

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[The Earl's Fate](#)

[Chapter 1 - The Wrath of the King](#)

[Chapter 2 - Something Broken](#)

[Chapter 3 - Love Without Fear](#)

[Chapter 4 - Bad Luck or Piracy](#)

[Chapter 5 - A Whisper](#)

[Chapter 6 - The Red Wall](#)

[Chapter 7 - The Black Dragon](#)

[Chapter 8 - The Last Scales](#)

[Chapter 9 - Goodbyes](#)

[Chapter 10 - A Shield](#)

[Chapter 11 - The Merchant's Daughter](#)

[Chapter 12 - New Thanehold](#)

[Chapter 13 - The Tales of a Halfcat](#)

[Chapter 14 - A Care for Words](#)

[Chapter 15 - Midlan's Army](#)

[Chapter 16 - A Fiery Battle](#)

[Chapter 17 - Devin and the Dragon](#)

[Chapter 18 - A Different Ending](#)

[Chapter 19 - The Voice of the Mountains](#)

[Chapter 20 - Persuasion](#)

[Chapter 21 - Warmth and Silence](#)

[Chapter 22 - Witchcraft](#)

[Chapter 23 - Another Army](#)

[Chapter 24 - A Cage](#)

[Chapter 25 - Rua](#)

[Chapter 26 - Wee Mountain Mice](#)

[Chapter 27 - To the Gates of Midlan](#)

[Chapter 28 - A Horrible Dream](#)

[Chapter 29 - His-Rua](#)

[Chapter 30 - Shipwrecked](#)

[Chapter 31 - Lowlanders](#)

[Chapter 32 - Hollowfang](#)

[Chapter 33 - A Dragon's Fury](#)

[Chapter 34 - A Woman's Sorrow](#)

[Chapter 35 - Familiar Wounds](#)

[Chapter 36 - A Secret Story](#)

[Chapter 37 - The Valtas](#)

[Chapter 38 - The Last Rat](#)

[Chapter 39 - A Short-Lived Victory](#)

[Chapter 40 - Olivia](#)

[Chapter 41 - A Month in the Brig](#)
[Chapter 42 - A Mad Plan](#)

[Chapter 43 - The Hatching Grounds](#)
[Chapter 44 - A New Fire](#)
[Chapter 45 - Baird's Cursed Letter](#)
[Chapter 46 - Meddling](#)
[Chapter 47 - The Battle Begins](#)
[Chapter 48 - Another Horizon](#)
[Chapter 49 - A Small Way](#)
[Chapter 50 - A Fight for the North](#)
[Chapter 51 - Heartbreak](#)
[Chapter 52 - A Mage's Revenge](#)
[Chapter 53 - A Lesson Learned](#)
[Chapter 54 - A Strange Lot](#)
[Chapter 55 - The Edge of Villainy](#)
[Chapter 56 - Kael the Fool](#)
[Chapter 57 - The Eternal Woods](#)
[Chapter 58 - A New King](#)
[Chapter 59 - A Dose of Tonic](#)
[Chapter 60 - A Little Reminder](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)
[Appendix of Characters](#)

Daybreak

Fate's Forsaken Series: Book 4

Shae Ford

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For Nana and Boompa; Mimama and Poppy

There was always a new adventure to be had, wasn't there?

Whether we trekked by machete or paintbrush — it didn't matter to us

Your homes were the corners of our Kingdom

The Earl's Fate

Devin stood alone at the mountains' top.

The world was cold and still. Snow poured so thickly from the clouds that if he paused, he could hear it: the earth tugging on their bellies while the air hissed across their backs. The heavy flakes wavered uncertainly. They spun like creatures with broken wings until they finally struck the ground, their fragile bodies shattering against unforgiving mounds of white.

They broke one after another, spilling across the remains of those who'd fallen just before. All the little pieces of their crystal flesh rolled away, each made a distinct sound — its own tiny, final gasp.

Noise had become unbearable, of late.

Devin could hear everything, even the things he didn't want to hear. The whistling of the archmage's breath as he sucked air between his teeth, the way his steps dragged across the cold stone floor — the things he laughed about with the castle guards. These sounds haunted him to the edge of the Kingdom, to the crest of the mountains' top.

A ruined, frozen castle surrounded him. Devin didn't remember the journey. But if he closed his eyes tightly, he could see it: a broken memory of rounded walls and a shattered tower perched upon a hill of bright blue stone. There was a gap taken out of the back wall — as if the rest of the fortress had broken off and fallen into the sea below ...

The sea ...

Devin's mind cut from the memory of the frozen ruins and struck upon another. He saw swirling waves and mountains of ice set adrift among the blue. Though a part of him curled its toes at the distance between his body and the ground, another part cleaved to the memory — it welcomed the cold relief of the icy spray, relished the danger of gliding between the mountains' peaks.

It wasn't the sea that excited him so much as the thing that lay beyond it ... a warm shadow at the distance ... a refuge set atop the world that made both parts of him long to take flight ...

The sea, Devin thought again. He took a half step towards the shattered cliff ...

Concentrate, beast. Tell me what you've found.

Devin clutched his ears at the sudden burst of Ulric's voice inside his head. The archmage was always listening. All the words that Devin thought belonged to *him* — he'd made that very clear.

But Devin never had much time to think.

A strange darkness had come along with the sounds. It stood unflinching at the back of his mind, always coiled to strike. Sometimes its presence was nothing more than a dull throb — an annoyance he shoved aside. But other times, the darkness rose sharply.

It covered his eyes and trapped him in something that felt like sleep, except that when the darkness covered him, he *knew* he was asleep. His mind scratched and clawed against its hold. Hours might pass while Devin battled the darkness. Sometimes it would be days before he woke — and its hold was always strongest around the archmage.

He was often awake when Ulric entered the chamber. Sometimes he would even feel the pain of the first cut or burn. But after that, the darkness snapped its wings over his eyes. He knew no more.

until he woke, wounded and sore.

— ~~Devin knew the darkness must've been his doing: the dragon whose soul he'd fought with the Braided Tree. Though they'd tried, neither of them had been able to defeat the other. Their battle crashed through the shadowed realm and into the world beyond. Now the dragon's grip on their bodies was just as strong as Devin's. Sometimes, it was even stronger.~~

There was no end to it, either. There was no hope that the darkness would ever relent. Devin could escape the dragon's hold no more than a man could escape his shadow.

He'd shoved Devin aside the moment they took flight. He'd carried them here. But the dragon didn't always understand what Ulric wanted from them. So he'd had no choice but to slink back and let Devin speak.

The fortress is ruined.

Devin picked his way across the snow. Behind him lay a broken tower. Its top had burst and its bricks were scattered across the field. The ruins spread in an arc throughout the courtyard.

Among the bits of brick were a number of strange mounds. Devin scraped the snow from the edge of the nearest one. His stomach twisted when he saw a hand lay beneath it — a human hand perfectly preserved beneath a cask of ice.

There are bodies in the courtyard.

Whose bodies? There should be an emblem on the chest.

Devin didn't want to look for an emblem. He didn't want to scrape any deeper. But Ulric would not be ignored.

Search the body!

His voice stabbed Devin's ears with something that felt like the barbs of bees. Their insides swelled, screamed for relief. He swiped desperately at the snow beside the hand.

If there had been an emblem on the man's chest, it was gone now. There was nothing but a ragged hole — edged by the shattered remains of his ribs, stained with the dark red of his blood.

Devin's stomach lurched and his last meal came up behind it. He was still retching when Ulric's voice stung him again. He nearly tripped in his rush to get to the next mound.

It was much larger than the first. When he wiped the snow away, a monster's face startled him backwards.

Fur sprouted from its flesh in coarse, uneven patches. Fangs cut out from a mouth twisted in a snarl. The bridge of its nose was wrinkled in what could've been pain or shock. Its empty black eyes were frozen in death.

What do you see? Ulric demanded.

Monsters — like the ones in the dungeons. Some sort of cat, he added, scraping the snow from its pointed ears.

This monster sickened him more than the corpse. Devin had seen the creatures trapped in Her Majesty's dungeons: their human halves had been nearly devoured by the animal. A curse twisted their bodies into horrible shapes ... the same curse Devin wore around his neck.

The iron collar had rubbed a raw circle into his flesh. If he ignored Ulric for too long, the collar would burn white-hot with his fury. He would threaten to boil Devin's blood and cook his innards. But though he feared the pain, he feared the change even more.

Devin's hand shook as he traced the curse's first mark: a line of scales that'd popped up down his nose. They'd burst through his flesh and bled weakly until they healed. The skin beside them was strangely hard. If he pressed down, he could feel another layer of scales growing beneath it.

Eventually, they would overtake him. They would twist his face and make his teeth grow long

—
The emblem, Ulric snapped.

Though his hands shook badly, Devin forced himself to wipe the snow away. Tiny links of steel were embedded into the monster's flesh — as if the change had pressed against the armor, but couldn't break it away. So its skin had begun to grow over the edges of the breastplate.

Ulric cast a spell on Devin's clothes that allowed them to stretch with his shape. But tears had begun to appear along the seams of his tunic. There were holes in his boots: he could feel the wet snow leaking through them.

He tried not to wonder if his skin would wrap around his clothes the way this monster's had, but he couldn't help it.

Carved into the shining metal plate — just above another tattered wound in the creature's gut — was the snarling head of a wolf.

Titus, Ulric mused when Devin described the emblem. His army froze to death at the summit. Then?

No, they were ... slain.

Slain? How?

Devin tried not to look at the monster's wound, but his eyes seemed to have a mind of their own. *It looks like a fist went through his middle. It's —*

He retched again at the thought. Ulric's voice grew impatient.

Impossible. No one could punch through armor. If they are truly slain, then you'll search for Titus's body.

Please —

Now, beast. His Majesty demands it.

Devin didn't want to have to sift through all of the bodies. He didn't think he could stomach the sight of one more frozen wound. But if he didn't obey, Ulric would punish him.

He'd resigned himself to his fate when a strange feeling made him turn around. The feeling grew as he stared at the broken tower. It tugged on his bones, made him want to go closer.

This feeling was another thing that'd come with the dragon's soul. It pushed him along sometimes. It showed him things he couldn't have possibly seen or heard — and it was never wrong. He'd learned to listen.

Devin dragged his feet through the snow, stepping carefully along the thick layer of ice that cloaked the summit. His blood boiled so hotly that he often had a difficult time falling asleep — even in the cool damp of the dungeons. The cold would've likely frozen any other man to the rocks.

But for Devin, it was a welcome relief.

He was near the rampart steps when a sudden gust of wind ripped through the still air. Bump rose across his flesh where it touched; his bones trembled against it. The feeling that guided him towards the broken tower now whispered that those winds were meant for *him*. The mountains were speaking to him.

They roared that he wasn't welcome.

Find Titus!

Devin bared his teeth against the mountains' growl and forced himself to the top of the ramparts. He climbed through the shattered remains of the tower and onto a stretch of wall. There were so many chunks of tower scattered around that he almost didn't see the lone mound hidden near the edge of the ruins.

It was misshapen, buckled in at its middle. When Devin cleared the snow away, the face of a man gaped back. Though his mane of hair was tangled and his face twisted in shock, it matched the memory Ulric had given him — one of many thoughts that'd come with the curse. Even now, the words of a thousand captives swam inside his ears, behind his eyes.

Ulric's was just one of the voices that kept him awake.

Interesting ... how did he die? Ulric said.

—~~Devin cleared the snow at Titus's chest — the part that bent inwards so strangely.~~ Though the ice shell was as clear as glass, it still took him a moment to realize what he saw.

One final blow had finished Earl Titus. It'd bent his breastplate, collapsed his chest. A nearly blackened puddle of blood ringed his corpse. Devin studied the mark for a moment, still not entirely sure. Then he stood.

When he placed a foot on Titus's chest, his boot slid perfectly into the mark.

There was no denying what had happened. As impossible as it seemed, someone had stomped Titus to death. But Devin knew Ulric would never believe it. *He was crushed.*

How?

A fallen rock. It landed straight on his middle.

Ulric's voice disappeared with a *whoosh*. He must've pulled out of the spell to speak to Her Majesty. Devin knew he would only have a precious few moments before Ulric's voice returned — and he planned to make the most of it.

He climbed one jagged edge of the tower, the highest point he could reach. The thick fall of snow made things more difficult. But if he focused his gaze, he could see quite a ways down the mountain. Had it not been for the clouds, he bet he could've seen into the Kingdom.

There was a whole world beyond the fortress in Midlan: miles of land, thousands of face realms upon realms of sights. He remembered watching them drift through the Seer's scrying bowl. He'd longed to see them for himself.

But Devin would never get to walk among these lands. No, the King would keep him tethered to the skies and only bring him down when it suited his task. Perhaps, if he had enough little moments like these, he might be able to piece them together someday and pretend he'd seen it all ...

But he doubted it.

Devin was about to climb down when a spot of blue drew his eyes to the south. He thought it was only a crop of that strange stone, at first. But then it moved.

His eyes sharpened onto the creature's graceful, serpentine body — tracing its blue scales from its wide nostrils to the tip of its stout tail. Spines grew down its back. They didn't stand straight, but curved in arches. They sprouted from a line of white fur that started at its horns and stopped just short of its tail. Other mats of white curled from its chest and the bottom of its proud snout. But what surprised Devin most about the creature were its eyes.

They cut through the curtain of snow and fell upon him. The creature's black, slitted pupils widened as they roved across his face — and froze when they touched his stare.

It was like gazing into a pool of water, except the reflection he saw wasn't warped by the ripples or darkened by the earth. The eyes that met his were a pure unfettered blue. They were *Devin's eyes ...*

His mother's eyes ...

The creature's furry chest swelled and Devin nearly fell off his perch when a ghostly hum rose from its throat:

Welcome, flyer, it sang. Its song pierced the clouds, rode across the frozen wastes upon a wind of its own. *Welcome home.*

CHAPTER 1

The Wrath of the King

Winter's grip had begun to tighten. Snow lay thickly beneath the Grandforest's trees, the mark of an unreasonably cold and dreary turn. The lake had disappeared beneath a shield of ice. It would be many ages before the wind could stir the water to ripple and wave once more. But though its hold was strong, the winter would eventually fade.

Countess D'Mere feared that the storm breaking upon her now might never end.

An impenetrable night draped over her castle: its face was torn of stars and the moon sulking behind it. The lake, usually alive and glittering at this hour, was nothing more than a sunken pit — a shadow so dark that it stood out from the rest.

But though the sky didn't offer so much as a ray of ghostly light, the world had lights of its own.

D'Mere glared at the fires that glowed in the village across the lake. There were enough to heat the water in an arch of flame. Tents packed Lakeshore's narrow streets and lined its dock. Cook fires flickered between the tops of the tents, winking from a distance.

Taunting her.

D'Mere drew the curtains tightly and paced to a second window. From here, she could see the courtyard and the castle's wide front gate. Her soldiers paced uncertainly across the ramparts — their helmets shining against the lights of other cook fires glowing just outside the walls.

Laughter rose in a swell to drift through the window. D'Mere clenched the ledge tightly as the noise reached her ears, grounding her palms against the stone until her arms began to shake.

Midlan patrols often camped at Lakeshore in the spring — but it was far from spring, and there was no patrol.

D'Mere's spies warned her a week ago that Midlan's army had begun to spill from its gates. She thought it odd that the King hadn't summoned her. Surely if Crevan meant to go to war with Titus, he would've called upon the forest for aid. In fact, she'd been counting on it.

Now that the other rulers were slain and the seas had ... refused, an offer of treaty, Crevan had nowhere else to turn. He would *have* to call upon D'Mere — and she would see to it that his army fell into Titus's trap.

But she discovered too late that she'd been fooled.

Her plan hadn't worked. She'd wagered far too much on Crevan's fury. She'd been certain that Titus's betrayal would drive him to the summit, where the elements and the wilds would devour his army. But Midlan wasn't going to the mountains at all.

No, Crevan planned to go to war with the *Kingdom*, to tighten the reins and bring every region back under his control. The battles would be bloody and quick. With the thrones of the Sovereign Five broken, there wasn't an army left that could stand against the wrath of the King — and D'Mere's army was no exception.

Crevan insisted that he'd sent his men into the Grandforest for her protection. The letter that arrived along with his army was dripping with concerns for her safety: what if the war spilled over

into the Grandforest? What if militants marched upon his final ruler in revolt? Crevan wasn't prepared to take that chance.

But D'Mere knew it was all a lie. The soldiers camped far too thickly in the village, far too boldly before her gates. They questioned anyone who left and inspected every wares the merchant brought inside. D'Mere had a feeling that if she tried to leave, she would be locked away. And if she so much as twitched to fight, there were enough soldiers gathered in Lakeshore to slaughter every man, woman, and child twice over — and they would move at Crevan's nod.

She was being held prisoner, a captive in her own realm ...

A calloused hand wrapped around one of D'Mere's shaking arms. She knew its touch well enough to feel the question in its hold. "Crevan must've figured out about Titus's monsters. By spy or bird, his eyes have somehow reached the mountains' top. He knows that I've betrayed him. So he trapped me here and left Titus to rot at the summit. That's all I can think of."

The hand tightened.

"No." D'Mere smirked, and her anger cooled. "No, Crevan won't kill me. He *fears* me. He knows a battle with the Grandforest would leave him sore, and he'd much rather take me alive. He'll trap me here until I give myself up."

The hand fell away, and D'Mere turned to glare at the young man beside her: a forest man with short-cropped hair and a slightly crooked nose. When his dark eyes roved to the lights beyond the castle gates, D'Mere shook her head.

"You'd be killed before you could do me any good, Left. Our moment will come — I promise it will," she said when his brows snapped low. "Just give me time."

They stood silently for a moment before Left reached for her again. His head turned expectantly to the door. A moment later, it opened.

D'Mere wasn't at all surprised when a second forest man stepped through — one who matched Left down to the angle of his crooked nose. The twins had always been connected strangely. They seemed able to sense each other's presence, seemed to know when the other had come to harm. They never once spoken a word.

But she supposed they didn't have to.

D'Mere frowned at Right. "What is it? You're supposed to be watching the village."

He stepped aside to let another man through.

Filth coated him so thickly that he left prints across the chamber floors. There was grime caked beneath his nails and in the creases of his arms. The hems of his trousers hung in tatters. His face was cloaked, but D'Mere knew from his plain black garb that he was one of her spies. There was a muted emblem in the clasp of his cloak — set so shallowly that only a certain angle of light would give it shape away.

When the man twisted to shut the door, the light caught it and she saw a burning sun upon the clasp. It seemed her agent from the desert had finally returned. She'd sent him away months ago to discover what had become of Baron Sahar — and for his sake, she hoped he'd discovered something useful.

"Well?" she snapped as he shuffled towards her.

The spy didn't answer. He stopped a few paces short and froze. His body swayed and his hands hung limply at his sides.

He staggered backwards when D'Mere shoved him. "Are you *drunk*? Answer me!"

The spy stood, wavering for such a long moment that D'Mere was about to have him locked away. She would wait to execute him when he was sober. But just before she could give the order, a voice whispered from beneath the spy's hood.

It gurgled inside his throat and came out in a strangled hiss: "I'm ... coming for you ..."

D'Mere.”

— Her chest tightened; her throat went dry. “What do you mean?”

The spy laughed — or rather, he tried to. But the noise sounded as if he choked on blood. His hand inched toward the dagger in his belt. “D'Mere ... D'Mere,” he *tsked*. “You knew what the bo was ... didn't you? Convinced me to spare him ... left me to die. *Me*, your closest ally.”

Ice snaked through her veins, growing colder as the voice continued. Left pulled on her arm but her legs were too frozen to move.

“I want him ... need him for my army ... you owe me that much. And I mean ... to take what owed. D'Mere ... D'Mere ...” The spy gripped the dagger's hilt as his voice crept into an eerie gloating song: “I'm coming for you ... D'Mere.”

The spy ripped the dagger free and lunged for her throat.

Instead, he met the tip of Left's sword.

Though the blade tore through his chest, the spy didn't seem to notice. He shoved himself further, drove the steel deeper. Blood gushed upon the floor. His hood fell away as he threw himself into one final heave, and D'Mere couldn't believe what she saw.

The dark was gone from his eyes, replaced by two deadened orbs of white. Wounds festered across his face — scratches and punctures that had never quite healed. She tried not to think about the brownish stains around his lips.

Left kicked the spy back and Right hurled him down by the cloak.

“Cut off the head,” D'Mere whispered.

She barely heard the spy's gurgling screams or the swift fall of Right's sword. What little feeling she'd felt was gone, vanished. Her mind was already set upon the game ahead.

When Left grabbed her shoulder, she pushed his hand away. “I'm fine. In fact, I think we may be able to use this to our advantage.” D'Mere lifted the hems of her nightdress and stepped absentmindedly over the body upon the floor, careful not to dirty her slippers. “Come with me — both of you. There's much to be done.”

“You've done this to yourself. This is what happens to little beasts who don't listen to their masters.”

The grand room shook with Devin's anguished roar; the windows rattled. King Crevan stood with his back pressed against the door as the dragon rent the floor with his claws. Chips of stone sprayed up in a stinging wave behind him as he flailed.

Ulric stood a mere arm's reach from the dragon's monstrous snout. A length of silver chain was wrapped around his wrist. He pressed his thumb against one of its links, and it came to life with an angry red glow.

Devin flinched against every pulse of the chain's light. His body shook as Ulric's hand twisted as he forced his great wings to shrink back inside his flesh. Human skin stretched over Devin's scales. Blood trickled from its edges as it grew — the rim of foam ahead of the tide.

But though he roared, Devin never blinked.

His burning yellow eyes stayed locked upon Ulric — even as his horns shrank and the spin atop his head gave way to a dark crop of hair. Soon the dragon was gone and a young man lay upon the floor in his place. His clothes were torn to rags. Blackened ridges of scales burst through his skin in places, the flesh red and swollen around them.

But though he'd been twisted into a human shape, he kept the dragon's eyes — and the hatred in his stare was enough to make Crevan's blood freeze to the bottom of his veins.

Ulric didn't seem to notice. In fact, he drank it in. "I think that's enough for today ... yes, you understand me now, don't you? The next time I call, I wager you'll come straight back." He twisted and snapped his fingers at a pair of guards who'd been assigned to the grand room. They'd started out on Ulric's side — but wound up stuck very firmly against the back wall. "Lock him up with the other. I'll send word when I'm ready to continue."

The guards moved stiffly towards Devin. Neither seemed willing to touch him: they prodded him with the butts of their spears until he rose, and pushed him out by their points.

Crevan stepped aside to let them through, careful not to look Devin in the eyes as he passed. They reminded him of another gaze, another blazing hatred:

I'm going to teach you, Crevan. Let me show —

No. He shoved her voice aside and blinked hard against the memory, forcing it back. Even after her image faded, his skin crawled and his fists curled tightly. He told himself it was *anger* that burned in the pit of his stomach.

But it wasn't.

Ulric kept his back turned as the guards marched away. The moment they closed the door, he collapsed on hand and knee.

Sweat beaded up across his neck and wept in lines to the collar of his robes — dulling the golden threads with damp. His ears had grown abnormally large from all the years he'd spent listening to the thoughts of Crevan's beasts. Now they were stretched so thinly that they were almost transparent. The blue veins that webbed across their backs were clearly inflamed.

"That dragon's going to kill me, Your Majesty. Sometimes he obeys, other times his will is strong ... nearly too strong. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to control him," Ulric rasped. He held his wrist out to the side, and the silver chains wrapped around it almost seemed to squirm under the torchlight. "The impetus has grown too heavy. I can't bear it on my own."

It was always the same complaint, always the same ragged moan — and Crevan was growing tired of hearing it. "I've given you the run of my mages. Find someone else to carry the other chains."

"I've been trying, Your Majesty. But this is a *living* impetus. Its power grows with each new link. It feeds off the creatures it controls — and if a mage isn't strong enough to wield it, the chain will devour him." Ulric nodded to the front of the room, where a number of shriveled bones lay piled in a corner.

They'd tried several times to pass the links on to the other fortress mages: some who had more experience, others who were young and strong. But the chain had devoured each one.

It'd snaked up their bodies and coiled around them tightly. Crevan didn't look away the first time it happened. He'd watched the chain crush an older mage beneath it. The impetus had drained him of everything: his blood, his marrow, his innards. It'd soaked him up, screaming, like water into a sponge. Then it'd slunk back to Ulric and wrapped around his arm, glowing in content.

"No, there's only one mage in the fortress who might be strong enough to bear it." Ulric's eyes dragged upwards. There were dark, heavy rings beneath them. "I await your order."

Crevan knew what he wanted. For whatever reason, Ulric was convinced that Argon was the only mage strong enough to carry the chains — which might solve their problem, if it were true.

But if it wasn't ...

"I won't risk my Seer. As long as the Dragongirl remains unbound —"

"The Seer is blind! What good is he to us —?"

"Silence," Crevan growled. The whole impetus came alive at his command, and Ulric's mouth snapped shut. "You forget, mage, that I could end you with a word. Do not interrupt me again."

Sweat slung off the archmage's chin as his head bobbed up and down.

"Good. I've taken care of D'Mere, but I'll need your mages for the chancellor's castle. I'd like

all the councilmen burned alive in their chairs and the island sunk to the ocean's bottom. The people of the High Seas should never have any reason to believe they can survive on their own. Leave them with nothing — make sure they are never able to rebuild.”

Ulric moaned as he nodded.

“As for the dragon,” Crevan went on, “I believe the time has come —”

“Your Majesty?” a guard called from the door. He leaned around it carefully, as if he preferred to keep a few inches of oak between his chest and Crevan’s sword. “It’s the Seer, Your Majesty. He says he needs to speak with you.”

“Send him in,” Crevan growled.

The guard stepped aside and Argon shuffled quietly into the room. His head was bent low and nearly hidden by his long, gray beard. He was so thin and frail a thing that a single trip down the stairs might’ve left him in pieces — and he moved at a pace that made Crevan want to strangle him with his beard.

“What is it?” he snapped.

“Your Majesty,” Argon whispered, his voice hardly a breath. “I have news.”

“No he doesn’t.” Ulric lurched forward. “He knows he’s useless. He’s just trying to save his skin.”

“Silence!” Crevan glared until Ulric slunk back. Then he turned to Argon. “What news?”

The Seer raised his head, revealing the thick trail of blood matted into his beard. It’d run out from his nose and spilled down in falls. His nostrils were still swollen from the pain. “I’ve Seen something, Your Majesty ... a powerful vision.”

Crevan could hardly breathe. “Tell me.”

“The Dragongirl ...”

His stomach twisted; his blood froze again. “Yes, what about her? Speak up, Seer!”

Crevan grabbed Argon by the front of his robes and shook him hard. The Seer’s eyes rolled back as if he clung to life. “Copperdock,” he rasped. “I’ve Seen her in ... Copperdock.”

Crevan shoved him aside. His legs shook as he stumbled towards the guard. “Sound the bells! Have my army ready to march at dawn! I will fill the Kingdom with Midlan’s fury. We’ll stretch to every corner of the realm. *She will not escape!*”

He chased the guards out the door, bellowing at them long after they’d scattered down the hallway. Then he spun to Argon. “Get in your tower, Seer. Do not sleep, do not blink. I want to know where she is at every moment. Do you understand?”

Argon’s head sagged as he shuffled for the door. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Crevan grabbed Ulric and hurled him away. “Forget about the council. I’ll send Greyson to deal with them once the ground has thawed. Wake the mages — all of them. Lead the swiftest to Copperdock and scatter the rest. I want eyes in every region. Do not return until you have her bound. And bring Devin along as well,” he added, as a wild grin split his face. “I think it’s time the Kingdom met my dragon.”

CHAPTER 2

Something Broken

Morning light bounced off the pool of ocean trapped within the white cliffs of Gravy Bay. Ships sat anchored by their bottoms to the rocks beneath the waves. One lone vessel sailed across the pool — a tiny fishing boat guided on by two darkened forms of men.

Elena watched until the vessel slipped into the narrow crack between the jutting cliffs. Only when its end had disappeared did she dare to blink.

“Well, I suppose that settles it,” Jake said from beside her.

They were alone, now. The whole rest of the wedding party had followed Kael’s sprint down the hill and into the village square. A great fountain stood in the square’s middle, surrounded by a mass of houses that were decorated strangely with statues and plunder.

The villagers’ colorful garments formed what looked like an enormous puddle around the fountain. If she closed her eyes, Elena could hear the trill of a cheerful song floating up from where the pirates danced — celebrating the wedding of the Dragongirl and the Wright.

“They’re going to go on like that all day,” Jake murmured.

When she glanced at him, she saw the shadow of a smile played across his lips. The pale blue eyes behind his rounded spectacles glowed warmly in the rising sun.

“*And it’ll go on all night. Believe me — I’ve already survived one pirate wedding. We’d better join them, I suppose. Uncle Martin wanted me to turn the fountain’s water into spirits.*” He frowned. “*Though after what happened the last time, I can’t imagine why ...*”

He went on about skin turning purple and some misfortune involving a goat, but Elena wasn’t listening. She watched his lips move through his words, watched his hands flex against the leather grip of his too-tight gloves — *her* gloves. The ones she’d given him ...

The gloves he’d cared enough about to turn into his impetus.

By the time his eyes had traveled back to hers, she’d decided. Her mind was entirely made up. It was a certainty she’d been waiting months to feel — and if she didn’t grasp it now, it might never come again.

There was no time to doubt.

Jake’s story stopped abruptly when he saw how her brows had tightened above her mask. “What —?”

“Not a word, mage.” Elena’s heart squirmed when she pressed her hand against his mouth. “Not one word. Do you understand?”

He nodded, his eyes wide.

“Good. Now come with me.”

She’d gotten used to his scent, but the raw magic inside his impetus still itched her badly. So she dragged him down the hill by the sleeve of his robes, instead.

“Where are we —?”

“No, not a word,” she snapped as they reached the hill’s base. Her heart thudded so viciously that it shook her smile.

Jake managed to hold his tongue until they'd pushed through the mansion's front door. "But what are you —?"

"*Shhh!*" Her finger trembled against his lips. "Hush. Just ... trust me for a moment, will you?"

He nodded, and she led him up the large spiral staircase — her breath quickening with every step.

Her chamber stood at the end of the hall, its door hidden well within the shadows. Warm light spilled from her window: it pooled upon the oaken floors and slid across her bed. Elena's heart was thudding wildly, now. She was certain she'd never felt it beat quite like this.

It was such a strange feeling, such a terrifying thrill — not even when she'd stared into the face of Death had her chest risen and fallen with such fury. She had to bite her lip to keep her head from leaping out her throat as she dragged Jake inside.

She slammed the door behind them.

"Elena ..."

At last, Jake seemed to understand. His eyes didn't rove but locked onto hers — searching, questioning. With far more courage than she felt, Elena managed to growl: "I'm not going to tell you again, mage. Be quiet." She pulled her mask away slowly, let it fall to her chin. "Now ... take off your gloves."

He did. Jake grimaced as he tugged them free and set them on the small table beside her bed. Next came his spectacles. When he turned around, it was all she could do to keep her footing.

He stood blurry-eyed and powerless before her. His bare hands flexed nervously at his sides. And yet ... her legs felt like lead, her boots seemed welded to the floors. "Come here."

When he stepped within her reach, she caught him by the wrists. She pulled him in against her. A strange, heart-rending warmth spread out from his hands and across her waist, down her back. But though his hands moved, his eyes never left hers — and his gaze held her to her feet.

"Are you sure?" he whispered, hands pausing their climb. "You ... you're certain?"

Her heart was too high, her throat too swollen with warmth to answer. Instead, she grabbed him under the chin and pulled him down to meet her lips.

Oh, her head went light. Every pinprick of her flesh bunched together tightly in a swell of blood. She could taste the magic in him. It coated his tongue: not as bitter as she'd expected, but odd ... sweet.

His hands rose and his thumbs dragged across the twin black daggers strapped to her arms — bold and unafraid. She'd lost count of how many throats they'd hewed. Slight and Shadow had sent hundreds of men to their graves. And yet, Jake handled them without fear.

A thrill rose up her spine, trembling as Jake drew each blade from its sheath and set them aside. Then his lips came back — firm, calm, and brave. Warmth trailed each pass of his hands, every dart of his tongue ...

Then quite suddenly, the warmth began to fade.

She felt it first at his lips: they brushed gently across her chin and left a cold line in their wake. The frost spread from his tongue and onto hers. It slid down her throat and into her middle. Ice patches formed beneath his hands. Everywhere he touched, he froze her.

Soon, she couldn't feel anything. Her skin eased and slipped back, hardening across her bones like a river's flesh against the winter. It dulled the pressure of Jake's hands. Her arms slid from around his shoulders and fell limply to her sides — suddenly too heavy to lift.

Jake's hands seemed to widen, to grow, to become impossibly strong. The pressure began to hurt her; the cold stung her lips —

No, she thought furiously. Elena squinched her eyes and tried to concentrate on the warmth she'd felt before — tried to remind herself that it was *Jake* who held her now. And Jake would never

try to hurt her. But out of the dark came a face that wasn't Jake's at all.

—Holthan's black eyes stared down at her, now. It was the biting pressure of *his* lips that she felt scraping down her throat, the painful grip of *his* hands. It was Holthan's horrible, gloating laugh that stung her ears ...

"Elena?"

All of the cold fled her body as Jake pulled away. Her eyes snapped open. They clung to him, trying desperately to forget the man who ruled her fears. But though she fought, a shadow of his face still hung before her.

"Are you all right, Elena?" Jake said again. He half-reached for her and drew back. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You aren't going to hurt me. I'm fine. Don't ... don't stop."

She rushed into his arms.

The cold rushed back.

Elena tried to fight it off. She was determined to shove Holthan away, to forget everything she'd known and begin something new. Nadine told her that she'd been wronged — that what Holthan had done to her wasn't love at all. She swore that *love* was different, and Elena knew she loved Jake. She was certain of it ...

So why did the cold still bite her flesh? Why couldn't she see him through Holthan's face?

"I can't," Jake gasped. He pulled back again and hurried to the bedside table. "I can't do this for you, Elena. I won't."

"You will," she snapped, the words bolstered by a sudden fear. Rage burned at the sides of her head as she watched him pull on his gloves. "You have to! I swear I'm ready for it. There's no doubt in my mind that this is what I —"

"I can't," Jake said again, shoving the spectacles up the bridge of his nose. He wouldn't meet her eyes as he swept past her to the door.

When he opened it, Elena felt the whole earth fall out from beneath her.

"Fine. Go on, then! But don't you dare try to come back to me, mage," she yelled as he ducked into the hallway. "Don't *ever* come back!"

Days passed. The sun rose and fell. Its light gathered, pooled ... slid into the crack between the walls and floor ... plunged the world into darkness. Elena sat cross-legged in a corner of the room. Her eyes were open, but unseeing.

What'd happened with Jake was entirely her fault. She should've known that he would pull away at her slightest flinch. He was so careful, so kind. Had she held her ground against the memories she might've woken that morning with him by her side — her heart flooded with warmth.

Instead, she battled the cold alone, fought on through endless nights ... and she was still moving closer to forgetting.

Each time she tried to force him into the darkness, Holthan rose against her. Every horrible moment flashed behind her eyes — glancing her with a dagger's bite. She watched through a cold blue film as he defeated her over and over again. Soon, it became clear that she would never overcome his laughter. She would never be able to shove his hands aside.

Holthan lived on to torment her, even through his death.

Elena still wasn't strong enough to stop him.

In a few of the darkest hours, she thought about telling Jake. Perhaps if he knew, he would understand that she needed him. Perhaps he would see that the warmth he'd given her might be the

thing that melted the ice from her blood. Perhaps this would be just another battle they might face together ...

No.

No, with the rising sun came clarity: Jake could never love her if he knew the truth. He wouldn't look at her in the same way again. The woman he knew was strong, after all. The mask she wore was of a warrior who could not be beaten. But inside, she was a broken thing.

Nobody could love something broken.

It was that thought that finally dragged Elena to her feet. She wouldn't try to fight the cold any longer. She would simply cover it up, and perhaps time would eat its edge.

The mansion was alive that afternoon. Servants bustled here and there. She followed the pattern of their steps and slipped around them to avoid their eyes. Elena was little more than a plume of smoke, a breeze so slight that it hardly stirred the things it passed. She drifted through the crowd of the balls of her feet and took refuge among the shadows.

A manservant peeled from the main room and set a brisk pace down one of the hallways. Elena followed silently in his wake — using his broad shoulders as a shield against the eyes of passersby.

“What's all this confounded noise about?” a blustering voice called from up ahead. “No sooner does a man get his grand-nephew settled for a nap than the whole house erupts. It's a curse, I tell you — a *curse!*”

Elena slipped behind the manservant's right shoulder when she saw a frazzled crop of gray hair approaching. Of all the many bodies swarming around the mansion, the Uncle was the absolute last one she wanted to be caught by.

She had no choice but to pin herself against the wall when the manservant stopped abruptly. “There's trouble in Harborville, Mr. Martin. Captain Lysander's ordered an emergency sailing —”

A metal platter struck the polished stone floor in the main room, and the resulting *clang* woke the baby with a scream.

“Confound it all!” Uncle Martin swore. He bounced the blankets in his arms for a moment, but to no avail. “What in high tide are they doing with the silver? No — you come with me,” he said when the manservant tried to escape. “You can explain it all on the way.”

Elena kept herself close to the servant's right shoulder throughout his reluctant turn, slinking behind him as she would an opened door. The Uncle and the servant took off back towards the main room, and Elena ducked into a nearby chamber.

She was careful to breathe lightly as she entered. Her mask muted the stink of magic in the spell room, but she could still taste it. The fumes made the back of her throat itch and stung the sensitive flesh inside her nose.

Shelves lined with books, tables piled high with vials and instruments covered the room. She could barely see the floor for the mess. But it wasn't nearly as messy as she remembered it being — wasn't as messy as it *ought* to have been.

The last time she'd been inside the spell room, rings of books covered the floor. There'd been various liquids inside the vials and bits of parchment strung all across the chamber, covered to the bottoms with strange symbols. Now the books sat neatly upon the shelves, the vials lay empty. There wasn't so much as a scrawled note in sight.

A small cot lay crammed against one corner of the room. She stepped over to it carefully, wondering why its blankets had been stripped and folded to the side. Then she spotted the tongue of a rucksack sticking out from beneath the cot.

It'd been packed. When Elena sifted through it, she found a cloak, a fresh change of clothes, and a couple of books — including a plain leather tome with no title.

She drew the plain book out and held it carefully. It was Jake's notebook — the thing he wa

always muttering over and scribbling in. Elena ran her thumb down its pages, watching as his words, numbers, and drawings flipped by. Some of it was written in the strange tongue of the mages. —

She'd begun to flip through it a second time when a pair of shuffling steps echoed down the hall. She slid the journal back exactly where it'd been — wedged between two thicker tomes — before she kicked the rucksack beneath the cot. Elena had just enough time to walk to the other side of the room before Jake entered.

His robes scraped quietly across the floor as he ducked in, arms laden with what looked to be stashes of dried provisions. Elena watched from the shadows as he tried to make room for them in his already-bulging pack. She read the frustrated words that formed upon his lips, watched as his round spectacles slid further down his nose.

When they neared the tip, she stepped forward instinctively — afraid they might slide off and be broken. But Jake managed to catch them ... just as her shadow crossed the wall.

He whirled around so quickly that one foot caught against the heel of the other, and he fell down hard. "Blast it, Elena! You know I hate it when you do that." He sprang up from the cot. His face burned red as he tried to cram rations between the folds of his spare robes. "Why are you here? I thought you didn't want to see me again."

His voice cut across those words and scraped against the thing buried beneath them. "I've come to tell you I'm sorry for what I said. I didn't mean it ... I don't want you to leave."

Jake's hands slowed, but he didn't answer.

Elena stepped closer. "I was only a bit nervous."

"Is that all it was? *Nerves?*"

"Yes," she said evenly, trying to ignore the scoff in his voice.

There were so many things she wanted to say, so many things she *needed* to say ... so many things she couldn't tell him. They wove around inside her head as she glared at the back of his neck, trying to work them all out. In the end, she couldn't. So she grabbed him by the robes and turned him around.

His brows lowered over his spectacles at the question on her lips.

"Please, give me one more chance."

"I don't think it'll —"

"I love you."

The words were out of Elena's mouth before she could think to draw them in. Her chest lurched strangely at the end — the throes of some fear trying to escape. She crossed her arms and held it pinned; she tried to meet its curious gales of frost and fire with calm. But it was difficult.

Jake, and his peculiar, quiet gaze, undid her.

"Do you?" he said, his voice hushed.

"Yes."

His face was completely unreadable. Even the vein beneath his chin moved in a steady throbbing. Jake held her gaze for a moment more before he sighed. Then he slid his gloves from his hands and laid them carefully upon the cot.

Elena's heart thudded once, hard, when he stepped forward. Her arms fell from across her chest and she closed her eyes.

Be calm. You must be calm, she told herself when she felt his hands against her throat. Warmth bubbled up inside her middle and she clung to it desperately, hoping it would be enough to hold back the frost. *Jake is a kind man. You love him. You —*

No, the ice wouldn't let her. Memories of a dark set of eyes overtook her vision; a spine-raking laugh filled her ears. The softness of Jake's hand turned callused and hard. His grip became strangling. It snuffed out the warmth and left Elena frozen. But she fought to hide it.

Be calm. Don't move. Just ...

“You've gone cold again.”

She opened her eyes when Jake took his hand away. Shock stole her breath for a moment before she remembered to hide it. “You're imagining things.”

“No, I'm not. I can feel it. Your skin is like stone.”

“It's only nerves,” she growled, stepping into him. “Quit worrying about every little thing and love me. I won't stop you.”

“That isn't what I want! That's the *least* of what I want. At the moment, there's only one thing in the whole Kingdom that concerns me.”

“And what's that?”

“Your eyes,” he said shortly, glaring as if she should know full well why he was angry with her. But she didn't.

“You can have those, too. Take whatever you want.”

“No, that isn't ...” Jake was quiet for a moment before he grasped her hands. “When I look into your eyes, I see a monster.”

Elena glared to hide her surprise. “You knew what I was from the beginning, mage. I've told you that I'm a killer. I've made no attempt to hide it.”

Jake shook his head. “I don't mean you — I mean *me*. My reflection. You go cold when I touch you ... you close me out. I won't be the thing that frightens you. I would rather harm myself a thousand times over —”

“Please, you're —”

“Listen! No, *listen* to me,” he shouted, clutching her hands. “I won't do it. Too many people have looked at me that way. I know fear when I see it — and I've lived as a monster, but no more. I know my magic must hurt you, and I ... I won't do it. I swear I won't touch you again.”

He spun away from her and tugged his gloves on roughly. Elena watched, still half-frozen and in shock. “Where are you going?”

“To the plains. There's a ship leaving this afternoon. Brend promised I could stay for a while and study things, so that's what I mean to do. It'll help, I think, getting some time apart.”

He swept past her, and she couldn't even turn to follow. The truth might stop him. Or his confession might bring him back, might possibly change everything ...

Then again, it might well *end* everything.

“Elena?”

When she finally managed to turn, Jake was standing in the doorway. A faint smile bent his lips as he pulled his eyes from the floor to meet her.

“I love you, as well. I always will. It was too much to ask of a whisperer to withstand a mage's touch ... but I thank you for trying.”

He slipped out the door, then — taking every last shred of warmth away with him.

CHAPTER 3

Love Without Fear

Darkness cloaked his eyes — impenetrable, at first. But it slowly began to soften. The darkness gave way to a warm, golden light. The light crept from yellow, to orange, to a heated, furious red.

It was the red that woke him.

Kael groaned as the morning light glanced across his eyes — stinging at their fronts, aching across their backs. He slammed them shut once more and draped an arm over his face, absolutely determined to sleep until a decent hour ...

Wait a moment.

The fog crept back. He braved the glare of the sun just long enough to peek out from beneath his arm and groaned when he saw that the hour *was* decent. Even through the chamber's one small window, he could see the sun had risen a good inch above the glittering waves. All of Copperdock would be about its chores by now.

Which meant that Kael was already late.

He tried to bolt up and very nearly snapped his neck. There was a strong arm clamped across his chest. It held him pinned to the bed — and it absolutely refused to budge.

“Kyleigh?”

She mumbled unintelligibly from beside him.

He'd learned the hard way not to try to force her awake. The first time he'd grabbed her by the arm, she woke up swinging — and he tumbled off the bed with a broken nose. So he'd had to come up with a trick to get free.

After a few moments of careful squirming, he was able to reach the back of her shoulder. He jabbed, flung his arm aside to avoid the wild swing of her fist, and managed to roll successfully onto the floor. “Get up, Kyleigh,” he said as he tugged on his trousers. “Copperdock can't have its lady sleeping in all day. The sun's awake, so you might as well be.”

Somewhere amid her muddled swears came a word that sounded suspiciously like *no*.

She was a tangled mess: wound up tightly among the blankets, pillow crushed between her arms and her raven locks held tamed only by a very clumsy pony's tail. It also looked as if she'd claimed one of Kael's shirts during the night — the one he'd stripped off the day before because it had finally become too filthy.

He frowned when she shifted to clutch her pillow tighter and he saw the grimy streaks trailing behind her arms. “There are plenty of clean tunics lying around here, I'll have you know.”

“Well, I like this one,” she mumbled, grinning into her pillow. “It has your scent.”

“I have my scent. And I'm lying right beside you. So there's no need —”

“Anything you leave on the floor is fair game, whisperer.” Her eyes cracked open, and her lips bent into a smirk. “Now come back to bed.”

No. He had to tell himself, very firmly, *no*. Flames danced behind the green of her eyes as they locked onto his. Her smirk spread into a grin that almost made him grin back. He swore he could see the memories drifting behind the flames, the shadow of the secret they'd shared ...

“No.” He had to say it aloud. For some reason, his legs had started to drag him towards the bed. ~~“You can stay here if you like, but I’m going to the docks. I swore to Shamus that I’d look after the repairs while he’s away. And I mean to keep my word.”~~

“Suit yourself.”

He would. As a matter of fact, he was determined to get his boots on and head out immediately. Kael righted a chair that lay on its side in a corner of the room — and nearly toppled over before he remembered that it'd been broken.

The back was gone, having been snapped off and hurled to another end of the room. The book he'd been trying to read lay sprawled between the wall and the floor, while the bedside table had been knocked askew. Though their chambers were in a near-constant state of mess, it certainly wasn't the worst thing to have happened.

After their first night together, Kael woke to find the mattress in ruins and the bed's stuffing plastered across his every inch: stuck in his hair, against his skin, and wedged into places where no man should've ever had to find feathers. The bed's frame had been reduced to splinters — crushed with its legs trapped beneath it.

He couldn't remember *exactly* what they'd done to cause such a mess, but he knew he didn't want to have to spend the day trying to seal all the broken pieces back together. So he'd decided to make them a frame of iron, instead.

Kael had shaped the metal beneath his hands, weaving an immovable pattern of slats beneath the mattress, twisting each of the four legs into spirals that occasionally bent, but never broke. The head wound high and the foot arched low. So far, it'd all held together.

But the rest of the chamber's furniture hadn't been so lucky.

Kael sat down carefully, easing forward as the chair groaned against his weight.

“The clouds are rolling in,” Kyleigh murmured from the bed.

Her back arched as she stretched her arms above her. One of her bare feet stuck out from beneath the covers. Her toes curled and uncurled as she gazed out the window, smiling as the morning light drifted across her face and left a trail of pink behind.

All too soon, the light was gone — shadowed by a cloud's billowing chest. The bright fires in her eyes fell to embers. They smoldered as they lighted onto his.

“Weren't you in some sort of great rush to get to the docks?”

Kael realized that he'd been staring — stuck bent over, with his foot frozen halfway inside his boot. “I was — I *am*,” he amended, when she raised a brow. He tore his eyes from her smile and crammed his foot purposefully into the boot.

It was the wrong one.

“I think I'll go for a fly today,” Kyleigh mused, her gaze returning to the window.

Kael had known from the moment she mentioned the clouds that *flying* was precisely what she wanted to do. But he didn't like it. “Just be careful, will you?”

“I flew around the Kingdom for centuries without being discovered — I think I'll be able to manage a few more,” she said wryly. Then she stretched her hands towards him and whispered: “But don't think I'll be able to do anything unless you help me out of bed.”

He was most certainly not going to do that. “I haven't got time for this, Kyleigh.”

“For what?”

“You know very well what. If I come over there, it'll be another hour before I make it out the door — if I'm lucky,” he added, glaring to keep the fires from rising up.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh please, I'm far too tired for any of that.”

“You are?”

“Yes ... it isn't easy, trying to hold my own against a Wright.”

The arch of her lips cut against the smooth pale of her cheeks. Red bloomed across her face. ~~spread down her neck as the fires within her eyes started to dance. The memories were there again sliding behind the flames.~~

Kael supposed she had a point. “All right, fine — I’ll help you up. But no mischief.”

“None whatsoever,” she promised.

But no sooner did he take her hands than the world spun and Kael’s head struck the pillow. He was trapped: one of Kyleigh’s legs draped across his middle while she wrapped his shoulders in her iron grip.

“Oh, I can’t *believe* you fell for it again,” she murmured into his ear.

He would have protested — he’d had every intention of protesting. But as if she could sense the words forming, Kyleigh’s lips were there. They pressed against him, tied his tongue. When she finally released him, he found he no longer had the breath to protest.

He gripped her arm as her lips trailed across his jaw and teased the vein that throbbed in his neck. It gave him away every time. That line of his blood rushed close to the surface, howling as it burst into flame. His fingers dug into her arm; he tried to bring her closer. Her grip tightened across his chest, and her lips parted in a grin at the agonized pounding of his blood.

In one final attempt to see reason, he arched his neck away ... but she followed.

Her growling laughter trembled against his side as she dragged her teeth across that vein — stirring the fires with something that frightened and thrilled him all at once. It was dangerous to be trapped so tightly against her. His body should have tried to wriggle free, to escape the trailing pressure of her teeth.

But in that moment, his only worry was that she wasn’t close enough. There were empty patches between her limbs and his, places where they didn’t quite touch. He didn’t want anything between them — not even the emptiness. So he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her onto his chest.

The fires roared. They lapped at the under-edges of his skin and brought his heart to life. Love with Kyleigh dragged him into a trance all its own: his heart pounded without mercy, his strength seemed to drop from limbs and into the depths of his blood — where it woke a strange, wild part of his soul.

This part of him never worried, it never thought. The wildness met Kyleigh’s love without fear and Kael never fought it.

Her grip tightened the moment the fires burned hot, as if she could sense the battle was about to begin. Their love was a never-ending war — a blaze of fury driven to anguish by their attacks. The world dropped away and the battle consumed them. Nothing was safe, once the fight had begun.

If they ever woke to find the castle torn down to its base, Kael wouldn’t be the least bit surprised.

He held his ground as Kyleigh’s lips returned. He let her lead him through their kisses — occasionally moving in a way that made her grin. In the moment before the wildness cloaked his eyes, his hand went to her throat. He traced the arch of her neck up to her chin. He wanted to see if her blood pounded as fiercely as his ...

It did.

Just when it looked as if the morning would be lost, a terrified scream startled them apart.

In the half-breath it took Kael to be surprised, Kyleigh had pinned him beneath her — one arm clamped protectively across his chest and her full weight planted on his middle. He heard a hiss and a shrilling hum as she ripped Harbinger from among the sheets and leveled the white blade at the door.

The maid standing in the archway screamed again and flung her arms protectively over her face. “Don’t hurt me, Lady Kyleigh! I only came in to tidy things up a bit. Crumfeld said you’d gone

and that I was to sweep the broken bits of chair off the floor and change the sheets. I wouldn't have come in had I known you were still ... um, *here*." She peeked through her hands at Kael before turning a tearful look onto Kyleigh. "Please don't lop off my head!"

"She's not going to hurt you," Kael promised. Then he glared up. "Didn't we agree not to keep any weaponry in the bed?"

Kyleigh shrugged. "Not that I recall."

"Really? Because I very clearly remember —"

"Tell Crumfeld we'll be along in a moment," Kyleigh growled, without taking her eyes off Kael.

He knew that look, and realized this might be his last chance to escape. "No, there's no point bothering Crumfeld. I'm on my way out." He scrambled from beneath Kyleigh and began searching through the shattered dresser for a clean tunic.

"Ah, I'll just come back when you've gone."

Kael turned in time to see the maid's eyes whip away from his back — and Kyleigh's glare followed her out the door.

"Humans," she muttered, shaking her head. "Always peeking around every corner and through every crack."

Kael didn't think that curiosity was an entirely human trait. He seemed to remember a certain halfdragon who loved to poke around. But it wasn't worth the argument. "I'm heading out."

"Wait — take this with you."

She slid out of bed and paced over to him, twisting the ring from her finger as she went. The delicate white-gold band had been woven into the symbol of the Wright: an eye with three triangles fanning from its top, three interlocking triangles at its base, and a small onyx stone carved into the black triangle at its middle.

It was a tiny thing, but the ring felt like stone in the palm of his hand. "How long will you be?"

She shrugged. "That all depends on how interesting the world looks today. It'll be nightfall, but the latest."

She couldn't wear the ring when she flew. It wasn't made of scales, which meant it couldn't hold her second shape. Still, the band felt oddly cold as he slid it into his pocket.

"Fine. I suppose I'll see you tonight."

"Kael?"

He turned at her growl and nearly choked when he saw how her eyes blazed.

"When I return, I plan to finish what I started," she warned with a grin.

Though Kael had promised to look after things while Shamus was gone, there wasn't much to do. Copperdock was always packed to its edges with ships needing repairs, and the shipbuilders could fix just about anything. They handled the merchants and dealt with the coin.

All Kael seemed to be good for was pretending to be the one in charge — and slipping occasionally to fix the things they couldn't.

"The weld keeps cracking," one of the shipbuilders muttered, dragging a sleeve across the damp of his brow. "We've been at it for ages, now. Nothing will stick."

They were deep in the belly of a merchant's vessel, crouched in front of a beam that'd popped free of its bolt. Kael felt as if he had an old sock stuffed over his head: the air was impossibly thick and reeked of mold.

He knew by the way the beam warped upwards that a weld would never stay put. "I'm going

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