

“Soar”

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Chapter 1: The Silver Hawk

There was a bitter chill in the air on the day I spotted the silver hawk, but the Dragonhold was warm, and there was music in my head.

Well, perhaps not music, I realized as I drifted out of the realm of my dreams. It sounded more like the clanging of the distant castle bells as I inched back to the world of the waking. The dream I was having broke into fragments, fragments of memories from a past life that swirled around in my subconscious mind. I begged them not to go, but they always left. The warm glow of firelight. The sound of music in the air played on flutes and lyres. The night breeze in my long, flowing, human hair. I had just bits, nothing more, but they were enough to make me long for what I couldn't yet have.

The dream-fragments were gradually replaced by the features of the Dragonhold surrounding me, and try as I might, the cavernous shapes and dim scent of brimstone won out over the now-fading sensations. I could hear the others talking as I drifted back towards the world of the waking.

“...do you think it is?”

“Some fool sounding an alarm this early in the morning! I swear I'll eat whoever set it off this time!”

Silence. They waited for the alarm to sound again. Sure enough, the jarring clang sounded from the castle and resonated through the Dragonhold.

“That's four, isn't it?”

“I think so.”

“If I'm not mistaken, three means it's not a drill. Four means-”

“Something must have actually happened. We'd better find out what.”

The sound of claws scraping against the stone ground assailed my ears as they hurried to their feet.

“Shouldn’t one of us wake up Riella?”

“No, let her be. I doubt she would be able to do much, anyway.”

I didn’t care for them brushing me aside, but I was grateful for the extra few minutes of sleep. Soon I heard them shuffling out of the cavern and the sound of feathered wings flapping in the air as the dragons took off towards the castle.

I decided to let my eyes rest for a few more moments, and then finally opened them and let the features of the Dragonhold come rushing back in. The cozy light emitting from the rainbow of gemstones lining the granite walls greeted me with their familiarity. I slowly stood, stretching my forearms out on the glossy stone floor, and a yawn escaped my maws. I made my way to the front of the cavern, letting the air current rustle the feathers of my blue-and-white wings.

Below me lie Initium. The clouds in the early-morning sky cast roaming shadows on the grassy fields that blew gently in the early morning breeze and engulfed the royal castle just below. Beyond the fields, the twisted jagged shapes of the mountains that separated the central part of Initium from Ina Desert came into view. Surrounding the southern half of the fields were the forests, the leaves of their trees gently swaying like the young girls who danced before the firelight during the festivals. I had often longed to join them, but a dancing dragon could be hazardous for those around her.

My eyes fixed on the castle, Alba Aula, directly below. White pillars stretched towards the sky like the points of light of a star. The alarm had stopped clanging, but my curiosity still

remained. I was about to spread my wings and glide down from the Dragonhold like the others had when a blur of movement caught my eye. I zoomed in my vision to track what it was.

There. A hawk.

A *silver* hawk.

Oh, was Edwin going to love this. Just like the hero legends he idolized.

My wings snapped open, and the current of air stirred them. My powerful legs launched me into the air and my wings caught the current, my tail steering me like the rudder of a boat. I soared over the castle, circling it, letting the draft guide me down to where the alarm had sounded.

I was soon grounded again. I landed in the courtyard at the center of the castle as the others often did, my pale white wings sending gusts of wind into the trees and bushes. I took a moment to appreciate the attempt at re-creating the forests. I had always judged it to be a poor attempt, but then again, I had never actually been in one of the forests myself. I was confined to the castle until the Binding Ritual, but I could still see them from a distance, and I knew that the trees there didn't grow in perfectly symmetrical shapes like the ones in the courtyard.

"White Dragon." One of the castle servants had paused his duty of trimming the bushes and lowered his head in my direction. "May the Light of Dominus shine upon you this day."

"And may He bless the road you tread." I lowered my head in turn. "So, what exactly is going on? Do you know why the alarm was sounded this morning? I don't have to eat anyone who started a drill at this unholy hour, do I?"

The servant looked up at me nervously, clearly uncomfortable at the joke I had made. I cursed myself silently for my poor taste. "I have been outside all this morning," he said

cautiously, “although I imagine those indoors may know. But something is amiss, that I can tell you.”

“I see. Thank you.” I passed under the gold-lined archway separating the courtyard from the interior of the castle and was greeted with the familiar sights of shimmering white floors stretching down the halls and marble columns reaching to the ceiling several feet above my head. The whole castle was structured to accommodate us dragons, and for that I was extremely grateful. I stode past the tapestries and stained-glass windows that depicted the lineage of the Royal Family and the heroes that had defended Initium throughout history. Normally I would take my time in the halls, taking in the way the light coming through the windows was scattered into a rainbow of colors against the floor, but today my attention was commanded by the alarm that had so rudely awoken me and the snippets of conversation I overheard from the castle servants.

“Do you think they’ll find him?”

“I don’t doubt they will. Seemed pretty furious though. I’d stay away from them.”

“Can you tell me what’s happened?” I approached the cluster of servants gathered before the stained glass window depicting the Daughter of the Sun, one of the Light-Casters who had defended Initium hundreds of years ago. They fell silent and gazed up at me with suddenly timid eyes. “Do any of you know why the alarm was sounded this morning?” None of them responded. Instead the all bowed politely and scurried away like mice escaping a howler. *What’s gotten into them?* I wondered. It was normal for the servants to revere me, perhaps, but avoiding me completely was new.

“Can *someone* please tell me what is going on?” I asked the question to no one in particular, and of course I got no response. I marched further down the halls until I found one of

the castle guards. Hopefully she had more of a backbone than the servants who had duties one can perform with no spine.

“White dragon.” She lowered her before me like the servant in the courtyard had. “I wish you the highest greetings on this splendid morning.”

“All right,” I huffed, running out of patience. I was quickly getting sick of everyone treating me like I was one bad glance away from devouring them. “Who set off that alarm this morning?”

“The Queen did, my lady,” came the guard’s hasty reply. “The Prince has gone missing. We have reason to believe that he may have been kidnapped-”

“*What?*” Kidnapped? Edwin? By who? A thousand and one questions whirled in my mind, and I spun in a circle like a diseased cow, nearly knocking over the unfortunately nearby servants with my tail, until the questions sorted themselves out into a more manageable jumble. I cleared my throat, trying to force myself to act in a more graceful manner than I just had. “How long has he been missing?” I tried to sound calm, but there was no mistaking the tremor in my voice. “Do you have any idea who may have kidnapped him?”

The guard shook her head. I could tell that my outburst had frightened her, and I understood now why the other servants had treated me so cautiously. The other dragons and even Edwin had noted that lately my behavior had been increasingly erratic. They assured me that it was because I was close to the time of the Binding Ritual and would be soon anchored to the Light Magic, but I had my doubts.

“I unfortunately don’t have any information beyond what I just told you,” the guard finally mustered up the courage to say.

“It’s all right,” I assured her. “I’ll ask someone else.”

I strode away again, but this time my steps were quicker. My head was still whirling, and I tried to think of who I should interrogate. The King and Queen themselves? King Rinell had never been someone I had talked with much, but Ania considered me a friend. But didn't she have more important things to worry about? Her son was missing, after all-

A shout came from the three men mopping the floor that I nearly stepped on. "Sorry!" I called as I hurried on. I must have gotten so wrapped up in my thoughts that I had forgotten to watch where I was going. Could I be blamed, though? My best friend had been kidnapped. But how would someone have broken into the castle to kidnap him? How could they have gotten in without any of the guards, the Dragons and Dragonbound, or even the castle itself noticing? The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed that he had snuck out voluntarily, but why in Dominus's name would he?

I stopped short. The conversation from the previous night came flooding back into my mind. Edwin and I were out in the courtyard at the front of the castle, between the keep and the outer wall.

"Your birthday is coming up soon, isn't it?" Edwin had asked me. Each year I tried to explain to him that dragons don't celebrate their birthdays, but even at twelve summers old the prince still insisted that I be given a gift.

"It is," I responded with reluctance, "but you really don't have to get me anything."

Edwin folded his arms across his chest and huffed. "I should, though. You always do something for me." That was true, at least. Each year as his birthday approached I would 'procure' one of the gems from the Dragonhold that floated just above the Alba Aula, born aloft by the Light Magic granted to it long ago. In the chilly winter weeks leading up to his birthday, I would slowly chisel at one of the gemstones lining the wall with my claws and teeth, careful not

to arouse the suspicion of the other dragons, until I finally was able to pry it off the wall and present it to Edwin. And Edwin, in turn, would buy me a gift from the market in Lux Splendens, the city that surrounded Alba Aula. This year, however, getting to the market would be an impossibility for him. The King and Queen had suddenly a few months ago come to the sudden decision that Edwin was no longer allowed to leave the walls of Alba Aula and enter the city. Neither he nor I were ever given an actual explanation for their decree, but their word was final and there wasn't much he could do to protest.

“Don't worry about it this year,” I had said. I knew that he was already upset about his parents' decision, and I didn't want to add to the slowly-growing tension between he and his father. “I don't need a gift, really.”

His eyes, which had been fixed on the ground before him, had slowly risen to the gleaming white walls surrounding the castle. “I'll get you a gift, one way or another,” Edwin had said as a sly grin crept across his round, freckle-covered face.

“Oh, Nox be damned!” I cried aloud as the memory faded.

I knew where Edwin was.

And his parents were going to kill him.

“Edwin!”

The vendor's booths and tents lining the streets passed beneath me in a blur. I scanned the sea of skin tones and range of hair colors, looking for the familiar features of the young prince. But Edwin was nowhere to be found. “Edwin!” I called again over the clamorous sounds of lutes as two minstrels began to duel one another.

The sunlight glinting off of heavy armor caught my eye, and I looked down and beheld a squadron of knights patrolling the streets. But these weren't knights of the Royal Army. On their blue and silver armor they bore the crest of House Volarus: a golden circular pattern framed by silver markings. Its shape had always reminded me of a flower about to bloom. House Volarus was the most wealthy and powerful of the group of nobles that governed the regions of Initium under the Royal Family. Lord Volarus had sent several troops from his personal army only shortly after Edwin's parents had sentenced him to staying inside Alba Aula, and they had been stationed in the castle as well as the city. Their presence set me on edge. Why did Lux Splendens need even more troops? Was the Royal Army not enough? Or was it just a power-play from Lord Volarus to get on the Royal Family's good side?

I landed near a booth auctioning off small Earth's Breath stones where a sizeable crowd had begun to gather, and immediately the pungent scent of sweaty performers mingled with the sweetness of fruits and baked goods assailed my nostrils. I tried not to gag. The humans gathered around paid the scent no mind. I was oftentimes jealous of their less-sensitive noses. And less-sensitive ears. And their hair that they could style and color and do whatever they wanted with. And their clothes-

I was getting lost in my thoughts again. I shook my head, snapping myself back into reality. I gazed out at the crowd, but Edwin was nowhere to be seen, and I couldn't pick up his scent over the other odors of the market. The humans who were nearby tried to pay me no mind, but I could tell from their quick glances that my presence was intimidating them. And could I blame them? I stood at least fifteen feet above the tallest of them, not to mention that I had rows of blade-sharp teeth and claws the size of daggers. I did my best to keep my mouth closed to hide my teeth and bent my head lower in an effort to look less intimidating, but I doubted it would

work. “Excuse me,” I said to the humans closest to me. Poor choice. The man and woman turned towards me, and I realized that they were accompanying three small children. The older two, both boys, hid behind their parents when I spoke. The girl who couldn’t have been more than five summers old instead stared up at me with her lips parted in a smile of awe.

The parents lowered their heads towards me, giving the same greeting the servants in the courtyard had. “White Dragon. May the Light of Dominus shine upon you this day.”

Yeah, yeah. “And may He bless the road you tread,” I finished hastily. “Have you seen the prince anywhere?”

“The prince?” Their brows furrowed in confusion. “Is he in the market today?”

“Well, he’s not supposed to be, but-” What was I doing? Was I just going to announce to everyone that we had no idea where he was? That he may have been kidnapped? Stupid, stupid! “Er, anyway,” I tried to end the conversation quickly. “Thank you for your help.”

I hurried away to another spot in the crowd, still flustered from my stupidity. “Excuse me,” I called again, this time picking out two men in their mid-twenties who likely wouldn’t be as afraid of me, only mildly terrified.

They both jumped when they realized I was addressing them, but quickly calmed down and collected themselves, bowing their heads in the customary greeting. “White Dragon. May the light of Dominus-”

“Have you seen a young boy about twelve summers old anywhere?” I cut them off. “He has light brown hair and blue eyes. And freckles,” I added.

Both men shook their heads in apology. “It’s possible that someone like that passed by, but we didn’t notice anyone in particular,” one of them answered.

“It’s alright. Thank you anyway.” I turned to leave, but saw something rolling towards me out of the corner of my eye. It was an Earth’s Breath stone. It wobbled forward from the crowd and came to rest at my left forearm. I lowered my head to examine it closer. It was a fine stone, smoothed and polished to perfection, with swirls of green and white on its otherwise clear surface. I could see the faces of the crowd reflected in it, light and dark, smiling and laughing but sometimes casting me nervous glances, with their friends and family, all human, none of them worried about intimidating those around them. And then my own face stared back at me: a face with piercing blue eyes with pointed, cat-like pupils surrounded by white scales with hints of blue at their tips. And, of course, there was the bright sky-blue diamond-shaped gemstone set in my forehead. Mine was narrow face, sharp and dangerous, and I fit in with the humans about as well as a hawk fits in with a flock of sparrows.

I blinked, breaking my temporary trance, and touched the surface of the Earth’s Breath stone with my snout. My eyes went wide. Something was very wrong.

A young woman ran forward and stopped dead at my feet. “This is yours?” I asked. She nodded quickly. I rolled it back in her direction, and she carefully bent down and picked it up, her eyes never leaving me. *Had these people never seen a dragon before?* I wondered to myself. They had, of course, if they lived in Lux Splendens. We dragons were constantly flying over it, travelling from our Dragonhold and the castle to the other regions of Initium. It was uncommon, however, for a dragon to stop in the market and walk around like this, I realized. We usually kept to ourselves and our Dragonbound, except during patrols and diplomatic missions.

And during times of war.

The women disappeared back into the crowd, but what I had learned about the stone from my brief contact bothered me immensely. I turned my attention to the booth itself where the

stones were being auctioned. The vendor had several of them in his arms as he called out the prices for them and the crowd responded in turn.

“One hundred gold pieces!”

“Three hundred gold pieces!”

“Five hundred!”

By Dominus, these prices were high. I didn't know much about human currency, but I knew that one hundred, let alone five hundred, gold pieces was a *lot* of money. It made sense, though, that good Earth's Breath stones would sell for a lot. They contained the energy the world itself was created with, the very life Dominus had breathed into the body of the earth at its birth. The energy could be channeled through a human's body and shaped with their mind, serving several purposes from enhancing the growth of crops to keeping houses warm in the winter better than any fire ever could. It took a calm and focused mind to be able to utilize the Earth's Breath, but with a few years of basic training, most people could pull off these simple tasks. It came with a monetary price, however, as once the energy was gone, it couldn't be regained. And in the hands of those who dedicated their lives to the art, they could be used to fuel powerful defensive and offensive magical spells. The Royal Family and their Lords regulated and distributed all the more powerful stones that could be used for combat, as they were rarer and far more dangerous, and they were usually kept to only the nobles and high-ranking members of the army. The lesser ones for everyday use, however, were left to the merchants and traders to sell.

Yes, perhaps five hundred gold pieces would be a reasonable price for an Earth's Breath stone that had enough energy to create a storm that covered several miles of the sky or heal a couple hundred people's broken limbs.

But an already-used one that contained no magical energy at all didn't deserve to be sold for even ten gold pieces.

"Hey, you!" The crowd abruptly fell silent as my voice carried above the clamor.

The vendor's face drained of its rosy red as he stared back at me. "Ah, greetings, White Dragon," he said as he recomposed himself and gave a bow. "May the light--"

"Yes, I know, may He bless your path and whatnot." I was losing patience for this man, and fast. He stank of flowery perfume, which somehow carried through the crowd over the other odors surrounding me, and the calm smile he gave me set my teeth on edge. But the grey irises of his eyes shook in the white surrounding them. He knew as well as I did that dragons were beings of magic and could sense Earth's Breath and the lack of it. "What do you think you're doing, selling these good people empty Earth's Breath stones?"

A gasp rose up from the crowd. Those who had already made their purchases inspected their stones frantically, some even trying to conjure up a simple spell to test them which they foolishly hadn't before buying them. Many of the people of Lux Splendens were overly trusting, and now I was seeing just where that trust got them.

"She's right!" A young man with a bright blue scarf tied around his neck pointed an accusing finger at the vendor. More angry murmurs rose up from the crowd, and the vendor put up his hands, trying to convince them that he had no idea the stones had been drained of their magic. The knights of House Volarus began to rush in, trying calm down the crowd before they turned violent. Several of them tended to the people, giving them empty words of assurance that they would be reimbursed. The rest of the Volarus knights escorted the man to safety from the enraged crowd. The man in the blue scarf squeezed his way through the masses and began to shout at the ones who were protecting the vendor.

“And what are you going to do about it?” I heard one of the knights laugh over the general commotion with my keen ears. With that he shoved the man in the blue scarf to the ground, and another one of them gave him a swift kick to the ribs. There was a sharp *crack* upon the impact of his iron boot. At this, the crowd exploded into a chorus of enraged shouts and raised fists that began to push against the knights.

Maybe I shouldn't have just shouted at that vendor, I realized. The last thing Edwin needed to get caught in was a riot.

Edwin! I needed to keep searching for him! I spread my wings and with a powerful flap and push of my legs was airborne. I glided just above the crowds, weaving between the inns and taverns made of bricks and wood, but still there was no sign of him. As I continued on I noticed more and more guards spreading throughout the crowd, no doubt searching for the prince. With the number of guards on the hunt in addition the other seven dragons and Dragonbound that had gone out to look for him, it was only a matter of time before he was found. But where could he be?

“Let me down, you fat flying bully!” A voice rang out above the din of the crowds, a voice I knew well.

I looked back in the direction of Alba Aula and beheld a spectacular sight. Furion, the gigantic ruby dragon, swooped above the crowd with his Dragonbound Alyssa in the saddle atop his back. And in his talons, wriggling and writhing in a futile effort to escape, was a dirt-covered boy in a muddy cloak.

They had found Edwin.

I flew after them, getting a closer look at his unsightly appearance. His usually neatly combed hair was in tangled matts and his face was smudged with filth. Lux Splendens was

generally a clean and well-kept city with cobblestone-paved streets, and I wondered how on earth he had managed to become so soiled. The only feature that looked like the Edwin I knew were his eyes, which were bright and mischievous as usual.

“Oh, hello Riella,” he said as I caught up with Furion.

“Oh hello yourself,” I huffed. “Do you realize how much you must have worried everyone? We thought you were kidnapped!” At this Furion shot me a warning look. “Although I suppose you are being kidnapped right now,” I continued with a smirk.

Edwin laughed, but Furion cut him off. “This is no laughing matter, Prince. You’re in a lot of trouble with your parents for this stunt.” The grin instantly disappeared from Edwin’s face, and I couldn’t help feeling second-hand anxiety for him.

“I’m sure they’re not *too* mad,” Alyssa tried to backtrack for her hot-headed companion, but I knew better, and so did Edwin. Queen Ania was gentle, but could be stern when she chose to. And King Ryle wasn’t someone I ever wanted to be on the wrong side of.

We coasted over the outer wall of the castle, and Furion set Edwin down in the front courtyard. Edwin didn’t bother getting up. He just lay in the freshly cut grass, and I landed beside him, breathing in the scent of dew that lingered in the air. The symmetrical branches of the courtyard trees swayed calmly in the breeze, betraying the storm that was undoubtedly brewing in the castle. “Come on now, to your feet,” Furion said as he nudged the boy with his snout. Edwin let out a groan and rolled to his side. “I said get up!”

If I had little patience, Furion had even less. We dragons often had short tempers, but Furion’s was exceptionally short. He permitted no nonsense and seldom smiled, except at his Dragonbound who was for all intents and purposes his exact opposite. While Furion had a muscular frame that was large even for a dragon, Alyssa had a twig-like build and a cheerful

disposition. We had all been surprised on the day of Furion's Binding Ritual eight years ago when he had returned to Alba Aula with a ten-summer-old girl with dark hair in tangled knots on his back. She was in a silent shock for at least another six months, but she evoked from him a gentleness none had thought existed in such a fierce personality, like a pool of cool water in the center of a fiery inferno.

"To your feet, my liege." Alyssa leapt down from her dragon's back and extended a hand to Edwin. The prince took it with a slim smile.

"How much trouble do you think I'll be in?" he asked us.

"You'll never see the sun again," I laughed, but based on his parents' recent strictness it wasn't entirely out of the realm of possibility.

"Come on." Furion pushed Edwin towards the main entrance with his snout. "Your parents are in the great hall. Stop wasting time."

Edwin turned and looked back at me. He was smiling, but it betrayed the slight tremor in his hands. "You're coming too, right Riella?"

More than anything, I wanted to fly back to the Dragonhold and escape back into the realm of sleep where I wouldn't have to deal with the repercussions of Edwin's foolish actions, but I couldn't abandon him when he needed my support the most. "Of course I am. I wouldn't miss you getting scolded by your parents again for the world."

The great hall was an entire ethereal plane in of itself, which fortunately like the rest of the castle had been built to accommodate the dragons. Gigantic silver-and-gold-lined doors made of oak creaked open to reveal a marble-tiled floor. The pure white walls gleamed in the sunlight the spilled through the windows the stretched from the floor until they nearly touched the ceiling.

Tapestries woven in every color imaginable told of ancient battles and the royal lineage, of the Light and Dark Magic alike. High above our heads on the ceiling was the dome of stained-glass mosaics that depicted the four Light-Casters that had defended Initium in times long past. The Queen of Dawn. The Light's Voice. The Daughter of the Sun. The Soldier of Truth. And in the center of the dome was the being who guarded the land since the war with Nox first began: the Guardian of Time. The light filtering through the dome reflected onto the floor, the images projected onto the ground we tread upon. As we passed through the reflection of the Guardian of Time I caught the hint of a smile from Edwin escape the anxiety emanating from him. The Guardian of Time had always been his favorite hero to learn about. He had never revealed his name or shown his face to anyone, always keeping himself wrapped up in a white hood and cloak, which made him a mysterious and alluring figure to the young boy. Not to mention the fact that he was likely the most powerful being to set foot on Initium aside from Nox since Dominus left to watch his creation from the Above.

The clacking of my claws against the marble floor faded into a dull thudding as we stepped onto the golden carpet just in front of the throne. A group of servants were rushing up and down the set of stairs leading to the elevated platform as the King and Queen sent them to and fro frantically. Such activity was unusual at this hour of the morning, but this had not been a normal morning. The remaining servants rushed out when we stopped at the foot of the stairs.

Before us, the King and Queen sat on their thrones. The seats themselves gleamed white and silver, and behind them a gigantic shape of the White Diamond, the emblem of Initium, had been carved into the wall. It was a simple design, but very effective reminder of who we now faced.

No one spoke a word.

The King and Queen stared down at our group with unreadable expressions. Finally Queen Ania stood to her feet and folded her hands behind her back. “Edwin. Do you have *any idea* how much trouble you caused this morning? How much of a panic? We had no idea where you went, not to mention the specific instructions from your father and I not to leave the castle.”

Edwin lowered his head before her. “I’m sorry, Mother,” he said. All of the mischievousness had been drained from his voice.

Queen Ania gave a sigh and descended the steps, wrapping her son in a tight embrace. “Please, please, never disappear on us again. We feared the worst.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“And just what were you doing out and about in Lux Splendens?” It was now King Rinell’s turn to speak. Queen Ania released Edwin and folded her arms across her chest, awaiting his explanation for his disappearance.

Edwin stared at the carpeted floor and scuffed his shoe against it. “I was buying Riella a birthday present,” he admitted. All eyes were now on me, and I squirmed beneath their weight. “It’s not her fault,” Edwin added. “She told me to not worry about it. Please, don’t punish her too.”

“We won’t punish her,” Queen Ania said. “However, I cannot say the same for you. Your actions disrupted the entire castle this morning.”

“Only because you made a big deal about it,” Edwin muttered under his breath.

“Edwin, do not speak that way to me! Do you have any idea-” she fell silent. “Do you have any idea,” she started again, “how scared we were?”

“No, I don’t. Because you and Father don’t tell me anything. You don’t tell me why I’m suddenly not allowed to leave Alba Aula. You don’t tell me why I’m not even allowed to go into the market. You don’t-”

“That’s enough!” Rinell leapt to his feet. “This conversation ends here. You will meet me in my study room at noon when you’ve had some time to think about what you have done.”

Edwin stared back at his father with contempt, but said nothing.

“All right,” Alyssa stepped forward. “I think that’s enough for now.” She gently grasped Edwin’s shoulders and lead him towards the oak doors of the great hall, Furion trailing behind them. I turned to follow, but the voice of Queen Ania stopped me in my tracks.

“Wait, Riella.”

I faced the King and Queen again and lowered my head until it nearly touched the carpet.

“Has Edwin confided anything in you that we should know about?”

Yes. “What sort of things do you mean?” Edwin was constantly confessing to me his grievances against the castle staff and his parents. The Queen spent far too much time teaching him the Old Tongue and not nearly enough time learning to use the Light Magic. The King seldom ate with them and almost never asked him how his day was. The castle staff woke him up too early when they came to clean the garderobe. His parents had imprisoned him in his own home.

“Has he said anything about us?” The Queen patiently awaited my answer.

“He has,” I responded after a moment of silence. “But I believe he’s already stated his issue.”

The Queen gave a solemn nod. “I see. Thank you, Riella.”

“I have a question for you, if you don’t mind me asking, Your Highness.”

“You may ask.”

I took a deep breath before I began. “I am not allowed to go outside of Lux Splendens, but this is because I am susceptible to Nox’s influence until the Binding Ritual. Edwin is similarly confined, but he does not have this danger. Is there a similar reason for which you aren’t permitting him outside of Alba Aula?”

They cast each other quick glances, and then finally the King spoke. “We have our reasons. I apologize for not telling you either, but please believe me when I say that it is for the best.”

I could tell I wasn’t going to get any more information out of them than Edwin had, so I decided not to press the subject. “I see. Thank you.” I turned and followed the path my friends had taken back to the oak doors.

I passed through the doors and met the three of them on the other side. “What was that about?” Edwin asked.

“Oh, you know,” I responded, “they wanted to know how many bad things you’ve said about them.”

Edwin’s face began to turn a soft red, and his eyes shook. “What did you tell them?”

“I said that you have already stated your grievances this morning.”

“A sound response,” Alyssa commented with a nod of her head.

Edwin was quiet again as he stared at the floor. “I’m never getting out of here again for sure,” he muttered. His head suddenly shot up, and the mischievous smile returned. “Do you want to see what I got for you?” he asked me. Without awaiting a response he produced a small paper-wrapped package from his cloak. “Ta-da!”

“What is it?” I asked as I bent down for closer inspection.

Edwin unwrapped it with nimble fingers, revealing an Earth's Breath stone. It had a pearly white surface with dots of light and dark blue and fit almost perfectly into his palm. "See? It looks just like you!" He held it out towards me with an air of triumph.

"Well, look at that! It does!" I bent forward and touched the surface with my snout. Immediately I felt the rush of energy coursing through my body, and the gem set in my forehead gave off a faint glow. I was relieved that he hadn't been swindled by the vendor I had seen that morning.

"That's enough fooling around," Furion huffed. "Edwin, go get yourself cleaned up before you track dirt and who knows what else into your father's office."

"Yes, sir," Edwin said and gave a Furion a mock salute. The red dragon growled in return, but Edwin shot me a sly smile, clearly unintimidated.

"I'll see you later," he said as he began to make his way down the hall. Despite his smile, his pace was slower than usual. No doubt the consequences of his actions had already begun to weigh heavily on his mind.

"Thank you for going out to look for him," Alyssa said to me when he was out of earshot. "He's been acting like his usual self, but I can tell that something is off."

"Well, I doubt being stuck in Alba Aula is helping," I said. It came out harsher than I meant it to, but I didn't take it back. I meant what I said.

"I suppose," she sighed. "I'm just worried about him."

"I am too," I agreed.

But Edwin wasn't the only one they should be worried about. I couldn't put a claw on it, but in the past few months as my behavior grew erratic when I became emotional, I felt a shadow

growing in the back of my mind. Something dark and dangerous in the space where the fire and rage is stored.

No, they shouldn't be worried about just Edwin.

They should be worried about me.

“-Could have gotten yourself robbed.”

“You don't know that!”

I sat near the King's study. Snippets of conversation floating through the wooden doors, and if I focused on the sound I could catch a few words here and there, and when their voices increased in volume and anger I was treated to a full sentence or two. I couldn't be too close to the study, lest one of the servants -or worse, the dragons or Dragonbound- realize that I was eavesdropping on the conversation Edwin and his father were having, so instead I remained in the solar room a few doors down. The warmth of sunlight poured through the gigantic window that stretched from the floor to the ceiling above. The white borders of the window were etched with patterns of flowers and diamonds, their shapes weaving in and out of each other. A few books lined the walls, the golden lettering on the covers catching the light and scattering it against the walls and shelves. I curled up on the carpet, tucking my wings and tail close to my body as I basked in the sun, letting my scales soak up the warmth like I was some misshapen cat bathing in the rays. The carpet was soft, like the feathery down of a duckling, and had it not been for the heated debate between father and son I would have dozed off.

The feathery down of a duckling. How did I know what that would have felt like? I had never seen a duckling up close before, I realized, let alone felt one. It must have been a fragment of memory from my past life, I decided. Sometimes they came and went when I saw certain

images or, like right now, when I felt something my past self must have also felt. The times it happened were random as far as I could tell, but they were growing more and more frequent as the time of the Binding Ritual drew closer. I had spoken with the other dragons about it, and they all shared stories of how they had felt the shadow lurking in the subconsciousness when they were around my age. But in all their experiences, it had been just that, no more than a dull sense relegated to background noise. This felt different. To be frank, it scared me. Why was the shadow in me so strong? But what I did know was that when I spent time with Edwin, it faded to the background again. It was part of the reason I spent time with him, although I genuinely did enjoy his company. The other reason was because of his parents and the life he lead.

I still remembered the day I first met Edwin. I had been only nine summers old and stood about as high as a wolf, but the images in my mind were still clear. I sat in front of the cradle, looking into his light blue eyes that were a shade close to my own. I had been nervous, worried that my appearance would frighten him even though I myself was still small and my features hadn't yet sharpened, but the infant cooed up at me, reaching for the blue diamond in my forehead like it was a toy he wanted to play with. I bent down and allowed him to place his chubby hand on it. The fingers were round, rich with folds of baby-fat, but when he placed his hand on me I could feel the faint rush of magic. Light Magic. It ran through all those in the royal bloodline, but I was surprised to learn that it would be manifested in a child only a few weeks old. The dragons' magic didn't manifest until the Binding Ritual.

His mother and father had both left to attend to their duties as King and Queen, leaving him to the wet nurses that would raise him. Queen Ania would spend time teaching him the Old Tongue and the ancient legends of Initium, as well as how to use his magic. But aside from that, he would be raised by the nurses and tutors, lost in a sea of royal duties and expectations that he

would one day become king. There would be no one to give him the chance to be just a boy, no older sisters or brothers, and his only cousin lived all the way in Scalva. I was going to be that someone, I had decided that day.

“Nox be damned!” Edwin’s voice drew me back into the present.

“Don’t you dare say that to me! As long as I am King, I will see to it that you never leave Alba Aula again!” King Rinell’s voice boomed through the rooms. Had I not been a dragon I still would have been able to hear it.

I leapt to my feet and headed for the door to the study as the King’s shouting continued. “I don’t ever want you to disrespect your mother and I like this again, do you understand? You defied our specific instructions!”

“Well maybe I wouldn’t defy them if you told me what those instructions were for!”

“Maybe I should get myself a son who isn’t a disobedient wretch!”

I pushed the study door open with my shoulder and lowered my head into the doorframe. The study was one of the few rooms in the castle that hadn’t been built dragon-sized, as dragons typically didn’t enter it. But I couldn’t just lay around when my boy was getting screamed at. “Your Highness, I really don’t think it’s necessary to-”

“What,” Rinell hissed, “do you think you are doing?” His jaw was clamped as he stared at me with a furrowed brow. “Are you involved in this conversation?”

“I am,” I said, and Rinell blinked in surprise at my bluntness. I was typically reserved on matters that concerned myself. But when it came to other people like those in the market this morning or Edwin, *especially* Edwin, I held nothing back. And now it was King Rinell’s turn to see this side of me. “I was the reason he left Alba Aula. If anyone is to be punished, punish me.”

Edwin stepped forward from his seat before the King's desk. The boy who had been wearing a muddy cloak and tunic had been cleaned up transformed by his servants into a prince in a spotless white shirt clasped with a diamond. "No! It was my own decision. Please don't punish her instead. It's not fair."

"Enough, both of you," the King said with a raise of his hand. He turned to me. "How *dare* you enter here uninvited and disrupt my conversation with my own son?"

"And how dare you scream at him like you did!" I fired back. Rinell's jaw clamped harder. "You have no right to yell at him like that, no one does!"

"I have every right!"

He does, I thought to myself, but I couldn't stop. "No one has the right to shout at another being like you just did! I could have been deaf and heard you all the way from Umbra!" Stop, stop! I was going too far! But the ugly shadow in the back of my mind, the place where the anger and rage was stored, had taken hold, and I let it run through my veins, filling them with icy fury. It was burning me up. And I liked it.

"He is my son, and I will do what I must as his father!"

"His *father*? Hah! You didn't even raise him! You left him to the wet nurses and tutors and never even bothered to play with him or read to him or love him!" I spat the words out at him, feeling their taste of hate and malice in my mouth. "You're no more a father to him than Nox is to me!"

Too far, too far! I blinked a few times, clearing my head, and the shadow began to ebb. I stepped back from the ledge of insanity, but the damage was already done. Edwin and the King stared at me in stunned silence.

“Leave my sight,” the King finally whispered. “Both of you.” He slowly lowered himself into his chair and put his elbows on his desk, running his fingers through his hair. The desk was a mess, covered with maps and books, unusual for a man so tidy and detail-oriented. One of the books caught my eye as I slid out of the doorway, a book with silver binding and title in white lettering on its spine: “Congregantes Tenebris.”

“Let’s go,” Edwin whispered to me as he exited the doorway. He turned back towards his father. “I’m sorry.”

The King didn’t respond, instead burying himself in his books with his head turned from us.

We strode down the hall with a solemn pace. Edwin’s footsteps fell heavily on the tiled floor. For a few minutes, neither of us spoke. What I had just said weighed heavily on my mind. Why had I said those things out loud? They had been thoughts in my mind for years, but I had always kept them to myself. I always knew better. But as the shadow in my mind grew, my private thoughts were slipping out more and more when the anger took hold.

“Wow,” Edwin finally said. “I think you may actually be in more trouble than me.”

I stood before the other dragons in the Dragonhold. The dim light emanating from the crystals on the walls and ceiling glinted off their scales and furrowed brows. They stared down at me with piercing gazes, and a shudder ran down my spine.

The oldest of the dragons, Halda, sat at the center of the seven. Her amethyst scales were always well-kept, and they sparkled in the light of the dragonhold like gemstones. “Riella.” Her violet eyes cut into me like an arrow piercing a stag. “You have been called before us to discuss your behavior this morning.”

“I apologize, oh Amethyst Dragon.” I used her formal title, trying my best appeal to her conceited nature in hopes that it would alleviate my inevitable punishment.

“A simple apology is not enough. Do you know what your actions caused? There was a riot in the market over that Earth’s Breath seller after you foolishly exposed him in front of an entire crowd! What were you thinking?”

Was that what this was about? When I was summoned to the Dragonhold I had assumed it was because of my outburst against the King. Had he not told anyone about what happened? “I understand that I acted foolishly,” I said to the group. “And I apologize for the trouble I have caused. But what should I have done? Do you want me to just let people like him get away with it?”

“Of course not,” Furion rolled his eyes. “Can you really think of not alternatives? Could you not have quietly reported him to the Volarus Knights who were nearby, so they could have handled it and returned the money to the people in an orderly fashion? That is what I would have done. But no, *you* had to shout out that he was a fake in front of hundreds of people and cause an uproar that took hours to sort out.”

Oh, I’m sure they would have ‘handled it’ all right, I thought to myself. The Volarus knights, much like the heads of House Volarus themselves, were known for letting those with wealth slide past the law. Their family motto was “Dignity and Prosperity,” after all. I doubted that if I had told those so-called knights it would have done the people any good.

“Hah! Is that really what you would have done? I bet you would have eaten him right then and there!” All the dragons turned and glared at Alkan, the smallest of the dragons. He had hatched around the same time I did, but for reasons none of us quite understood, his growth had been severely slowed, and while I now stood at almost full height he was only about the size of a

horse. His Binding Ritual wouldn't be happening for several more years. The emerald dragon shook his head with a smile, not caring that the others were now nearly equally cross with him. "In the end the people got their money back and the man was escorted safely out of the city. Isn't that what really matters here? Shouldn't you be glad that she stopped him?"

Some of the dragons nodded in agreement, but Halda let out a low growl. "This is not about the end result. This is about Riella's behavior." She turned her attention back to me. "You have been acting out of line. You seldom think before you speak, never considering the long-term consequences for your actions." Oh, if only she knew about my conversation with the King. "You live in your own little world where you are the only one who can solve the problems you see before you, and you forget that it is not your place."

"Then what is her place?" Alkan said before I had the chance. "To just sit around and watch things happen to the humans? I for one--"

"Silence!" Halda reared up to her full height, spreading her lavender wings in a display of dominance. "This is not your trial! I'll have you expelled from the Dragonhold until this trial comes to an end if I hear another word out of you!"

Alkan's mouth parted in a small smirk, amused at the reaction he had gotten. "Another word."

"That is it! Get out! Now!" Halda's roar shook the crystals of the cavern.

Alkan stood and walked out of the semicircle of dragons, still grinning. "Good luck," he whispered as he passed me.

Yes, thanks a lot, I thought to myself. His actions had only gotten Halda more riled up than before.

Or perhaps he had tired her out, I realized as the amethyst dragon sank back down to the floor of the cavern, and the others looked at her expectantly. She gave a weary sigh. “I don’t have time for this. Riella, you are confined to Alba Aula and the Dragonhold for the duration of this week. Now leave my sight.” The others nodded in approval of the sentence.

Was that all? “Yes, Amethyst Dragon,” said as I bowed before the group. I turned back to the entrance of the Dragonhold and stepped past its walls. The sun had risen to its afternoon position, and below me I heard the bustle of the market in Lux Splendens, the sounds of people negotiating their prices and counting gold coins echoing in my ears. I bid the market a brief farewell and leap down from the cavern, letting the wind sweep me to the central courtyard of the castle where I knew Alkan was waiting to watch Edwin’s lesson with the Queen.

“White Dragon.” Alkan leaned forward in mock respect as I lowered myself into the central courtyard. “May the Light of Dominus shine upon you this day,” he said as he bent his head so low that the top of his skull met the grass.

“And may He bless the road you tread,” I responded, doing the same. We stood in there for a few minutes, both of our heads upside-down as we laughed to ourselves over the ridiculous lives we lived. Finally I lifted my head, and Alkan followed the momentum of his body and did a forward roll, popping back up on his feet. He paced in a circle, flattening the grass, and I joined him. The servants would no doubt be furious about us ruining the uniform shape of grass blades, but it was far more comfortable this way.

We sat in our flattened grass, curled up against one another, as the birds sang in the unnaturally symmetrical trees. The light breeze carried the scent of daisies and lilies from the pool in the corner of the courtyard to my nose. Clouds rolled gently above us, passing over the

outer wall which Edwin wasn't allowed to go beyond, and floated outside of Lux Splendens itself, where Alkan and I weren't allowed to go until our Binding Rituals.

"Hey, look up there," Alkan said. I followed his gaze and beheld the silver hawk once again. It weaved its way in and out of the clouds as it circled around the castle and then disappeared from sight. "It's beautiful."

"It is," I agreed.

"And probably bigger than me." Alkan let out a light chuckle, but I caught a hint of melancholy beneath it. He was constantly poking jokes at his size, but I could tell that it bothered him. It would bother me if I was in his position.

I caught a whiff of Edwin's scent, the smell of old paper from his studies and ink, and something new. Honey, perhaps? A new soap he was using? It made my nose tickle. Soon enough he appeared from one of the archways leading into the inner part of the castle, his mother following close behind.

The Queen was a beautiful woman, if unconventionally so. She had the classic golden hair that many of the kings and queen before her bore, and it encompassed the diamond headpiece in her forehead that glinted with sunlight. Her traditional white dress trailed in the grass behind her. Edwin often joked that it was only a matter of time before it got stuck on something, but I thought it looked regal, especially on her. But her face was where her true beauty lie. A marking had been etched across her skin, a white lightning bolt that began at her right jaw and ended at her left eye. It was a marking she had carried since birth. It was said that it was caused by the powerful Light Magic of the royal bloodline that brimmed beneath her skin, and the lightning bolt was a physical manifestation of it. It was a rarity even amongst the Royal

Family, and I doubted a similar brand would appear on Edwin, but it gave the Queen an almost ethereal appearance.

She and Edwin had just finished their lesson in how to speak and write the Old Tongue, the language spoken in Initium hundreds of years ago, and now it was time for him to practice his use of Light Magic. Edwin sat cross-legged in the grass while his mother sat across from him, her legs neatly folded beneath the dress. His attitude was always different when he was around her than with me and the others. He became more focused and quiet in her presence, wanting - no, needing- to win her approval. Rinell had married into the Royal Bloodline, but Queen Ania was the direct descendent of the Queen of Dawn, the first hero who had united Initium and sealed Nox away, and it was from her that Edwin had inherited the Light Magic shimmering within him.

“Focus your energy inward,” the Queen began the lesson for the day. She closed her eyes, and Edwin did the same. “Listen to the voice inside of you. Dive down deep, to where you see the Light. What is it telling you?”

“It’s telling me that I’m hungry,” Alkan whispered to me. I gave his shoulder a nudge.

Queen Ania opened sky-blue her eyes and looked at her son. “Do you hear it?”

Edwin kept his own eyes shut, but he nodded his head. “I do.”

He had been training with the Queen for three years now, but it had only been a few months ago when he first began to be able to consciously feel the magic. The Light Magic was very different than the Earth’s Breath, and it was far more difficult to use. Unlike the Earth’s Breath which manifested in stones, his magic was within his body, inherited through blood, and would recharge along with his own life-energy. Because of its ability to recharge and sustain itself, Light Magic users had always been far more powerful than mages who used Earth’s

Breath, pulling off incredible feats that mages could only dream of. But the Light Magic didn't always do what the user wanted it to. The magic had a will of its own, as it came directly from Dominus, and as such followed His will once it was released over the will of the one using the magic. Sometimes it would do what the user intended it to do once it was released, but sometimes it would do something else entirely. And sometimes it wouldn't do anything at all.

The Queen produced a seed from her palm and began to dig a small hole in the ground. She placed the seed in it. "Your task today is to make this flower grow."

Edwin stared at the spot in the ground where the seed had been buried. He nodded his head and closed his eyes, spreading his fingers over the spot where the seed was. Alkan and I watched with wonder as small tendrils of white light emitted from his fingers. Edwin's brow furrowed as he concentrated harder on the magic and its will, attempting to bend it to his own.

"Can you do it?" Queen Ania asked after a few minutes. The ground remained absent of any flowers. Edwin opened his eyes and shook his head. He lowered his hands back into his lap in defeat. The Queen sighed. "Let me try." She too spread her hands over the seed, and the white light flowed out of her fingertips into the ground. Seconds later a bud appeared, and the Light Magic wrapped itself around the growing flower in glittering swirls, coaxing its stem to lengthen and the petals to bloom. She opened her eyes and beheld the bright yellow flower with a satisfied smile.

"Why wasn't I able to do that?" Edwin said, his gaze fixed on the flower.

"Because you need to listen to what the Light Magic wants to do," she said simply. "I gave you this task, knowing that it was what the Light Magic wanted me to do, but its need for you may not be the same. It seldom is. Sometimes, you will know what the magic wants you to do, like I did today. There will be times when the magic wants to do what you want to do, and as

you use it more and your will aligns with the magic's, and this shall more often be the case. But sometimes you will have no idea. These moments are the most important, because that is when the magic does its most wonderful works. What you need to do is listen to the Light, let it out, and have faith and trust that it will do what is best for you and those around you, even if it's something you never would have thought of yourself."

Edwin nodded wordlessly. He closed his eyes again and focused himself inward.

"Are you ready to try again?" his mother asked.

"I am."

The Queen planted another seed, and he spread his hands out over the spot once again. This time, however, his hands glowed with the magic only faintly. Alkan's shoulders slumped in disappointment, and I shared his sentiment. It wasn't fair. How come the magic had worked for the Queen, but wouldn't respond to Edwin? He tried so hard. I had often caught him still awake late in the night, practicing spells as the tips of his fingers glowed dimly. But still the flower refused to bloom.

"Don't let your own will get in the way," Queen Ania instructed. "Just release the magic. Let it do what it wants to do."

Edwin nodded, and the glow from his fingers ebbed and faded away completely. I sat up in frustration. Was the magic's will to do nothing at all? How come-

A blinding flash of bright white erupted from Edwin's body, sending out a shockwave of wind that rustled my feathers and the symmetrical branches of the courtyard trees. There were spots on my vision from the blast, and when they cleared I let out a gasp of disbelief.

In all of the trees were pure gold flowers, their petals spread in full bloom. The oaks, hickories, and even chestnuts bore the golden petals. How was that even possible? But it was,

there was no denying what I was seeing. My own shocked expression was mirrored by Alkan, who sat with his eyes wide and his jaw agape at the spectacle.

Edwin opened his eyes and surveyed his accomplishment. He too was rendered speechless. “Wow,” he finally whispered.

“The groundskeepers are going to kill you,” Alkan chuckled, and I couldn’t help but laugh as well. “Golden flowers on all the trees in the middle of summer! Who would have thought?”

The Queen smiled as she gazed at the petals that sat impossibly in the branches among the bright green summer leaves. “You’re ready,” she said.

“For what?” Edwin asked her.

But she didn’t respond. Her smile faded as her gaze shifted to the sky above, and my eyes followed hers. Dark clouds had begun to form in the distance, and I again felt the chill in the air of that morning.

The stars shone brightly above us, winking in the cool night sky as the clouds passed through them. Edwin and Alkan sat beside me, along with Alyssa and Furion, as we gazed up at the star-filled sky. The light emanating from the castle and Lux Splendens illuminated the clouds, but the stars were still visible.

“Look up there.” Alyssa pointed to a cluster of stars directly above us. Her favorite area of study once she had become a member of the Dragonbound was the stars, and as often as she could she would have the five of us gather to be taught about the points of light high above. The gleaming dots floated in the sea of darkness impossibly out of reach, but she insisted there was meaning in them. “See those twelve stars gathered together there? They form Aura, the Queen of

Dawn's youngest sister. It's said the queen used her magic to transfer her sister's soul to the sky after her death, and that she still looks down upon the people of Initium to this day."

I couldn't see how the stars connected to form anything for the life of me. They were just dots. There was no indication that they somehow joined together, and even when I tried to project connecting lines onto the stars in my mind, it came out as just blobby shapes. My eyes fell instead to the star whose meaning I could more easily understand, the brightest star in the sky: Aster.

Aster was the first star Alyssa had educated us on, as per Edwin's request. The story goes that Aster was once a King of Initium, the King at the time of the Rending War, when the land split into the two kingdoms: Detra in the North, and what remained of the original kingdom of Initium in the South. Usually when a member of the Royal Family passed away, they were buried within the castle so that when the magic left their bodies it would breath into the castle, giving it life. But instead, as he lay dying, Aster sent his magic into the sky. The Light Magic within him formed a star, the brightest light in the endless stretch of black. The legend goes that it could be seen from any part of the kingdom, even during the stormiest of nights, and that those who followed it were lead to where they were meant to be. Every time I looked up at the brilliant point of light, it lay directly overhead, shining down on Alba Aula.

"Do you really believe that she's up there?" Edwin asked Alyssa. "Wouldn't Aura be in Caelum?"

"There's no way to tell for sure," Alyssa responded. "Perhaps that *is* Caelum. Or perhaps she is in Caelum, but uses the stars to look down on us. But either way, I find that it gives me a sense of peace, knowing that even after she died she could still watch her descendants." There was an unspoken understanding that she held onto this hope because of her parents. She had been

orphaned at the age of eight and then lived alone in the streets for two years before being Bound to Furion. She didn't speak much about those two years, but she often described to us what her parents were like, giving small details here and there to keep their memory alive. The lavender scent of her mother. Her father's musk of chopped wood and pine needles. The silver comb in her mother's hair that she and her father had saved up all year to buy her for her birthday right before she died. Her fragments of memory reminded me of my own that I carried from my past life, and when she finally shared with us the pain she felt as she watched the life fade from her father's eyes, I felt the pang of familiarity.

I had lost someone, too. The memory of who it was had faded in my rebirth, but the sorrow remained, forever branded into my heart.

"So, how much trouble did you get in, Edwin?" Furion changed the subject when his Dragonbound fell silent.

"Not too much," Edwin said. "My father said that I would have to stay in Alba Aula for longer now."

"Wasn't that an undefined period of time to begin with?" I asked.

Edwin shrugged. "I thought so too. He probably would have done something else too if you hadn't interrupted when you did."

Furion sat up and stared at me. "You interrupted the King?"

My gut clenched as I readied myself for the inevitable lecture I was about to receive. "I did."

"And what did you say?"

Neither Edwin nor I spoke. If Furion found out what had happened, or worse, if Halda found out, I would be in a world of trouble. The lecture from the other dragons earlier that day was just a small taste of the possible torment that awaited.

“What did you say?” the red dragon repeated with a low growl.

“Calm down,” Alyssa said as she reached up and rubbed his neck.

“I’ll calm down when I find out what happened!”

“I said things I shouldn’t have said,” I responded. I thought back to the King’s reaction. He should have screamed at me too, punished me for my insolence and disrespect. I deserved it, after all. But instead he had sunk into his chair, his head turned away from us in, what? Shame? I swallowed the lump in my throat as my mouth ran dry. “I feel awful about it,” I whispered.

Furion snorted, releasing a plume of smoke from his nostrils, but didn’t press the subject when Alyssa shot him a warning look. “I think it’s getting to be the Prince’s bedtime,” she suggested, sensing the tension in the air between Furion and me. She held out her hand and helped him to his feet, exposing the grass stains on his white shirt and pants. “Run inside and get dressed for bed.”

Edwin turned to me. “Can I sleep in the Dragonhold tonight? They’re getting closer.”

“Of course,” I answered. There was no need to ask who ‘they’ were. A few months ago, Edwin began having nightmares that there were faces in the darkness of the castle. Phantasmal hands reached out for him from the shadows in the hallway. None of us were very concerned, convincing him that it was just a bad dream, until a few weeks ago when he reported that the ghostly figures had begun to enter his bedchamber. His parents still largely dismissed his night terrors. The Queen had apparently suffered from a similar phenomenon as a result of the Light Magic roiling inside her, and she said that he would simply grow out of it. I, however, couldn’t

stand to see him suffer any more sleepless nights, and so I turned to my brethren for help. The dragons permitted him to sleep on the mattress for the newly-selected Dragonbound, who would spend the first few days and nights after the Binding Ritual beside their dragon as a means of solidifying the bond between them. If what Edwin was seeing were real ghosts, there wouldn't be much any of us could do, but sleeping in the midst of gigantic dragons gave him a sense of security that little else could.

Edwin ran inside and then returned in his night robe that bore patterns of blue and gold woven together with a light fabric. He climbed into Furion's saddle behind Alyssa, and the three of them took to the air with Alkan and I close behind. I would have carried Edwin myself, but I was banned from bearing humans upon my back until my Dragonbound had their first flight. To let another fly before them would be a disgrace and a dishonor to them and myself.

We reached the mouth of the cavern, and Edwin leapt out of the saddle. He pulled the mattress and sheets out of the far end of the Dragonhold, taking light steps so not to wake the other already-sleeping dragons. He flopped down onto the mattress, pulling the sheets tight around himself, and I lay beside him and encircled him with my blue-and-white wings. Alkan took his spot opposite us, yawning and stretching like an oversized house cat.

I gazed down at the boy as he drifted into a sound sleep. The faint light emitting from the crystals of the cavern cast a rainbow of light onto his soft, freckle-covered face. The breath of the sleeping dragons stirred his hair in a rhythmic pattern. I thought back to what I had said to the King that day. *"You didn't even raise him! You left him to the wet nurses and tutors and never even bothered to play with him or read to him or love him!"* I tried to let myself float away into the ethereal plane of my dreams, but the weight of the words held me down. An hour passed, and

then another as I lay awake, wishing I could take back the way I had spoken to the king. But the words themselves had been true.

The relationship between Edwin and his father had never been a good one. I thought back to the seasons spent watching him grow up. Five-year-old Edwin knocking on the door to his father's study with a book in his hands, asking his father to read to him. The door never opened. Eight-year-old Edwin begging his father to come to his fencing practice, only to be pushed aside as the King readied himself for his meeting with the other nobles. His mother was able to spend more time with him, fulfilling her duties of passing on her knowledge of the Old Tongue and the Light Magic, but both of their lives were consumed by the demand of politics and running a country. Since their coronation fifteen summers ago, they were always trying to clean up the mess their predecessors, Ania's parents, had made. But it left them with little time for their own son.

I watched the moon climb high into the star-lined sky. The air grew increasingly bitter, and a shudder ran through me. I noticed Alkan shake as well, but he was fast asleep, his lips moving as he muttered to himself. I focused on what he was saying, just barely making it out, even with my keen hearing.

"They came from the North, they came from the North," he whispered in a rhythmic chant. Another shudder ran through me, but this time not from the cold. I gazed again up at that sky. A cloud had passed over the moon, blotting out its bright light, along with the light of nearly all the surrounding stars. But the star of Aster still shone brightly through it.

I let Alkan's words slip away from my awareness as I finally felt myself drifting off. Soon I was once again lost in the endless realm of my dreams. But instead of the usual glimpses of a past life where I had once been human, the dream felt muffled and disjointed. Thick fog

surrounded me, and I coughed and gagged as the shadow pulsed in the back of my mind, bulging and swelling. And in the fog I could hear a voice, hoarse and desperate, calling for help. Calling my name.

Edwin and I sat in the front courtyard. Alyssa and Furion were absent, consumed by their respective duties, and Alkan had decided to sleep late. Beams of sunlight poked through the trees above us, shining down on the grass and pebbles of the path near where we sat. The jewel-encrusted sundial showed that it was still early in the morning, and I could taste the dewey sweetness of a new day. Edwin leaned against me, his back pressed into my warm scales. He was lost in one of his books, the cover of which read “Tales of Laetitia,” no doubt one of his old stories of heroes.

My thoughts were absorbed in the dream I was having since the night Edwin had run away, which was about a week ago now. It had only repeated twice since that night, but each time it left me with a cold tingle in my spine that travelled all the way to the tips of my teeth. The shadow in my mind hummed in the background, a constant drone that I could usually tune out, but now I was filled with a sense of urgency. Someone somewhere was crying out for my help. I tried to tell myself that it was just an old memory of my past life, that it was something that had already been resolved, but every time I recalled the dream my wings screamed to be allowed to carry me over the walls of Alba Aula and beyond Lux Splendens.

“There it is!” I cried out suddenly, ripping myself away from the spiral of thoughts. Edwin jumped up, startled, but followed my gaze to the sky above. Circling above us was the silver hawk, its resplendent unfurled wings catching the morning light.

“It’s beautiful,” the Prince said with a smile. “Just like you said.”

Edwin still refused to give anyone details as to how he got out, even to me, and no one knew what had transpired during his short-lived journey. The only thing I knew of his trek was the Earth's Breath stone, which I kept wrapped in its packaging safely inside the Dragonhold behind a few of the crystals that jutted out from the wall.

A chilly blast of wind gusted through the air, stirring Edwin's hair and the feathers on my wings and tail. It was the same cold that I felt the day he ran off, and it had continued throughout the week. Normally it wouldn't concern me, but it was far too early in the summer for weather like this. And it felt unnatural. I couldn't put a claw on it, but the blast shook not only my scales but something else inside of me. Something within my very soul.

And the shadow in the back of my mind was growing along with the cold.

Edwin continued to watch the hawk, grinning all the while, and when it finally disappeared from sight he turned back to his book. I rested my head on the grass, breathing in its scent as I closed my eyes.

My head shot back up.

Something was wrong.

I looked about wildly, but there was no indication that something was amiss. No alarm. No shouting from the servants. But something deep inside of me, something from where the fragments of memory from my past life lay dormant was screaming, branding a single word into my mind in a steady drumbeat.

HIDE.

HIDE.

HIDE.

I leapt to my feet, turning about wildly like the day I had when I found out that Edwin had gone missing. I was trying to put something together in my mind from the fragments, but what? What? What? What? *HIDE. HIDE. HIDE!*

“Riella,” Edwin’s voice pulled me out of my frenzy of panic. I breathed again and turned towards his voice.

Edwin’s face had completely drained of color. The book had left his hands and lay sprawled on his lap. His eyes, normally full of mischief, were fixed straight ahead. A shadow was growing over us, like something was beginning to block out the sun. I followed Edwin’s terrified gaze to the shadow’s source, and for a brief second my heart stopped beating.

The outer walls of Alba Aula had begun to rise.

Chapter 2: They Came from the North

Alba Aula was a castle made of brick and stone, but it was very much alive.

Since the days of the Royal War, when the Royal Family reclaimed their throne from the hands of the usurpers, the members of the family in whom the Light Magic dwelled were buried in the graveyard. There they lay behind the castle's keep amongst the marble gravestones and flowers left by loved ones.

But the Light Magic didn't depart along with the person's soul to the Above and Caelum. Instead, it seeped into the environment where the body of the deceased lay. If they died in Ina Desert, their Light Magic became a part of its sands. If their body lay at the bottom of a lake, the life of the magic was breathed into the waters. And if they were buried within the walls of Alba Aula, their magic became a part of the castle itself, giving it the same life and consciousness that the Light Magic has when present in a living being. The act of burying the Royal Family within the castle had given it a will and an intelligence, able to change its form to suit whatever purpose it needed, even if its inhabitants did not yet know what that purpose was. In times of peace, it was the shining white star with towers reaching to the sky that I knew and loved. But according to the old stories and legends, during times of war it became a fortress, with high walls and ramparts filled with slits for the archers to fire their arrows, with catapults and narrowed halls that twisted in a maze to confuse the would-be invaders.

And now the walls were beginning to rise.

I turned to Edwin and saw a look of bewilderment and terror on the boy's face, an expression that I too must have worn. I grabbed the back of his shirt with my mouth like I was a cat carrying its young and made a break for the castle. I could begin to hear the confused murmurs and shouts of the servants as they too noticed the walls that began to loom above them.

Children clung to the dresses of their nursemaids as they watched the texture of the keep's walls change from a sparkling white to dull, hard brick.

The better to keep out invaders, the stories said.

Edwin glanced back at the spot we had abandoned and reached out for his book that still lay there. But there was no time. I had to get him inside the keep, inside with his parents and the knights before whatever was coming got here. I charged through the main entrance, not daring to look behind me as the shadow from the walls continued to grow, spreading its darkness over the grass and stone walkways.

The interior of the castle was in an uproar. I had thought the day Edwin disappeared had been unusual, but it was nothing compared to this. Servants ran frantically to and fro in the halls just outside the great hall, calling out for their families. The knights and soldiers rushed about, finding their weapons and armor, gearing up for the unknown threat, hurrying to their stations. I watched as several of the Gryphon Riders donned their feather-embellished helmets and headed for the stables where their mounts were kept, and the Wyvern Squadron members charged for theirs as well. The stench of fear and sweat was in the air. My ears clanged with the sound of crying frightened children and weapons sliding in and out of their scabbards and armor clanking and knights shouting out their commands from beneath their polished silver helmets.

And all around us, the high arched ceilings and generously wide hallways were beginning to narrow.

"Excuse me!" I tried to shout above the din. But no one responded. Not even my status as one of the dragons could elicit their attention. They were all too caught up in their respective tasks of preparing for battle. "Where are the King and Queen?"

“Maybe they’re in the Great Hall,” Edwin suggested, nearly having to scream to be heard above the roaring all around us. He slipped through the rush of people and I followed, leaping over the crowd with a gigantic bound. I landed at the steps in front of the massive oak doors, and Edwin pushed them inward.

The Hall was dark. The windows had disappeared altogether, leaving no source of light save for the dome at its ceiling’s center, which cast a blood-red light on the floor. And the thrones sat empty. “Mother! Father!” Edwin ran into the Hall, unable to see that they weren’t there in the darkness like I had.

I followed after him to the center of the Hall. “They’re not here, Edwin!” But he was already nearly at the throne, and when he saw their absence he turned back to me. His eyes left mine and travelled to the dome above my head.

The red light fell directly on me, basking me in its eerie glow. I slowly followed Edwin’s gaze. The glass of the dome too had transformed. Where there had once been five heroes, only one remained: the Guardian of Time. The light had dyed his white cloak a crimson red, and his sword, previously in its scabbard, was drawn.

Blood was to be spilled this day.

“Come on,” I whispered to Edwin, trying to swallow the unease the transformation of the dome had caused. “We need to find your parents.”

He and I made our way to back where we had come, and as if on cue the oak doors swung open, revealing Alyssa and a squadron of knights behind her. She was wearing the full Dragonbound regalia: the silver breastplate with her dragon’s gem, the diamond-shaped ruby, at its center, the white and grey bracers on her arms, and the chainmail-lined red tunic that matched Furion’s scales. The white feathered cape, fastened by a smaller version of the ruby on her

breastplate, flowed past her shoulders. And her Dragonblade hung in its scabbard at her belt. “With me!” she shouted to us. “The King and Queen are in their bedchambers. Hurry!”

We dashed towards the group, joining their ranks as we hurried through the halls to Edwin’s parents. The servants still rushed about as they found their families and headed for the shelters within the keep. The halls grew darker. The windows were shrinking and disappearing completely, replaced by dimly-lit torches that grew out of the walls. The air became cold and damp as contact with the outside world was cut off. The castle appeared to be sealing us in like we were corpses within a tomb, but I knew better. It wasn’t us who were being sealed in.

Alba Aula was sealing something else out.

We rushed up the stairwell to the living-quarters floor. The stones dug into my feet as they twisted and shifted, imprinting their stony texture on my scales. The entire stairwell had begun to spiral and narrow as we passed through it. Edwin and Alyssa leapt off of the twisting steps with the knights close behind them. I tried to keep pace, but I was losing my breath. The walls were closing in all around me, all the light outside fading away. I felt as if my body was growing and swelling to meet the walls, and although my mind tried to tell my body that it was the other way around, that it was the walls that were getting smaller, my heart pounded in my ears and I couldn’t breath. Oh Dominus help me, I couldn’t breath.

“Riella!” Edwin ran back to me despite the frantic shouts of the knights. “You can’t stop here!”

“It’s going to be alright,” Alyssa tried to reassure me. “The walls won’t close in on you, they know better.” It was easy for her to say. She still fit comfortably within the halls, but I was at least ten times her size. And while the walls and ceiling still weren’t close to closing in on me, it sure felt like they were.

Edwin put his hand on my snout, and I thought back to the day I first met him, to the day when he stood outside his father's unopening door with the book in his hands, to the day a week ago when he had run away and risked the wrath of his parents just to buy me a birthday present. My legs found their strength again, and I followed close behind him as we wove our way through the twisting halls.

At long last we reached the door to the King and Queen's bedchamber. Alyssa turned the golden knob and let Edwin in. I couldn't fit through the door frame, but I managed to poke my head through.

The King and Queen stood at the foot of their silken bed. They had both donned their suits of armor, white pieces of finely-tempered metal that caught the faint light of the torches that had replaced the windows. The white diamonds adorning their armor matched those they wore on the crowns on their foreheads. And at each of their hips hung their swords. Edwin leapt into his mother's arms, trembling in her embrace. She ran her hands through his hair, trying to reassure her son, whispering to him that everything was going to be all right when we all knew that it wasn't.

The Queen raised her head, looking even more regal than before with her golden hair pinned back against her skull. "Edwin and I will stay here," she said to us. "I ask that you accompany us and offer us your protection," she addressed the knights.

They knelt before her with their hands crossed before their chests. "It would be an honor, Your Highness."

"Riella," she said as she turned to me, "You and Alkan are to report to the Dragonhold with Alyssa."

“Yes, Your Highness,” I said and tried to lower my head as much as I was able in the confined space. I locked eyes with Edwin. “Be safe.” He gave a sombre nod in return.

“This way,” Alyssa said as she led me away from the bedchamber. We sprinted down the remaining halls towards the stairwell that led back to the ground floor. She flung open the door at the end of the hall but stopped suddenly, and I nearly crashed into her.

The stairwell was gone. Beyond the door was a straight drop to the ground several feet below us. I shook my head, trying to clear it from the disorientation this whole debacle was causing. Alyssa hesitated for a moment and then leapt off of the doorway’s ledge. Her white cape snapped open into two white silken wings, and she glided safely to the ground. I readied myself to mimic her jump, but first turned and looked behind me.

The halls were continuing to narrow, and as I stared at them they twisted into curving shapes. My stomach churned. When I gazed out again beyond the doorway it looked as if the entire world and not just Alba Aula was twisting and spinning as well. “You need to jump!” Alyssa called up to me. But I couldn’t. My breath was trapped in my throat again. My ears rang and stung with the shouting of the knights and screeching of the gryphons and wyverns. And the door frame around me was beginning to shrink. I cried out in shock as I felt the wood press against my scales. In a wild panic I threw myself away from the door, just barely managing to open my wings before I crashed into the ground. I stood in the grass, heaving and retching up all the food I had eaten that morning. When I looked back up at the spot where I had jumped, I saw that the door had disappeared altogether.

Chaos was all around us. An impossibly dark cloud had covered all of Lux Splendens, seeping down from the north and blotting out any light from above and turning the early morning into the middle of the night. The knights of the Royal Army and of House Volarus, along with

the castle guards, rushed to their stations along the ramparts above us, readying their arrows to be fired through the loopholes in the walls. Men and women in white and silver armor manned the catapults that had sprung up along the walls, and ranks of soldiers stationed themselves within the courtyards. Their weapons were drawn as they looked about wildly, awaiting the enemy to arrive. The King joined their ranks at the center of the ramparts, his armor gleaming in the little light that remained. The Gryphon Riders and Wyvern Squadron had taken to their air, circling the castle on their winged mounts. And above them, resplendent and shimmering, soared the Dragons and Dragonbound.

My attention turned to the shouting at the front of the walls of Alba Aula, where a gigantic portcullis had formed. The drawbridge was drawn upward above the moat and the gate was closed, not allowing any of the people to enter. A crowd of the citizens of Lux Splendens had gathered at the entrance, crying out to be let in to safety. But the drawbridge stayed drawn upward, and the wall around Alba Aula had risen to at least three times its normal height.

A resounding boom emanated from behind me. “The Dragonhold has lowered,” Alyssa whispered with a hint of panic in her voice. I turned and looked for myself. The massive cavern, usually held aloft by the same Light Magic that gave life to the castle, had now touched down to the ground, landing in the courtyard behind the keep.

It didn’t take much to figure out what was going on. Normally the citizens of Lux Splendens would be let into the keep for safety along with the servants when the city was under attack. But this time Alba Aula itself was the target. And our enemies were airborne.

Alyssa donned her helmet. The silver metal covered all the curly dark hair that she had tied back against her head, and I barely recognized her. Furion swooped down beside us, and as he zoomed by she swung herself into the saddle with one fluid motion. “Get to the Dragonhold!”

she called to me as she was borne away into the sky with the other Dragons and Dragonbound. The air rang with the clanging of the alarm, the same bell that tolled the day Edwin had run away. One clang. Two. Three. Four. It was no longer a drill. This was an emergency. Five. Six? Seven. Eight. Nine. I lost count as the clanging sounded through Alba Aula, and with each toll the hole in my stomach tore wider and wider with pure fear.

And then everything was silent. The alarm stopped abruptly, and the knights shuffled in their stances. Minutes stretched on as we watched the sky with no sign of an enemy except for the black cloud above us. With each passing second my blood pulsed in my ears, my muscles taunt with dread.

I felt Alkan appear beside me. I could hear his heart pounding inside his chest like a bird trying to escape from its cage. “We need to get to the Dragonhold,” he whispered in the silence. But I didn’t move, and neither did he. We stood rooted to our spot in the courtyard, our gaze frozen on the black cloud above us. The minutes dragged on, and still no sign of an invader appeared. The knights began to mutter to themselves, and many of them began to visibly relax, leaning against the walls and lowering their weapons. But the Dragons and their Dragonbound knew better, still watching the skies intently.

After nearly an hour of paralyzing fear, still nothing had happened. Alkan and I were rooted to the ground, but gradually my fear began to ebb. Maybe it was a false alarm. Maybe Alba Aula had made a mistake. The muscles in my legs relaxed, and I turned to Alkan. “We should go,” I said, and he nodded in agreement. He turned and started to head for the Dragonhold. I took one last look at the cloud-covered sky.

My heart froze. The shadow in the back of my mind stirred, and from where it lay I felt a sharp stinging pain erupt out. From it came a single word: *KILL*.

The cloud exploded, and the Abyss itself rained down upon us.

They came from the North.

The cloud tore to shreds, and from it erupted legions of shadow-beasts, horrifying creatures of all shapes and sizes with jet-black fur and scales, crimson claws and fangs, and bloodlust in their eyes. The beasts of Umbra, the land in the northeast tip of Initium, descended upon Alba Aula, colliding with the spears and swords of the knights and the claws of the Dragons. They tore at the towers of the once-gleaming castle, ignoring the city and its inhabitants completely. Those manning the gate to Alba Aula had been right to not let the people in. Whatever the monsters wanted, it wasn't in the city. It was in the castle itself. Screeches filled the darkened sky as the creatures cried out their murderous intent. They filled the air, borne aloft on their membranous bat-like wings, raining acidic spit upon those defending the castle.

And then the Knights of Initium fought back. A volley of arrows shot upward, plunging their barbed tips into the wings and chests of the beasts. Bolts of Earth's Breath magic erupted from the fingertips of the mages stationed on the ramparts. And above all the chaos, the roaring of the dragons rang through the blood-soaked air. The six dragons swooped about, sinking their teeth and claws into the monsters while the Dragonbound leapt off their backs, twirling through the air with their swords drawn. Alyssa dove out of Furion's saddle, free-falling as her Dragonblade shimmered in the light of the Earth's Breath bolts and flaming arrows. She twisted herself in the air, spinning as she brought the blade down upon the shadow-beast directly below her, lopping off its head in one powerful sweep. Her cape snapped open into the two white wings and she landed with a *thump* on the ground that was quickly becoming soaked with blood from the monsters and soldiers alike. The girl continued to fight, plunging her sword into the shadow-

beasts surrounding her alongside the other knights she had landed amongst. She shouted a word in the Old Tongue and a blast of ruby light erupted from the Earth's Breath stone in the pommel of her Dragonblade, searing through dozens of the beasts surrounding them. With a shake of the ground Furion landed beside her, a blast of flame spewing from his maws.

The catapults let loose their ammunition, sending rocks, flaming bundles of wood, anything the soldiers could find at the enemy. Several of the volleys hit their mark, but there were so many of the monsters, too many. They filled the air like a swarm of locusts unleashed upon a field of grain. The screams of dying men and women echoed across the courtyard, mingled with the shrieks of the beasts. The air reeked of sweat and blood.

And in the midst of it all were Alkan and me.

We stood rooted to the ground, unable to move as we surveyed the chaos around us. Above me I watched as one of the gryphons was caught in the talons of a shadow-beast. The monster's powerful tendons rippled as it tore the poor animal in two, spilling blood and severed intestines down upon us. A scream erupted from my throat at the horrible sight, and I made a break for the Dragonhold. Alkan followed close behind as I ran across the blood-stained grass, weaving my way between the mutilated bodies of knights, gryphons, wyverns and shadow-beasts that had fallen to the ground. We didn't dare take to the air. The Dragonhold grew closer, and I forced my legs to move faster, go faster, please, let me get out of here-

A tremor ran through the ground as a hideous shadow-beast landed in front of us. It was slightly smaller than I was, but it bore two sets of wings and four heads upon its shoulders, each gleaming with rows of spiked horns and teeth. Four sets of jaws opened, and a terrible screech emanated from its maws. Alkan crouched low, his tail flicking, and he lunged at the beast before it had a chance to strike. The monster caught him with its claws mid-leap, sending him sprawling

through the air. He landed with a thud on the ground. The beast spread its four wings wide as it loomed over him, froth dripping from its fangs.

And I just stood and watched.

My vision was slipping. Everything became blurry as the shadow in the back of my mind pulsed and grew. The inky black fingers stretched across my consciousness, spreading their message. *Kill. Kill.* I shook my head, trying to blot out the droning, but it wouldn't relent. I started back at Alkan, who was struggling to get up from the ground. The shadow-beast smacked his face with its claws, sending him back down, and two of the four heads reared up and then sank their teeth into his scales. He screamed as the teeth tore into his flesh, and crimson splattered across emerald green.

His scream brought me back. The shadow disappeared, retreating back to the far corner of my mind, and my awareness of the rest of the battlefield disappeared along with it. There was only one thing before me: the monster that was tearing into Alkan.

From deep inside of my chest a roar burst forth, the cry of an enraged dragon. I charged the beast, striking it squarely with the top of my skull, tearing into its flesh with my horns. Without thinking I flapped my wings and thrust myself and the beast upward, anything to get it away from Alkan. The monster screeched in pain and sank its teeth into me. I let out a cry as the teeth easily tore through my scales that hadn't yet been hardened by the strength of the Binding Ritual's magic. Beneath me Alkan had gotten back to his feet, and he too took to the air. He collided with the beast's back, gouging at it with his teeth and claws, and the monster released me from its grip.

Now was my chance to do what only dragons could. I gathered the heat within me, focusing it into a torrent. The scales on my chest glowed white-hot as the heat gathered, and the

beast looked at me with terror in its eight eyes. But it was too late. I released the flames, sending them spewing from my jaws right into its four ghastly heads. The monster hollered and clawed at the air, but to no avail. Alkan joined me and a second jet of flame engulfed the monster. The smell of smoke and burning flesh filled the air, but we didn't let out flames ebb until its shrieks slowed and finally stopped. I let the stream of fire end, and the incinerated foe crumpled to the ground.

"By Dominus," Alkan whispered. We were in the midst of the worst of it. The monsters flew about in all directions, clashing with the remaining gryphons and wyverns.

"Get to the Dragonhold!" Halda shouted as she swooped by. Her tail whipped around and struck one of the nearby shadow-beasts in the chest, killing it instantly.

Alkan turned to me. "What do we do? I don't think we'll make it out of this." He turned just in time as one of the beasts grabbed at him from behind. His teeth sank into its throat as it charged him.

What do we do? I surveyed the area as quickly as I could amidst the chaos. More than anything I wanted to retreat to the safety of the Dragonhold, but just getting there would be a struggle from where we were. I looked down below me and watched as one of the knights was torn to shreds like he had been made of paper. No. I wasn't going to let this continue. I wasn't. I was a Dragon. And if the beasts got into the castle, they would get to Edwin.

I copied Halda's maneuver, bashing the shadow-beasts around me with my tail as they approached. Blood covered my white scales. I dove down to where the knights were, raking my claws into several of the beasts below me, lifting the smaller ones into the air and then dropping them over the soldier's ready lances. My wings carried me between the volleys of arrows as I rampaged through the air. A cluster of monsters charged me and I became a flurry of claws and

teeth, biting and slashing, gouging at them with everything I had. I released the fire from my throat once again. The scorching flames jetted through the sky, incinerating dozens of our enemies. Three of them charged me at once, biting into my legs and sides with their fangs as I yelped in pain. A blast of fire engulfed me and the shadow-beasts. The flames passed harmlessly around my fire-proof scales, but the beasts weren't so lucky. I sputtered, coughing up blood, and beheld Furion hovering just above me. He gave me a solemn nod and then turned his attention back to the battle around us.

The waves of enemies were finally beginning to end. From where I hovered in the air, I could see that there were less and less shadow-beasts in the air. They instead piled up upon the ground, crumpled corpses that had already begun to stink of rot. The knights began to cheer as their numbers dissipated, and I caught a few smiles on the mouths of the dragons. But something was wrong. I could still feel the shadow in the back of my mind pulsing and growing again. My vision grew dim.

It wasn't just my vision, I quickly realized. A hush came over the knights, the cheers stopping abruptly as the cloud above us grew even darker than before, casting Alba Aula into even blacker night. The remaining shadow-beasts turned their heads to the clouds, a rhythmic chittering coming from their maws. And from within the black cloud came the roar of a Deathwing.

The Deathwing descended from the cloud, its leathery wings unfurled to display their full length. The black dragon's tail flicked with bloodlust, and its eyes glared down at all those below. Several more accompanied it, soaring down from the cloud along with another hoard of shadow-beasts. They were all here. All eight. Icy fear seared through my veins at the sight of

them. The Deathwings turned to each other, screeches coming from their hideous mouths. As I listened to them, the screeches began to sound different in my ears, almost like...words.

“...queen.”

“...take the... tower...”

“Death to the Light!”

The sounds of the Deathwings sorted themselves out into full sentences little by little, and my horror grew. I looked frantically at the other dragons around me, hoping for some indication that they too suddenly understood the speech of the black dragons, but I got none. Instead the Dragons and Dragonbound charged forth, straight into the line of Deathwings as they hollered their war cries, swords and claws raised. This was our battle.

And I wasn't ready.

One of the Deathwings broke past the line of Dragons and Dragonbound above, diving straight towards me. But instead of colliding with me in combat, its wings spanned open, holding it aloft in the air just above my head. “White Dragon,” it snarled. The black gemstone on its forehead matched my own in all but its color. Its lips were set back in a cruel smile, and its green eyes glared down at me. Green eyes...

Without warning it pulled its wings back into a steep dive and came down upon me, dragging me to the ground as its claws tore into my scales. I screamed in panic, but there was no one to help me. The other dragons were occupied with the remaining Deathwings, and the rest of Alba Aula's forces were busy fighting off the second wave of shadow-beasts. The scent of my own blood burned into my nostrils as the Deathwing's claws raked across my ribs, tearing open the scales and flesh. I fell to the ground with a thud as the Deathwing stood over me, blood and gore dripping from its claws and lips.

“Traitor!” the monster snarled. It struck me across the face with its claws.

I gasped from the pain, struggling to regain my breath. The icy fear blasted through my whole body, more so than the day Edwin had gone missing, more than when the castle’s halls had shrank all around me, more even than when the first wave of shadow-beasts descended upon us. I balked in terror, limping across the crimson grass in a futile attempt to get away, get away, get away-

The black dragon grabbed my head in its hands and forced me to look into its terrible emerald eyes. “Can you still understand me, Light-speaker? Traitor?” I struck me again, and I coughed up blood in response, my chest heaving from the fear and the pain. This was it. I was going to die, here and now, at the hands of the Deathwing. The beast rose up to its full height above me, wings spread wide and jaws agape, ready to deal the final blow.

A memory from my past self rushed into my mind, flooding out the fear and the pain wracking my body. I had stood on a field like this one, my sword raised against the black dragon. I was afraid, but there was something else. Something overriding the fear.

Dominus.

A burst of light bolted through my mind, obliterating the fear and the pain and the shadow. I gathered my remaining strength and threw myself at the Deathwing. Although it was covered with far more horns and was more muscular than I, we were nearly the same size, and the weight of my body sent it sprawling backwards. It flapped its wings, dragging its bulk into the air and me along with it. I released my grip on my foe and dropped just below it, my wings catching me before I hit the ground. Now was my chance to escape. I wove between the shadow-beasts and Deathwings who were locked in combat with the Dragons and their Dragonbound,

pulling off tight loops and twisting myself in the air as I dodged blasts of Dark Magic from the mouths of the black dragons and the talons of the beasts.

A shout in the Old Tongue rang through the air from the direction of the keep. It should have been lost amidst the sounds of the raging battle, but it was a voice I recognized: The Queen.

I doubled back towards the keep. The claws of the shadow-beasts tore at the feathers on my wings, but a blast of Light Magic from the gem on Halda's forehead eliminated them, clearing my path. I hovered within sight of the keep, my heart utterly frozen in my chest.

One of the walls of the keep had been blasted open, revealing the King and Queen's bedchamber. The Queen stood in the wake of the destruction, grim and resplendent. Her once white armor was covered with the crimson of her enemies, and her long thin blade was dyed a dark red. Her hair was loose from the pins, hanging in erratic golden waves as she spun about, slashing and stabbing at the shadow-beasts climbing the walls and circling the air around her. The striking lightning-bolt mark on her face was aglow. The dim white light emanating from it cast an ethereal light on her skin amidst the dirt and gore of the battle. The knights once guarding her lay at her feet, limp and lifeless. And Edwin was nowhere to be seen.

Bile and metal filled my mouth as I tucked my wings into a steep dive for the keep, cutting through the hordes before me. I slashed and sliced through them, spattering myself with their blood and intestines. But I couldn't stop. Don't stop. A burst of Light Magic emitted from the Queen's entire body, incinerating the beasts around her, but more quickly took their place. And then, a Deathwing descended upon her. I flapped my wings furiously in a desperate attempt to make it in time, a steady drumbeat filling my head. No, no, no, no-

The green-eyed Deathwing crashed into my wounded side, drawing a pained howl from my throat as its full weight smashed my already-damaged ribs. I was thrown away from the keep

as I clawed helplessly at the air, reaching for the Queen, but to no avail. All I could do was watch as I was dragged away from her and Edwin.

The world slowed. The Deathwing alighted on the crumbling remains of the wall, its wings open wide. The Queen raised her sword and a bolt of Light Magic erupted from it, striking the monster in the face. It reared back in pain, but then it swung its clawed hand down upon her, knocking her to the ground. The sword flew out of her hands and to the blood-covered grass far below. Queen Ania heaved, desperately trying to force herself to her feet, but she was already badly injured and drained of her life-energy by the onslaught of shadow-beasts. And then the hand of the Deathwing wrapped around her, squeezing away her consciousness as it lifted her into the air. The Queen let out a cry that sounded across the battlefield. She screamed her son's name. And then she fell limp in the hands of the black dragon as her consciousness fled her. The Deathwing flapped its tremendous wings, lifting them into the air. And then they were gone, lost in the cloud of night above us.

A scream exploded from my throat, a cry of raw anguish and rage and pain as the claws of the Deathwing dug into my shoulders. The monster let out a hideous laugh of triumph as it carried me helplessly through the air. We passed over the impossibly high wall of Alba Aula. I thrashed and writhed in a desperate attempt to escape its hold on me, but to no avail. The claws sank too deep into my scales. I watched helplessly as the Deathwing raised its head back. Its jaws parted, revealing the full set of fangs that dripped with the poison of Dark Magic, ready to give the killing blow.

In a last attempt I lunged my head upward, biting down hard into the monster's neck. My teeth throbbed and my mouth filled with the taste of metal, but my fangs broke through the row

of tough scales. The Deathwing screamed and sputtered as its own blood filled its mouth. Its wings flapped wildly, and its claws released their hold on me.

I fell. My wings no longer had the strength to hold me aloft, and the life-energy the dragons used to allow us to fly had been depleted by the battle, all of the remaining energy now being used to just keep me alive. As I tumbled through the air I watched the world float by. The dark cloud hovered above, black streaks of lighting shooting forth from it. The shadow-beasts fluttered about as the catapults fired the last of the remaining ammunition at them. Their wings crumpled and their bodies fell as they were struck down by the chunks of rocks and arrows launched at them. Above them the Deathwings and Dragons were locked in combat, their roars filling the air above the din of the rest of the battle. The Amber Dragon, its scales glittering gold in the light of the bolts of magic, rose up above the Deathwing it battled. The gold-colored gemstone on its forehead glowed with a bright light and a beam of Light Magic blasted from its jaws, engulfing the black dragon as it howled.

Someone screamed my name. I turned and saw Alyssa reaching her hand towards me as I fell beyond the outer wall. Her fingers were outstretched as if she could catch me. Blood and gore were splattered across the dark skin of her face, and her hair escaped from the helmet in tangled mats. The flames from the Deathwings' maws surrounded her. She called my name as I passed from her line of sight, rocketing towards the ground.

I landed in the moat surrounding the wall of Alba Aula. The water had widened and deepened when the castle underwent its transformation, and I crashed into the cold liquid. My drenched feathers dragged me downwards, and I let the waters take me. I was too tired. Too tired to struggle anymore. The water around me was dyed red with my blood, the crimson seeping out in waves as I sank downwards. The sounds of the battle were drowned out as my ears passed

below the rippling waves I had created upon impact. Above me the dark cloud still blotted out all the light, save for one single white point now shining through directly above me. The star of Aster.

As I sank into the depths of the moat, my consciousness fled and the watery darkness took me.

Chapter 3: Holding on to Hope

We were once children of Nox, but then we discovered the Light.

It began with the creation of humanity itself thousands of seasons ago. Dominus, the god of Initium and maker of all living things, used his own life-energy to create the land and sea and sky. Upon the land he placed animals of all shapes and sizes. In the sea he formed fish in a rainbow of colors and nymphs to guard the waters. Into the sky he breathed birds, feather-catchers, wyverns, and gryphons. Last of all, he blessed the land with his most beloved creations: humans. He looked down upon humankind and decided that they deserved a guardian, someone who would serve at Dominus's side while leading humanity and guiding them. And so he wove together Nox with the stitches of life, his most trusted creation.

But shortly after his birth, Nox looked down upon humanity and saw for himself what the beings were. They were cruel to each other, greedy, and filled with hatred. He watched as they squabbled with one another, stealing each other's land and belongings and even lives. He became jealous of the compassion Dominus had for the lesser beings, unable to understand why the all-powerful god would make such creatures and allow them to act as they did. That jealousy soon turned to hatred, and he resented the task of guiding humanity that Dominus had appointed him with. Shortly after his creation, Nox turned on his father. He waged war against the Caelum, the city of Dominus, and he created his own magic to match Dominus's might: Dark Magic. Nox performed creations of his own with his new form of magic, producing twisted mockeries of Dominus's majestic beings and setting them upon Caelum.

It was all in vain. Try as he might, Nox could stand against the full might of his father, and he was ultimately defeated. With great sorrow in his heart, Dominus cast Nox out of the city

of Caelum and all of the Above itself, banishing him to the reality Initium existed within, where he was trapped amongst the humans he so abhorred.

But it didn't end there. Nox mourned the loss of his place in Caelum, but he quickly began to amass his forces again. Dominus had cast him out, but his hatred for humanity remained, and he would use that hatred to destroy them and have his revenge against his father. He built his armies of shadow-beasts and lay waste to the human kingdoms within the land of Initium. His forces overwhelmed the humans completely. They had the Earth's Breath to fight back, but it could in no way match the power of the Dark Magic. But when all seemed lost, the Guardian of Time appeared.

The hero wrapped in a white cloak and silver armor wielded a blade of diamonds and, most importantly, the Light Magic of Dominus himself. He took up arms beside the one of the kingdoms' queens, the Queen of Dawn, and the two of them united Initium under one banner and fought back Nox. Seeing that his forces were being destroyed, Nox's rage burned brighter, and with his fury he created us: the Eight Dragons.

We were Nox's greatest work. The dragons brought destruction to the humans with the fire from our mouths and storms from our wings. But most deadly of all was the Dark Magic Nox had granted us. The power was stored in the gemstones set within our foreheads, a mockery of Dominus's emblem of the White Diamond, and we used it to rip to shreds all the humans had built along with the humans themselves.

We brought fire and chaos down alongside Nox, but we could not prevail. The Queen of Dawn and the Guardian of Time triumphed over us, and they sealed Nox away within the lands beyond the mountains in the far North. The dragons remained in the land of imprisonment with him, for although we were not physically bound, we could not live long without his power

nearby to sustain us. In the land of Umbra we remained, awaiting our creator to return, until one day a mage channeling Nox's magic summoned us forth.

We answered his call, and Nox granted him his power, allowing one of us to fly free once again to rain fire and death down upon the land. The dragon brought forth its destruction once more, until the fateful day when the Blue-eyed Dragon, the one previous to me in our line of rebirth, encountered a young woman called the Daughter of the Sun. The hero, like the Queen of Dawn, had been granted the Light Magic of Domius that resided in a White Diamond hanging from her neck. She reached out and touched the gemstone on the dragon's forehead, filling it with light where there was once naught but darkness.

The black dragon was transformed, its scales dyed white with the magic, while bits of blue remained at the tips of its wings and on its horns, indicating the color it would have been had it not been the first to touch the light. The dragon recoiled in fear and confusion, but then realized that it much preferred this new form. It was no longer a slave to Nox, instead presented with a choice to continue to accept the magic or reject it and return to being a black dragon. It flew back to Umbra where the other dragons lay and passed on its magic to them, sharing with them its new form and awareness. The eight dragons decided that they would live in the Light, and so they made plans to leave Umbra.

But Nox would not allow it. While they now had the light of Dominus in them, Nox was still their creator, and he dragged them back into his darkness, forcing them to once again don their monstrous black-scaled forms. One dragon managed to escape before the Dark Magic engulfed her, and she fled to the Daughter of the Sun for aid.

The dragon who had escaped, the emerald dragon, came to the realization that while she was filled with the Light Magic, she was still bound to Nox. But, if she were to bind herself to

another being, she would be able to resist his call. With the aid of the Daughter of the Sun, she bonded with the human the Light Magic chose, and he became the first of the Dragonbound, her anchor in a sea of darkness. The children of Dominus fought against Nox's mage and defeated him, eliminating the foothold Nox had, and then spread the light back to the other seven dragons. The dragons chose for themselves Dragonbound, one of whom was the Daughter of the Sun herself, and were able to remain in the Light and serve as guardians of the land.

However, Nox wouldn't let us just go. Even while we were bound to humans, he tried to invade our minds, attempting to pull us back into his darkness. When his efforts proved unsuccessful, he used his remaining power to create eight more black dragons, which we referred to as the Deathwings. We clashed with our monstrous counterparts during the Dragon Wars hundreds of seasons ago, driving them back to Umbra after several bloody battles.

There were, however, side effects of being bound to humans, the main one being the alteration of the dragons' cycle of life and death. When we were under Nox, each time we died we were re-formed as eggs that would hatch with all the memories of our previous life. But when the first human reached out to the emerald dragon and bound himself to her, he also entered this cycle of death and rebirth, as did all the other Dragonbound. When the dragon and Dragonbound died, they would both be reborn, but the dragon would be reborn as the human, and the human reborn as the dragon, alternating as they lived and died, neither with the memories of who they had once been save for fragments that lingered in their dreams and subconsciousness. What's more, the dragons found that once they went through one cycle of rebirth, they could use the Light Magic that awakened during their Binding Ritual to take a human form, often with an appearance similar to the last Dragonbound in their line.

I had once been the Daughter of the Sun. While the other Dragons and Dragonbound had by now gone through several cycles of life and death, Alkan and I were the first dragons in our line to be reborn long after the deaths of our previous incarnations. It was speculated that this was because we were the first to be touched with the Light Magic and the first to be Bound, but no one could say for sure. All I knew was that I existed as the White Dragon, the first of the dragons to be touched with the Light and the rebirth of the Daughter of the Sun's soul. I was the second in the line of what was to be a proud lineage that had begun with one of Light Casters themselves. I was meant to be a protector of Dominus's creations.

But when the Deathwings had come to Alba Aula and taken the Queen, I could do nothing but watch.

When I finally regained consciousness two days after the siege on Alba Aula, I learned two important pieces of information.

The first was that while the Queen had been kidnapped and brought to Umbra, Edwin was safe. He was there when my eyes slowly creaked open, and his face broke out into a smile when I lifted my head towards him. Alyssa and Alkan sat beside him, and they were beaming as well. We were in the Dragonhold, and I was lying on a cotton mat. Bandages covered my body where the shadow-beasts and Deathwing had torn through my scales. Everything felt sore, but it didn't hurt. Dragons' high amount of life energy allows us to heal quickly even without being connected to the Light Magic, and what I hadn't been able to heal myself the mages had used their Earth's Breath to finish. Once I was coherent enough to absorb new information, Edwin and Alyssa shared with me what they knew about the events that had transpired.

Alyssa had watched me fall into the moat, and she urged Furion to fly over and get me out. But the Deathwings were relentless, and Furion nearly had his head torn off as he lifted me out of the water before I drowned. Alyssa had to use the last of her Earth's Breath to fend the monster off, sending a bolt of magic squarely between its eyes. My limp body lay on the other side of the wall as my two rescuers fought off the stray shadow-beasts that swooped down at us, and Alkan joined them, protecting me with the little strength he had left. Eventually the shadow-beasts dwindled in number as the catapults and knights did their job, and all fire was concentrated towards the Deathwings, overwhelming them at last. The dark cloud dissipated from the sky, and everyone's attention turned towards the gaping hole in the wall of the castle that exposed the bedchambers of the King and Queen like an open wound revealing that the heart had been ripped out of its ribcage.

Edwin had still been in the bedchamber with the Queen when the Deathwing blasted a hole in the wall. It had sounded like a sudden clap of thunder, and the wall crumbled before them, revealing the source of the screeches and tortured screams echoing through the chambers of the castle. The Queen and knights drew their swords immediately, and she directed Edwin towards the wardrobe in the room's far corner. She placed a hand upon his forehead and he felt her Light Magic flow through him, placing a spell of concealment on him. She then grasped his shoulders and pushed him into the wardrobe. "Whatever you hear, do not open this door. As long as you stay out of sight, they will not find you," she instructed. "I love you," she said after a pause. There were tears in her eyes. The doors of the wardrobe shut, and he was swallowed up in darkness.

He heard the sound of metal ringing against claws and scales and agonizing cries from the knights. *Do not open this door.* The scent of blood eked in through the bottom of the

wardrobe door. *Do not open this door.* A hideous roar rang out. His mother screamed his name. *Do not open this door.* And then nothing but the beating of gigantic wings filled his ears.

One of the surviving knights found him when the battle finally ended. The doors of the wardrobe opened, and Edwin drew the sword his mother had given him minutes before the wall collapsed, ready to defend himself. He dropped the blade when he realized it was one of his allies. And then he burst into tears.

His mother was gone.

The Queen was gone.

I sat before them, still in a daze, unable to fully believe that this was the reality we were living in, a reality where Alba Aula, the shining star of Initium, had been invaded and the Queen kidnapped. “Do you know if she’s...?” I finally worked up the strength to ask.

“She is,” Edwin answered before Alyssa had a chance to say anything. “She’s alive. I know it.” He stared down at the ground, and tears began to form in his eyes.

“If she’s alive, we can rescue her,” I tried to comfort him with my words. Normally I would wrap him up in the feather blanket of my wings, but I was too sore to move. “We’ll get her back.”

That was when I learned the second important piece of information. No one had been sent to rescue the Queen.

“*What?*” I cried when Alyssa broke the news to me. “No one at all? Surely we could send in our aerial forces.”

She shook her head. “It is the King’s decision. He hasn’t said much about it, only that he doesn’t want to send any troops.”

I stared at her in disbelief. Send no troops? What was he thinking? Something was missing here, something wasn't right. Did he not want to save his wife? And did he not know what the consequences would be if Nox had her in his clutches?

He would be able to break what remained of his seal.

The seal had begun to weaken many seasons ago. I learned of it when I was just nine summers old and the Guardian of Time himself paid a visit to Alba Aula. I was told that in the past he came to the castle often, but his visits had been growing less frequent. I had been sitting in the front courtyard, laying beside the three-month-old Edwin and his nursemaid when I saw the silver hawk circling in the air overhead. A great commotion came from the front gate. The soldiers stiffened and snapped to attention before the man striding down the walkway. He wore a white cloak speckled with dirt and filth, and a hood shrouded the top of his face in shadows. The white diamond his cloak was clasped with and the golden-hilted sword at his hip indicated who he was. I followed him towards the great hall at a distance, unable to believe that such a legend had just casually strode down the walkway a few feet from me. He had appeared in nearly every story and legend, giving the heroes advice and coming to their aid, but nothing at all was known about who he actually was.

The white-clad man disappeared behind the doors of the great hall, and I waited outside, straining to hear what was going on. The doors of the hall were always sealed with magic, preventing anyone outside from hearing the proceedings within no matter how keen their hearing was. The nursemaid and Edwin joined me, and I kept myself busy making the baby laugh with funny faces until the doors of the great hall opened again. The soldiers around us snapped to attention again as the Guardian of Time walked out. Despite his easy stride, I could tell from the

grimace on his face that he was agitated. He paused and turned to Edwin and me, dropping the grimace.

“So, this is the young Prince,” he said with a smile as he looked down at Edwin in the nursemaid’s arms. The baby giggled and reached out for his gloved hand, and the Guardian let his small chubby fingers wrap around his. He stroked Edwin’s hair. “I’m sure you’ll make a great king someday.” He turned to me. “You are Riella, correct?”

I froze, unsure of how to respond. What does one say to a living legend? I remained silent and nodded my head.

He smiled, and I relaxed a little. “It’s a fine name. And you seem to be a fine dragon.” Even up close in the well-lit castle, the shadows of his hood hid the upper half of his face, no doubt some work of magic.

“Thank you,” I squeaked.

He looked back to the doors to the great hall, and I caught a sigh leave his chest. “Look after Edwin,” he said to me. “He’s going to need you.” He gave us one last smile, but I sensed a hint of sadness. The Guardian of Time left the castle, never to be seen by its inhabitants again. The silver hawk, too, disappeared from the sky. I later learned from Rokel, the Turquoise Dragon, that he had come to report that the seal on Nox was continuing to weaken.

There were a few things I knew about the seal that had been placed on Nox. It was a barrier of Light Magic, but Nox’s Dark Magic could counteract it if he found a way to overpower it. In his weakened state, there would be little Nox could do to free himself, save for finding a way to gather more power. That power could be gained from life-energy, the source of life present in all beings, from plants and animals to humans and dragons. A being cannot live without it like it cannot live without breath itself, and when it dies the life-energy exists and

dissipates, lost forever. Most beings have a moderate amount of life-energy, but dragons have more and use it to fly and breathe fire. And those in the Royal Bloodline who have Light Magic have the most. No one knew for sure why, but it was speculated that because they were tied so closely to the magic, their life energy amounts had increased with each generation. If Queen Ania were to be brought to Umbra, the Dark Magic concentrated there would overwhelm her magic, and with her abundance of life energy Nox would be able to break free.

How could the King not send troops to rescue the Queen? Surely he knew what would happen if Nox succeeded in using her? The five of us sat in silence in the Dragonhold, not knowing what to say.

“I’m so sorry,” I finally whispered to Edwin.

He didn’t respond. The boy just stared at the crystals in the walls, sucking in his cheeks in an effort to not cry. But it didn’t work. His tears spilled out uncontrollably, and this time I found the strength to pull him close to me, covering him with my wings. His body trembled against mine as he was wracked with the sobs. I held him close as the sun outside set and the moon rose, plunging us into night once more. The stars shone brightly, and I looked up at them, straining to see the constellations Alyssa always pointed out. I gave up quickly. I was still unable to fathom how just four or five of the tiny dots could make a picture. I turned my attention to Aster instead.

It wasn’t there.

The star of Aster was gone from its usual spot in a sky. I felt a spike of panic as I searched for it. Where could it have gone? It was always supposed to be there. What could have happened-

There. For the first time since I had began watching the skies several years ago, the star of Aster had moved. The bright point of light down shone to the southwest of where I sat, twinkling in a sea of black.

Edwin and his father were arguing in the study again. Four days had passed since the Queen was kidnapped. I sat in the solar room like the last time, but I had promised myself that no matter what happened I wouldn't interfere. The sky outside was dark, but few of the stars shone through. Clouds had gathered, blotting out the sky from above, and almost no light at all shone through the window. This time I couldn't fully make out their words, but I heard Edwin's voice shouting from the study. The King was uncharacteristically quiet, and I could only make out muted tones from his voice. I left the solar room and crept toward the study.

The side door of the study slammed. I heard Edwin's footsteps pattering down the next hallway in a quick stride. Whatever direction the conversation had taken, it hadn't been a good one. I turned to follow after him, but a sound from behind the study doors stopped me. I pressed my ear against the wood.

The King was weeping.

I stepped back, shocked. He was a man who seldom showed any emotion, and when he did it was usually only anger. But now I heard the King crying the kind of tears that makes one's body shake and heave with the force of the sorrow. I considered pushing my head through the door, but decided against it. I doubted a man like him wanted anyone to discover his moment of weakness, and I thought back to the last time I had come into the study uninvited. I would keep this to myself, I decided. If everyone else found this out, that their stoic leader had finally broken, they would lose what faith they had left in the Royal Family.

I made my way down that halls. They were empty save for the occasional guard, everyone having already turned in for the night. The castle and its corridors had returned to their normal state, and I once again fit comfortably inside. Every once in a while I would still look at the ceiling or a wall and see it beginning to shrink around me, but after a few blinks it would return to its normal state. I followed the direction Edwin's footsteps had taken and guessed that he was headed to his bedchambers.

I rounded the corner and came within the view of the bedchambers. Sure enough, I could sense him inside. I listened in, trying to make out if he took was crying. All I could hear was the faint tinkling of the music box the Queen had given him as an infant, the beautiful yet sorrowful melody slipping out into the hall from under the door. "Is everything all right?" I asked. I nudged the door with my snout, but it didn't budge. "Did you lock your door?" No response came from within the room. "I know you're in there, Edwin. Please let me in. It's not good for you to be alone right now."

I heard him jiggle with the bolt, and the door creaked open. He held it open a crack, staring out at me. "I'm fine," he said.

"You don't have to lie to me."

He turned away quickly, refusing to make eye contact. I peered over his shoulder into the room. I couldn't see much through the sliver in the doorway, but a pile laying at the foot of his bed caught my eye. "What's that?" I asked. His eyes widened and he tried to shut the door, but I pushed against it and forced it open, shoving my entire head into the doorway.

Edwin's room was usually a mess, but now even more so. The doors of his wardrobe were thrust open, and the dresser drawers had been ripped out of their spots and now rested on the ground. The pictures of his favorite heroes from the old stories had been taken off the walls

and gathered in a pile on the floor at the foot of his bed, along with a simple shirt and pants, a pair of boots, and a hooded cloak. “What is this?” I asked, even though I had a fair guess at to what was going on. But I needed to hear it from him. He still refused to look me in the eye.

“Edwin, what are you plotting?”

He dragged himself over to the pile on the floor and began to flip through the pictures. “Father still hasn’t sent anyone to rescue Mother,” he said finally. “I don’t think he’s ever going to.” He paused and looked up at me. “I’m going to go get her back.”

I lowered my head so that my eyes were level with his. “Oh, Edwin,” I whispered. “I don’t think-”

He stood suddenly and threw the pictures to the ground. “You don’t understand! No one does! I have to go!” Tears were rolling down his face, tears of frustration and sorrow, and something else. Fear.

“So you’re going to go rescue her,” I said, trying to placate him. He needed to understand why he couldn’t. “How are you going to get all the way to Umbra by yourself? It’s a long journey to the North, and the Dragonbound and Royal Army will track you down right away. And once you’re there, how are you going to fight Nox’s army alone?”

“I’m not going North.”

His response took me aback. “Then where are you going?”

“I’m headed southwest to Scalva.”

Southwest. I immediately thought back to Aster, shining brightly in the night sky. Shining to the southwest.

“I’ll ask Felice and his parents for help,” he continued. “I bet they won’t be cowards like my father and actually send troops to help us. And besides, everyone would think I was going straight to the North first, wouldn’t they? They wouldn’t look for me to the south.”

He did have a point. His cousin, Felice, and his family lived in the castle at the center of the city of Scalva. Queen Ania’s brother was a hothead, much like Furion, and I doubted that if Edwin did arrive and ask for him to send troops to Umbra he would say no. He loved his sister but disliked King Rinell, and being able to rescue Ania while going behind his brother-in-law’s back would just be an added bonus. And when Edwin had said he was going to Scalva instead of straight to Umbra, it had surprised me. The maneuver would likely also throw off anyone tracking him. He could cut straight to Scalva, and once he got help from Felice’s family the King would be hard-pressed to have him brought back to Alba Aula.

But while the journey to Scalva would take a fraction of the time that a journey to Umbra would, he would still be travelling by himself out on the open roads. I doubted any of the servants would be willing to undertake such a trek. If they were to be caught helping the Prince escape, their punishment would be severe. Even Alyssa would likely deem the journey too dangerous for him and feel obligated to report his plans to the King.

“But who will you go with?” I asked him, hoping he had some kind of plan for this too.

“By myself,” he said with a shrug.

My heart sank. No, as much as I sympathized with his need, I couldn’t let him try to go all the way to Scalva alone. “I can’t let you do that.”

“I have to! You don’t understand!”

“I do understand! You love your mother, and you would do anything to get her back, but please think about what you are doing. You, a twelve-summer-old boy, are planning to walk all

the way to Scalva by yourself when you've never even left Lux Splendens. You don't even know if she's still alive, and I doubt the Queen's wishes would be for you to risk yourself like that. It's not what she would want."

"It is what she wants!" His fists clenched in anger as he stared me down, and the tears rolled down his cheeks. "I know she's alive! I can sense her just as well as when she was still here with us! And she's been calling me. I can hear her calling out to me with the Light Magic. She needs me. She was always telling me that I needed to listen to the magic and do what it told me to. And it's telling me to go!"

I stared at him in silence. How could I argue with that? He had no doubt that it was the Light Magic's will, and by extent the will of Dominus himself. The certainty in his voice left little doubt in my mind too. The Queen had said he was ready the day he made the flowers bloom in the trees. Maybe this was what he was ready for.

But even still, he couldn't go alone. I looked down at the floor, staring at the pictures that had been strewn across the ground, hoping that I could glean some sort of answer from the images of the proud heroes of ages long passed. My eyes fell upon the picture of the Guardian of Time. He looked more regal in the picture than he had in person, with his cloak a pure and clean white and a silver breastplate with a white diamond etched in its center. His words from the day I met him echoed in my mind. "*Look after Edwin. He's going to need you.*" The memories of the dream suddenly overwhelmed me, the thick fog blinding my mind's eye. Someone was calling out for my help. Had it been the Queen? A premonition of what was to come? Was she calling out to me as well? My wings and heart screamed louder than ever, urging me to go and seek the one calling for my aid.

"I'll go with you."

“What?” Edwin stared at me, his brow furrowed in confusion. “But you just said-”

“You said you felt the Light Magic calling you, right?” I asked. He nodded. “Then you need to go. And I need to go with you.”

“But you’ll be too easy to track. You can’t really hide in any crowds.”

He had another good point. “We’ll have to think of something,” I said. Maybe he could turn me invisible? But even that would be too conspicuous. I would leave gigantic tracks everywhere if I walked, and if I flew the sound of my wings would carry for miles. “How about you gather the supplies you need while we try to think of something? Is there anything I can get?”

Edwin looked down at the pile of clothes on the floor. “I should bring at least four or five sets of clothes,” he stared, “and a map. And plenty of food. And lots of water. And money.”

“And weapons,” I added, shuddering at the possibility of a confrontation with thieves. “The Earth’s Breath stone!” I said suddenly. “We should bring that!” It would be easy to conceal, but its magic would come in handy if we did end up in a fight. Edwin had yet to begin learning how to use the Light Magic for combat, and I doubted he would be able to control it well enough in a dire situation. But the Earth’s Breath would be much easier for him to use, and if he practiced with it even a little he would likely be able to use it in a pinch.

“Good idea,” he agreed. He knelt down and began to pull more clothes out of his drawers.

“I think I left it in the Dragonhold. I’ll be right back,” I said. I slipped out of the doorway and into the halls, trying to keep a normal pace so as not to raise any suspicion. I flew up into the Dragonhold. The others were asleep, curled up with their wings tucked tightly against their bodies. The Earth’s Breath stone was still in its hiding spot amongst the crystals. I picked it up

with my claws and headed for the mouth of the cavern. I paused when I passed Alkan. He too was fast asleep, and this time his slumber was peaceful. I was tempted to wake him and ask him to join us, but having another dragon come along with us would just make it easier for us to be found. With guilt weighing upon my heart, I stepped to the cave's opening.

I turned around and took one last look at the crystal-lined walls. If Edwin and I were truly leaving for Scalva, I wouldn't see this place again for a long time. The place where I had hatched after being reborn, the place where I had meditated on the faint disconnected trace of Light Magic within me, the place where I would gaze out at the stars in the night sky. It was home. I thought back to all the good memories I had and all the dreams, dreams of a time when I had flowing hair and danced around a fire-

That was it. A rush of energy ran through me as the pieces snapped into place. It was utterly crazy. And it just may work.

I spread my wings and glided down to Alba Aula, making sure that I enjoyed the flight. If it did work, I wouldn't be flying again for quite some time.

"I'm back," I whispered into the doorway. The door slowly creaked open and Edwin's face appeared on the other side.

"Did you get it?" he asked I stuck my head through the doorframe. I nodded and placed the Earth's Breath stone at his feet. "I still haven't thought of any way to hide you," he said with a sigh. "Did you think of something?"

"I did." I took a breath, and then went for the plunge. "I need you to turn me into a human."

“What?” His brow furrowed with shock and confusion, and he took a few steps back.

“You- you can’t do that! You’re supposed to wait until the Binding Ritual!”

“We can’t wait that long. It won’t be for another few months, and I doubt the Queen will be able to hold out for that long.”

“No,” he shook his head. “It’s too dangerous.” He was right. To alter my form and use any kind of magic before my own awoke within me, even if it was Light Magic, could upset the delicate balance between light and dark that I was caught in as a dragon.

“I don’t think there’s any other way. Look,” I said, “it’s like the day in the courtyard when you grew the flowers on the trees. If the Light Magic wants it to happen, if you and I are meant to go to Scalva to get help for the Queen, then it will work. If not, then we know it wasn’t meant to be. The Queen said you were ready that day. I think you are too.”

My words seemed to assure him, and he nodded his head. “Ok. I’ll try it. But what spell would I even use?”

“Just release the magic and let it do what it wants to,” I said, paraphrasing the Queen’s words.

“All right.” He gingerly placed one of his hands on the blue gemstone in my forehead. “If it starts to hurt, let me know.”

Edwin closed his eyes, and the tips of his fingers began to glow faintly with the white light. It spread outward, causing my own gem to give off a blue light in response, and I felt a tingling sensation running through my body. I closed my eyes as I felt warmth rush through me. The shadow in the back of my mind pulsed through me, but suddenly a great wave of light washed through, sweeping it away. In the visionless space of closed eyes was the white glow. It

flowed through my blood, reaching the tips of my wings and tail and fingers. I could feel a breeze flowing around me, stirring my hair-

Hair! My eyes snapped open. The room had grown larger around me, or so it seemed. And I felt lighter. I shook my head and felt soft waves running down my shoulders and rustling in my ears. And skin. Smooth, soft skin. I ran my fingers over my face, feeling the features I had so longed for. A round nose. Eyelashes. I stuck one of my new fingers into my mouth. Flat teeth! And some pointed ones too, but not nearly as pointed as before. I spun in a circle on my two legs, letting my hair flow out around me. "It worked!" I laughed to Edwin.

Edwin didn't answer. His hands had flown to his face, covering his eyes from the sight of me. "What's wrong?" I asked him. A spike of panic shot through me like an arrow. Was I ugly? Horribly deformed?

"You're not wearing any clothes," he squeaked.

Oh. I looked down at myself and realized that he was right. I hadn't been wearing any as a dragon, and I supposed it wouldn't make any sense for them to just appear out of nowhere. I rushed over to Edwin's pile of clothes, grabbed one of the cloaks, and wrapped myself up in it. "I have clothes now," I told him, "somewhat."

He lowered his hands and carefully turned to me. "Wow," he whispered. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," I smiled. I gazed down at my hands again, soft and new.

"But you need real clothes," he added. "I already got some food from the kitchen while you were gone, but I'll get you some clothes from the servants' quarters." He slipped out of the room and shut the door behind him.

As soon as he was gone I turned to the mirror next to his bed. A young woman stared back at me. She looked to be about in her early twenties, which was my actual age. She had a thin figure, but her thighs and arms showed faint signs of muscle rippling beneath the soft skin. Her jawline was soft, but her cheekbones were sharp, and her skin was unblemished. I guessed that I was about average height, standing a foot or two taller than Edwin but a foot or two below most of the grown men in the castle. I pinched a strand of hair, pulling it away from my face. The hair was white. It wasn't a light blonde, which would at least be considered unusual but not impossible. No, my hair was the same white as my scales had been, the color of the White Diamonds etched all over the castle. My skin also gave off a faint ethereal glow, adding to the otherworldly effect. I guess that it was a result of the previous White Dragon being the first to touch the Light Magic. The scales and feathers being dyed white must have carried over into the human form, turning my hair white and causing my skin to glow like it did.

This wouldn't do. I would stand out far too much and draw attention to us. I was in the midst of mulling over the predicament when the door opened again and Edwin entered. "I got some clothes!" He triumphantly held out the pile of fabric. "And I also got this," he said as he placed a jar in my hands.

"What is it?" I asked. I unscrewed the jar and peered inside.

"Well, your hair is white," he started, "and most people your age don't have that hair color, even people who dye their hair." Ah, so he had come to the same realization of the issue I had. "So I thought, maybe you could also dye your hair? And I remembered that one of the knights is really into himself and doesn't like his grey hair, so he dyes it brown. He always uses too much though," he laughed.

I stared down at the bottle in my hands. "Did you steal this from him?"

Edwin nodded. "He had at least ten of the bottles in his room."

"That doesn't make it right," I said, but I was already sticking my fingers into the bottle. The pale skin of my fingers came out a dark brown, and I ran them through my hair, spreading the cold liquid over my head. "How does this work? Do I need to rinse it out afterwards?"

Edwin shrugged. "I've never done this. I don't do much with my hair."

"Well I've never even had hair," I said with a laugh. I finished rubbing in the dye, and Edwin gave me one of the outfits. It was a simple brown short-sleeved tunic and tan pants with a belt, and he turned around as I tried it on. It fit well enough, so I pulled on a pair of boots he had brought back and fastened one of the hooded cloaks over my shoulders. "I think I'm ready."

He turned around and wrinkled his nose. "I think you were right. You do need to rinse it out." I glanced at the mirror and saw what he meant. In the new set of clothes I looked like just any of the travellers passing through Lux Splendens, but my hair looked like it had just been dipped into mud. He grabbed the pitcher of water from the corner of his room. I stood over a pile of blankets as he poured the water over my head. I scrubbed furiously at the hair as it suddenly transformed into a horrible tangled monster latching itself to my skull. Why, oh why, did I ever want hair? I ran my fingers through the tangled knots, several clumps falling to the floor as I combed through the mess in front of the mirror. The hair finally reverted back to its flowing waves, but this time they were a chestnut brown. It was a lighter shade than Edwin's, but combined with my pale blue eyes that matched his, I now looked like I could be his older sister. I smiled at the thought.

When the ordeal with my hair was resolved, we began to pack the clothes and food into the bags Edwin had procured. He stuck the Earth's Breath stone into a pack and shoved it into his clothing pack as well. We managed to fit five sets of clothes each into two bags and the food

and water containers into two more, so we swung one of the four very full bags over each of our shoulders. Pouches of coins hung at our belts, and Edwin helped me fasten a sword in a scabbard to my belt when he was finished with his. We pulled the hoods of our dull brown cloaks over our heads and slipped gloves and bracers onto our arms. Last of all, he carefully lifted the tiny music box off of his dresser and placed it in his pack of clothes.

“One more thing,” Edwin said. He reached his hand out to me. “Before Mother was, before she,” the words caught in his throat. “When she hid me,” he tried again, “she put a spell of concealment on me with the Light Magic. I think it’s still there. And I think I should try to give it to you too.”

“That’s a good idea,” I agreed. I took his hand, and I again felt the warmth of the magic wash over me when he closed his eyes. “Did it work?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

Edwin inched the door open and peered out into the hallway. “All clear,” he whispered back to me. I joined him in the doorway, and we shut the door behind us as we slunk out into the halls. We crept along step by step like two thieves during a heist, hugging the corners and slipping into the shadows when the guards passed by.

Before long we had made it to the door to the courtyard. I pressed my hands against the wood and pushed out slowly. The door let out a loud creak, and I stopped, by heart in my throat. Edwin’s head turned about frantically, but no one was around. I pushed the door out the rest of the way, and we slipped out into the courtyard.

“How are we going to get through the main gate?” I whispered to him. The opening in the walls was crawling with at least thirty guards. I looked up and realized that all the walls of the castle above us had dozens, no, hundreds of knights stationed at them, no doubt a measure taken

after the attack on Alba Aula. My breath froze. There was no way we were going to make it without being spotted.

“This way.” Edwin pointed at a spot in the wall, and I followed. I crouched low, hoping it would somehow hide me, but we were out in the open with no trees or shadows to conceal us. I looked back and made eye contact with one of the knights on the wall. I froze. Edwin turned around and froze too, his eyes wide with fear.

But nothing happened. The guards stared at us and then simply shifted his gaze slightly to our right, continuing his patrol. “I think your spell worked,” I said with a quiet laugh. We continued towards the wall. *How are we going to get over it?* I wondered. If I still had my wings it would be no problem, but now that they had been replaced by fingers and toes the wall presented an obstacle.

“There.” Edwin scooted to the base of the wall and pointed to an opening that started at the bottom. “This is how I got out the last time.”

I stared down at it, dumbfounded. “Was this always here?” I never noticed it before. Come to think of it, I hadn’t seen the opening until we stood right before it, even with my keen dragon vision that I had miraculously retained, and it was large enough for a grown man to walk through without having to bend down.

“It started to show up a few weeks ago, but only when I was close to it,” he explained. “All I know is that it’s our way out.”

Alba Aula itself was permitting our exit. I looked down at my hands again, soft and human. Edwin had been right. This was what the Light Magic wanted us to do.

Edwin crept forward through the opening and disappeared into the shadows on the other side. I hesitated for a moment, glancing back at the keep and the courtyard, at the Dragonhold

that hovered in the air where the others lay. My home. But it was time to leave it. The Queen needed me, and so did Edwin. I gathered myself and bid Alba Aula farewell.

The moonlight shone down on the grass of the courtyard. Aster hung in the sky, twinkling over Scalva in the southwest, shining its light down on where we were meant to be. I took a deep breath and stepped forward through the opening into the unknown, disappearing into the shadows of Lux Splendens and the world beyond.

Chapter 4: Leap of Faith

The city of Lux Splendens was quiet. Normally I would be able to hear the hum of people's conversations in the streets from the Dragonhold late into the night, but now the darkened streets were empty. A faint light was given off from the firelit lanterns lining the paths. The only sound was the pattering of my feet alongside Edwin's on the cobblestone roads as we passed by the tightly-locked houses and closed shops. No doubt the inhabitants were still frightened after the attack on Alba Aula.

It was still a few hours before dawn, and we needed to be out of the city by then. We crept along as quickly as we could while still keeping to the shadows. A few guards passed by us and we slipped out of sight into one of the alleyways, taking cover behind a few stray boxes. We waited, our hearts pounding in our ears, until they passed us by. I went to stand up, but Edwin's hand wrapped around mine. "What's wrong?" I whispered to him.

I could feel his heartbeat through his fingers. "I think the concealment spell is wearing off."

I tried not to let my panic show, but without it we wouldn't get far. "Do you think you can re-cast it?"

"I can try," he said, and closed his eyes.

I expected to feel the warmth rush through me again, but nothing happened. His fingers pressed tightly into my hand, but no magic flowed through. "I don't think it's-

A bright flash erupted from his entire body, illuminating the whole alleyway like it had been struck by a bolt of lightning. "Edwin!" I shouted in surprise and covered my eyes with my other hand. I blinked a few times, waiting for the sharp points of light that had been burned into

my vision to fade. Edwin was just as startled as I was. He shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair, panting for breath.

“What happened?” I asked. I tried to stay calm, but the words came out sharply.

“I don’t know. I just released the magic like last time.”

“Hey! Over there!” A voice rang out and echoed down the walls of the narrow alleyway. Two guards in their silver armor stood in the street beside it, looking directly at Edwin and me. “You there!”

“Run,” I whispered to Edwin, and we both took off. I grabbed his hand and pulled him along down the alleyway as quickly as I could manage with the packs on my shoulders. So the spell hadn’t worked.

“Halt!” The voices of the guards faded with the distance, but they were still on our trail. We burst out of the alleyway and onto the street on the other side. The footsteps of the guards came crashing after us. I grabbed Edwin’s shoulders and pulled him into the shadow of a tavern next to the alleyway. It had a sign in the shape of a dragon hanging above its door, and the building’s shape gave good cover.

The guards sprinted down the streets past us, still thinking that we were running. We waited for their footsteps to fade away completely before we emerged from the tavern’s shadow. Edwin’s chest heaved with the stress of the ordeal, and I vaguely considered turning back. But we couldn’t go back. We needed to get to Scalva. Just to Scalva, and then we could let Felice’s parents handle the rest.

The journey to Scalva would take about five days on the main roads. With the concealment spell gone I wondered if we would now have to go another way, but we would have to cross that bridge when we got to it. Right now our main concern was making it out of Lux

Splendens without getting caught. I took Edwin's hand and we continued down the dim streets, praying to Dominus that we wouldn't be noticed by anyone else.

As we grew closer to the exit the sun began to rise in the sky. The mass of clouds had dissipated as the night wore on, leaving only a few puffy ones that had been painted pinks and oranges. The usual hum of the city returned as its inhabitants woke up for the morning, unlocking the doors to their houses and shops and lifting the heavy blankets that covered their carts. Soon the bustle of the city was in full swing. I held Edwin's hand tightly in mine as we wove through the crowds. No one gave us so much as a second glance as they brushed past our shoulders. I glanced about, waiting for someone to stare at me in fear and awe and address me as "White Dragon," but no one did, and no one stopped and bowed before Edwin either. A grin crept across my face, and I even dared to lower my hood. And why shouldn't I? Edwin's face was still recognizable to the people in Lux Splendens who were more familiar with him, but my face was new. *Never-before-seen face, limited time offer*, I thought to myself with a chuckle, mimicking the cries of the vendors trying to swindle the people passing by.

The early morning light shown down on the gate that served as the entrance and exit to Lux Splendens. I felt Edwin's fingers tighten on my hand as we stood before it. If we were going to be recognized, it would be now. Twenty guards lined each side of the gate, and thirty more stood on the walls directly around it, scanning the city and the field beyond for any sign of a threat. Edwin pulled the hood of his cloak tighter over his face, and I prayed to Dominus that its shadows would be enough to conceal who he was. I gathered all the courage I had within me and took a step towards the gate. This was it.

We walked through the row of guards carefully, the weight of the bags on our shoulders multiplying with the weight on our minds. Did we need to say something? Did I have to give an

explanation for leaving? But the guard at the front didn't stop us, and as we walked down the line a few other travellers passed in and out of the gate, none of us being questioned.

The hair on the back of my neck rose. I was being watched. I made accidental eye contact with the guard who I sensed was eyeing me, and for a second I thought he would be to one to halt us. Instead his face flushed with color and he quickly looked away. I blinked at his reaction, confused, but we pressed onward.

“Excuse me, my lady.”

I turned with a jolt and faced the guard addressing me.

“Where are you headed?” he continued. He was one of the younger guards, and I guessed that he must have been around my age.

“Scalva,” I blurted quickly.

“That's quite a bit of a walk with those bags. Would you like an escort?” His lips pulled back, revealing his teeth, and he gave me a wink. A wave of confusion washed over me. Was I allowed to say no? Was this their way of stopping us?

“No thanks.” I turned away quickly, my pulse throbbing in my skull.

“I wish you safe travels,” the guard called behind us, but none of them gave pursuit.

We continued along the stone path leading out of Lux Splendens. The walls and bustle of the city faded away, and the travellers dispersed, leaving just us and the open fields ahead.

Before us was all of Initium. The fields opened up before us, surrounding us on all sides with lush grass that swayed gently in the morning breeze. The scent of dew drifted through in the air. The sky hung above us, unobstructed by any city or castle walls, the sun now burning brightly in the blue sea over our heads. I took a deep breath, soaking in the fresh air. The free air. My wings were gone, but I felt freer than I ever had before.

An uncontrollable urge rose up within me, and once we had walked far enough from the city I threw the packs off of my shoulders and spun around, taking in the breeze and the singing of the birds and the sounds of the leaves rustling in the trees, trees with unsymmetrical branches the way they were supposed to be. I flopped to the ground and rolled in the grass, letting it stain my clothes and soak into my skin. After a minute or two I stopped and lay still in the green field. I closed my eyes and let the sun fall on my human face. The grass of Initium covered my hair and clothes, and my face was smeared with dirt. But I didn't care. Halda wasn't around to scold me, and neither were the rest of the dragons for that matter.

Edwin joined me in the grass, and we lay beside each other, staring up at the clouds rolling above our heads. "Can you believe we did it?" he asked me. "We actually made it!"

"I know! I thought for sure that guard was going to stop us," I laughed. "What do you think that was all about, anyway?"

"I think he was teasing you," Edwin answered with a shrug.

Teasing? It made no sense, but then I thought back to the guard whose face had turned red when I made eye contact with him. I felt the heat rising to my own face as well.

I glanced over at Edwin, trying to take my mind off the new sensations. The laughter had faded from his, and he now stared up at the crystal blue sky intently. "We're really doing this."

"We are," I agreed. "But I think we made it through the hardest part."

Right on cue, the alarm within Alba Aula tolled. I could feel the chiming ringing my bones, even from all the way out in the field. Four rings. One of the servants must have gone to Edwin's room and discovered that he was gone. "We should keep moving," I said as I rose to my feet. Soon the dragons and Dragonbound would be sent out to track us. I grabbed my two packs and slung them over my shoulder, and Edwin grabbed his.

The roads from Lux Splendens branched out to the north and south. The south road headed towards forest in the distance, and before it lay a village of a few dozen houses, some small farms, and a couple of shops. They no doubt made their income from travellers going to and from the capital city like us. Behind us I could hear the whooshing of air as the dragons circled Lux Splendens, and we quickened our pace.

A shadow loomed above us. My heart leapt into my throat as I looked up. Directly above us soared the peridot dragon, Diya, her powerful wings carrying her overhead. I froze, unsure what to do. Diya may not recognize our appearances, but our smells would not have changed, and without the concealment spell our scents would be detected.

Diya flew above for a minute, and then she circled back to the castle, taking no notice of us. A sigh of relief left my chest in a heaving gasp, and I heard Edwin let out a sigh of his own. “I think the spell only partly works,” he observed. “We’re hidden from above.”

“But not from the ground,” I said, recalling the incident with the guards in the alleyway. Edwin nodded in agreement. “Well then, we’ll just have to be more careful.” I was immensely relieved the spell still partly worked. We would have to be careful on the roads, but at least the dragons and Dragonbound wouldn’t see us. We had a chance.

We continued at a good pace towards the village until the sound of hoofbeats resounded behind us. I turned and saw scores of the Royal Army’s troops pouring out of Lux Splendens, nearly all of them mounted on horseback. “Uh oh,” Edwin whispered when he followed my gaze. But as we watched the troops turned away from our direction, taking the road that lead to the North. Edwin’s plan had worked.

The boy put his hands on his hips and raised his eyebrows at me. “I see, I see,” I said with a laugh. “You were right after all.”

“Oh course I was,” he smiled. He skipped ahead of me, the weight of the world dropping off his shoulders, at least for the moment. I skipped after him, feeling the waves of my now-brown hair bounce up and down along my shoulders.

We were nearly at the village an hour or two later when I heard another set of hoofbeats, but this time much closer. I looked behind us and my face drained of its blood “They’re coming this way,” I gasped. “Come on.” I grabbed Edwin’s hand and leapt off the road, making a break for the cluster of houses and small farms before we were in their line of sight. I headed for the barnhouse near the front of the village, praying to Dominus that it was empty and that there would be a place for us to hide. The doors opened easily, revealing nothing but piles of straw inside. Perfect. Edwin and I hastily covered our packs with the straw before we buried ourselves, diving into the stiff yellow hay. The sound of my own rapid breathing filled my ears, and I tried to calm myself down, forcing my breath into a more quiet and regular pattern.

Outside I could hear the clopping of hooves and knights dismounting. Then silence. We waited, each second passing agonizingly slowly as the straw tickled my nose and tempted me to sneeze.

“Did you find anything?”

The sudden voice coming from behind the wall right next to my head made me jump, stirring the straw slightly, but I doubted anyone would have heard it.

“Nothing,” a second voice said. “I still don’t understand why we’re even here.”

“Beats me,” the first voice replied. “If I were the Prince I would have headed straight to Umbra. It’s not like the Queen will be alive for long, if she isn’t dead already.”

“Poor kid. His father barely talks to him, and now his mother’s gone too.”

“Report?”

“No sign of him, sir,” a third voice responded.

“Blast. How hard is it to find a pampered child?”

“Not to mention the White Dragon’s likely with him too,” the second voice said. “How easy can it be to hide a whole dragon?”

I couldn’t help but smirk. So they had figured out from my absence that I had gone with Edwin, but none of them had any idea I was now in a human form. Not even I would have considered it without thinking about the dreams of my past life, and Edwin’s ability to pull it off had been extremely unlikely.

The voices faded as footsteps carried the men away from the barn, and eventually the sound of hoofbeats filled the air and grew distant as they continued south. I waited a few minutes and then sat up in the straw, prompting Edwin to do the same. We undug our packs and threw them over our shoulders. “Come on,” I said to Edwin. “We should keep moving.”

“Can we just stop here?” Edwin asked. “I’m tired. And I have to pee.”

“It’s only noon. We still need to get all the way to Scalva.”

“Shouldn’t we let the soldiers get further ahead of us? They already looked for us here and didn’t find anything.”

He had a point. The soldiers were likely to continue along the road to the south if they assumed we had already passed through or hadn’t come this way at all. “All right,” I agreed. “We can spend the rest of the day here and leave in the morning. But we need to keep a low profile, understand?”

He nodded, and we opened the doors of the barn and entered the village.

The village of Augus was a sleepy town. There was a dull droning of chatter in the air, but it was nothing compared to the bustle of Lux Splendens. We stopped at the inn to rent a room for the night before they all filled up. We then spent the next few hours exploring the shops that branched out from the main road to the south. Edwin ran eagerly from window to window, dragging me along and pointing out all the items he found interesting. Clever as he was to devise an escape plan, he was still just a boy.

We stopped in front of a shop selling dresses, and I looked in the window. Our faces stared back at us from the glass. Neither of us looked like we had while we were in Alba Aula. The radiant glow of my skin was gone, covered up by the dust and dirt of our travels thus far. My hair had become wild and frizzy, but still had an odd messy beauty to it. Edwin's face had similarly been transformed by the dirt and grime, and I doubted that anyone who didn't know him personally would suspect that he was the Prince. We were just two worn travellers on our way to Scalva.

"I'm hungry," Edwin said, holding his stomach.

"Do you want to head back to the inn?" I asked. "I think they have food there."

"How about that place?" He pointed to a tavern that stood slightly apart from the other shops and houses.

"All right," I agreed. "But let's try not to spend too much money."

As we approached the tavern and got a closer look at it, I was taken aback. It looked strikingly similar to the tavern we had hid in the shadows of in Lux Splendens, and it even had the same dragon-shaped sign hanging above its door. Edwin didn't seem to mind, and he pulled the door open and held it for me.

Inside it was just an ordinary tavern. A bell dinged above our heads as we entered. There were a few round wooden tables circled by chairs, and a warm fire glowed from the fireplace on its left side. Lanterns hung from the ceiling, but the light came mostly from the windows whose shutters had been open to let in the sunlight. The smell of pine needles and honey wafted through the air. I took a deep whiff of the pleasant aroma. We were the only ones inside, but the atmosphere the tavern gave off made me immediately comfortable.

A young woman emerged from the back room and stood behind the counter. “Welcome! How can I help you today?” She wore a simple brown tunic similar to my own and a belt around her waist. Her hair fell in wild golden waves past her shoulders, and a single small braid peeked out from her tresses.

I approached the counter and pulled a few of the gold coins out of the pouch on my belt. “We’d like some food, please. Whatever you have.”

“I have some soup and milk,” she smiled. Up close I got a better chance to look at her face, and her eyes startled me. They a mixture of brown and green, but they also had a yellow shade to them that tinted them gold, the same odd color as her hair. “It won’t cost that much, though,” she laughed when I handed her three of the gold coins. I froze, quickly realizing that I had no idea how much human money was worth in these situations. She took one of the gold coins and handed me back a handful of silver ones with a smile, and then disappeared into the back room.

Edwin had taken a seat at one of the round tables next to the fire, and I joined him. “I like it here,” he said. “It’s nice and quiet.”

“It is,” I agreed. “So, what’s your plan?” I lowered my voice in case the woman overheard. “Do you want to continue on the main roads?”

“I think we can for now,” he replied. “I bet the soldiers are way ahead of us.”

He fell silent as the woman brought out our food and set it down in front of us. “Enjoy,” she smiled, and then disappeared into the back room again. I took a spoonful. The flavor filled my mouth immediately, and I gasped at how good it was. It was my first time eating human food, and it didn’t disappoint. As a dragon I had stuck to a diet of mostly deer and rabbits that were brought to the dragonhold, but the soup had cheese and potatoes, foods that were new but much better-tasting than those I had before.

We finished eating and then made our way out of the tavern. The bell jingled again as we left, and I breathed in the fresh air of the outside world. It didn’t smell like pine needles and honey like the tavern had, but the scent was still pleasant to my nose. I was thankful that I hadn’t lost my keen sense of smell when I had shifted into human form. My eyesight and hearing had also been retained, and they had already come in handy, allowing me to see and hear the soldiers on the roads long before they could detect us. We wandered around to a few more of the shops, and finally the sun began to sink in the sky. “Come on,” I said to Edwin, “we should head back to the inn.” He agreed, and we walked back to the front of the village and stepped inside the large building.

A wall of sound slammed into us as soon as I opened the door. While the other tavern had been empty save for us, the inn’s tavern was filled to the brim with other travellers sitting around the tables. Their faces glowed in the firelight as they raised their cups of ale above their heads, singing boisterously. They were all smudged with dirt and wore simple clothes like us. I carefully slunk towards the main counter with Edwin close behind me. No one took much notice of me, too consumed by their drinks and each other’s company.

“Excuse me,” I nearly had to shout over the tavern’s other patrons. “Could we get some dinner?”

The man behind the counter, a burly fellow with sideburns reaching down from his ears to his chin, nodded and slapped two plates of meat and beans down on the counter. “You want ale?” he asked.

“No thank you, water is fine.” I wasn’t sure if I could get drunk or not, originally being a dragon and all, but now was not the time to find out.

He nodded his head and filled two glasses with water. “That’ll be two silver pieces. When you’re done you can head up to your rooms.”

“Thank you,” I said as I took the coins out of my pouch and placed them on the counter. We took our meals and sat at the last remaining table in the far corner. We ate in silence, the conversations of those around us drowning out anything we would try to say. I eventually decided to pay attention to what they were saying, listening for anything interesting. There was talk of people’s travels, and a group of girls were giggling over someone called the “Blue-Scarved Bard.” A conversation at the table on the other side of the room caught my attention, and I honed in on it.

“Wonder if they’ll find him,” a middle-aged woman said as she took a swig of her ale.

“He’s probably in Umbra by now with his mother,” the man at the table replied.

“Assuming he was kidnapped like the Queen. I heard he ran away before into Lux Splendens. Probably ran off again, thinking he could save her. The poor fool.”

A pit formed in my stomach. So the common people were also aware of Edwin’s disappearance. None of them seemed to recognize him, but I wondered how long it would take for the Royal Family to offer a reward to anyone who could find him and bring him home safely.

I tried to finish my meal despite my newly-found anxiety, and we returned our plates and headed upstairs to the bedrooms.

The bedroom was tiny. It was little more than a narrow room with two small beds and a dresser between them and a single window on the far wall. I had a brief moment of panic, wondering how in Dominus's name I was going to fit in such a constricted space, until I remembered that I no longer was fifteen feet tall. I slipped easily through the doorframe and dumped my packs onto the floor beside one of the beds, and Edwin did the same. The packs took up nearly all the floorspace.

"Aren't we carrying too much?" I asked, rubbing the soreness out of my shoulders from carrying the packs around all day.

Edwin shook his head. "We need all this, don't we? We don't know how many places with food will be on the way." He rummaged through his pack until he found his nightclothes, and I turned around so he could get changed. I took the opportunity to change out of my outfit as well. My tunic had become full of dirt and sweat from our time on the road. I thanked Dominus that it wasn't as hot as past summers had been. There had been an odd chill in the air this season, but it was working to our benefit.

When we were both finished changing I sat down on the bed, utterly exhausted. I hadn't gotten any sleep the previous night, and while adrenaline had kept the exhaustion at bay during the day, the sleepiness hit me with its full force. I could tell that Edwin was feeling it too. He sank into his bed and pulled the covers close.

It was my first time in a bed. I lay down it cautiously, not knowing what to expect. I let out a gasp as the softness of the mattress melted into my back. The pillow was like a cotton cloud that my head sank into, and the blanket wrapped around me like a warm silken mane. So this was

what it was to be a human and sleep in a bed. While I hadn't been uncomfortable sleeping in the Dragonhold, compared to this luxury the Dragonhold may as well have been the dingy floor of a prison cell. It made me wonder why the other dragons who had the ability to take a human form and sleep in a bed chose the Dragonhold as their sleeping place. And come to think of it, all of them had only rarely taken their human forms. It was something I had just accepted, but now that I was a human myself I couldn't understand why they wouldn't choose to be a human more often. No one was inherently afraid of me. I was treated with the same easy comfort as all the other humans. And now I got to sleep in a bed.

Edwin grunted beside me. He tossed to his right side and then his left, squirming beneath the blankets. "What's wrong?" I asked him.

"It's this bed," he sighed as he flopped onto his back. "It's awful."

"Awful? What's bad about it? I think it's great!"

"Yeah, well, you haven't slept in any other beds." He flipped around to his stomach.

"The mattress is all full of lumps. The blanket is itchy. And the pillow keeps sinking so far down my head's going to fall through to the floor."

"Well, I am sorry, Your Highness," I said with a roll of my eyes. "Just be grateful that you have a bed."

He rolled back onto his side again. "I guess." After a few minutes the exhaustion overwhelmed him completely, and his eyes blinked and then closed.

I stared out the window set in the wooden walls, gazing out at the moon that had risen into the sky. The clouds were gone tonight, and I could see nearly all the stars. Aster wasn't visible from the direction we faced, but I was certain that it was still pointing to Scalva. Or at least, I hoped. But what if what we were doing wasn't right? Edwin was certain that the Light

Magic was calling him to Scalva, but he was only twelve. Had I really staked everything on the whims of a young boy? No, the fact that the magic had allowed me to become a human must have meant something too. And I had heard the call from the Queen too, or at the very least a call from *someone* beyond Lux Splendens who needed me. I tried to reassure myself, but images of knights and the dragons catching up with us flashed in my mind. What would happen if we were caught? Edwin surely would never be permitted to leave Alba Aula for several more years, and I doubted I would be allowed to speak to him. And the punishment for me would undoubtedly be severe. I had let the Prince escape and been his accomplice. Just what had we done?

Eventually the exhaustion won out over anxiety, and tumbled into a sleep filled of dreams of firelit dances and this time, something new. I caught flashes of someone else, someone I had loved dearly but couldn't save.

The sound of clinking glass from below jarred me awake. I sat bolt upright in bed, looking around the room wildly until I remembered why I was now in a bed and had hair and clothes. The sunlight drifted in through the window and onto Edwin's sleeping face. I slipped out from underneath the covers, careful not to wake him, and got changed into another tunic. It was the same color and style as the last one. I tried to not be disappointed, since I was grateful to be able to wear clothes at all, but it would have been nice to try out different things. I put on a fresh set of pants, my belt, and my boots, and then shook Edwin's shoulders lightly. "It's morning," I whispered to him. "We should be leaving soon." He groaned and turned over beneath the blankets, but after a few minutes kicked them off and rose from his bed.

"How did you sleep?" I asked as he got changed.

"All right, I guess."

“You seemed to sleep pretty well even after all that complaining about the bed.”

When he was finished I opened the door, and we headed downstairs.

The tavern was abuzz with travellers having their meals before they continued along the road. All of the tables were filled again like the night before, a few young women were rushing about, filling plates and glasses for the customers. “Look,” Edwin tugged on my sleeve suddenly. I follow his gaze to the windows.

Outside stood three soldiers. The morning light glinted off of their silver helmets and the white diamond emblems on their breast pieces. A fourth joined them, decked out in blue-and-silver armor. On his breastplate he bore the crest of House Volarus that gleamed in gold and silver, a flower about to bloom. I focused in on them, listening with my keen ears for their voices over the commotion of the tavern.

“No sign still from anywhere.”

“Told you, he wouldn’t be headed this way.”

“Better check just in case.”

The soldiers turned towards the door.

“We need to leave. Now.” I grabbed Edwin’s hand and pulled him up the stairs. I threw on the rest of my clothing, and Edwin did the same.

“What were the soldiers doing?” he asked, although he likely already knew.

“Looking for you,” I said as I threw the packs over my shoulders. I could hear them beneath me now, their armor-heavy footsteps falling on the wooden floorboards. “We’ll need to slip out the back and hope they don’t see us.”

“And then what? Where do we go?”

We couldn't stick to the main roads anymore, that much was certain. "Maybe there's a path through the forest?" I suggested. "All we need to do is keep heading south. How hard can that be?" I opened the door and we slipped out, carefully not to make any of the floorboards creak. We inched down the staircase and slid to the back door. I tugged it open, and we made our escape.

The soldiers were all along the road. As I watched they entered the shops and houses. No, the main roads were no longer an option for us.

"Over here!" Edwin called. I followed him to the edge of the forest. He pointed at a stone path running through the piles of leaves and twigs. "It looks like it's headed in the same direction as the road."

"I sure hope so," I said. We stepped onto the pathway and into the realm of towering trees, leaving the main road to Scalva behind us.

The forest was just how I had imagined it. The scent of pine needles and decaying leaves was rich in the air, and there was a crunching sound with each step I took as we walked through the leaves along the forest path. The sunlight was blocked by the green canopies above our heads, but there was still enough light to clearly see the path ahead. Squirrels and chipmunks scuttled across our feet. I caught the occasional shadow of a sparrow and a feather-catcher flying overhead.

The trees were nothing like the ones in the courtyard of Alba Aula. They were wild and untamed, their branches growing in unsymmetrical directions as they reached for the sky above. And they weren't organized by type. Pines, oaks, maples, and even a few birches all mingled

together. All of them were much larger and had coarser bark than the ones in the castle. They were allowed to grow to their full size and shape without being constantly pruned and picked at.

A pinehopper hovered in front of our faces, and Edwin let out a gasp. Such creatures were rarely seen in Alba Aula, as they were regarded as nuisances that could potentially destroy the carefully groomed trees. The tiny brown creature zipped around Edwin's head on its four green-feathered wings. It flew off to one of the nearby pines, and a whole flock of them suddenly flew out of the tree, twittering as they took to the sky, their long green tails swinging behind them.

We walked on for a few more hours until Edwin stopped in his tracks. "I have to use the garderobe," he said when I looked back at him.

"I doubt there's one out here," I answered.

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

It was a good question. I looked around at the trees surrounding us. There was no sign of any type of civilization as far as I could see ahead, and he hadn't passed any buildings since leaving the inn in August.

"Use a tree?" I suggested.

Edwin wrinkled his nose. "I don't think so."

"Then pee your pants, I guess." I turned and continued walking. I stopped again when I heard the sound of his packs hitting the forest floor, and he ran off into the trees. A few minutes later he returned. "How did it go?"

He remained silent as he gathered his packs and threw them over his shoulders. "Let's just keep going," he said. I decided not to press the subject further.

We walked on until nightfall. Edwin's shoulders began to slump, and I too could feel sleep tugging at my eyelids. I searched for someplace without too many roots and sticks on the ground. "Let's stop here for the night," I said when my eyes fell upon a leafy clearing in the trees. He nodded in agreement, and we stepped off the path and threw our packs into the leaves. I tried to spread the packs out, putting the food bundles on one end of the small clearing and the clothing packs on the other.

"Where are we going to sleep?" He looked from the musty ground to me. "We're not just going to sleep on the ground, are we?"

I hadn't thought about that detail. Dragons were generally comfortable sleeping anywhere, but I wondered if this new body would be able to handle sleeping directly on the ground. And from the way Edwin had complained about the bed at the inn, I doubted he would get any rest laying on a pile of leaves and dirt. "How about we sleep on the clothing packs?" I suggested. "They're about the right size, aren't they?"

He stared at me with his eyes narrowed into slits. "You're joking."

"Sleep on the ground then." I pulled my clothing pack over to where we lay and climbed on top of it, stretching my limbs out over the lumpy surface. The material was coarse and scratchy, but it would do.

Edwin dragged his feet over to his pack and did the same. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"This was your idea," I reminded him. He grunted and turned to his side, facing away from me.

The sounds of the night filled the forest. In the distance an owl hooted, and the screeches of the Howlers rose up from somewhere deeper in the woods. Edwin stiffened on his pack, his eyes bulging at the noise.

But I let sleep drag me away from the world of the waking. Why did I have to worry about owls and Howlers? I was a dragon, after all, a creature with teeth and claws and an armored tail. I shifted onto my side, trying to convince myself that I had nothing to worry about. No soldier would find us out here. They would never consider that the Prince would be tough enough to venture off the main road. But I was here with him, and we could handle whatever the forest could throw at us.

Hit me with your best shot, I thought to the trees above our heads as I drifted away. *We'll be ready.*

Chapter 5: Finding a Guide

Something was snuffling nearby.

In my half-asleep state I thought at first that it was Edwin and that he had gotten a cold from sleeping outside. But as I regained consciousness I realized that the sounds were much deeper than Edwin, or any human, could make, and there were irregular grunts mixed in. I lay still, too scared to move. The snuffling increased in volume, and then the sound of one of the packs tearing rang through the air. I sat up cautiously, praying to Dominus that whatever it was wouldn't take notice of me.

A huge brown bear was rummaging through the food packs. Its massive paws had ripped open Edwin's bundle, and its snout was buried in the fabric. The bear raised its head and removed the pile of sandwiches that had been wrapped in a paper bag. Its claws tore through the rest of the bag, and the creature busied itself by emptying out the rest of Edwin's supply.

"Hey!" Edwin sat up on his clothing pack. "You stop that!" A low growl rumbled in the bear's throat. Edwin took little notice and rose to his feet. "I said to stop!"

"Edwin, be quiet," I hissed. "It doesn't care if you're the Prince or not. It's a wild animal."

As if to prove my point, the bear's maws parted and a horrible roar rang through the trees. It lurched towards us, and as we watched in horror it picked up its pace into a full run.

"What do we do?" Edwin asked with a tremor in his voice.

"I don't know!" Do we run? Stand our ground? Fight? "Use your magic!"

"Right!" He raised his hands, and his fingertips glowed. Suddenly a blast of white magic erupted from his hands, engulfing the bear in the light.

The bear staggered backward. It blinked and shook its enormous head. And then it let out a gigantic sneeze. It blinked again and its gaze fixed on us again, and it let out a low snarl.

“That was it?” I cried. “You just made it sneeze!”

“I’m sorry! I don’t know why it didn’t work!”

The bear was charging us again, and it glared at us with furious eyes.

Furious *red* eyes.

“Run!” I screamed and grabbed Edwin’s hand. I pulled him along as quickly as I could, leaping over the branches and rocks on the ground.

It was a Blood Bear. I had overheard some of the castle knights discussing their encounter with such a creature months ago, and there was only one thing to do when facing a Blood Bear: run. I had dared the forest to hit us with its best shot, and by Dominus it had delivered. A normal bear could be chased off if we were lucky, but Blood Bears weren’t creatures to be messed with. They were far stronger and more aggressive than any other bear species, and very few weapons could pierce its thick hide. But worst of all were its eyes. A Blood Bear could paralyze prey of any size with its crimson gaze. Fortunately this bit of evolution allowed the Blood Bears to slack on their endurance, so it was possible to outrun them, but only if you were very lucky.

“It’s chasing us!” Edwin squeaked. His thin legs spun in a blur as he tried to keep pace with me.

“Don’t look back at it!” I said between gasps. “It’s a Blood Bear! Look back and you’ll be killed!” Almost immediately after I spoke my foot slipped on the rock I was bounding over, and I tumbled to the ground. I struggled to my feet, forcing myself not to look back as I heard the

sounds of the raging animal behind us. Its roars combined with the sounds of tree trunks exploding into sawdust as it charged through the woods, letting nothing get in its way of its prey.

I looked up at Edwin. "Keep going!" He shook his head, but another roar from the bear caused his legs to move of their own accord. I bounded after him, but my pace was slowed considerably. My ankle throbbed with each step, and my knees felt like they could give out at any minute. And the sounds of the bear tearing through the forest were getting closer.

"Riella, it's getting closer-" Edwin's voice cut off as the log his feet were on shifted beneath his weight. He tumbled forward and struck his head on the rock beside him. Blood scattered onto the grey surface.

"Edwin!" I hobbled forward as quickly as I could. "Are you all right? Answer me!" He gave a small groan and lifted his shoulders with a heave, but fell back to the ground. There was no way he was going to outrun the Blood Bear. If either of us were going to be eaten today, I wasn't going to let it be Edwin. I turned around and drew the sword from my belt.

The Blood Bear was charging us at its full speed. Froth dripped from its lips as it crashed through the trees, ripping right through even the thickest of trunks. I tried not to look directly at it. If I looked into its eyes, I was done for. I held the sword out, my hands shaking like the leaves in the exploding trees. By Dominus, this was the first time I had ever held a sword. The Blood Bear was now within striking range, and with all the strength I could muster I swung the blade at where I judged it to be.

The sword bounced back like it had just hit a brick wall. The metal sent painful tremors and vibrations up my arms, and with a cry I let it clatter to the ground. "Riella!" Edwin screamed my name. The Blood Bear's claw smashed into my face, sending me sprawling to the ground. A

warm taste of blood filled my mouth. And then, despite everything I knew about the beast, I looked up.

The Blood Bear had risen to its full height above me, drips of saliva falling onto my hair. Its crimson eyes pierced mine, and I felt my muscles seize up instantly. I couldn't move. Dominus help me, I couldn't move. I tried to scream for Edwin to run or at least turn away so he wouldn't see what was about to happen, but I couldn't even manage that much. I couldn't even look away as the Blood Bear raised its massive paws above me, about to bring them down upon my stupid human head.

A hail of arrows soared through the air. They sank their barbed tips into the Blood Bear's hide, and the beast howled in pain. The instant its gaze broke from mine I felt life return to my joints. I sprang to my feet and began to scramble away. The beast snorted and took a step towards me, but a second volley of arrows landed on the ground directly in front of its head. A plume of smoke erupted from the tips of the arrows, blinding the bear along with myself. I stumbled forward, gagging on the noxious fumes. I felt Edwin's arms wrap around my own as he pulled me away from the bear. A *thwip* sounded in the air as a third round of arrows came, releasing even more smoke upon the beast. The Blood Bear groaned in pain, and it shuffled away, its footsteps growing quieter and quieter.

My shoulders shook uncontrollably as Edwin held me close. My vision slowly returned, and I rubbed away the tears leaking out of my eyes from the smoke. "Are you all right?" I asked him. "You hit your head on that rock. You were bleeding."

"I think I'm all right," he shrugged. "It doesn't hurt anymore." I examined his skull with my fingers. His hair was smeared with a thin layer of blood in the spot where he had hit the rock,

but other than that there was no sign of damage. He was fortunate the Light Magic caused him to heal rapidly from such injuries.

“My, you two fools nearly met Dominus today.”

We spun around at the new voice behind us. A figure in a brown cloak and hood stood where the Blood Bear had been. They wore a tunic in a lighter shade of brown than mine and a pair of tan pants. From their belt hung several pouches and a sword in its scabbard, and a bow and quiver were strapped to their back. They bent down and began to remove their arrows from the ground, examining the tips.

“You’re the one who rescued us?” I approached them slowly. I was grateful they had come, but with all those weapons they may pose a threat worse than the Blood Bear.

The hooded figure gave a grunt in response. They reached their hand up and pulled back the hood, revealing a tannish face with green eyes and straight brown hair tied back in a tight ponytail.

“Hey, you’re one of the Guardian’s Order!” Edwin cried suddenly. He brushed past me and stood in front of the young woman. He pointed to the brooch her cloak was fastened with, which was in the shape of a silver feather. “Only members of the Order wear those. It represents the Silver Hawk, the Guardian of Time’s companion.”

“Well, look who’s so knowledgeable,” the young woman rolled her eyes. “I’m guessing you’re one of the types who reads a lot.”

Edwin glanced over at me, looking for an indication of how to continue. “I read a bit,” he said slowly.

“Did you a lot of good against the Blood Bear.” The woman snapped up the remaining arrows on the ground and tied them up in a bundle that she threw into her quiver. “Made me waste perfectly good smoke arrows.”

“What’s so special about smoke arrows?” Edwin asked. I gave him a nudge. This clearly wasn’t someone who wanted to answer the thousands of questions he could ask.

The woman rolled her eyes. “I thought you read? Blood Bears can’t stand the smell of smoke. Irritates their sensitive little noses. And they’re not easy to make.”

“Then why’d you waste them on us?” I asked as I folded my arms over my chest. I didn’t care for the way she was talking down to us.

“It’s my job,” she huffed. “Kid’s right. I’m part of the Guardian’s Order, so I’m stuck looking out for squabbling infants like you who happen to wander into the wilderness.”

Squabbling infant? “And what exactly were we supposed to do against the Blood Bear?”

“Well for one thing, tapping it with your sword will get you killed.”

“I didn’t have a choice. He,” I gestured to Edwin, “fell and couldn’t run anymore.”

“Then that is *your* chance to run while the Blood Bear is busy with him. Standing and trying to fight it will only get you killed, and then it would just move on to the fool who fell. If you kept running, at least one of you would have survived.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, by the way,” I said, holding out my hand.

The woman stared at my outstretched fingers. “Leanne,” she finally said, but refused to shake it. “You are?”

Oh no, I hadn’t thought of fake names! “Tenya,” I blurted out the first common name that came to mind. “And this is my little brother,” I gestured over at Edwin.

“Uh, Cerric,” he said quickly.

“So, Tenya and Cerric, is it?” Leanne paced around us, looking us up and down. “I see you’re both travelling light, and neither of you seem to have much experience with the woods. Although Blood Bears are rare, I will give you that.”

“How rare are they?” Edwin asked. Dominus, he was full of questions today.

“Rare enough that travellers don’t usually run into them,” Leanne responded. “They usually stay much deeper in the woods, but all the animals have been acting strange lately. But enough about that. Where are you two headed?”

“Scalva,” Edwin said.

“Why Scalva?”

“We’re, uh, we’re going to meet some relatives.”

She folded her arms across her chest and raised a skeptical eyebrow. “For what purpose? And why aren’t you on the main roads?” She stared intently at Edwin. *She knows the Prince is missing!* I realized with a jolt. I didn’t know much about the Guardian’s Order, but I did know that they had an excellent communication system of sending messages via hawk. They no doubt would have been alerted that Edwin had run away and issued a general description of his appearance. I had to think of a lie, and fast. But why would we be going to Scalva? We didn’t have any valuables on us except for-

“The Earth’s Breath stone!” I cried. Leanne turned and cocked her head at me. “Um, the Earth’s Breath stone,” I repeated, but much calmer. “We’re in possession of one with immense magical energy. A group of rogues has been after us for it, so we had to stay off the main roads because they would find us there for sure. We’re trying to bring it to Scalva to give it to our relatives. Old family heirloom, you know the deal.” I prayed to Dominus that I had been convincing enough.

“And why didn’t you just ask the Royal Army, or any of the knights for that matter, for an escort?” she asked.

“Well, you know how they are,” I replied. What a ridiculous answer.

“I do, unfortunately,” she agreed, much to my surprise. She turned back to Edwin and stared at him intently, and I was terrified that she would recognize us and drag our stupid hides back to Alba Aula. For a long minute she stood in silence, deep in thought as she sized us up. But then she blinked and rubbed her temples, breaking her gaze. “Very well,” she said. “It is my duty to look after idiots like you, and as luck would have it I am also headed to Scalva. I’ll be your escort.”

“Why are you headed to Scalva?” Edwin asked.

“What he *means* to say,” I said as I nudged his ribs, “is thank you.”

She gave a grunt in response. “Where is this Earth’s Breath stone? I’d like to see it.”

Edwin’s eyes widened. “It’s in my clothing pack!” We looked at where the Blood Bear had chased us from. Smashed trees and sawdust lay in a path of destruction. “Is it safe to head back that way?”

“It should be by now,” Leanne responded. She followed the trail of wreckage, and we kept close behind her.

When we made it back to the spot we had slept in before, my heart sank. My packs were intact, but Edwin’s food pack had been torn to shreds. He rushed to his clothing pack and began to fish around for the stone.

“What is this?” Leanne shouted, gesturing at the packs. “Are you serious?”

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked, quickly growing annoyed with her attitude.

She kicked the torn food pack with her boot. “Is this all *food*? No wonder the Blood Bear came after you!”

“That one is food too,” Edwin pointed to my pack.

“Oh, by Dominus,” she groaned. “You two are more hopeless than I thought.”

“What’s wrong with bringing food?” I said. “We need to eat, don’t we?”

She glared at me with her piercing green eyes. I stood at least a head taller than her short stocky build, but I was still intimidated. “We need,” she hissed, “to travel light. If you cannot run with all your gear on your back, you are carrying too much. All this food will only attract wild animals.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

“Hunt. Gather. Find food along the way. Finish it the same day you get it, and if you can’t then hang it from the trees and do not sleep next to it. I can’t believe you don’t know this. These are things even inexperienced travellers know. And what are these packs?”

“Clothes,” I responded.

“How many sets did you bring?” she sighed.

“Six each.”

She sank to her knees and stared up at the trees above us. “All right,” she rose and paced in a circle, trying to calm herself. “All right.”

“Hey, I found it!” Edwin held the Earth’s Breath stone above his head with a smile. “Isn’t it- oops.” It slipped out of his hands and fell to the ground, hitting a sharp rock.

“Oh, for Nox’s sake!” Leanne cursed. She rushed over to the stone and snatched it from the ground, examining it with her fingers. “It’s not cracked,” she breathed. “You were very

lucky. I can tell it's an expensive one too, by the way it's cut. It must be valuable after all." She stared intently at the two of us. "Tenya. Cerric."

Who? I almost asked, but quickly caught myself.

"Take a look at how I am packed," she continued. She took the bow and quiver off of her shoulders. "One: bow and quiver. Necessary for defending yourself from enemies like Blood Bears and wolves. Two: hood and cloak. Three," she began to remove the contents of her belt, "sword to protect from hostile humans. Four: some dried meat." She opened one of the packs on her belt. "Notice that it is *dried*. Notice that I don't have an entire packful. And I'll be finishing it before the day ends and then hunting again. Five: only one change of clothes," she said as she pointed to another bundle at her belt. "Six: knives. Seven: small Earth's Breath stone to help out in a pinch." She indicated a necklace with a small crystal on it around her neck. "And eight: tent and sleeping bag."

"How do you fit all these things?" Edwin gasped.

"It's called folding. And you may want to try it."

"What should we do with our packs, then?" Edwin asked. "Are we supposed to just leave them here?"

"No," she said slowly. "This path is frequented by rogues and bandits. Leaving your clothes behind would only give them something to use to track you if they followed you here. And if you leave the food here, the Blood Bear will come back and could run into more travellers. Follow me"

Edwin nodded obediently, and we grabbed our packs. His food pack was no longer in carrying condition, but we were able to stuff what hadn't been eaten by the Blood Bear into mine. "This way," Leanne called from the middle of the woods.

“Shouldn’t we follow the path?” I asked. “The rogues following us are on the main roads.”

“I told you, this path is used mostly by rogues and bandits,” she answered. “Even if yours aren’t here, you’re likely to run into another group of them sooner or later.” She waved us forward again, and I reluctantly followed with Edwin trailing close behind me.

We were off the path. The woods enclosed around us, encasing us in a world of endless bark and leaves. By noon I had lost all sense of direction, but Leanne hopped from rock to root nimbly before us, and we followed her, praying to Dominus and the Above that she knew what she was doing. And that she wouldn’t turn us in. There was a very real possibility that she was just leading us back to a group of knights, or even Alba Aula itself. But as the day wore on my suspicions eased. We were now deep in the forest. There was no sign of human life save for the two of us crashing through the undergrowth and the member of the Guardian’s Order who glided ahead of us, barely making a sound.

Edwin strode ahead of me, kicking his feet through the piles of leaves. “That’s a good way to get ticks and poison ivy,” Leanne called over her shoulder.

He stopped immediately. “Poison ivy? It’s here?”

The Order member circled back to where we stood with a weary sigh. “Do you see that plant over there?” She pointed to a small three-leaved plant growing near the roots of the trees.

“That’s poison ivy. And so is that one,” she indicated a plant a few paces from our feet.

“What about ticks? Where do those come from?” Edwin asked. His boyish ease had faded, replaced with a cool nervousness.

“Oh, those can be anywhere. Any plant can have ticks. Nasty little buggers, they are.”

She leaned in close to Edwin’s face. “They’ll suck the blood right out of you and spit diseases into your head,” she smirked.

Edwin’s shoulders stiffened, and he took a few steps back. “Leave him alone,” I said. “I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

Leanne shrugged. “We’ll see.”

We continued walking, but this time at a much slower pace. Every plant had transformed into tick-infested poison ivy. I inched after our guide, carefully weaving my way through the undergrowth, trying to make as little contact with the deadly plants as possible.

“Oh, for Dominus’s sake!” Leanne turned around towards us again. “What is taking you two so long?”

“We’re trying not to touch the poison ivy,” Edwin called back.

“And the ticks,” I added.

“For the love of- you can’t avoid all the ticks! We’re in the woods! Just avoid the poison ivy when you see it and don’t go crashing through the undergrowth,” she said. “Damned city kids,” I heard her mutter under her breath.

“What was that?” I asked.

She scowled at me, and I realized that as a human I probably shouldn’t have been able to hear her. “Just hurry up,” she huffed. “You want to get to Scalva this year, don’t you?”

We picked up our pace until we were walking alongside Leanne. Silence fell between us again, the only sounds filling the air coming from the birds and pinehoppers. “If you’re going to worry about a plant,” Leanne said at length, “worry about Weeping Ivy.”

“Weeping Ivy?” It wasn’t one I had heard of before, but by the name alone it didn’t sound like something I would want to encounter.

“It will be hard to miss if we come across it,” she continued. “It has four leaves, but its blue speckles are what make it obvious. Poison ivy will give you a rash at worst, or if you’re like me you won’t get even that. But Weeping Ivy is deadly. If its toxins seep into your skin they go straight to your head.”

“What happens then?” Edwin gulped.

“You weep, as the name implies. The toxins cause an imbalance as they erode your mind, and you cry uncontrollably until you die.”

“Well, that sounds intense,” I said. Edwin’s face had gone completely pale, and I needed to do something to lessen his anxiety. “It’s pretty rare though, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Leanne agreed. “If we come across any I’ll be sure we avoid it. As long as you don’t wander away from me, you’ll be fine.”

“You hear that, Edwin? You don’t need to worry-” I was cut off by a screeching sound from above us.

A gigantic hawk circled in the air above our heads, bits of feathers flashing down from between the leafy layer of the trees. Leanne held out her left arm, and with a whooshing of its wings the hawk landed on her bracer and began to preen. She reached out with her other hand and stroked the hawk’s head. “Let’s see what you have today,” she said as she untied a piece of paper that hung from the hawk’s leg.

“What’s it say?” Edwin stood beside her, staring at the hawk with wide eyes.

“It’s from the other members of my Order,” she explained as she opened the note and read it. “Still no sign of the Prince. And no sign of the White Dragon either.” She turned and

stared at Edwin. My head pounded like someone was hitting me with a rock. But then she blinked again and rubbed her temples. The hawk gave a screech as flapped up to the tree beside us.

We continued on with the familiar silence settling between us. The woods looked all the same now, just rows of endless trees, and I wondered how long it would now take us to reach Scalva. An extra day? Two? Three? It was impossible to tell where we were. I had lost all sense of bearing. We could have been going in circles for all I knew. But Leanne pressed onward, and I had no choice but to follow. She seemed to know where she was going. The hawk circled above us, gliding from branch to branch, and I couldn't help but be envious of its wings. If I still had mine we would have been in Scalva by now.

The sunk began to sink into afternoon. My didn't feel any soreness in my legs, much to my relief, but Edwin's pace had slowed considerably. "Can we take a break?" I called to Leanne when Edwin came to a halt completely.

She looked at us from over her shoulder. "All right," she agreed. "But only a short one."

I took a minute to examine where we were. We had entered a small clearing in the forest, and above me I could actually make out most of the sky. It was a pure blue like usual, but a group of storm clouds was rolling in. A stream burbled beside us. I sat on one of the large stones nearby, breathing in the scent of pine. A gigantic mountain in the distance was visible through the opening in the line of trees. Its snowy peak reached up to the sky much like the towers of Abla Aula. A wave of homesickness passed over me, and I tried to focus on the mountain, imagining instead what it would be like to try to climb it.

"That's part of the Dureth mountain range," Leanne's voice came from behind me. She perched on the rock to my left and joined me in gazing at the distant peak.

I turned to my right and saw Edwin squatting in a patch of grass, his eyes fixed on a cluster of moths that were fluttering above the ground. They bounced around on their bright blue wings, dancing around the young boy. A gentle breeze wafted through his hair.

“You’re fond of him, aren’t you?” Leanne noted.

“I am,” I replied. “He’s very dear to me. I’ve known him since he was born.”

“Well, I would imagine so.”

Above us the hawk let out a screech. “What about you?” I asked. “Do you have any siblings?”

“A brother. He’s stationed in Scalva. That’s the reason I’m headed there. I haven’t seen him since he received his assignment a year ago. Almost had to cancel the trip when that idiot of a Prince disappeared, but they decided to let me go anyway.”

“Why would it matter if he was missing?” The question left my mouth slowly.

“The Order is part of the search party. Honestly, I’m surprised they haven’t found him yet. A spoiled city kid like him couldn’t have gone far.”

You’d be surprised, I thought to myself. But something still felt off about her. Shouldn’t she have been at least a little suspicious of us? We were headed in the opposite direction of where the Queen was, but we still reeked of city-life-induced ignorance, and Edwin must have fallen under the general description of a twelve-summer-old boy they were looking for. I tried to brush the thought aside, but it persisted, much like the shadow still lingering in the depths of my consciousness. It had faded considerably since we began our journey, but I still felt it, pulsing with my heartbeat, waiting to make me lash out again.

“We should keep moving.” Leanne stood after a few minutes and gathered her belongings. “We still have a few hours left of sunlight, but we don’t want to waste them.” I

threw my packs over my shoulders once again. While my legs didn't hurt, my shoulders burned with the weight of my food and clothes.

I watched as Edwin tried to shoulder his clothing pack, but the weight of it sent him sprawling to the ground. Leanne just stood and watched, her eyebrows raised in amusement. "A little help?" Edwin squeaked from beneath the pack.

"I don't think so," she said. "You were stupid enough to bring all those clothes. That's not my problem."

"Can we just leave some here, then? We're in the middle of nowhere anyway."

"Absolutely not. You carried it into the forest, and now you're going to carry it out."

I walked over to where Edwin lay and helped him to his feet. "Just a little while longer, and then we'll stop for the night." He gave a solemn nod of his head. We continued along Leanne's invisible path, both of us struggling to keep pace with the Order member. At long last, the sun sank completely out of sight, and Leanne announced that we would make camp.

"I still don't get it." Edwin stood at the foot of the trees Leanne had selected to hang the food from. "What if the feather-catchers get in?"

"They won't," Leanne grunted as she hoisted the pack into the air. She had suspended it from a network of strings that she had woven around the trees. She explained that the Blood Bears, or any bears for that matter, wouldn't be able to get to it at this height. "The fabric is too thick for feather-catchers to be able to rip through," she continued. "The main threat is the bears, but now it's out of reach." She raised the pack up to its full height. "There. That ought to do it." She turned and made her way back to the camp she had set up a few hundred feet away. If the bears did find the food, we at least wouldn't be there with it.

We walked back to the small clearing Leanne had found. It was still surrounded by trees, but the ground was even and generally free of roots. Leanne had explained that it was also a good spot because it was on a slight slope, meaning that if it rained the water wouldn't collect where we were sleeping. She knelt down in the grass and pulled out a sheet of fabric from her pocket. Edwin and I looked on in amazement as she transformed it into a small tent with just a few strings and sticks she stabbed into the ground. It was like watching bread rise in an oven. "Well?" She stood over her newly erected tent, her hands on her hips. "Aren't you going to set up yours?"

"Oh, uh." I rubbed the back of my neck with my hand. "We don't have tents."

"Of *course* you don't. Why would I even have thought you did?" She threw her hands above her head. "It's not like you need them for days-long journeys. What were you planning on sleeping in?"

"We slept on our clothing packs last night," Edwin said with a shrug. "That wasn't too bad."

Leanne just stared at him with a glare that could split a rock. "Yes, that turned out great for you, didn't it? Now, I for one, am going to sleep in my tent. Good night, fools." With that she threw open the tent flap and slid into the cocoon of fabric, disappearing from sight.

"Let's get some sleep too," I sighed. I threw my remaining pack to the ground, and Edwin did that same. I laid down on the pack and instantly felt every fold and crevice in the lumpy fabric dig into my back and legs. I shifted around, trying to situate myself in a more comfortable position, but quickly gave up. I was sleeping on a bag of clothes.

As much as I hated to admit it, Leanne was right. We had no idea what we were doing. I glanced over at her tent. I guessed that she was asleep by now, or at least beginning to drift off. I

wasn't quite sure what to think of her. She was harsh, and quite frankly I could do without her short words with us, but at the same time I couldn't blame her for her attitude. Edwin and I were two bumbling infants when it came to surviving in the wilderness. And when it came to most things, for that matter. What had we actually done successfully? I had failed to stop the Queen from getting kidnapped. Edwin and I had managed to sneak out of Lux Splendens, but that was only because a tavern had been there to hide us from the guards in its shadows. We would have both been mauled by the Blood Bear if Leanne hadn't shown up when she did.

I jumped when I heard a sharp sound directly next to me. I glanced over and realized that it was Edwin snoring, and I immediately relaxed. He hadn't complained about the faces he saw in the dark while we were still in the castle. Perhaps now he was too exhausted to care about them anymore. *Get some sleep*, I tried to tell myself. I focused on the sounds of the forest around me. A chorus of crickets sang in the air, and in the distance I could hear the yowling of the howlers. The branches above me rustled as a feather-catcher darted between the leaves, chasing after its pinehopper prey. Its brown coat and bat-like wings glinted in the pale moonlight shining down through the branches. I sensed something moving in the trees near us, and a pair of eyes glanced out at the campsite. A howler emerged from the shadows. Its grey and black fur glistened as it sniffed the air. It looked much like a cat, but it was about twice a cat's size, and its tail ended in a thick tuft of fur that flicked in the air. It looked directly at me with its pale silver eyes and cocked its head to the side. I wondered what it made of me. Did I smell like a human? Or was I still a dragon to the animals? The Blood Bear hadn't seemed to care either way, but the howler's tail swished back and forth as it stared at me. It quickly gave up and slunk back into the trees, disappearing from sight.

I felt sleep overwhelming me once again. My eyelids drooped, and I let it carry me away on its waves.

There was something wet on my nose.

I felt a prick of cold, and then another. My eyes creaked open and beheld tiny droplets of water leaking down from the leaves above. It was still night, and I guessed that it was nowhere near morning. Beside me Edwin groaned, and his eyes opened as well. "Rain?" he asked.

I nodded. We sat in silence as the drops continued, hoping they would go away. But they didn't. As the minutes wore on they increased in their size and frequency, and before long we were both being drenched by a downpour. A flash of light shot through the air, and the leaves of the trees shook with a booming of thunder. The wind whipped violently through my drenched hair, the cold ripping right through my soaked clothes and chilling me to the bone. "We can't stay out here," I realized aloud. "We'll get sick."

"Where do we go?" Edwin shouted over a second clap of thunder. The lightning illuminated his face for a brief moment, a pale face with chattering teeth. I frantically searched the area with my keen eyes. There were trees all around, but with the wind blowing the rain about they would do little good. My eyes landed on Leanne's tent. "The tent?" Edwin asked. I nodded, and we scrambled to the only shelter.

I pulled open the flaps of the fabric and stuck my head inside. Leanne lay on the floor of the tent in her sleeping bag, completely dry. "Hello," I said with an awkward smile.

Her head snapped up. "What in Dominus's name are you doing?" she shouted. "You're going to let the rain in!"

"Can we stay in here with you?" Edwin called from behind me.

Leanne stared at us for what felt like an eternity as the raindrops ran their freezing fingers down my back. “By the Above,” she finally groaned. “Get in here. Now! Before you flood the tent!”

We crawled inside, immediately ruining the tent’s dryness with our soaked clothes and hair. “It’s a bit small,” I commented as my shoulders brushed against both sides of the fabric. Leanne alone took up nearly all the floor space, even with her short build.

“That’s because it’s only built for me,” she snapped.

Edwin wriggled up beside her. He lay down on the remaining floor space to her right, his elbows up against her ribcage. I had no place to go but at their feet, but even then there wasn’t enough room for me to lie down. “Move up your legs,” Leanne said to Edwin. They pulled their feet closer, their knees rising to my face. I curled up on the remaining space. My back squished up against Leanne’s calves, and I felt her shuddering from the cold Edwin and I had brought in. “You two are the worst,” she moaned. “The worst.”

Outside the storm raged on, and I let myself drift away again. It wasn’t easy, but I finally managed to close my eyes and let sleep take hold.

For the first time in a few days, the dream of the shadowy fog returned. The voice called out for help. *I’m coming*, I tried to shout into the dreamscape void. *We’re coming*.

Chapter 6: Mylka

There was a sword in my back.

The metallic blade pierced my scales, sending ice through my rent flesh. Blood rolled out of the wound like droplets of rain crawling down a windowpane. Raindrops on Edwin's face. Teardrops. He cried when they took his mother.

I tried to get up, but each movement nudged the sword in my back and sent fresh ripples of pain through my frozen veins. I tried to flap my wings. The limbs were heavy, membranous and bat-like. Black wings. *No*. I whipped my head around, looking at each of the hideous appendages attached to my back. In a spout of madness and frenzy I brought up my claws to rake them off, only to see that they too were covered with the blackness. Dark scales glinted in the red light now shining above me. Black scales on my body, on my neck, on my face. I screamed, but my voice came out in a horrific roar. The roar of the Deathwing. The shadowy fog had returned, and from it I heard a voice crying back to me, equally full of pain and terror. I tried to see through the dark cloud, but nothing was visible save for the noxious vapors wafting around me.

Pain rippled through me again where the sword was stuck. I turned around with the intent to rip it out, but then froze. A gold hilt. A diamond on the pommel, a second diamond where the hilt met blade, a diamond shape etched into the white blade itself. It was the Blade of Light. A blinding flash erupted from it, engulfing me in pure white, and my eyes snapped open.

I was lying on the floor of Leanne's tent. I immediately looked down at my hands, terrified that I would still see the black scales and awful claws. Instead I beheld soft and pale human hands.

The black scales had been nothing but a dream. The sword in my back was Leanne's knee digging into my spine.

The patterning of light rain filled the dreary tent, and the scent of dew and leaves wafted through the tent flaps. Both Leanne and Edwin were still fast asleep. In their unconsciousness they had wrapped their arms around each other. Edwin's head rested against Leanne's shoulder. He had told me that when he was very young he had often slept beside his mother the same way, and my heart burned with a sudden burst of grief.

Leanne's eyes slowly opened, and as soon as she was fully conscious she pushed Edwin's head off of her and untangled their arms. "Wake up," she grunted. "We should keep moving."

Edwin sat up and rubbed his eyes. His hair stuck out in all directions, and dark circles bled beneath his eyelids. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Time to get going," Leanne answered. She poked at Edwin's clothes. "Amazing. You're still wet. You're lucky it's summer or we'd all be dead."

"Well not all of us," Edwin said. "You weren't out in the rain."

"You brought your soaking selves into my tent and drenched everything. Had it been winter I would have frozen to death from sleeping next to your wet bodies all night."

"Good thing it's not winter," I snapped. "And you're not dead. So shut your mouth and leave him alone."

"Are you all right?" Edwin asked. His eyebrows furrowed, creating creases of worry in his forehead.

"I'm fine," I said as I opened the tent flaps. I rose to my full height as soon as I was outside. My legs immediately screamed at me for lying in such an awkward position so for long,

but I forced them to walk anyway. I needed to clear my head. The dream had left me feeling particularly vulnerable, like I had left a window open in a house and a thief was about to enter.

The scent of dew was heavy in the air. Beams of golden sunlight trickled down to the forest floor through the breaks in the canopy of leaves above. A group of squirrels chattered in the trees above my head, and in the distance a deer peeked out at me from behind the safety of a tree trunk. I walked a good distance into the woods, still on the lookout for poison ivy, and even worse, the Weeping Ivy Leanne had spoken about. I needed to be alone.

I found a sizeable boulder that sat at the foot of an oak tree and curled up on it. I drew my knees to my chest as if they could protect my heart and breathed deep. What happened last night? What was that dream? I had known something was wrong for a long time. Even though it was often weak and passive, the shadow was ever-present in the back of my mind. The others had assured me that it was normal, that it would pass once the Binding Ritual took place, but did they have random bursts of anger when they were my age? Could they understand what the Deathwings were saying during the attack on Albla Aula? I hadn't gotten the chance to ask that one, but I doubted they could. And now this dream. More than anything I wanted to forget it, but it burned bright in my mind, like the shape of a fire that I had stared at too long. Still there when I closed my eyes.

"Tenya!" Edwin's voice echoed through the trees. A flock of pine hoppers leapt out of the branches above my head, startled by the sudden noise. I had a moment of confusion before I registered that he was using my fake name. I was grateful he had remembered. I barely did myself.

"Over here," I called in response. I stood and walked back towards the tent. When I came to the clearing I saw that Leanne was already finishing her task of stuffing the tent back into her

pack. It amazed me that she could fit such a piece of cloth into so small a space at her belt, but then again she had years of experience that Edwin and I lacked. Edwin stood over the clothing packs we had been sleeping on. “What’s the status?” I asked.

“Your clothing is soaked,” Leanne glared at me. “It’s going to be several pounds heavier. I can’t believe you brought all those garments and no tents.”

Edwin tried to thrust his pack over his shoulder, but the weight of it dragged him to the ground. He toppled over slowly like a poorly-constructed festival cake. I grabbed by pack in turn and grunted at the shift in weight. Leanne was right. It felt like someone had filled it with rocks while we were sleeping. “What should we do?” I asked her.

“Leave it for now,” she said. “We should check on the food and see how it fared in the storm.”

The food had fared even worse. The stench of mold and rancid fruit hit our noses within a few feet of the pack that miraculously still dangled in the trees. “I don’t even want to go near that,” Leanne sighed, but she did anyway. She cut the strings holding them aloft with a knife from her belt, and the pack plummeted unceremoniously to the ground.

“What should we do with it?” Edwin looked up at me. “We can’t just leave it here, can we?”

I started at the stinking mess of fabric lying in the leaves and grass. The foul smell would likely linger on our clothes, and the last thing I wanted to wake up to was a Blood Bear licking my tunic. “We need to dispose of it,” I said.

Leanne put her hands on her belt and glared at us. “And where are you going to do that? I’ll not be letting you just leave your rubbish lying about the forest.”

“Is there a village nearby? We should stop there,” Edwin suggested. “We wouldn’t have to stay long, just long enough to get rid of the food pack and lighten our clothing loads. And we could even buy tents if we can find them.”

I turned to him and shot him a warning look. What was he thinking, suggesting that? He knew how much of a risk it could be.

“Absolutely not,” Leanne said. “We’re sticking to the forest. If it rains again I can build a shelter out of branches and leaves.”

“But why? I thought you were upset about us all sleeping in the tent with you, and wouldn’t building that be a lot of work?” Edwin responded. “I don’t care if we run into the bandits or rogues. I’m willing to take the risk.”

She was silent as she paced through the leaves, her hands still at her belt. “Fine,” she said at length with her back to us. “But if anything happens, it’s not my responsibility, do you understand? There is a town near here called Mylka that we can reach by evening.” She turned and faced us again. “And another thing. You both carry swords with you. If we’re going into town, you need to prove you can defend yourselves. You first,” she nodded her head in my direction.

Uh-oh. The first time I had held a sword had been when the Blood Bear was chasing us down, and it had nearly also been my last. “Is this necessary?” I asked.

“Do you want to go into Mylka or not?” she growled.

I glanced over at Edwin, who gave me a quick nod. “I do,” I sighed. I had trusted him thus far, and I would trust him now.

“Then draw your blade.” With the ringing of steel she drew the sword from her belt. It was a simple sword, with a blade about arm’s length and an engraved hilt. She twirled it in her fingertips, passing it from hand to hand as she stared intently at me.

My own fingers trembled as they closed around the hilt of my sword. The blade left its scabbard with a sickly whine that made my ears ache and Leanne’s teeth grit together. I spread my legs apart and held the sword out before me with both hands, keeping my arms straight. I wanted the end of the weapon as far away from me as possible. “All right, I’m ready,” I said, trying to keep the nervousness out of my voice.

“No you’re not.” She walked over and swatted the sword out of my fingers, sending it flying across the forest floor. “Do you even know how to hold a sword? Dominus, you are hopeless.”

“I do!”

We turned to see Edwin standing behind us. His sword was drawn, and he held it in his right hand as he beckoned Leanne towards him. I breathed a sigh of relief. If either of us stood a chance against her, it was him. He had been trained by the knights at Alba Aula since he was six years old, and even though he still had a lot to learn, he had the basic form down as far as I could tell.

Leanne raised her brows and narrowed her eyes at him. “Very well. Let’s see what the foolish boy can do.” She leapt at him with her blade, but he easily blocked it with his own. She gave a few more slashes from her sword. Edwin managed to parry each one and slashed back in return. They danced back and forth, their blades colliding with a ringing that reverberated through the trees. Leanne appeared to have the upper hand. She thrust her blade at him repeatedly, but Edwin was managing to hold his own.

I stared down at the sword in my own hands. What in Dominus's name was he thinking? Why was he so intent on stopping in a town? Every time I thought about walking through a row of shops and inns again, the memory of the soldiers outside the tavern flashed in my mind. My pulse quickened. It wasn't like they could find us here, but nonetheless, I was suddenly too afraid to make a sound. The soldiers. The Deathwings. The gryphon was ripped in twain above my head over and over, playing in an endless loop in my mind's eye. Shadow-beasts crawling the walls of Alba Aula. A hole in the castle wall. The Queen. I shut my eyes but the images wouldn't stop. Beads of cold sweat trickled down my forehead and back. My fingers trembled with the weight of the sword. The weapon that takes lives. The instrument of death-

The sword felt different in my clammy grip. My eyes were still closed, but I looked down at it and saw a new blade in its place, pale and shimmering with a golden hilt: the Blade of Light. My arms were fitted with pale gold armor. I took a step forward and saw a face reflected back up at me from the puddle of water in my path. The face of a woman, pale and round, with soft lips but stormy eyes. The Daughter of the Sun.

My eyes opened again, and I was back in the forest. I glanced down at the sword. It was just a normal blade again, but holding it must have awoken some dormant memory from my past life. I looked up as the sound of clashing swords drew my attention. Edwin and Riella continued their perilous dance. His arms moved slower than before, and the fabric around his arms was drenched with sweat. Leanne was as nimble as ever, easily blocking the advances he made. She brought her sword around his arm, twisting his wrists and forcing his sword to the ground. She held her own blade at his throat.

"Not bad," she said, and lowered her sword, sliding it back into its sheath. She turned to me. "I cannot say the same for you, however."

I took a deep breath and rose to my feet. "I'd like to try again." I held the sword out before me. I relaxed my muscles, letting them be the ones to decide what they did instead of my own foolish brain. My arms and knees felt loose. I was suddenly aware of the whisper of the light breeze around me, and I sucked it into my chest, letting it flow deep into my soul.

Leanne raised an eyebrow at me but advanced with her sword drawn again. "Very well. You at least seem to have a manageable stance this time." She swiped at me with the blade. I could feel the wind parting around it as it inched towards my face. I raised my arms in one fluid motion, and my own sword collided with hers, sending a painful vibration down my arms and into my chest. She withdrew her sword and swiped again, and I again moved my sword to meet hers. Was she going slower than before? I could feel the breath leaving her mouth and nose. As I watched her arms bring her blade around I could see what direction they were going in, and brought up my own sword. The ringing of the metal clanged in my ears, but it didn't drown out the other sounds of the forest.

She swung at me several more times, but I evaded them all either by blocking her swipes or ducking beneath them. A burst of energy rippled through my arms, and I advanced on her, forcing her to parrying my own blows. "Good, good," she said as she danced around my attacks. "You're not so hopeless after all. You seem to have some natural skill. However, it can't compete with years of training." With that she dropped to the ground, her hands hitting the leaves, and swung her leg out beneath mine, knocking them out from under me. My feet flew up in the air, and I landed flat on my back. The leaves around me flew up from the gust my fall had created. I lay like that for a few minutes, groaning as I tried to regain the air that had been knocked out of me. The sound of Leanne re-sheathing her blade mingled with the muffled laughter of Edwin.

“You think it’s -ow!- funny?” I asked as I struggled to my feet. My back was aching, but my pride had been damaged even more so.

“Sorry,” he said. “You should have seen how you looked though. You were scowling and intense, and then your legs just flew up in the air.” He smirked, but quickly concealed his mouth with his hands.

“She beat you too, if I recall properly,” I responded. “So, what do you think?” I turned to Leanne. “Are we good enough to go to Mylka? I’m getting tired of carrying these giant packs everywhere.”

She was silent and stared off into the distance. Her brow furrowed, and shadow passed over her face. It was gone in an instant, but it left me feeling uneasy. My veins were cold again, like my blood had been replaced by ice. “You two can defend yourselves,” she said finally. “I’m not responsible if something happens to you. This was your decision.” She turned her back to us and gathered began to walk off into the trees. “I’m not responsible,” I heard her mutter again.

I grabbed the stinking pack of rotten food and threw it over my shoulders in a burst of strength. I hoisted the clothing pack over my other shoulder, and Edwin did the same. We followed after her. I constantly scanned the trees for signs of Blood Bears as we walked. The rancid food reeked, and the smell no doubt carried through the air for miles. After an hour or so of silence I finally relaxed. “Are you sure about this?” I whispered to Edwin. There was no way Leanne would be able to hear us from this far back, but I kept forgetting that not everyone’s hearing was as sensitive as mine.

“No,” came his response.

“No? They what are we doing? There could be soldiers there looking for us!”

“I know,” he said slowly. “I just, I feel like we need to go to Mylka.”

“Is it the magic telling you that?”

He nodded. “I think so.”

“You *think*? You don’t know?”

“Sometimes it’s hard to know,” he said. “I knew the night we left Alba Aula. I think I know now, but I’m not completely sure.”

“If you’re not completely sure, why are we doing this?”

He was silent, scanning the trees around us. The chirping of the sparrows and pinehoppers rang through the air in the absence of our voices.

Mylka was more of a small city than a town. The lake that bore the same name stood just where the forest ended and the fields began again, and rows of houses, shops and inns lined its perimeter. In some areas they were crowded together much like the ones of Lux Splendens, creating a network of buildings and alleyways.

Just behind the lake and buildings, the distant mountains were visible. Their peaks touched the clouds that had been dyed pink and orange from the setting sun.

“This is it?” Edwin asked upon breaking through the final row of trees. “It looks big.”

Leanne simply nodded. “This is the town of Mylka. It’s a frequent stop for travellers and traders, so it will likely have the supplies you need, as well as a place to dispose of your... garbage.”

Garbage was right. As the day wore on the smell from the food pack had only crescendoed into the stench of the decaying animal, and the clothing packs had begun to smell of mildew as well. I wondered if they would leave a permanent odor on my body from carrying

them in the woods all day. The added weight of the absorbed rain hadn't helped my back, and I could feel the dull aching of my spine.

We strode into town, careful not to draw too much attention. Fortunately for us the streets were bustling with other travellers in similar garb, and no one took much notice of us. Leanne quickly found a shop where we could purchase the small belt-pouches she wore. We then discovered from the shopkeeper where the garbage was dumped, and we took the few actual necessities we had out of our packs and threw the rest away. Edwin was careful to conceal the Earth's Breath stone as we cast away our clothes aside from our cloaks. The last thing we needed was for our lie about the rogues chasing us to become reality.

With the weight of the packs finally gone from our shoulders, I afforded myself the luxury of taking a look around Mylka. It was a mix between Lux Splendens and the village of Argus, a perfect balance of plentiful vendors and inns, but not to the point that it was overwhelming like the city. Had I actually been a human and not on a quest to rescue the Queen, I would have liked to settle down there. The sun sank further into the sky, and those attending the streets began to light the lanterns surrounding us. Unlike the lights of Lux Splendens that gave off a bright white light, these glowed a hue of orange, casting a soft glow on the faces of the vendors manning the shops and travellers inspecting their wares.

"This way," Leanne called. She led us over to a booth that was selling tents and sleeping bags similar to her own. We exchanged our quickly-depleting supply of gold coins for two tents and bags that we then fixed to our belts as Leanne showed us the proper technique. "There, see?" she said with a satisfied grin on her lips. "No gigantic packs on your shoulders. You have everything you need right here." She patted her own belt. We continued through the maze of shops and inns. A few of the booths caught my eye as we passed them. One man was selling

caged sparrows and pine hoppers. Another shoved candles in our faces, instructing us to smell them, but we politely declined.

Leanne stopped short in the middle of the street. “What’s wrong?” Edwin asked. We followed her gaze to a woman who sat at a booth in front of a small wooden building that I guessed was also part of her store. She wore long dark robes, and her table was filled with herbs and vials of liquid that gave off an eerie glow in the light of the orange-flamed lanterns.

“An apothecary,” she answered.

“What’s wrong with that?” I said. There didn’t seem to be anything threatening about the woman. We watched as a young girl stopped in front of the booth. The apothecary smiled and pulled out a mortar and pestle that she began to grind the herbs with. “Don’t apothecaries make medicine?”

“They do,” Leanne responded. “But some of them are also Death Dealers. They make potent poisons that they sell on the black market. The Guardian’s Order has been after them for years, but it’s hard to actually accuse them. The ingredients they use in their poisons are harmless until they’re mixed in the right combinations or until the poison itself is extracted and concentrated.”

“Do you think she’s a Death Dealer?” Edwin asked in a hushed voice. He reached up and gave my hand a nervous squeeze.

Leanne shook her head. “It’s hard to say either way.” The apothecary caught Leanne’s gaze and paused in her grinding of the herbs, returning the glare for an instant before she turned her attention back to the young customer. “Needless to say, none of them care for the Guardian’s Order very much,” Leanne continued. “And we aren’t fond of them either.” We continued on past the apothecary’s shop. As we passed I caught the woman tracking our movement with

narrowed eyes. I tried not to meet her gaze. I could do without getting into a brawl with an apothecary today.

The sun sank further in the sky, but still the shops were bustling with activity. “Look!” Edwin cried out suddenly. He pointed to the lake at the center of the town. Tiny bits of light had begun to rise over the waters, hues of pink and blue and green, all the colors of the rainbow. They danced just above the surface. “Rainbowflies!” He turned to me. “Do you see them?” I nodded my head with a smile.

Rainbowflies were a rare sight. They closely resembled the typical fireflies that we sometimes saw in Lux Splendens, but instead of bearing white lights, the rainbowflies’ lights shone in every color. They usually were found only near bodies of stagnant water, like ponds and lakes like Mylka, so we seldom saw them in the city, except on the Night of a Hundred Thousand Lights. On one of the last days of summer, they would all take to the skies in one last show of colors before their lifespans came to an end, filling the entire sky with a hundred thousand different shades of color that glistened over the entire kingdom. Those in Lux Splendens would hold a great festival that night that we always participated in. There was food, music, and dancing for all as we watched the incredible display of lights over our heads.

The few rainbowflies hovering above the waters of Mylka paled in comparison to the Night of a Hundred Thousand Lights, but the display was beautiful nonetheless. I walked to the edge of the lake and sat in the grass, and Edwin joined me. Our eyes followed the glistening lights as they mesmerized us with their soft glow. Edwin rested his head against my shoulder, and I took his hands in my own. His fingers were trembling. Did he have flashbacks of that day too? Did he see the battlefield over and over like I did whenever I closed my eyes? I had been so preoccupied with the quest and my own trauma that I had barely thought about what he must be

feeling. He had done a good job of covering it up, but sitting here before the lake with the light of the rainbowflies dancing in our eyes, we finally had a chance to breathe again. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and stroked his hair. Beads of wetness formed on my shoulder. Tears. We sat in silence as the sounds of the town droned in the background for what felt like hours. Just breathing.

“We should get going.” Leanne’s voice finally broke us out of our trance. The sun had sank completely in the sky, giving way to night, and the bustle of the town had died down into a dim murmur as the shopkeepers began to close up for the night. I rose up on my stiff legs and helped Edwin to his feet. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” She nodded towards the lake and the rainbowflies.

“It is,” I agreed. “Rainbowflies are a rare sight.”

“Unless you know where to find them,” she said with a smile. It was the first time I had seen her smile, and it transformed her countenance completely. But it quickly faded, and her eyes again became serious. “We have a choice,” she said. “We can spend the night here, or we can get moving now.”

“Can we spend the night?” Edwin asked as he rubbed his eyes. “I’m getting tired.”

Leanne nodded. “I thought you would want that. I personally would rather keep moving, but we likely wouldn’t get far before we would have to settle in for the night anyway. And putting up your tents for the first time will likely take a while. We can head to the inn and spend the night there.” She directed us back towards the rows of shops.

Edwin and I followed her through the thinning crowds. There was a dull droning of voices in the air, but my sensitive ears picked up a group of voices that had more intensity than the murmur of the villagers and shopkeepers around us. “I’ll be right back,” I said to my

companions. I turned towards the direction of the sound. I wasn't sure what it was, but there was a twinge in my gut that told me I had to investigate it.

I broke off from the party and wove my way through the other people. Most of the booths had been covered up for the night, and the bottom floors of the buildings were dark. Light shimmered from the windows of the upper floors where the shopkeepers lived. I continued to follow the noises as they crescendoed into voices calling out in the night air.

“Fifty gold pieces!”

“Seventy!”

“I'll give you one hundred gold pieces!”

A group of people was gathered around the last open booth. They shouted their prices into the air, waving their arms about. I wondered what was being auctioned, but I didn't have to wait long to find out. The overpowering scent of flowery perfume was in the air.

At the center of the crowd stood five men selling Earth's Breath stones, and in the middle of the group was the Earth's Breath stone vendor that had been in Lux Splendens the day Edwin went missing. His appearance has changed drastically since then. Powders and paints changed the tone and contour of his face, and his hair had been dyed a rusty brown, but his scent and aura he gave off were the same. It was no doubt an attempt to keep from being recognized as the vendor in Lux Splendens by other travellers like me, but it would take much more to fool a dragon. He must have escaped the riot in the city's market and moved on to another group of people he could deceive. I cowered for a minute, afraid that he would recognize me from that day. But how would he? I was now completely different. I smiled to myself, amused at my secret. His water grey eyes met mine for an instant, and he flashed me a smile of teeth that were

too white to be natural. “One hundred gold pieces?” he called to the crowd. “Going once? Twice? Three times? Sold!” He handed the stone over to its new owner.

As I watched his greasy fingers pass the stone on to the young woman who had bought it, I felt a familiar anger burning in my chest. *Don't say anything*, I scolded myself. *Remember what happened the first time. Do you really want to start another riot? The last thing you need is to draw attention to yourself.* But the shadow in the back of my mind was taking hold again. Who did he think he was, to cheat people out of their hard-earned money like this? And if I knew he was deceiving people, wasn't I obligated to say something? My concern about Edwin and our quest faded out of my mind as it was replaced by the inky black anger spreading over my consciousness. It was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong-

“Hey, you!” I took as shocked breath as the words left my mouth at full volume while I was still in the midst of my thoughts. Had I said that? It felt like I had heard it come from someone else's mouth, but the voice was unmistakably my own. The vendor and the crowd turned to me, their eyebrows raised in anticipation of what I was going to say after such a fiery shout. “Who do you think you are, selling these people empty Earth's Breath stones?”

“Empty? Surely you jest!” The vendor let out a laugh, but his voice unmistakably wavered for an instant.

Most of the crowd smiled at his assurance, but the woman who had bought the stone furrowed her brows. She closed her eyes and shouted a word in the old tongue. A hush came over the crowd as they awaited the spell to take effect. Nothing happened. A murmur began to fill the air again, but this time it was more like the low growl of a feral animal. The five vendors gave words of reassurance, and the people eased a bit, but one by one they returned the stones

and demanded their money back. This crowd had been a lot less hostile than the one in the city, and for that I was grateful.

The vendor from Lux Splendens maintained the smile on his face, assuring the people that he had no idea the stones were empty. But then he glanced over at me. My blood ran cold. His gaze was full of malice and venom. It was a look I had never gotten before from anyone. Who would dare to glare at a dragon in such a way? He certainly hadn't in Lux Splendens. But I wasn't a dragon anymore. I was a human. A simple, stupid human. My fierce scales and wings were replaced by mushy flesh. Weak and vulnerable. I suddenly felt small, so very very small, and I retreated back into the masses, praying to Dominus that he would soon forget me.

I wove my way past the crowds, walking as quickly as I could without attracting even more attention. I needed to get back to Leanne and Edwin. But even more than that, I needed to get away from that con artist. The knot forming in my stomach grew into an ogre that twisted my intestines as I walked, but before long the inn came into view. The sign hanging above the door read "The Rainbowfly Inn" in multiple colors, and the soft glow of firelight spilled out of its windows. I eagerly pulled open the door and retreated inside.

The Rainbowfly Inn was much quieter than the one in Argus had been, much to my delight. I glanced around at the tables and found Edwin and Leanne sitting beside the fire, ripping off pieces of bread and dunking them into their bowls of soup. "There you are," Leanne said as I pulled out a chair and joined them. "Where did you go? Not getting yourself into more trouble, were you?"

I laughed and gave a smile. I could tell by Leanne's countenance that it wasn't a convincing one.

“Were you?” she repeated with more urgency. She glanced around at the other travellers at the tables. “What did you do?” she hissed.

“I’ll tell you later,” I answered, glancing over at Edwin. I didn’t want him to worry about the vendor coming after us. He already had enough on his mind.

He took little notice of the conversation as he devoured his soup and bread, for which I was grateful. “We got you some food,” he said as he pushed another bowl of soup and hunk of bread towards me. “It’s still warm.”

“Thanks,” I smiled. I took a spoonful and focused on the flavor filling my mouth, trying to forget the encounter with the vendor.

It was easy to forget in the Rainbowfly Inn. The fire beside us crackled as its flames danced lightly on the logs, and the travelers at the tables kept their voices to soft murmurs. The main sound filling the air come from a young man playing a lute near the countertop of the bar. A group of girls had gathered around him, all fawning over his music and his appearance as he returned their affections with a bright smile. In a way, I couldn’t blame the girls for their doting. His lute-playing was skillful, and I would admit that he was good-looking. His soft blonde hair fell across his forehead in a messy yet attractive way, and the black leather shirt and pants he wore framed his lean yet strong build. His clean-shaven face and strong jaw were pleasant to look at. But what stood out most was the bright blue scarf he wore around his neck. The fabric was well-woven and rich in color, much like the scarves the noblewomen in Lux Splendens wore.

He suddenly looked over in our direction. His striking silver eyes met mine, and gave me a wink and a small smile. I turned away quickly, my face aflame with embarrassment. My heart

thudded in my ears like the beat of my wings against the air. Had I been staring? I hadn't meant to, but something about him seemed familiar. Where had I seen him before?

"Ugh," Leanne groaned. "Look at that idiot."

"The one with the lute?" Edwin asked between slurps from his soup. "He seems nice."

"He's a bard," she said, and left it at that. She was just full of prejudices today. First she hated apothecaries, and now this.

"And what's wrong with that?" I asked. "They seem to appreciate his music. I think he's good-" My words died away as my attention was drawn to the door that had swung open. Four of the Earth's Breath stone vendors walked inside. They stopped at the counter near the bard and then sat at a table across the room from us. I sank into my chair, willing myself to turn invisible.

"What's wrong with you?" Leanne whispered.

"Remember when you asked me if I got myself into trouble?" I whispered back.

"Them?" She gestured over at their table.

I gave a nod in return. "They were conning people, and I called them out on it."

I stole another quick glance at the men seated at the table. To my horror the vendor from Lux Splendens's eyes met mine. They were just as full as malice as they were before, and he gestured to his companions and pointed in our direction.

I awaited Leanne to reprimand me, but a scolding never came. She was silent. Her face went completely pale, almost as white as my scales. This was far worse than any scolding could have been. "All right," she whispered so quietly that even I had a hard time hearing her. A shudder ran through me. There was a waver in her voice that I had never heard before. She had previously been calm and collected, but now there was a slight tremor in her hands as she spoke. "We can't stay here."

“Where should we go?” Edwin had picked up on our unease and leaned in closer to the table, his voice low as well. I gave him the most genuine smile I could muster, hoping it would ease any sense of danger he felt, but I doubted it did any good.

“We can try to make a break for the woods again,” she answered. “We should be able to lose them easily, and if they did attack I could climb into a tree and pick them off.”

“Wait, attack?” Edwin’s eyes travelled frantically from Leanne to me. “Are you sure they want to hurt us?”

An eerily empty look swept across Leanne’s face. “Yes.”

My heart thudded in my chest louder than ever before. Almost as loud as the roaring of the Deathwings, their eyes hungry with bloodlust, their scales black as the night sky itself-

“We can try to sneak out,” Edwin suggested. His voice pulled me back to reality, and I took a gasp for air like I had just resurfaced from the moat of Alba Aula.

“I don’t think that will work,” Leanne answered. “They would notice us right away and follow us out. We’d need some kind of diversion-”

“Lords and ladies!” In a single bound the bard in the blue scarf leapt onto a table in the center of the room. Everyone’s head turned at the sight, and several of the patrons raised their mugs of ale and shouted loud cheers. “I trust you have all been well this evening?”

“Yes!” came the drunken reply. The girls at the counter of the bar giggled. I caught Leanne rolling her eyes, back to her usual surly self.

He gave a grin and bowed low before the crowd. “For those of you unlucky people who don’t yet know me, I am the Blue-Scarved Bard.” Another round of cheer erupted from his fans, who apparently made up nearly the entire crowd. I thought back to the inn at August where the

girls had been giggling over someone called the “Blue-Scarved Bard” and realized this must have been him. He was apparently well-known, and with his charisma I could see why.

“I’ve one last song, and I would appreciate it if you would all join me,” he continued his speech to the crowd. With that he put his fingers to the strings on his lute and began to strum an upbeat rhythm. The notes came rapidly and without fault, and I couldn’t help but tap my foot along with the music. The others in the room also couldn’t help themselves, and soon the clapping of hands and stomping of feet accompanied the sound of his lute. He danced around the table while he played as the crowd cheered even louder than before, and after a few minutes of this he opened his mouth and began to sing.

“Oh, I’ve travelled through hill and valley

By the way of the moon and stars

By the strength of a gale

Or the drought of some ale

From only the finest bars!

A finer woman I’ve never met

Than the good lady of sweetened wine

Who will pour me a drink

Just as quick as a wink

And will forever be mine!”

As he sang the crowd leapt to their feet and joined his dance. They were much more drunk than I had thought, and several of them tripped over themselves. Laughter and boisterous singing soon filled the entire room with the Blue-Scarved Bard at the center of it all. I was

surprised at how good he was. The words he sang were not much to my liking, but his voice was sweet yet powerful and quite possibly the best I had ever heard.

“I think this is the diversion you wanted,” I whispered to Leanne. She nodded in agreement. With the entire room up on their feet and singing along, it would be nearly impossible for our adversaries to keep track of us. We silently left our chairs and snuck through the crowd. Drops of ale flew through the air and splashed into our clothes, and the drunker patrons stepped on our toes, but we pressed through until we reached the door. Leanne pulled it open and she and Edwin stepped through.

I took one last look at the inn. The Blue-Scarved Bard was strumming furiously on his lute with a bright smile as he continued to sing. The crowd cheered and pounded on the floorboards as they swayed to and fro in the firelight. I was sorry I had to leave the festivities behind. I had longed for the nights of dancing with other humans, my hair twirling in the firelight, but Edwin’s safety was far more important. I turned and followed my companions into the chilly air. The door closed behind me, and the music of the Rainbowfly Inn faded into the night.

We walked quickly away from the inn, putting as much distance between ourselves and the Earth’s Breath vendors as we could without attracting attention. The moon hung high in the sky, casting an eerie glow on the houses and shops around the inn. The sound of crickets chirping filled the air along with our footsteps against the cobblestone road. But then another noise rang out. The music from the Blue-Scarved Bard suddenly increased in volume, quickly followed by the sound of a door slamming shut. We turned and saw four figures exiting the inn and moving in our direction.

Leanne's hand flew to her sword. Her silence wasn't unusual, but her chest heaved.

"Run," she whispered when she finally regained her composure. She didn't have to tell us twice. We sprinted down the cobblestone path, praying to Dominus that we would escape. I stole a glance back over my shoulder again at the four men. They too had increased their speed to a run, and my heart felt like it was about to explode. Wait, four men? Hadn't there been five?-

A scream from Edwin pulled me out of my thoughts. He stopped dead in his tracks as the fifth vendor materialized from the shadows of the houses, cutting off our path. Edwin panicked and bolted to the left, making a break for the nearby alleyway, and I followed him.

"No!" Leanne cried after us. "That's the last place we want to go!" But she followed us anyway. We dashed down the alleyway and came to an abrupt halt when it ended with a brick wall. Leanne whirled around and drew her bow and arrows. Her hands shook, her eyes wide and wild like a deer caught in a hunter's trap.

The five men slowly stepped into the alleyway after us. In the center was the vendor from Lux Splendens, and the other four flanked him on both sides. The moonlight illuminated the greasy smile spreading across his face. "Well, well," he chuckled. "If it isn't the girl from the market today."

"Get back, or I'll shoot." Leanne's voice came out coolly, but her hands were still shaking, sending tremors down the shaft of her arrow. Her fear only magnified mine. She had been so calm around the Blood Bear. Just how dangerous were these men? A hand squeezed mine, and I looked down and saw Edwin clinging to my fingers. His entire body trembled as he stared in utter silence at the advancing men. Advancing on us, like the shadow-beasts descending from the cloud-

“Oh, you’ll shoot?” the vendor sneered. “By all means, go ahead. You’ll take one of us down, two if you’re favored by fortune. But I wish you the best of luck with the other three.” As he spoke they drew their swords from beneath their cloaks. The blades glinted in the moonlight with a terrible beauty.

“I’m warning you,” Leanne said again, but I could tell she was losing her nerve. The men just laughed.

“Why are you doing this?” We all looked down in surprise at Edwin, who was stepping in front of me towards our adversaries. I was perplexed by the sudden burst of courage, but I guessed it had something to do with the magic-

The magic! He could use it, but would it even work? It hadn’t worked against the Blood Bear, and even if it did, it would no doubt give us away and result in Leanne dragging our sorry rear ends back to Lux Splendens. He could also use the Earth’s Breath stone, but he had never done so before and now wouldn’t be a good first time. The raw magic could be unpredictable in the hands of an inexperienced mage. *Please don’t do anything stupid*, I thought to Edwin as my own hand wrapped around the pommel of my sword.

“My, what a brave boy,” the vendor smiled. “Our business is with that young lady there,” he gestured at me, “but I suppose it’s yours now too. You see, we are businessmen, just trying to make a living, and we could do without people like her ruining our business.”

“What business?” I shot back. Edwin’s defiance had given me a bit of courage of my own, and I decided to continue the momentum. “All you’ve been doing is conning people. The whole lot of you.”

“Call it that if you like,” he replied. “But the matter is that we can’t have people like you slandering us.”

“What do you mean, people like her?” Leanne spoke up now.

The Earth’s Breath vendor let out a cruel laugh. “You have a high capacity for magic, don’t you? You’re one of the Breathers?”

My heart pounded in my ears even louder. “Why would you think that?” I tried to maintain my composure, but I was quickly losing my nerve.

“You either recognized me from Lux Splendens,” the vendor replied, “or you could sense that the stones were empty. But you see, in addition to the face and hair job, I have a bit of a spell on my appearance to make sure that no one will recognize me. Can’t risk losing my customers over it.” He lifted the sword and pointed it towards my throat. “I’m not a fool. Only a Breather can sense the presence of Earth’s Breath or see through illusions like that.”

A Breather. It was the name given to those who rare few who were born with a naturally high affinity to use the Earth’s Breath. The trait usually stayed within a bloodline, much like the Light Magic of the Royal Family, but sometimes a random person could be born with the ability to sense Earth’s Breath magic and life energy. Breathers were the ones who went on to be the mages who used the potent spells sung about in tales of battles and heroic deeds.

My first instinct was to deny that I was a Breather to our foes, but what would the alternative be? It would nicely explain all the abilities I had carried over from my dragon form without giving me away. “All right,” I admitted. “Maybe I am a Breather. But I don’t want any trouble.”

“Don’t want any trouble?” At this all five of the men laughed. “You should have thought of that before your outburst in the market. Unfortunately for you, you caught our group during a rendezvous, so we’re all here to deal with you.” His eyes darkened, and his voice dropped dangerously low. “You won’t be leaving this alleyway alive.”

The vendor from Lux Splendens stepped forward, sword drawn, and the others followed. Edwin and I drew our own swords in return. The pommel felt hard and uneven in my trembling fingers. I tried my best to focus like that morning in the forest, desperately searching for those memories from my past self that had given me the strength to fight, but they slipped away like wisps of smoke. This wasn't a sparring match with Leanne. And these weren't mindless shadow-beats like at Alba Aula. I no longer had my teeth and claws. The tough armor of scales was gone. All I had left was this mushy pinkish skin that could easily be ripped apart and an over-glorified pointy piece of metal that I still barely knew how to use. I felt small, smaller than I ever had before. Small and weak and afraid and vulnerable.

I felt human.

And right now it was the last thing I wanted to feel.

“What do we do?” Edwin whispered.

Beside me Leanne continued to tremble. Her eyes darted from one side of the brick wall encasing us to the other. Encasing us like a tomb. But she didn't let loose any of her arrows. “You don't want to do this,” she said in a weak voice. “You stand before a member of the Guardian's Order. These two are under my protection. If you harm any of us, the entire Order will be after your heads.”

“Oh my dear.” A smile slithered onto the greasy lips of the vendor. “Don't you worry. No one will find out what happened here tonight.” With that he pulled the sword in close to his body, his spine arching back like a cat about to pounce.

“Hello there, what's this?”

The three of us jumped at the voice suddenly echoing off the walls, and the five men turned sharply to see who it was. A single figure stood at the entrance of the alleyway, his hair

and face illuminated by the moon. The pale light glinted off of his leather shirt and pants and the lute strapped to his back. And wrapped around his neck was the unmistakable blue scarf, standing out in the gloom of our surroundings like a single beacon in a stormy ocean. His eyebrows were raised with surprise at the sight of us.

“The Blue-Scarved Bard!” The vendor from Lux Splendens called with a laugh out to the man standing before us. He and his companions fully turned their attention from us as they faced the new witness. “You are a bold one.”

“That’s just part of my charm,” the bard replied with a crooked smile. “Now what exactly is going on here?”

“What’s going on is that you picked the wrong alleyway to relieve yourself of your ale in,” one of the other vendors snickered, and the rest joined in his laughter.

The Blue-Scarved Bard tilted his head back in laughter as well, but then his head shot forward again and his eyes narrowed. “On the contrary, I happen to be completely sober tonight.” His voice had suddenly lost all of its light-heartedness, and it was instead replaced by a softer warning tone. “After all,” I heard him whisper under his breath, too low for anyone else but me to hear, “Tonight is a special occasion.”

The vendors stopped laughing, and all but the one from Lux Splendens instinctively took a few steps backwards.

“Yes, you seem to know me as the Blue-Scarved Bard,” he continued, “but I take it that you’ve heard of the reputation I have for when I am sober and run into thugs like you.”

“Thugs?” the vendor from Lux Splendens held out his arms in a sign of peace, but his right hand still gripped the pommel of his sword. “We are honest businessmen, I can assure you.” Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead as he spoke.

“Of course you are. Don’t all honest businessmen corner ladies and children in alleyways with swords?” The Blue-Scarded Bard reached down to his belt and produced a long, thin sword of his own that I hadn’t noticed on him back at the inn. It was elegantly tempered and gleamed silver in the faint light emanating from above. “I’ll warn you once and once only: leave them alone.”

The five men hunched down suddenly, bringing in their own blades close to their bodies, ready for a fight. “Do you really want to do this?” the vendor from Lux Splendens growled with a tremor in his otherwise threatening voice. “You think you can take all of us?”

“I don’t *think*,” the bard replied. He locked eyes with me and gave me another one of his silver-eyed winks. “I *know*.” He passed the blade lightly between his hands, rolling it around his fingertips and arms in a flashy display.

“Get him!” The vendor from Lux Splendens sprung forth, blade raised at his new foe, and the rest followed suit. The bard simply smiled and sidestepped the swipe from the vendor’s sword. He and the other four came at him at once, all swinging wildly, but the Blue-Scarved Bard miraculously dodged and parried each blow with a light grin smile upon his lips. One of the men leapt up into the air and brought his sword down upon where the bard was standing. I watched with awe as the young man rolled to the side at the very last second and popped up to his feet with a back handspring.

“Had enough?” he chuckled as he propped his thin-bladed sword into the ground and leaned against it. The vendor from Lux Splendens let out a snarl of rage and swung at him again. “I’ll take that as a no,” he continued as he bent over backwards, the blade passing just inches above his neck. “Right then. Time to get serious.” He suddenly rushed the man nearest to him, assailing him with a series of lightning-quick one-handed blows. The vendor recoiled with

shock, and the bard took the opportunity to kick him squarely in the chest, sending him flying into the opposite wall in one fluid sweep. The other four men all rushed him at once, but he simply backflipped over them. He turned in the air and struck the back of one of their heads with the pommel of his blade, knocking him unconscious.

“Shouldn’t we help him?” I whispered to Leanne.

She had slowly begun to lower her bow and put the arrow back into its quiver. “No,” she responded. “I want to see how this plays out.”

It was down to three vendors on one man in a blue scarf. He clashed blades with one of them and twisted his wrist around. The vendor’s own wrists bent with his sword as he cried out in agony. His blade clattered to the ground, and the bard delivered another blow from his pommel. The man collapsed to the ground alongside his comrade. The last two took him together. They danced back and forth, the Blue-Scarved Bard countering and blocking the blows of both men at once as their blades flashed in the moonlight. I was genuinely surprised at how good he was, and as much as I felt I should help him, I couldn’t get Leanne’s mentality out of my own mind. I wanted to see how it played out. He was extremely skilled, perhaps more so even than the guards at Alba Aula had been, and the light and graceful manner in which he wielded his blade was mesmerizing. He parried and leapt about them, pulling off flips and handsprings as he blocked their blows, his blade swiping back and forth from his right hand like it was an extension of his own arm. I stole a glance down at Edwin who too was captivated by the skill of the musician. The boy’s mouth hung agape in wonder.

A grunt suddenly echoed through the alleyway as the bard bested one of the men. The sword flew out of his hands as the bard knocked it through the air, and then the pommel of the

bard's sword came swiftly down upon his head. Just one man was left: the vendor from Lux Splendens.

“Well, are you done now?” The bard raised his hands to the vendor standing across from him. “Admit it, you've been bested.”

The vendor spat a wad of blood onto the ground in response and rubbed the spot on his cheek where the bard had struck him during their fight. “It's not over yet,” he rasped. “You do live up to your reputation as a swordsmen, I will admit that much. But even more prominent is your reputation as a musician, and I can't let you be singing songs about me.”

The bard's eyebrows shot up at this. “You know, I hadn't even thought about that, but now that you've mentioned it, I'll be sure to write a song about you.”

The vendor screamed in fury and charged at the bard. I knew the look in his eyes. Eyes full of fury like the eyes of the Deathwings. The fury of bloodlust. This strike would kill the bard if it got through. A weight suddenly landed on my chest and I couldn't breath. I watched in horror as the bard sheathed his own blade, leaving himself completely open and defenseless against the attack, and the weight on my chest grew impossibly heavier.

“I think,” the bard said over the crazed screaming of the vendor, “I'll call it ‘The Tale of the Honest Businessman who Cornered Women and Children in Alleyways and was Beaten by a Fool with a Lute.’” And with that, in one swift motion, just as the blade was about to pierce his chest, he pulled the lute off his back, twirled it in his hand, and smacked it into the head of the vendor. The vendor was sent sprawling from the force of the blow into the wall and crashed to the ground, unconscious.

The bard stood over the limp bodies of his foes with his hands on his hips, surveying his handiwork. “You three all right?” he called to us as he turned around. We nodded dumbly in

response. All of us were too shocked to speak. I had been certain he was going to die. What had he been thinking, pulling a stunt like that? And how in Dominus's name had a lute, of all things, managed to do so much damage?

"You should get going before they wake up," he continued. He walked over to us and looked us up and down. "I thought I saw you three at the inn. What was all this about?"

Neither Edwin or Leanne responded, and I realized that it was up to me to give some sort of explanation. It had been my fault, after all. "I had a run-in with them while they were auctioning off fake Earth's Breath stones," I said, trying to keep it as vague as possible. The less people that knew about our party, the better. And a bard was the last person I would trust to be discreet.

"You don't say," he said with a light chuckle. "Good thing I swooped in at the last minute, eh?" He turned his attention to Leanne. "Although I would have expected a member of the Guardian's Order to put up more of a fight."

"I would have," she snarled, "if you hadn't interrupted."

"Yes, you clearly seemed to have things under control." He rolled his eyes, but the smile remained on his lips. "Anyway, off you go." He made a shooing motion with his hands. "They won't stay knocked out forever."

"He's right," I agreed. "We should get going." I was eager to leave the nightmare alleyway behind. I took Edwin's hand and lead our party back to the cobblestone street.

The Blue-Scarved Bard followed a few paces behind, but stopped when we reached the end of the alleyway and leaned against the wall. "If you don't mind my asking, where are you three headed at this hour of the night in the first place?"

"Scalva," Leanne answered over her shoulder, not even bothering to look back at him.

“Scalva, is it? That’s quite a few days’ walk from here. I wish you the best of luck.” The shadows of the alleyway began to swallow him up as he spoke.

“Why don’t you come with us?” Edwin asked suddenly. Leanne and I looked down at him in surprise. What was he thinking now? First demanding that we come to Mylka, and now inviting a bard, of all people, to come with us?

The bard’s eyebrows raised in surprise as well. “Come with you?” He stepped out of the shadows of the alleyway, and the moonlight illuminated his face again. “You sure you want someone like me coming along?”

“No,” Leanne snapped.

“Oh, come on!” Edwin faced her sharply, shocking us even more. “You just saw him fight!” He locked eyes with me and raised his brows. *Trust me.*

“I think he should come,” I agreed. “That is, if you want to.”

The bard stared at the ground, and I caught his eyes dart back to the shadows of the alleyway for a fraction of a second. “Well, I may as well,” he said after a few moments of consideration. “I had been planning on going to see my sister again, but I don’t think she would mind waiting a little longer.”

“We can try to stop by if she’s on the way to Scalva,” Edwin offered.

“No, don’t worry about it,” he said with a light laugh and left the alleyway behind. He turned his silver-eyed gaze to me as he walked alongside us down the cobblestone path. “I don’t believe I ever learned your name.”

“Oh, I’m Ri- uh, Tenya.” I cursed myself for nearly forgetting my fake name again, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Tenya, is it?” He took my fingers in his own and gave my hand a quick kiss. My face felt like it was on fire. “A lovely name, for a lovely lady. I don’t believe I ever properly introduced myself either. My name is Nyvek, but you likely know me better as the Blue-Scarved Bard.” He gave a low flourishing bow.

“What a stupid name,” Leanne huffed.

“Which one? ‘Nyvek’ or the ‘Blue-Scarved Bard’?” Edwin asked.

“Both.”

“Well now, I didn’t choose the latter one,” Nyvek said with a note of hurt in his voice.

“That’s just what people started calling me, so I went with it. If anything, I should be called ‘The Blue-Scarved Minstrel.’ ‘Bard’ implies that I get paid regularly, and the only time people pay me is to make me leave.” He gave me another smile and a wink, and I let out a light laugh. It was good to have someone more laid-back than Leanne around. “And what is your name, oh member of the esteemed Guardian’s Order?”

“Leanne,” she responded curtly.

“And I’m Cerric!” Edwin chimed in.

“Tenya, Leanne, and Cerric,” he repeated with a nod. “And now Nyvek. That’s a pretty good variety of names.”

The houses and shops began to thin out as we walked, and soon the cobblestone path of Mylka ended and the dirt roads connecting it to the other points of civilization began. Leanne turned sharply off the road, heading straight for the line of trees, and Edwin and I followed her. “Hold on, where are we going?” Nyvek called after us. “Don’t you want to stick to the road?”

“No,” Leanne snapped at him. “That’s where the rogues are.”

He raised one of his eyebrows. “Just how many bands of rogues do you have after you?”

“At least one more,” I answered. “We’re carrying a valuable Earth’s Breath Stone to our relatives in Scalva, but there’s a band of rogues after it.” I knew it was a risk to tell someone like him that we were carrying a valuable, but the bigger risk would be him asking more questions.

He folded his arms across his chest. “I see. So you’re staying off the roads to avoid them. Makes sense.” With that he followed us into the woods.

The moonlight shined down and scattered onto the forest floor as it broke through the rows of leaves far above our heads. We walked in silence. Every snapping of a tree branch or rustling of leaves from the pine hoppers and howlers was the Earth’s Breath vendors coming after us in my ears. But they never came. Before long the woods swallowed us up completely and I once again lost my bearings, but I knew that we were going to be where we were needed. The star of Aster still hung in the sky above Scalva, beckoning us onward.

Chapter 8: The Blue-Scarved Bard

We walked for about two hours before Leanne came to a halt. We stood in a small grassy clearing with a few large rocks surrounded by the sea of trees. Bits of moonlight scattered onto the grass at our feet. “We’ll make camp here,” she announced to the group. “I think we’ve got enough distance between us and Mylka now.” Edwin and I took out the new tent packs from our belts. Leanne stooped beside us and helped us put them up, showing us how to get the stakes into the ground and at what angle. After a few minutes we had successfully pitched our first tents. We stood back and surveyed our handiwork, and a light round of applause came from Nyvek, who sat perched on a rock nearby. He had pulled the lute off of the strap across his back and was fidgeting with the strings.

“And what about you?” Leanne turned to him. “Where do you plan on sleeping?”

“Me?” He strummed on the lute, and a few quiet notes echoed off the trees. “Bold of you to assume I sleep.”

Leanne rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips like she was a mother scolding her petulant child. “Answer the question, fool.”

“Very well,” he frowned in feigned offense. “I’ll just pick a patch of grass over there that looks soft. It’s a clear warm night, so I should be fine.”

“Don’t you have a tent?” Now it was Edwin’s turn to chide him with his hands on his hips. I did my best to stifle a laugh. It appeared he had finally found someone he could talk down to.

“Don’t need a tent if you can sleep in a real bed,” Nyvek shot back with a wink. “I usually stick to the main roads and perform at the taverns and inns, and then I just spend the night there. Or in the house of one of my lovely lady fans- ow!” He rubbed his shoulder where

the rock I had tossed hit him. It had been a light throw, not enough to actually injure him, but enough to give him a warning. He stared at me with one eyebrow raised and a crooked smile on his face. “All right, all right, I get it. There’s a kid in the party,” He nodded in Edwin’s direction. “I’ll watch what I say.”

“You’d better,” I replied. “If he starts singing about ale and women I’ll know who to blame.”

“You mean ‘thank’,” he corrected me. He gave a few more strums from his lute and then leapt off of the rock. “Well, I think it’s absurdly late enough in the night that I should be getting some sleep. You three ought to do the same. A little sleep is better than none, after all.” He walked over to an even patch of grass and flopped to the ground.

“I’ll keep watch,” Leanne said. “Head to your tent,” she nodded in Edwin’s direction, and he followed her orders. I turned to do the same, but she caught my arm. “You and I need to have a talk first.” She lead me over to another patch of grass out of earshot of Nyvek. She looked me in the eyes for a few minutes as an uncomfortable silence fell between us. “You didn’t tell me you’re a Breather,” she said finally.

“I didn’t think it mattered.” I decided to try to play it off and continue with the lie that I was a Breather. How else would I explain the run-in with the Earth’s Breath vendors? And it would give me the freedom to tap into what abilities I retained from my dragon form without drawing suspicion from Leanne.

“Didn’t think it mattered?” Her brows furrowed, and she leaned in closer. “Do you have any idea what kind of danger a secret like that could put us in if more people find out? The last thing I want is Scorpion Sword after us-”

“Scorpion who?”

“Don’t try to change the subject.” She looked me in the eyes again. “If you’re a Breather, why didn’t you use your Earth’s Breath stone against the Blood Bear?”

“I don’t know how to yet. That’s why we’re headed to Scalva,” I added quickly. “Our relatives there may be able to teach me how to use it.”

“I see,” she said slowly. “Is Cerric a Breather too?”

I nodded. “He is.”

She was silent for a few moments. She stared at me, and for an instant I thought my quicky-spun lie would crumble, but then she broke her gaze and rubbed her temples with a wince. “All right,” she said at length. She glanced over in the direction the bard lay sleeping. “Don’t tell Nyvek. I don’t trust him.”

“Why not?”

“He’s a bard. Their type tends to be deceptive and will take any opportunity they can get to rob you blind.”

“He doesn’t seem like her would do that, though,” I responded. “He did come to our rescue, after all, and he seems nice enough.”

“He’s a performer,” Leanne said, leaning in closer. “An actor. He can ‘seem’ like anything he wants to. You do understand that, don’t you? Those who spend their lives entertaining people perfect the art of appearing to others exactly what those others wish for them to be. It’s bad enough that Cerric told him about the Earth’s Breath stone. Don’t tell him the two of you are Breathers.” With that she walked off to a large rock on the other side of the clearing and perched upon it.

Don’t tell him. Don’t tell him the lie I had told her. Guilt plunged into my gut like a spear, twisting around my intestines. How many levels of lies did I have to be on? I sat right

there in the grass, not yet ready to settle into my tent for the night. I turned my attention to the stars above my head. The tiny lights blinked down at me. Thousands of lights. Millions. I wondered if the human I once was had looked up at the night sky and thought about all the lies she had told. I wanted to tell Nyvek what I had told Leanne. It would at least remove one of the levels of lies, but would it even matter? Edwin felt he could trust him, even if I wasn't so sure myself. But could they trust us?

Could they trust me?

Not even Edwin knew the truth about me. About the shadow in the back of my mind. No doubt he had caught on that something was off, especially after my outburst towards his father. But I had never told him about the black inky fingers in my thoughts, never mentioned the recurring dream of someone reaching out in the dark. And maybe there were things he was hiding from me, too. I would have no way to know.

Sleep eventually began to lead me to my tent, and I complied. I pulled open the flaps of fabric and curled up in my sleeping bag. It was a small tent, but felt much larger than Leanne's had when Edwin and I had piled into it with her. And it felt warm in the sleeping bag. Warm like the Dragonhold. I felt a sudden pang in my chest as I recalled the glowing crystals on the wall and the steady rhythm of the other sleeping dragons' breath. I turned over on my side and faced where Edwin's tent lay beyond the wall of fabric. He hadn't complained about the faces in the darkness of his bedchambers. Far worse nightmares likely filled his mind in their stead.

Nightmares from the attack on Alba Aula-

I forced the thought aside. I didn't want to see those images flashing through my mind again. My hands had begun to tremour slightly, and I shoved them behind my back until they

steadied again. I calmed my breathing and let myself roll across the waves of my consciousness until they brought me to the far-away land of sleepy dreams.

I dreamed of home.

The scent of smoke pulled me out of my sleep. Smoke and cooking meat. I sat up in the sleeping bag and rubbed the lingering sleep out of my eyes. After a few minutes of sitting, I pulled aside the tent flaps and headed into the forest.

Edwin, Leanne, and Nyvek sat around a small fire, their legs crossed in the grass. “Good morning!” Edwin called to me with a mouth full of food.

“Good morning,” I smiled in return and sat down between him and Leanne. “What’s this?”

“Breakfast,” she answered, and handed me a few chunks of cooked meat. “Eat up. We have a full day of walking ahead of us.”

I popped the meat into my mouth without question and began to chew. Unlike the heavily seasoned food at the taverns and inns I had treated myself to over the past few days, the food was bland, but I didn’t care.

“You’re awfully brave,” Nyvek raised his eyebrows at me. “I usually ask what it is I’m eating before shoving it in my mouth. Last time I didn’t was at a tavern just outside Scalva, and I could taste the skunk for a week.”

I paused my chewing and glanced around at the three of them. Was it normal for humans to ask first? We dragons were accustomed to eating whatever happened to come across our path. Just whack it with your tail or claws, add a bit of fire breath, and voila, dinner. Of course, since I wasn’t allowed to go outside of Lux Splendens until the Binding Ritual, I had never been able to

hunt for myself, but the other dragons would bring back a combination of food from the forests and from the kitchens, and I wouldn't question what it was.

I looked over at Leanne, trying to gauge how odd my eating habits were to her, but she paid it no mind, so I decided to shrug it off. "I'm not a picky eater," I said, and left it at that.

"Good. One of those is enough," Leanne said with a glare in Nyvek's direction.

"What?" He took another bite of the meat in his hands. "I just said it could use a bit of seasoning, is all. Some salt or pepper won't kill you."

"It can if it weighs me down too much," she answered.

"Yes, because salt and pepper is extremely heavy," he chuckled.

Leanne shot him a glare that could have split a rock. "You know what I mean. I only bring the necessities and travel light."

"Well, maybe salt and pepper is a necessity," he shrugged.

"Then why didn't you bring any, if it's so important?" Edwin chimed in.

Nyvek opened his mouth to speak, but then slowly closed it. "All right," he said at length. "You got me." He turned towards me. "I like this kid," he said, pointing at Edwin.

"I do too," I said as I ruffled his hair.

"Enough chit-chat," Leanne said, standing to her feet. "We should get moving. Clean up the camp."

We did as we were told. Edwin and I took down our tents while Leanne handled the fire and stored the leftover meat in her belt pouches. Nyvek decided to make himself useful and helped Edwin with his tent, and soon we were ready to continue our journey.

“How much longer until we reach Scalva?” I asked Leanne as I walked beside her. With no clear path, we had to pick our way through the bushes and trees. It was slow-going, but it was far better than getting cornered in another alleyway.

“At this rate, about another two days,” she answered. “Maybe longer if-” A yawn escaped her lips, and she tried to cover it with her hand.

“Were you keeping watch all night?” I looked closer at her face and noticed bags under her eyes. She didn’t answer, so I pressed her further. “What happened to ‘a little sleep is better than none’? I could have kept watch if-”

“No,” she cut me off.

I leaned in closer. “If it’s Nyvek you were so worried about,” I whispered, but trailed off as I noticed him getting closer to us. He and Edwin walked a few paces behind us, but they were very much within earshot.

“It’s not just him I was worried about,” she whispered back.

I nodded in understanding. The Earth’s Breath vendors. Unlikely as it was, I supposed the possibility of them being able to track us wasn’t entirely out of the question. “Thank you for keeping watch,” I said, “but please, next time let me take a shift too. It’s not good for you to stay up all night.”

“I’m used to it,” she muttered in return.

Silence fell over the party. The only sound came from the rustling of bushes and leaves as we walked through them and the chittering of birds and pine hoppers in the trees. Nyvek ended up walking alongside me as the minutes rolled on, and I took the time to get a better look at him. A gray earring pierced the top of his earlobe, and he wore a silver ring that matched his eyes on

his right hand. I looked closer at it, captivated by the tiny blue stone set in its center. "Pretty, isn't it?" he smiled.

I nodded quickly, embarrassed that I had been staring. "It's very beautiful," I said.

"Simple but elegant," he agreed. "So, what's your story?"

"My story?"

"You know, likes, dislikes? So far all I know about you is that you've got a pretty face and you have a knack for pissing off 'honest' businessmen."

Likes and dislikes? I loved to fly more than anything, and I hated the constant scolding of Halda when she thought I was being "improper" or "childish." But of course I couldn't say that.

"I like Cerric," I said quickly.

"The kid?" Nyvek nodded in his direction. "Is he your little brother? I can see the resemblance."

"He is. I've been looking after him."

"All right, I guess that's an acceptable answer. But aside from just your duty to your family, what is it that you enjoy? What do you hope to do with your life?"

I stopped mid-stride, caught off guard by the question. My life had always been something predetermined, like Edwin's was. I was a dragon. I was going to find my Dragonbound and live out my days protecting Initium. But was it what I wanted? Or was it what the other Dragons wanted of me? I had never stopped to give it any serious thought.

"I don't know," I responded slowly. My voice felt heavy as it left my mouth.

"Well, that's all right." Nyvek patted my shoulder with a small smile. He must have sensed my unease. "It sometimes takes a while to identify our dreams."

“Our dreams?” Edwin rushed up to match our stride. He popped in between Nyvek and me with a bright smile.

Nyvek nodded. “Yes, our dreams. I can give you a few examples, if that helps. For instance, my dream was to become a minstrel who put a smile on everyone’s faces.” He pulled out the lute from the strap on his back. “During my travels across the land, I’ve met many different people, and they all had unique dreams.” He began to strum on the lute, filling the forest air with the upbeat rhythm, and then he began to sing.

“I met a man in Lux Splendens,
Whose dream it was to sing
One day before the king and queen
For that he’s do anything.

I met a women in Scalva
Who dreamed of owning a bar
With the finest ale in all the land
Her dreams would take her far.

I met a girl in-”

The song ended abruptly as Leanne spun around and yanked the lute out of his hands mid-note.

“Hey now,” Nyvek chuckled, “if you wanted a turn, all you had to do was ask.”

“To the Abyss with your infernal lute playing,” she hissed and chucked the instrument several feet through the air. A hollow twanging note resounded from the bushes it landed in. We

stood in stunned silence at her sudden outburst. I glanced over at Nyvek, expecting him to laugh it off, but instead he glared at Leanne, all the laughter gone from his eyes. He spun on his heel and went to go retrieve his lute. We watched as he crawled into the row of bushes and reappeared with his instrument in his hands. He returned to the rest of the party, his hands folded across his chest, and the familiar smile returned to his lips, much to my relief.

“Was that really necessary?” he asked upon returning. “You could have just asked me to stop playing.”

“You wouldn’t have listened,” Leanne snapped.

He pointed an accusing finger at her, but then slowly lowered it. “That is true.”

I decided to say something to her as well. I was tired of this surly attitude of hers. “You still shouldn’t have done that. You could have easily broken it with a maneuver like that.”

Leanne just rolled her eyes. “If it didn’t break when the idiot smacked it against a human skull last night, it wouldn’t break from being thrown into a few bushes.”

“That is also true!” Nyvek proudly stroked his lute like it was a prized pet. “This baby is built tough. It would take a lot to break it. But even so, I’d appreciate it if you treated it with a bit more respect.”

“I have no respect for bards,” Leanne huffed. “Your kind are all the same.”

“This again? What is it with you and making assumptions about people?” I was surprised at my own indignation, but decided to roll with it.

She stood inches from my face, her gaze drilling into my eyes. “I make ‘assumptions’ from my own experiences and the experiences of the Guardian’s Order as a whole. It’s what’s kept me alive out here.” She turned to Nyvek. “Bards as a whole tend to be dishonest folk. You always put on a show and seldom do anything productive or meaningful with your lives.”

“Excuse me, ‘meaningful’?” Nyvek was laughing, but it was a strained laughter. “We serve an important purpose, I’ll have you know. Our songs and ‘shows,’ as you call them, help people escape the misery of their lives and forget their troubles for a little while. And those of us who are well-versed in Initium’s history can help educate the common folks on their pasts and make sure those legends never die out. We give people hope and inspiration. Do you call that not meaningful?”

“I do,” she snapped. “You give people a false sense of pride. Bards are just thieves. Name one difference if you can.”

“Well, for one, I don’t steal anything, which is the whole point of being a thief.”

“Then how do you explain that?” She pointed an accusing finger at his blue scarf. “You parade that scarf around your neck and have people refer to you by it, but I know it wasn’t rightfully yours. The fabric is far too rich for someone of your profession to be able to afford.”

He placed a hand over his chest and sniffed in feigned offense. “I’ll have you know this was a gift.”

“From who? One of the ‘lady fans’ you seduced?”

The smile dropped and a shadow passed over his face like the ones of the alleyway that had begun to engulf him last night. “It was from my sister,” he said quietly. With that he turned from the group and continued walking through the woods at a quick stride.

“Wait, isn’t Leanne supposed to be leading us? Come back!” Edwin called after him. Nyvek paused and waved back at us, beckoning us to catch up. The crooked smile had returned, and glad as I was to see it, something about it felt off. He was definitely hiding something. I didn’t think Leanne had been right about calling him a thief, but there was certainly more to the Blue-Scarved Bard than he was letting on.

We continued on foot for a few hours. Nyvek struck up his friendly chatter again, for which I was grateful. Edwin had been too engrossed in examining every leaf and stick in our path to hold a conversation, and Leanne trudged ahead of us in her brooding silence. Naturally, I became Nyvek's main target in his quest to get to know us better, and I was barraged with a series of questions that I did my best to answer without blowing my cover. My favorite food? Potato soup. Favorite color? A soft yellow, like the color of the flowers that lined our path here and there. If I could have chosen the color pallet of my scales, I would have added a few splashes of the hue, but of course I didn't tell this to him. Favorite type of music? I preferred the ballads about the ancient heroes. None of his questions went beyond my basic likes and dislikes, which I was grateful for. I didn't want to have to lie even further and make up a story about a family who had never existed. I asked him a few questions of my own and learned that the Starlight Tavern had the best atmosphere he had ever performed in, that his favorite flowers were lilacs, and that his favorite color was blue like the scarf he wore. I, too, steered clear of the deeper questions about his background. I was grateful he hadn't pried into that part of my life, and I decided to honor it by not prying into his.

Even so, I now knew more about him than Leanne, even though I had been with her much longer. I knew she was a part of the Guardian's Order and was apparently handy with a bow and arrows, but aside from that I knew almost nothing. What was her favorite story? Her favorite time of day? In fact, the only people I actually knew, I slowly realized, were Edwin, Alyssa, and Alkan. Furion had spent time with us, but he never shared anything about himself. The humans in Lux Splendens had generally kept to themselves in my presence, and the King and Queen were too busy with ruling a kingdom to be bothered with such trivial matters. The

other dragons and the Dragonbound spent all their time with me teaching me about history and magic. I knew from them nearly the entire history of Initium, every battle that had been fought, every name in the Royal Family's lineage. But what was their favorite color?

Leanne stopped abruptly in front of us, and we all did the same. "There's a stream up ahead," she said. As she spoke the rushing of water came into focus in my hearing. It had been drowned out by the conversation between Nyvek and I about the best way to prepare deer meat. We followed her to a gap in the forest floor where a stream of water shot through, carving down through the grass and dirt. "We'll cross here," she said. "It should be narrow enough." With that she leapt over the water in a single bound.

I stared down at the swirling water below us. Its long shape reminded me a bit of the moat around Alba Aula, but this was much more untamed. The roaring blotted out all the other sounds of the forest. The water was moving quickly enough that if I fell in I would likely be swept away or even worse, pulled under, and it was wide enough that I was legitimately afraid I wouldn't make it. Edwin stood beside me and glanced over the ledge. His face had gone pale.

I took a deep breath. "I'll go first," I said to him, trying to act brave for his sake. I stepped back a few paces to get a running start. I closed my eyes in an attempt to calm myself down. This was utterly ridiculous. Just a few days ago I had fought like a savage animal, tearing my way through hordes of shadow-beasts, and now I was afraid to cross a stream. How I wished I still had my wings. How far could humans normally jump? Leanne had made it, and she was shorter than me, so I should be able to make it too, right? I breathed out, letting my muscles relax.

And then I ran. The roaring creek bounced closer in my vision, and when my foot hit the edge I launched myself forward with a yelp. The creek passed painfully slowly beneath me. I landed ungracefully on the other side, falling to my knees, but I had made it.

I stood back up and turned to the other bank where Edwin and Nyvek remained. “It’s all right!” I called back to Edwin over the roaring of the water below. “I’m here to catch you if you don’t quite make it. I won’t let you fall.” Now how on earth would I manage that? If I had still been a dragon, it wouldn’t be a problem if I had to fish him out of the stream. I had succeeded in rescuing one of the Noble’s children from Alba Aula’s moat when I was only eight summers old, but I had my wings then. What would I do with these flimsy human arms? Wave for help as we were both swept away?

Edwin copied my technique and took a few steps back. And then without warning he charged forward and jumped through the air. His arms and legs flailed about in terror as he somehow cleared the creek. He had been about as elegant as a pile of dishes being chucked across a kitchen, and I watched Leanne stifle a smirk as I helped him to his feet.

“Bard! Are you coming with us or what?” Leanne quickly turned her attention back to Nyvek, who still stood on the opposite bank. He had scarcely moved an inch since we had initially approached the water.

“Are you alright?” Edwin called to him.

“Yes, uh, I’m fine,” he replied. His muscles had gone completely rigid as he gazed down at the swirling waters. “Isn’t there a better place to cross? Somewhere where I’m less likely to fall in and die?”

“This is about as narrow as it will get,” Leanne shouted back to him. “Hurry up and get over here. We want to get to Scalva sometime this season.”

He blew air out of his cheeks with a *pffft* sound and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ll need a minute or two.” The tremor in his voice was audible, even with the turbulent water.

“What is this? Are you seriously afraid of water?” Leanne put her hands on her hips and scoffed. “What are you, a cat?”

He shrugged his shoulders with a wry smile. “Meow, I guess.”

“Wait, really? You, the famed ‘Blue Scarved Bard’, are afraid of water? What happened to the dashing minstrel who comes to the rescue of helpless women and children in alleyways?” She shook her head with a sickening grin. “Perhaps if it was a stream full of ale you wouldn’t be so scared?”

I wanted to slap her.

“Why are you so afraid, anyway?” she continued.

“Oh, you know, just some good old-fashioned childhood trauma involving me and water and near death. Nothing serious.” He waved his hand in a joking manner, but his feet were still planted on the other side of the creek, frozen to the ground.

“You can do it!” Edwin cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted his encouragement. “I made it, and I’m, like, half your height!”

At this the bard gave a light chuckle. “I suppose you’re right.” The smile disappeared and his eyes glazed over as he stared down at the water again. He shut his eyes and took a huge gulp of air like he was about to submerge himself in the ocean. And then he jumped. His thin long legs carried him as he soared over the creek, and for an instant time slowed and he was suspended there, a poised heron in mid-flight, before he landed with a soft thump and both feet cleanly on our bank. He gave a low bow like he had just finished a performance. But his hands shook and betrayed the facade.

“Bravo.” Leanne gave him a round of sarcastic applause. “Now let’s keep going. We’ve wasted enough time already.” We continued follow her through the forest, but an eerie silence

had fallen over the party. Or at least, a silence had fallen Nyvek, who had previously been the one holding the conversation.

“Are you all right?” I asked him after a few minutes.

He grinned and waved his hand nonchalantly. “I’m fine! Don’t you worry about me.” With that he resumed the conversation we were having before we approached the stream. But something had shifted in his countenance that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. No, he wasn’t fine. Just like I wasn’t.

We walked until the sun began to set and then finally settled down to set up another camp. Leanne built a small fire and roasted the squirrels and rabbits she had shot throughout the day. The only sound in the air came from the crackling of the flames as we sat in a ring around them on the logs we had dragged into a circle. After a few minutes Nyvek pulled the lute off its strap and played a few quiet notes. Leanne said nothing, instead staring intently into the fire.

It was a nice moment of stillness. The notes of the lute blended with the peeping of birds and pinehoppers in the trees. The fire illuminated each of their faces, mixing them in light and shadow. Truly still moments like this had been rare in Alba Aula. There had been times when we were able to sit back for a few minutes, like the nights when we gazed up at the stars, but the bustle of the castle and the city still lingered in the background, the anxiety and business of everyone else leaking into me like spilled ink spreading across parchment. But out here, there was no bustle, no business. Just the four of us.

After plucking the strings for a few minutes, the bard paused and looked around at our faces. “Anyone have any song suggestions?”

Leanne gave a snort. “Let’s hear you sing about how you’re terrified of water.”

“This again?” He chuckled and shook his head, but I noticed his fingers twitch. “Will you ever let this go?”

“Of course not,” she replied. “I’ve been saying all along that you’re a fool, and it just proves me right.”

“Do you get some kind of twisted self-satisfaction from mocking me? Please, continue. Your ego could use the boost.”

At that she leaned forward, and her brows furrowed with anger. “Why, you-”

“Can we talk about our dreams again?” Edwin quickly intercepted the impending brawl, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Nyvek sat up, visibly glad that the conversation had shifted topics. “Of course! What is your dream, Cerric?”

“Well, I was thinking about it all day,” he said slowly. “But I think I want to be like the Guardian of Time.”

“Oh-ho! Now that is a lofty dream!” The bard chuckled good-naturedly. “But an admirable dream, to be sure.”

“What do you mean by that?” Leanne asked.

Edwin cocked his head to the side. “What do you mean, ‘what do I mean’?”

“There are many aspects of him that you could be trying to emulate,” she explained. “The Guardian’s Order as a whole is dedicated to watching over the common people, like he is. But some within the Order focus on swordsmanship, or magic, to try to emulate those aspects of him. Others model themselves after his tactics and philosophies and dedicate their lives to the studies.”

“I guess I hadn’t thought about all that,” Edwin said. “I kinda just wanted to do what he did in a lot of the old stories, you know, wandering around and helping whoever he came across. Not tied down to just one place or one group of people. He just did whatever he knew was right and didn’t care what anyone else said.”

“That sounds a lot like what you do,” I turned to Leanne.

“Perhaps you should join the Guardian’s Order?” Nyvek shrugged. “Seems like a good fit.”

“Not quite,” Leanne shook her head. “For one, he’s too young. You have to have seen least fifteen summers to join our ranks.”

Nyvek resumed lightly plucking at the strings of his lute. “Now that’s interesting. I would think you’d want them to join as young as possible so they could go through all the training. Get used to the lifestyle and all.”

“The Guardian’s Order isn’t just physical training,” she continued, “nor is it simply a physical role you have. It’s a pledge that you dedicate yourself to. We’re sworn to protect the people no matter the circumstances and uphold what is right, but that could mean acting against the nobles and even the Royal Family themselves. It’s an honorable way to live, but a dangerous one, and we need to be sure our members know exactly what they are getting themselves into.”

“So how do you know ‘what is right’?” I asked.

She gave a sigh and a long pause before answering. “That’s where it gets tricky. We don’t always know. We usually look to the Guardian of Time for guidance, as he’s the head of the Order. But he’s not always around to tell us what we should do.”

“So what do you do when he isn’t?” Edwin said in a small voice.

“Pray and hope. And try to do the most good for the most people. That’s the code we live by.”

A somber air fell over us. The fire crackled in response to Nyvek’s lute, the two harmonizing with the rustling of leaves around us. “Have you ever met the Guardian of Time?” Edwin broke the silence again. “What’s he like?”

“That’s something I’ve wondered about too,” Nyvek added. “He comes up in so many of the old stories and songs, and some go back hundreds of years. But no one really knows anything about who he is. Or even if they are a ‘he.’ I’ve heard some say that it’s a title that’s been passed on from individual to individual over the generations.”

“I met him once, when I was very young,” Leanne said slowly. “It was before I was an official member of the Order, but I already knew I was going to join like the rest of my family had. I honestly don’t remember much about him. But the general belief of the Guardian’s Order is that he is one being who has lived through all the hundreds of years that you spoke of. A higher being of magic, sent by Dominus to guide us.” She paused and gazed into the crackling fire. Tiny sparks shot out and reflected in her eyes. “What I do remember from when I met him is that he gave me this.” She reached into one of the many pouches at her belt and produced a single feather. A silver feather. She held it up in the firelight for the rest of us to get a better look at. “This is a feather from the Silver Hawk. He let me pet it and then gave me one of its feathers.”

“Can I see it?” Edwin leaned in and reached out his hand with a smile of wonder on his lips.

She jerked the feather out of his reach. “No. That’s the thing about the Silver Hawk’s feathers. They’re magic. It’s said they can only be held by the ones the Guardian of Time gives

them to. If anyone else tries to hold it, it will immediately be blown out of their hands and out of their reach.”

“Do all members of the Order have one?” I asked.

“No.” Her voice grew quiet, and she put the feather back into the pouch. “Just me.”

Nyvek gave a low whistle. “That’s quite an honor.”

She didn’t respond. The conversation had ended.

After a few minutes she rose to her feet. “Well, I think I should be getting some rest.”

“Yes, you should,” I agreed. Going without sleep for one night was bad enough. Who knew what two sleepless nights would do to our guide? “I can keep watch.”

“Can I trust you to do that?” she asked. She stared intently at me through the firelight.

I gave a firm nod. “Yes. Now go get some rest. I’ll wake you up when I need to switch out.”

She wordlessly complied and walked off to her tent.

I turned to Edwin. “You should be getting some rest too,” I said. “I know it’s early, but we didn’t get to sleep much last night.”

“But I’m not tired,” he said as he yawned.

“Of course not.” I ruffled his hair. “Just try to sleep, all right?”

“Okay,” he agreed, and dragged himself to his tent.

Just Nyvek and I were left. He sat across from me, the dying fire forming a barrier between us that coughed out smoke and sparks. I stared into the embers, watching the flames dance before my eyes. I had once been a master of the fire. It was hot but it never burned. I wondered if it would burn me now. It probably would. It had burned the humans at Alba Aula. Soldiers charred black and lifeless by the flames from the mouth of the Deathwings, full of teeth

sharp as daggers that sunk into my scales and claws that ripped the gryphon is half that rained its intestines down upon me and the soldier I watched burn alive-

“You all right?”

I jumped as Nyvek’s voice cut through the air. I blinked and realized I had been clutching my shoulders as I stared at the remaining flames in the fire. I was shivering. I wasn’t cold.

No. No, I’m not. “Yes.”

He put his lute aside. “You sure?”

I nodded. “You should get some sleep too.”

“I suppose.” He stood to his feet with a grunt and walked over to a patch of grass, collapsing down onto it like the previous night.

I sat alone before the fire. I watched the flames slowly die away until all that was left was the charred remains of the sticks used to create it. I tried not to think about the bodies of the soldiers that had looked the same way as they lay smoldering on the grass of the courtyard. The air had reeked of smoke and blood. *Stop it, stop it!* I tried to command my thoughts, but new ones were surfacing, unfamiliar images. Men and women lying in a field with strange emblems upon their armor. A sky tinged blood-red. My past self had seen more than her share of battles as well, and now those memories were overlapping with my own. I pulled my arms in close to my chest. I was shaking again, but it still wasn’t cold. I sat like that for what felt like years but couldn’t have been more than an hour or two.

Footsteps behind me. I forced myself to stop shaking. I thought at first it was Edwin, and the last thing I wanted was for him to see me like this. But I quickly realized the footsteps were too heavy for the boy.

Nyvek sat down on the log next me and stared at the spot where the fire had once been. Neither of us said a word. The chirping of crickets filled the air.

“Can’t sleep?” I finally asked.

He shook his head. “Afraid not. Do you mind if I keep you company?”

“Of course not. Company’s always welcome.”

Silence fell again. I tried to keep my breathing calm and even, but the longer I stared at the remains of the fire, the more and more I could see the young men and women lying on the ground below me as I flew above Alba Aula, fighting off the shadow-beasts.

“Thanks for letting me come with you.” Nyvek’s voice again pulled me out of the awful memories. I thanked Dominus that he was there.

“No, thank you,” I said with the best smile I could manage. “I still can’t thank you enough for saving us in that alleyway.”

“Don’t mention it.” He waved away the praise with his hand. “It was my pleasure. It’s nice to have a group to travel with again.”

“Do you not usually travel with other people?”

“I used to. I have a group of friends, some of whom are in the same profession as me, if you can call it a profession. But we eventually started to go our separate ways, and I ended up travelling by myself more often.”

“Isn’t it lonely?” I couldn’t imagine what it would have been like to journey to Scalva without Edwin. What would the point even have been?

“Sometimes it is a bit,” he admitted, “but I make new friends along the way. I’ve gotten to the point where I’m generally recognizable, and I like to think that I’m also generally liked.”

“The people at the Rainbowfly Inn all seemed to know and like you.”

“Ah, I thought I saw you there. You were the girl who had been staring at me from across the room, weren’t you?”

All the heat in my body suddenly rushed up to my cheeks. “I didn’t mean to,” I blurted.

He gave a light chuckle. “Couldn’t help yourself, eh? Don’t worry, most girls can’t. I’m used to it.”

“It’s just, I had never seen someone that good with a lute before,” I said, trying to give a feeble justification. That, and the fact that he looked familiar had drawn my attention. I knew him from somewhere, that much was certain, but where? And I was too afraid to ask lest it reveal my true identity.

“You must not have seen many bards then.”

“I haven’t,” I admitted, “but you’re really good.”

“Thanks. Playing the lute itself really isn’t very hard, though. I could teach you a bit, if you want.” He picked up the lute from the spot where it lay on the ground and held it out to me.

Play a lute like a bard? If Halda could have heard the offer being made, she would have scoffed and spit on the ground and said something along the lines of “*such foolish trifles are below dragons.*” But right now, I wasn’t a dragon, was I? And besides, maybe it would help me to calm my nerves and forget what I had seen at Alba Aula. It seemed to relax Nyvek enough.

“All right,” I smiled and took the lute from him. I held it with my hands and ran my fingers over the smooth wood. But there was something odd about this lute, something-

Earth’s Breath.

I let out a small gasp as I suddenly felt the faint rush of magic emanating from the wood. It wasn’t enough for it to be drawn back out and used like an Earth’s Breath stone, but I could tell it had altered the instrument in some way. And how had he managed to get his hands on

something like this? An enchanted instrument would have been well out of the range of something he could afford. Had he stolen it?

“Where did you get this? It’s beautiful,” I asked. Perhaps it was rude to pry, but I felt like I had to ask. I hoped he would say that it was a gift like the scarf had been and my suspicions about him would be disproved.

“Bought it myself,” he said proudly. No, I highly doubted he had. Perhaps Leanne had been right about him after all. Tried to push the thought aside as he leaned in and began to instruct me on the instrument, but the uneasy sensation lingered. “You’ll want to place your right hand here,” he said, tapping where the strings crossed the intricate pattern of holes in the lute’s center. I obeyed and put my hand where he had shown me. “Just try plucking the strings using your fingers. Doesn’t matter which ones for now.”

I did as he said and gingerly pulled at the strings. They let out a soft *twang* as my fingers brushed over them. I sat there playing with the strings for a few minutes, smiling at the comforting sound, but as I did so I also dipped into the magic. I thought back to the lessons the dragons and Dragonbound had given me. It was one thing to be able to sense Earth’s Breath from an object, but it was another to be able to tell what it was there for and what it was doing. When the magic was in one of the stones, it was simply that, just raw energy waiting to be tapped into, but I could tell that the magic in the lute was being actively used for some purpose.

As the soft twanging of the strings continued, I closed my eyes and let my awareness recede completely inside myself. I pulled all my senses into the confines of my body and then sent them out towards the lute, wrapping the wood in the fingers of my consciousness. The magic washed over me, and in an instant I knew what it was doing: it was reinforcing the lute. The magic permeated the wood, making it as sturdy as forged iron and nearly unbreakable. That

explained why Nyvek had been able to smack the vendor with it without damaging the instrument. But the sound coming from it and my ability to play the lute were unaffected by the Earth's Breath. I let out a small sigh of relief. There were old stories and rumors of bards who sold parts of themselves in exchange for enchanted instruments that served as the source of their talent, but Nyvek wasn't one of them. He may have stolen the tough lute, but at least he was an honest musician.

"You're pretty good!"

I pulled my consciousness back into the waking world at the sound of Nyvek's voice. "Thanks," I smiled.

"You looked like you were getting into it, too. You're a natural. Now, you'll want to place your left hand on the neck." He leaned in and reached around me, draping his left arm on my shoulder and guiding my hand up to the lute with his. His face was only inches from mine, half-illuminated by the light of the moon, and his breath stirred my hair. With my heightened senses I could feel all the ripples of muscle in his chest and torso, and I was suddenly struck by how close we were. I shuddered involuntarily at the unfamiliar touch.

"Sorry," he said quickly, and pulled his arm away. He sat back up in his original position.

"Oh no, you don't have to apologize," I stammered out. What was wrong with me? I could hear my heart thudding in my ears like someone was chopping down trees in my head. "I'm the one who should be sorry."

"Sorry for having personal boundaries?" He shook his head with a light laugh. "Don't be. Anyway, you'll want to put your left hand on the neck." Instead of reaching around my shoulders again, he held his hands out in the air beside me like he had a second invisible lute.

I mimicked what his hands were doing, and he showed me a few simple chords. After a few minutes I was able to play a some of them, switching clumsily between the different ranges.

“Hey, there you go!” he said proudly when I succeeded with a few notes. “Not a bad start.”

“Thanks.” I smiled at his praise, but my fingers felt sore from rubbing against the strings for so long. “I think that’s enough for tonight, though.” I passed the lute back over to him. He took it from my hands and put it back on its spot on the ground.

The silence returned. The sound of our breathing filled the night air between us. I stole a look at him out of the corner of my eye. The moonlight still cast an eerie glow over his features, making him look almost more like one of the Alegeri than a human. I brought my focus back to the pile of soot and embers at our feet. What once had life was now naught but ash. Thus was the fate of all who breathed in this land.

“So,” he said at length, “I, um, I don’t know what you’ve seen or what you’ve been through, nor do I mean to pry. But I can tell that it was something bad. I know you probably aren’t comfortable telling me about it, but just, if you ever need someone to talk to, you can talk to me. I’d like to help if I can.”

I just stared at the ashes. Black like the burned bodies, like the scales of the Deathwings, like the cloud over Alba Aula. I shook, but I wasn’t cold. All the panic and fear suddenly rushed forth, bursting down the wall I had put up so carefully, a wall I had constructed so that I wouldn’t have to see, and even more importantly, so Edwin wouldn’t have to see, the pain that lay behind it.

One by one the tears began to form. But I didn't try to stop them. Edwin wasn't here to watch. A sob that sounded more animal than human escaped my throat and the shaking grew worse. The tears so long locked away spilled forth, drenching my hair and tunic.

"Hey, hey." Nyvek put his arm hesitantly around my shoulders again, but this time the contact was welcome and I didn't flinch away. He pulled me close and let me bury my face in the rich silk of his scarf and drench that too. "It's all right," he whispered as he stroked my hair. He paused as some of the brown dye began to run off on his fingertips, and for a second my breathing froze and I was terrified that he would question me about it, but he ignored it and continued his attempt to comfort me. It was the first time a human besides Edwin had dared to give me so much as a hug. The realization came over me like a clap of thunder, and I cried even harder. I was so tired. So tired of being the "mighty" White Dragon. So tired of trying to be strong for Edwin so he wouldn't lose whatever hope he had left. So tired of lying to everyone.

After a while the tears began to subside, and I sat up and blinked the remaining moisture out of my eyes. "You good?" he asked. I nodded. He rubbed my back and gave me a sad smile. "You really should try to get some sleep too."

I shook my head. "I have to keep watch."

"I can do that. I can't sleep anyway."

"I don't-" I stopped mid-sentence. *I don't trust you.* I glanced down at his scarf. His most prized possession was still wet from the fluids that had poured from my eyes, and the hair dye had even stained it in some spots. Guilt engulfed me like the waters of Alba Aula's moat. "I don't think Leanne would like that," I finished instead.

"I don't think Leanne would like anything," he responded with a crooked smile. "Don't worry. I'll take the blame if she gets upset. Now off you go."

I nodded and turned back to my tent. I took a few paces and then glanced back over my shoulder. I caught Nyvek's gaze following me for a second, but he quickly looked away and rubbed his temples with a slight grimace. Just like Leanne had. A strange sensation twinged in my gut, but I wasn't sure what to make of it.

I pushed the tent flaps aside and curled up in my sleeping bag. The events of the day churned in my mind as I tried to make sense of them. My skin tingled as I thought about how Nyvek's arm had felt wrapped around my shoulder, and suddenly, to my surprise, I was thinking about Alkan with a mixture of guilt and remorse. We had left him behind. What was he doing now? Was he allowed to be part of the search party, if there even was one? Was he stuck waiting in Lux Splendens, confined there like I had been not long ago? Was he worried? Did he miss me?

I missed him.

I directed my thoughts back to my current companions to try to escape the guilt. I definitely knew Nyvek from somewhere. But where? I suddenly recalled the morning Edwin had gone missing in the marketplace. There had been a young man in a bright blue scarf who had backed up my accusation against the Earth's Breath vendor and gotten assaulted by the power-hungry House Volarus knights when he had stood up to them. That must have been him, but how had he recovered so quickly from the iron-booted kick the knights had given him? I was certain I had heard his ribs crack. But even if it had been him then, I felt like I had seen him somewhere else, and I was certain it had been something important, but what? The memory of the Volarus crest on the knights' armor danced in my thoughts, the gold and silver of the flower about to bloom hovering in my mind's eye like some kind of premonition.

I turned over in my sleeping bag and shut my eyes. Maybe I would remember in the morning. By tomorrow we would reach Scalva, and then I would finally be free to stop lying to our companions. But until then, there could be no personal questions, no hint as to who we really were. And I hated it. Nyvek clearly trusted me, and Leanne, doubting as she was, was risking a lot to escort us. And we were deceiving both of them.

As I drifted off to sleep, the sound of Nyvek's lute gently wafted through the air. I let the pleasant notes wrap around me with their calming embrace. The bard softly added lyrics to the tune. Unlike the boisterous voice that had filled the Rainbowfly Inn, it was a gentle tone that lulled me off to sleep as I caught bits and pieces of the lyrics.

“Have you seen my lady,
Her hair golden like the sun
She walks in starlight,
She's the new dawn day's begun
Her heart is pureness,
And her soul it is kind
Tell her I love her,
Until the end of time.”

The words faded out of my awareness as sleep fully took hold of me. I slipped into my dreams as the lullaby of the lute played on, temporarily banishing all the nightmares and the shadows that tried to drag Edwin and me into their domain.