ring," she said, her voice level. "Ciaran gave it to him directly. I was witness to it." She gazed around the room, daring anyone to challenge her.

"Your witness is the only one I need," High Queen Ionar said to Elaina. "If Ciaran chose his brother, I will honor his decision and pass my crown to him."

"B-but," King Jacobi sputtered.

I saw that it was my turn to press a weak spot. "And even without the ring, my status already denotes me the only person eligible for the position." I turned to the other leaders of the Seven Houses and summoned up my most charming smile. "Unless you don't want to abide by the rules of the Seven Houses?"

No one had a response to that.

"Then it is settled," Elaina declared. "Prince Callan will be named the next High King."

Chapter 64

"Well then, we mustn't waste any time," High Queen Ionar stood.

"What, now?" King Brando looked startled.

High Queen Ionar nodded. "We've already had the official ceremony for High Queen Elaina. I see no reason to put off Callan's coronation."

"Everyone has had a long journey, and surely needs rest," Jacobi interjected. "And I confess the weight of my brother's passing is starting to bear on me. I suggest we retire briefly first." The emphasis he put on the word "suggest" made it clear he was not suggesting anything. High Queen Ionar's expression remained unchanged, but her shoulders stiffened. I guessed that Jacobi behaved like this regularly during their reign.

"The ceremony requires only Prince Callan and myself." High Queen Ionar's voice was level. "You may lead the others to the guest quarters if it's what you desire," she said.

"It is," Jacobi replied curtly. He marched from the room with great purpose. The rest of the House leaders followed, leaving behind only High Queen Ionar and High Queen Elaina.

I sighed. "I made them mad, didn't I?"

"You embarrassed Jacobi in front of others," High Queen Ionar said. "He doesn't take well to that." She stood in front of me and removed her crown. "As for the others, they can be won over." She held the crown above me and I lowered my head. "May the dragons of the ocean turn the tide in your favor," Ionar said as she placed the crown on my head. "Bear this weight proudly."

"Thank you..." I tried not to cry. I had always imagined that I'd be watching Ciaran receive this crown, and the reality that he wasn't going to was starting to sink in.

She brushed the back of her hand against my cheek. "Take courage, young one," she said. "The years have made me weary, but I found strength I did not know I had. You will too." She reached down and touched the blue jewel on my ring. "And one last thing."

"Yes?"

"Secrets will be revealed to you soon. Secrets both terrible and beautiful. Please know that if you ever need someone to talk to, you will find my door is open to you. You will always be welcome at House Clementia." I nodded, numbly. Secrets? That sounded ominous. Queen Ionar turned and left the halls of the

High Court. Without a crown, she looked lighter. Freer.

As soon as the doors shut, Elaina approached me. "I looked for you. After the Confirmation Tournament." Her expression was tight, but her voice wavered. "I went to House Ars. Demanded to know about Ciaran's maidservant. They told me no such person existed."

"I'm sorry." I hung my head and the crown immediately began to slide down my forehead. I caught it in my hands.

"It was only after I spoke with your mother that I came to understand that the girl I met and the lost prince were one and the same," she said. "And despite everyone in my House telling me that it was illogical to feel such things, my heart ached while you were gone. You have no idea how relieved I am to see you safe."

She looked me in the eyes, and I saw determination etched into her face. "The word whispered in the hallways is that you tracked the assassins to House Fortitudo, but that cannot be the entire truth. Please tell me what happened."

I took a moment to plan out my response. "I'll tell you. But first, I want you to meet someone." I looked upward and Elaina's gaze followed mine. Ani sat among the rafters. She leapt from her perch and used a quick burst of flame from her Dragongift to cushion her fall. "Elaina. This is Ani."

Chapter 65

"Elaina. This is Ani."

Elaina looked more impressed than surprised at Ani's Dragongift. "I knew it," she breathed. "Dragons ARE real, and you... you're some sort of envoy."

"Agent," Ani said. "But yes."

"How do you survive the Dark Beyond?" Elaina asked, her face brimming with curiosity. "Of course dragons must be suited for it, but surely it's difficult for you!"

"I can answer that later," Ani said. "But what you need to know now is that some dragons wish harm on you, while others wish to protect you."

"I heard the reports!" Elaina pieced together the pieces of the story quickly. "Two dragons were fighting

in the courtyard when House Fortitudo came under attack. The ones who died."

"Dragons don't die," Ani corrected. "But you're right. They were on opposing sides. And now that they've been seen, we might have some problems. Secrecy is our number one priority."

"Why is that?" Elaina looked puzzled. "I'm certain most people would be able to cope with the reality."

"I wish I shared your idealism," Ani sighed. "But please understand that secrecy is the only thing keeping the people of the Kingdom alive."

Elaina pursed her lips. "I can't understand it until you explain it to me."

"There's a lot to explain," I said.

Elaina turned to me, and I felt her Sky Dragongift flare up. "Let me explain something to you, then. Two weeks ago, my life made sense. My sister was about to

be elevated to High Queen, and I knew in my very core that dragons weren't real. Then my sister was murdered by a strange man, and I had no time to grieve, because everyone in my family insisted that I become the next High Queen. They said logic dictated that I take her place to honor her, no matter what. And so I fought the other princesses and pushed myself until I felt my very soul break, all for a crown that I never wanted. And now a girl I thought I'd lost is the new High King, dragons are real, they have Agents who also bear Dragongifts, and I'm going to rule the Kingdom for TEN YEARS alongside you without being told the full story?"

"Well, when you put it that way..."

"There's no other way to put it!" Elaina snapped.

"You're right!" I held my hands up. "And I'm sorry. I, of all people, should understand what you've been

through. You deserve to know what's going on." I glanced at Ani and she nodded. "Okay, short version is that some dragons hate humans and would rather see us all dead. We live in the Preserve. It's a protected land where the dragons who prefer us alive can keep us safe."

"We have no doubt that people would appreciate the reality of dragons," Ani said.

Elaina folded her hands together and stared at her intertwined fingers. "But to know that we live inside a fence? That we are captives, even for our own safety? No, I understand your reasoning." She inspected Ani more closely. "Hence you. Agents who can move inside the Kingdom without arousing suspicion."

Ani nodded. "The Dark Beyond is a myth concocted by your own ancestors. The Preserve was an agreement settled upon by humans and dragons alike."

"It is the most logical explanation," Elaina conceded. "And it lines up with several discrepancies that I've long been bothered by." She took a moment to think. Lines furrowed into her brow as she absorbed the new information. "The man who killed my sister. Who is he?"

"One of the Hunters," Ani said. "Humans who side with the dragons to save their own lives."

Elaina's expression darkened. "And will these Hunters continue to be a problem?"

"That's what we've been trying to find out," I said. "And why we're being so cautious."

"It's unusual for them to act so openly," Ani explained. "My current mission is to figure out why they're behaving like this after so many years of maintaining secrecy."

"And that's not the worst part," I added, "We're pretty sure someone inside the Kingdom is working with the Hunters. Someone from one of the Houses."

"Then we shall root them out," Elaina declared. "I propose we invite each of the leaders of the Seven Houses for a personal meeting. We can do it under the pretense of familiarizing ourselves with the Kingdom."

"That's a good idea," Ani said.

"Excellent." Elaina looked pleased. "Then we'll start tomorrow."

Chapter 66

Wind rippled across my bedsheets. I shivered and pulled them tighter over my head, but something seemed off. I strained my ears to pick out what was bothering me. A soft note vibrated quietly in the wind. No... two notes. A familiar chord. I sighed and pushed the bedcovers back. "I thought as much. Are you here to kill me?"

"That's the job," Rain replied. I turned to see his silhouette in the window. The faintest hint of moonlight outlined him. He leaned casually against the window frame, no more concerned than someone watching a parade go by.

"You shouldn't have brought Sunshine with you," I said. "The notes gave you away."

He chuckled and ran his hand along the wheel fiddle's side. "I would never leave Sunshine behind. Besides, you're the first target who's noticed."

"I'm also the first target who's heard you play regularly."

He smirked. "Hardly. Not even the second or third for that matter."

We sat in silence, serenaded only by the soft vibration of Sunshine's strings as the wind blew through the window. Finally I spoke. "Aren't you going to kill me?"

"Aren't you going to call for help?"

"It's you. If the guards aren't already asleep, you'll probably kill them when they enter. I'd rather keep the body count to a minimum, if that's okay."

My eyes had adjusted to the darkness enough for me to make out Rain's signature cynical smirk. "Such a benevolent king."

"That's the job," I sighed, echoing Rain's previous remark.

"I should extend my congratulations on your new position."

"Save your congratulations." I sat up straight in bed and turned to face him. "This is the last thing I wanted."

He crossed his arms and inspected me closely. "Men have shed blood to get this position. I should know. And you don't want it?"

"This will come as a great surprise," I said dryly. "But I liked it a lot better when bards weren't climbing through my window at night to kill me."

"Then why?" Rain appeared genuinely puzzled. "You could have run away like I told you to. Why return? Why claim the crown?"

"Because someone out there hurt people to get this. Anyone who would kill and destroy to be a leader does not deserve to lead."

Rain arched an eyebrow. "And you do? Deserve to lead, I mean."

"Of course not," I snapped. "I'm just a kid who showed up wearing his brother's ring. I didn't earn this position at all."

"Then the question still stands. Why did you claim the crown?"

"Because I can't overcome the sea."

"What does that even mean?"

"I said the same thing," I laughed. "It's something Majorelle taught me," I explained. "It's not about

moving all the water. It's about focusing on a single drop. And then another. About pouring your intent into the things you can control and letting the rest be. No one has enough power to change everything, but we all have the ability to change something. I've spent so long comparing myself to others and letting it keep me from moving forward. Imagining I was powerless just because other people are stronger, or faster, or smarter. But who cares if I'm not the best at anything? That doesn't mean I'm useless at everything. If I can change things for the good even a little bit, it's a world better than doing nothing at all." I stood and faced Rain. "I've had a lot of near brushes with death in these past weeks, and every time I found that I wasn't as brave as I hoped I'd be. To be honest, I'm still not ready."

Rain sighed. Another one of his long, world-weary sighs. "Tomorrow night, then?"

"What?"

"I'll come kill you tomorrow night," he said. "My schedule is flexible."

"Um, I guess if I have to decide between tonight or tomorrow, I'd prefer tomorrow." I forced myself to avoid thinking about the absurdity of scheduling my own assassination.

"Tomorrow night, then." And with that, Rain disappeared into the night.

Epilogue

Ani entered my room just as the first rays of sunlight began to peek through my window. "Cally," she said. "I have something to show you."

I sat up in bed and rubbed my eyes. The events of the night before felt like a dream, but I was pretty sure they weren't. "What is it?" I asked groggily.

She held her hands out to reveal a small egg wreathed in flame. "It came to me this morning. Touch it."

I gingerly touched it with my finger and felt a sudden surge of fire pass through my chest. It had a familiar warm feeling to it. "Sekh?"

She nodded. "As I told Elaina, dragons never really die. They are from the earth itself, and merely change form over time." She tucked the egg into a small pouch

she kept at her side. "It can take hundreds of years for a dragon to reform after it returns to the earth, but if that dragon has a tether, it can come back sooner."

"A tether..." I mused. "You mean us? Because we carry Sekh's Dragongift?"

"Exactly. It's the greatest role any Dragoncynn can play. To tether their partner to this world."

"But if we're tethering Sekh, then that means Osir..."

Ani nodded. "Haemon is Osir's Dragoncynn. It won't be long before Osir returns as well." She sighed. "Unfortunately, the Preserve is not an ideal place to allow Sekh's egg to hatch. I have to return to the village immediately."

I nodded. "You'll need to update everyone on what happened as well. Whatever the Hunters are planning, it's not over."

"I agree," Ani said, but she looked disappointed. She leaned forward and touched her forehead to mine. I felt a spark pass between us. "I promise, I'll be back as soon as I can." She stood, checked the egg in her pouch, double-checked her sword, and left as quietly as she came. I sat alone in my room to take stock of the situation. The Hunters were planning something, but we had no idea what. Sekh and Osir weren't dead. Ani was leaving. Elaina and I had appointments with the leaders of the Seven Houses. And I had scheduled my own assassination for that night. With a groan I lifted myself out of bed. I only had one day left to live, so I might as well get to work.