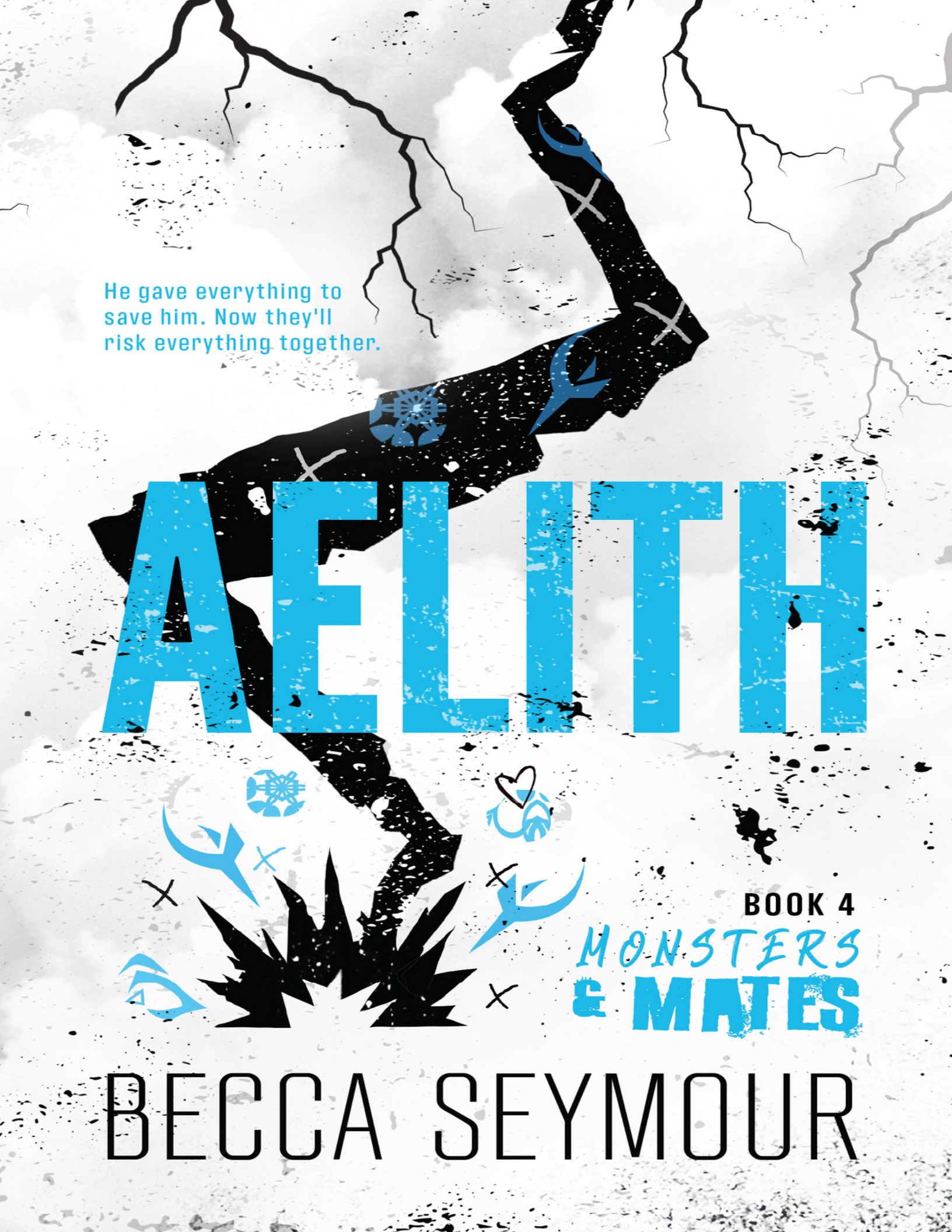

He gave everything to save him. Now they'll risk everything together.
AELITH
BOOK 4
MONSTERS & MATES
BECCA SEYMOUR

AELITH

MONSTERS & MATES

BOOK 4

BECCA SEYMOUR

RAINBOW TREE PUBLISHING

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CONTENTS

Also by Becca Seymour

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Aelith
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Aelith
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Aelith
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Aelith

Also by Becca Seymour
About the Author

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BLURB

Accidentally bonding with an alien prince who growls at anyone who gets too close to me? Not on my Terrafeara survival bingo card.

I was supposed to be snowboarding in Portugal. Instead, I got dragged through a dimensional rift, dropped into a monster-filled world, and nearly died before I even figured out which plants were trying to eat me.

Then I met Aelith.

Prince. Warrior. Walking political disaster.

He's also six-foot-something of glowing-eyed devotion who apparently decided I'm his person after sharing enough life force to keep me breathing. Now he watches me like I hang the stars, growls at anyone who upsets me, and makes my pulse do deeply embarrassing things whenever he's nearby.

The problem?

His mother is the Queen.

The rebellion wants her overthrown.

And the entire realm is one bad day away from falling apart.

As the bond between us grows stronger, secrets about the rifts begin to surface—secrets that could change everything we thought we knew about Terrafeara and the worlds beyond it.

Because if we fail, we won't just lose each other.

We might lose every world connected to the rifts.

Aelith is the fourth book in the Monsters & Mates series, a monster-filled MM romantic fantasy featuring fated mates, hurt/comfort, found family, political intrigue, portal fantasy adventures, possessive devotion, and a love powerful enough to change worlds.

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ALSO BY BECCA SEYMOUR

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CHAPTER
ONE

AT FIRST, THERE'S NOTHING. NO LIGHT. NO SOUND. NO SENSE OF UP OR down, of body or breath or anything that feels remotely like *me*. Just… blank. Which, for the record, is not my favourite experience.

I'd like to say I handle it well. Stay calm. Assess the situation. Remain rational.

But I don't. Because the second I realise there's nothing, my brain goes, *Oh cool, we're dead. That's it. Game over.*

Which feels unfair, considering I don't even remember what happened.

I try to move, but nothing happens. Not even a twitch.

Okay. Not ideal.

I try again, harder this time, like effort alone might kick-start whatever system has clearly failed me.

Still nothing.

Right. So either I'm dead—which rude, right?—or I'm… somewhere.

Trapped.

That thought lands differently. A little less final and a whole heap more uncomfortable. Because being dead is one thing. Being *aware* and stuck? That's a whole different category of nightmare.

I focus, or at least, I try to.

There's a presence there. It's faint and distant, like a pressure just outside of reach. Not a sound exactly, but not nothing.

"…son…"

The word brushes against me, soft and warped, like it's travelling through water. I latch onto it straight away because it's real. Real means not dead, right? Which, gotta take one where I can get it, big win.

I reach for it—or try to. It's hard to tell what reaching even is right now—but the effort seems to change things. The darkness isn't as solid anymore. It's still there. Still thick and heavy, but not absolute.

"…stay with me…"

That's clearer… closer.

The voice is low, rough around the edges, like it's being dragged through something sharp before it reaches me. There's another sensation beneath it.

Heat…. It's faint, like a steady pulse, right in the centre of… me.

Huh. That's new.

I focus on it instead. On the warmth and the way it spreads just noticeably enough to make me feel like I'm not completely gone.

It's… nice. Comforting, even. Which, honestly, surprises me as I wouldn't have thought mysterious disembodied warmth would be comforting.

"Dawson."

That gets me. Not just because it's my name—though, yeah, it's reassuring—but because something in the way he says it hits differently, like a recognition.

Like it belongs to me.

Or maybe I belong to it.

That's… a thought—a strange one to be fair, but it sticks.

I try to focus on the voice itself now, pulling it closer, letting it anchor me to more than empty space and questionable life choices.

He sounds—

I pause.

Because I know this. Not logically. Not in a neat, tidy way I can explain. But I know *him*.

It's recognition that doesn't come from memory so much as… instinct. A truth older than thought. It settles into that warm place in my chest and says, *this matters.*

He's important.

If I could, I'd shake my head, as he's more than that.

Mine.

Okay. That's… hell, that's definitely new.

I'd like to unpack that, but I'm currently stuck in what might be the void, so we'll circle back.

“You should not be alive.”

Well… rude.

I would object, but I’m still working on the whole *existing in a functional way* thing.

There’s a pause after that. A long one. Then, quieter, the words “You will stay that way.”

Huh. Okay.

I like that tone better, and then another voice bleeds in. It’s faint and a little, I don’t know… messier. Not like him.

“…still not stabilising—”

That voice is different. It’s lighter and faster. A little panicked under the surface.

I frown. Or at least I think I do.

“…you need to stop—”

Another voice cuts in, sharper. More controlled. Like someone trying very hard not to lose it. That one feels wrong. Too sharp. Too worried.

I drift back towards the first voice—the rough one, the one that feels like it’s hooked directly into my chest.

Safer.

Better.

“…killing yourself—”

That panicked voice again. It’s closer now and so much louder.

Wait.

What?

I try to follow it, but it slips, like it’s not meant for me. Like it’s happening somewhere else, just out of reach. Which is frustrating because I would very much like context.

“What the hell does that even mean?” I try to say.

Nothing comes out. Because, again, no body, which is still seriously rude.

The warmth in my chest pulses suddenly, stronger this time, and everything else fades out again. The other voices blur, become distant and muffled, like they’ve been pushed behind a wall.

Only he remains. Just his steady, grounding presence.

“You will not leave me.”

Bloody hell. Those words hit harder than they should.

I don’t fully understand why, but some deep, instinctive part of me answers anyway, like it recognises the promise in it. Or the demand. Or both.

It’s all a bit intense, honestly, but also, it’s kind of nice.

Though, to be fair, I think I might have questionable standards right now.

The other voices flicker again at the edges.

“…script—there has to be something—”

“—not enough—”

“—he won’t last—”

Right… so things aren’t going great out there.

Good to know. Love that for me.

I try to move again, pushing against whatever is holding me here.

Nothing.

Still nothing.

But then there are shifts. It’s small. Barely noticeable, really. Like a ripple through whatever this space is. The darkness loosens just a fraction, and for a split second, I almost—

Almost—

Feel something.

My hand, I think. Or at least the idea of one. It’s enough to make me try harder.

Come on. Just a little.

Nothing.

The effort drains out of me before it even really starts.

That’s… frustrating. I don’t like being stuck. I never have.

Then I become aware of another sensation. Not the voices. Not the warmth.

Pressure.

Like I’m boxed in. Not physically—not exactly—but contained. Held in place by something I can’t see or touch.

I push against it instinctively, but it doesn’t move.

Of course it doesn’t move. Why would anything be easy?

“Open your eyes.”

Ah. Right. That.

I’d love to. Genuinely. I’m a big fan of eyes.

I try, and for a second, the darkness fractures. Not fully. Not enough. But enough to let light in.

It's faint and blurred… and wrong.

It vanishes just as quickly as it came, snapping back into that thick, endless dark. But it was there. Which means—

Okay.

Not dead.

Definitely not dead.

That's progress, right?

I focus on that. On the voice. On the warmth in my chest that feels stronger now, steady and insistent, like it's refusing to let me drift too far.

Whoever he is—

No.

Not whoever. I know him. I just… don't know how I know him. But I do. And that's enough for now.

I gather whatever strength I've got—whatever part of me is still listening, still trying—and push again.

Towards the voice.

Towards the light.

Towards *him*.

Because if there's one thing I'm very good at, it's not giving up. Even when I probably should.

I push, and the darkness gives. It's not easy, and it's not all at once. It's more like forcing my way through thick water, like every part of me has to fight just to exist again. But the darkness cracks, splintering just enough.

Light floods in.

It's too bright at first, too sharp. Everything is wrong—blurred edges, smeared colours, shapes that don't quite make sense. I blink, or at least I think I do, and the world begins to sharpen.

A ceiling that's high and, for some strange reason, glowing faintly.

But it's not the void, so I'm definitely not dead.

Woohoo! Big win.

There's noise too. A rhythmic beeping that feels like it's drilling straight into my skull. Voices overlap, sharp and urgent, but they don't line up properly in my head yet.

I turn—or try to—and the world tilts violently for a second before settling.

There’s someone near me. A woman. Dark hair pulled back tight, expression focused in that very specific way that screams *doctor*. I don’t think I’ve seen her before, but maybe I have. She moves like she knows exactly what she’s doing, even if everything around her is… not helping.

Because between her and me is him. The… prince. The blue one.

The very pretty, very intense, definitely-a-monster one with silver symbols glowing faintly across his skin like they’ve got opinions.

He’s… not calm, like… at all.

There’s a low, dangerous sound coming from deep in his chest, like a warning that hasn’t quite decided whether it’s a growl or a roar. He’s half turned towards the woman, body angled like he’s ready to block her from getting anywhere near me.

Which feels counterproductive.

“Move,” the doctor snaps sharply, absolutely not intimidated.

He doesn’t move. If anything, he leans closer.

Right… so we’ve got a standoff. That shouldn’t be kinda cool, right?

Hands grab at him from behind—and I realise now that there are other people, shapes I can’t quite focus on—which try to pull him back. He resists, muscles going taut, that low sound turning louder, making the air feel like it’s vibrating.

The beeping spikes.

Loud. Fast. Insistent.

Okay, I’m not loving that.

Everything starts to blur again, not visually this time but… emotionally? Like the room is tipping towards chaos, and I’m stuck in the middle of it with no idea how to fix it.

But I know him.

I *know* him.

And that matters more than anything else.

“Aelith.” The name scrapes out of me like it’s been dragged over gravel. It barely sounds like my voice, but it’s enough.

Everything stops.

Not gradually. Not slowly.

Just—stops.

Like someone hit Pause on the entire room.

The beeping steadies. The movement halts. Even the air feels different, like it’s holding its breath.

I blink. “Did I… do that?” I mumble, my voice still rough and not entirely cooperative. “Do I have, like… remote control powers now?”

Because honestly, at this point, I wouldn’t even be surprised.

There’s a beat. Then someone huffs out a breath that sounds suspiciously like a laugh.

“That’s not exactly how I’d describe it,” says a familiar voice. It’s warm, Australian, and a little amused despite everything.

I drag my gaze towards the sound, and my blurry vision shifts until it lands on a blond guy with broad shoulders and a face that’s annoyingly good-looking.

Sonny.

Right.

That clicks into place with a soft *oh* in my brain.

“Hey,” he adds, softer now. “You’re back. Take it easy, yeah? You’re okay.”

I consider that.

Am I okay?

Debatable.

But I appreciate the enthusiasm.

The doctor—still there, still fierce—points an instrument sharp and glowing towards Aelith without taking her eyes off me. “If you interfere again,” she says, voice low and dangerous, “I will sedate you myself.”

Bold. I like her.

Aelith doesn’t respond. He’s gone very, very still, which is somehow more intense.

Slowly, like the world is catching up with itself, everything starts moving again. Sound returns. Breath. The faint shuffle of people shifting their weight.

And then his eyes find mine.

Everything else fades.

It’s not dramatic. There’s no big moment where the room disappears or the light changes. It’s just… him. And that warmth in my chest settles properly, like a compass finally finding north.

Oh. Oh, yeah. That’s mine.

I grin widely before I can stop myself, which is probably a little ridiculous given the situation, but I don’t care. My stomach chooses that

exact moment to let out a loud, traitorous grumble, which is deeply unhelpful, but I ignore it.

Priorities.

I lift my hand slowly. It's heavy, but it works—and hold it out towards him.

For a second, no one moves. Then he's there.

Not fast enough to be alarming, not slow enough to be hesitant. Just… there. His hand closes around mine, warm and solid and very real.

Definitely not a hallucination, which is good to know.

I turn my hand slightly and tug his towards me. I press a quick kiss to his knuckles, because that feels right for reasons I absolutely do not have time to unpack.

"You need to stop being a menace," I mumble, my voice already starting to drift again. "Let the nice doctor do her thing."

A gentleness flickers across his face unlike anything I've seen from him before, but I don't get to study it properly because everything goes heavy.

My grip loosens, and the last thing I register is the warmth of his hand tightening around mine as the darkness pulls me under again.

Still there.

Still holding.

Then—

Nothing.

WHEN I WAKE AGAIN, IT'S QUIETER.

It's not the eerie, controlled silence from before. This is softer and a little dimmer. The kind of quiet that settles around you instead of pressing in from all sides. The lights are low, casting everything in a muted glow, and even before I open my eyes, I can tell the room isn't full of people anymore.

There's no rush of voices. No chaos.

Just… presence.

I feel it first.

A hand wrapped around mine. It's strong and warm. Solid in a way that anchors me before my brain has fully caught up. It's not a loose hold either.

It’s firm, like letting go isn’t even an option that’s been considered.

Good. I like that.

My throat, however, does not.

“Water,” I croak, my voice rough enough to sound like I’ve been chewing gravel for fun.

The reaction is immediate.

A sharp inhale. A heavy swallow. Then quick but careful movement. An arm slides around my shoulders, lifting me with surprising gentleness, guiding me upright like I might fall apart if handled wrong.

There’s a pause, and then a straw presses lightly against my lips.

I don’t hesitate. I take a deep pull—and immediately regret my life choices as water rushes in too fast.

I choke slightly, pulling back before I drown myself trying to accomplish what should have been a simple task.

“Easy,” a low voice murmurs so close that I feel it more than hear it.

Right, pacing is important.

I try again, slower this time, taking measured sips until the dryness in my throat eases and my brain starts to feel like it belongs to me again.

“Better,” I manage, voice still rough but at least recognisable as human.

Well. Human-adjacent.

Only then do I finally open my eyes.

The world comes into focus more easily this time, less blur and more shape, and the first thing I see are his eyes.

They’re luminous and sharp and watching me like I might disappear if he looks away for even a second.

Aelith.

He’s close. Really close. Close enough that I can see the subtle shift of colour beneath his skin, the faint shimmer of those silver markings that seem to move when I’m not quite looking at them directly.

And yeah, he’s still stupidly pretty.

I can’t help myself. I squeeze his hand and use my free one to lightly bop him on the nose, croaking “Pretty.”

He startles.

Actually startles.

It’s small, just a flicker of surprise across his face, but it’s there, and it’s *adorable*.

His gaze drops to my mouth, probably checking if I'm about to say something deeply concerning, but all he finds is my very wide, very pleased grin.

His lips curve, just a little, but it's enough.

"Hi," I say, because that feels appropriate.

He doesn't answer straight away. He just… looks at me. Like he's confirming I'm real by cataloguing every tiny detail and committing it to memory.

"You're beautiful," I add, because also appropriate.

That gets a reaction.

His cheeks darken, the blue deepening in a way that's very noticeable, and the markings along his skin shimmer faintly, as though they're responding to whatever he's feeling.

Oh. Oh, that's interesting.

And also very, very pretty.

He finally speaks, his voice low and rough. Careful. "You are awake."

"Observant," I murmur.

His expression doesn't quite change, but relief flickers beneath everything else. Or maybe I just want it to.

"Are you in pain?" he asks, the words measured, controlled.

I consider it. "My head feels like it lost a fight," I admit. "And my throat is staging a protest. But I've had worse hangovers, so… overall, not terrible."

His brow furrows slightly at that, like he's trying to decide whether that's a serious medical assessment or not.

It isn't.

"I can get you more… hydration juice," he says carefully.

I blink at him. "More what?"

A hint of uncertainty crosses his face. Or maybe confusion. It's quick, but I catch it. "Hydration juice," he repeats, a little more firmly this time. "It is what Australians call it."

There's a beat.

"…According to Sonny," he adds, and now there's a definite edge of suspicion there, like he's only just realising this information might not be entirely reliable.

I stare at him for a second. "Oh my god," I breathe, delighted. "Hydration juice is *amazing*."

His eyes narrow slightly. “It is… correct?”

“Completely,” I say with absolute sincerity. “Best term I’ve ever heard. Ten out of ten. No notes.”

He studies me like he’s trying to determine if I’m making fun of him.

I’m not.

Well. Maybe a little. But also not.

“It’s very efficient,” I continue, nodding seriously. “Hydrates you. It’s juice. Hydration juice. Honestly, I’m kind of mad the whole human world doesn’t call it that.”

He looks like he’s trying very hard to accept this while remaining at least a little annoyed about it. His cheeks darken another shade, and the silver markings along his skin brighten for a heartbeat.

Adorable.

“I will… continue to use it,” he says, like he’s committing to a strategic decision.

“You absolutely should,” I reply. “You’re leading the charge on that one.”

He exhales softly, possible embarrassment flickering across his features, but there’s a hint of satisfaction there, too, like he’s pleased he got it right—or at least didn’t get it wrong.

He brings the straw back to my lips, his other arm still braced around me, steady and unyielding. I take another drink, slower this time, letting it settle before pulling back with a small, satisfied sigh.

“Okay,” I say, voice already sounding a little more like mine. “That’s significantly better. Hydration juice for the win.”

There’s a faint movement behind him, and Aelith goes still. Then he growls. It’s low, quiet, and definitely dangerous.

Apparently my brain—or whatever part of me is making decisions these days—likes the sound**,** which is new, and honestly a little concerning. I lean slightly to the side to see past him, and sure enough, the doctor from earlier stands a few steps away, arms crossed, expression unimpressed.

“Iris,” she says, introducing herself like we’re not in the middle of a territorial standoff. “You’re conscious. Good.”

“Hi, Iris,” I say, because politeness is important. “Big fan of your work so far.”

She inclines her head slightly, accepting the praise in a way that suggests she has no time for nonsense but will tolerate it.

Aelith, however, doesn't move.

"Hey," I say, nudging his arm lightly. "Be nice."

His sharpened gaze flicks back to me. "She will examine you," he says, like it's a statement of fact rather than anything open for discussion.

"Yeah," I agree. "That's generally what doctors do."

He doesn't look convinced.

I turn my attention to Iris. "Can you check me out?"

"Yes," she says at once.

"Great," I reply. "Love that plan." I shift slightly, trying to sit more upright. "You can let me go."

Aelith's arm tightens. "No."

A flicker of memory from when I first woke in this strange place slots into place in my brain. Right. Prince mode. I seem to get a much friendlier version than everyone else.

"I need to examine him," Iris says, her tone taking on an edge.

"He is fine," Aelith counters.

"I'm not fine," I interject. "I just woke up from what I'm assuming was a very dramatic sleep. I feel like a checkup is fair."

His jaw tightens. "He remains with me."

"That's very romantic," I say, "but also medically inconvenient."

When he doesn't budge, I sigh, tempted to lift my hand again and bop him lightly on the nose again. I don't. Instead, I offer a soft smile.

He blinks.

"You're a sweetheart," I tell him, completely serious. "But you need to sit back on that chair and let the professional do her thing." A beat follows before I add, "You can still hold my hand."

That seems to do it.

Slowly—reluctantly—he does as he's told, guiding me back against the pillows before stepping away just enough to sit exactly where I pointed. His hand never leaves mine.

Huh. Well, that was easier than expected.

I glance at Iris. "See? Teamwork."

She doesn't respond, but there's the faintest hint of approval in her expression as she steps forward.

Aelith's grip tightens slightly around my hand.

Still there.

Still watching.

Still not letting go.

Yeah. I can work with that.

Iris moves closer, all sharp focus and quiet authority, and begins her examination without hesitation. Her hands are efficient but not unkind as she checks my pulse, my eyes, then moves a faintly glowing apparatus over my chest, presumably scanning for hidden problems.

I try to stay still. I really do. But I'm also me.

"So," I say, watching her work. "How long was I out? Like, a solid nap situation, or did I accidentally commit to a full hibernation?"

There's the faintest pause before she answers. "Twenty-three days."

I blink.

Then I blink again.

"Twenty—" I push myself up a little more, earning myself a sharp pulse of pain behind my eyes. "Twenty-three days? As in… over three weeks? With bonus days?" My heart constricts. Panic crowds my chest, making it difficult to breathe.

I press my hand against my chest and drag in a breath. Twenty-three days. I'd lost three weeks.

Shit, am I having a panic attack… or maybe a heart attack? What if it's both? I struggle to drag in oxygen, and I've parted my lips to speak—not quite sure what yet—when a noise comes from across the room, distracting me.

I turn my head just enough to see Sonny, who's studying me carefully. He catches my eye. Thank fuck. A familiar face. But also, holy shit, does that mean I was in a coma?

"Twenty-three days, Dawson." Sonny's voice cuts through my spiral, but it's how he's bouncing his brows up a down that captures my attention and distracts me enough to drag in a solid breath. "Dawson—mate—you've been lying there for over three weeks. Do you know what that means?"

I frown, taking another breath, liking this air in my lungs gig a lot. "That I'm well-rested?"

"It means you need a shower." He's all wide-eyed, and I think I see a teasing smirk, but I can't quite be sure, especially because I freeze, completely horrified by the thought. And then he winks, which is weird because why would he wink over something as godawful as my butt stinking?

“Bloody hell,” I whisper, a different kind of panic setting in. “Do I stink? I stink, don’t I? I absolutely stink. I’ve been unconscious for weeks. Of course I stink. That’s basic biology—”

“You do not,” Iris cuts in, voice calm but firm. “You’ve been cleaned regularly.”

I stop mid-spiral. “Oh.” Relief washes through me so fast, it’s almost embarrassing. “Oh, phew,” I breathe. “Okay. Great. I’m a big fan of hygiene.”

Then a new thought hits.

I go very still. Slowly, I turn my head back towards Aelith. “Wait.”

He’s already watching me, expression carefully neutral, which absolutely makes me suspicious.

“Did you—” I gesture vaguely towards myself. “Like… was it you? Because I just want to clarify expectations moving forward—”

His reaction is instant. “No.”

The word comes out sharper than expected, and embarrassment slips through before he can hide it. His markings pulse softly beneath his skin.

“The physician performed those tasks,” he adds, more controlled now. “I would not touch you without your permission.”

There’s a pause before I let out an “Oh.” Relief washes through me again, which hits differently this time. “Okay, good,” I say, nodding. “Consent is sexy. I’m a super big supporter.”

Sonny snorts somewhere to my left. Iris doesn’t react at all, which I respect deeply. Aelith, however, looks like he’s trying to process several things at once and not enjoying any of them.

His grip on my hand tightens slightly. I squeeze back. Yeah, that feels right.

“So,” I continue, since apparently, I’ve decided I’m just saying everything that comes into my head now, “how am I awake? Not that I’m complaining—very pro-being-conscious—but last I remember, things were… not great.”

I deliberately try not to remember landing in this strange world, then being attacked, then waking up in a weird bowling alley. If I do, that strange spiral thing might happen again, which I’m not a fan of. Being slammed by fear and memories is crazy exhausting. I don’t invite any of that bad energy into my good juju vibes.

Iris straightens slightly, her attention still on me but her expression turning more thoughtful. “We’re not entirely certain,” she admits. “The scripts retrieved from the archive referenced a combination of methods. Stones, herbs, energy channelling. We attempted all viable options.”

“Plus human tech,” Sonny adds. “Whatever we could salvage. It was a bit of a… throw everything at the problem and hope something sticks situation. That and your Prince Arsehat—”

I cut Sonny off. “Hey.” I frown. It’s true that the prince definitely seems like an arsehat, but he also feels like mine, and I recall enough discussion before I hit coma land to know that he strangely is—assuming any of that was really real. But still, it’s not nice to be mean.

“Right, sorry.” Sonny doesn’t look exactly repentant, but he smiles brightly, which makes me forgive him and think about what he said about fixing me.

My gaze drifts around the room, taking in the mix of things that don’t quite belong together. Strange glowing instruments sit alongside what looks suspiciously like repurposed human equipment. Nothing matches, but somehow it all works.

“This place is wild,” I mutter, not for the first time. I vaguely remember saying something like that when I initially woke up after being attacked by that freaky monster. “Monsters, magic-adjacent energy, and scavenged tech. Have I missed much while I was busy being unconscious?”

“A little,” Sonny says noncommittally.

When he doesn’t expand, I follow Iris’s instructions to sit up so she can listen to my breathing. She seems satisfied, as she then heads close to the door and starts writing on a chart.

A moment passes, but then a new reality hits. “Oh. Erm….” I shift slightly, and my body files a new complaint. “Okay,” I say slowly, “new development. I really need to pee.”

Silence.

I glance between them. “And I would strongly prefer not to use a bottle, if that’s on the table. Because I have dignity. Some of it. A little.”

“There’s a restroom,” Iris says.

“Yes.” I nod eagerly. “I remember. I’ve used it. Big fan. Five stars. Would visit again.” I look at Aelith. “However,” I add, “I’m about 90 percent sure my legs are currently decorative. So I’m going to need some help.”

His attention sharpens. “You should remain in bed.”

“I would love to,” I say, “but my bladder has other plans, and I feel like ignoring that is a bad life choice.”

“You are weak,” he insists.

“Accurate,” I agree, not even offended. “Which is why I’m asking you to help me.”

That stops him. I can practically see the moment the argument shifts in his head.

I soften my tone a little. “We’ll go slow. You can hover dramatically the entire time if it makes you feel better.”

Sonny snorts again.

Iris exhales, clearly weighing the options. “He should not exert himself—”

“I won’t,” I promise. “Minimal exertion. Maximum teamwork.”

There’s a pause. Then, reluctantly, she nods. “Carefully.”

“Carefully,” I echo. Smiling, I turn back to Aelith. “See? Official approval.”

He doesn’t look convinced, but he stands anyway, still holding my hand. “I will escort you,” he says, voice low and steady, “to the long drop.”

I blink.

“…The what?”

“The long drop,” he repeats, completely serious.

I stare at him for a beat. Then I peer past him.

Sonny is very deliberately not looking at either of us, his shoulders just a little too tense, his mouth pressed into what might be restraint or might be the worst attempt at innocence I’ve ever seen.

Aelith’s eyes narrow. “There is confusion?”

“No, no,” I say quickly, squeezing his hand.

He studies my face, searching for mockery again. When he still doesn’t find it, his shoulders ease just slightly, though there’s a faint darkening of blue along his cheeks. “I was given this term.”

“Yeah,” I say, glancing back at Sonny. “I’m sure you were.”

Sonny raises his hands in surrender, still grinning, while Aelith looks between us again, clearly filing this away for later retaliation.

Honestly? Fair.

Sonny deserves it.

“You can keep using it,” I add, because I genuinely don’t want him second-guessing everything. “I like it. It’s got character.”

“It is accurate,” he says, a little more firmly now.

“It is,” I agree. “Very on brand for you too.”

He pauses at that. “…On brand?”

“We’ll unpack that later,” I promise.

Sonny snorts again while Aelith pointedly ignores him, though the faint shimmer of his markings gives him away.

Adorable.

Getting out of bed is… humbling.

That’s the polite way to frame it.

The more accurate description is that my body has apparently forgotten how to be a body.

Aelith moves in close, one arm braced firmly around my back, the other steadying me as I swing my legs over the side of the bed. The moment my feet touch the ground, my entire lower half protests like I’ve been asking far too much of it and it’s setting a boundary.

“Oh,” I breathe, wincing. “Okay. That’s—yeah. That’s not great.”

“You are weak,” Aelith says again, like he’s delivering a medical diagnosis.

“Helpful,” I mutter. “Very supportive.”

He doesn’t respond to that, but his grip tightens, adjusting to take more of my weight before I can even properly stumble. Which is good because I definitely would have.

I push myself upright slowly, leaning into him more than I intended, and for a second, everything sways. My legs feel shaky, like they’re not entirely convinced they’re part of the team yet.

“This is fine,” I say, mostly to myself. “We’re walking. Walking is happening.”

“You are not walking,” Aelith replies. “I am moving you.”

I huff a quiet laugh. “Team effort, then.”

We take a step, which isn’t graceful. My foot drags slightly, my balance wobbles, and I instinctively clutch at him, which only seems to make him more rigid and focused.

“Careful,” he murmurs.

“I am being careful,” I say. “This is my careful.”

Another step, which is slightly better, albeit still questionable.

I glance up at him, because distraction feels like a solid coping mechanism. “So. Quick question.”

He doesn’t look down, but I can feel his attention shift towards me.

“Those few days we spent together before I… you know.” I gesture vaguely with my free hand. “Collapsed dramatically. That was real, right?”

His body stills for just a fraction of a second.

“It was real.”

“Good,” I say, nodding. “Because I’d hate to think I hallucinated you and all the awesome chats we had. That would be deeply unfair.”

His grip tightens again, just slightly. “You did not,” he says.

“Excellent,” I reply. “Because I distinctly remember you being very grumpy and a little bit terrifying, and I feel like that’s important context for our relationship.”

“I am not—” He starts, then stops, like he’s reconsidering the accuracy of that statement.

I grin. “You’re a little terrifying.”

“I am not terrifying.”

“You growl at people.”

“They are often deserving.”

“Valid,” I concede. “But still terrifying.”

We reach the doorway, and I pause for a second, catching my breath. “Also...” I glance up at him. “I remember feeling weirdly certain about you.” A beat follows before I clarify, “That's normal, right?”

That gets his attention. He looks down at me properly now, eyes sharp and searching. “You are correct.” Absolute certainty colours his words.

Warm and steady emotion settles in my chest. “Cool,” I say softly. “Just checking.”

We make it into the bathroom—sorry, *long drop*—with minimal further incidents, which I’m counting as a win. Aelith doesn’t let go. Not even a little. Which is… nice. Also mildly inconvenient.

I glance at him, raising an eyebrow. “You planning to supervise the entire process?”

His expression doesn’t change. “You may fall.”

“I might,” I agree. “But I also have a strong preference for privacy during certain activities.”

A pause follows before he reluctantly loosens his hold just enough to let me stand on my own—while still hovering close enough to catch me if I

even think about tipping over.

I consider this. “You’re going to stand there, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Right,” I say. “Okay. Boundaries. We’ll work on those later.”

There’s a faint flicker of confusion, possibly curiosity, in his expression, but he doesn’t move. I shake my head, still smiling despite everything.

Yeah, an overprotective handsome, blue prince. I can definitely work with this.

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CHAPTER
TWO

THREE DAYS LATER, I CAN OFFICIALLY WALK WITHOUT LOOKING LIKE A newborn deer discovering gravity for the first time.

I mean, it's still not graceful. There was an unfortunate incident this morning involving a chair, my left foot, and what I maintain was an aggressively placed blanket. But compared to day one? Incredible progress. Inspirational, honestly.

I'm currently stretched out on one of the beds in the medical bay with a bowl balanced in my lap while Aelith sits beside me looking exactly like he belongs in some dramatic fantasy painting about war and heartbreak.

Except unlike a painting, this one occasionally issues orders without looking up.

A healer carrying bandages crosses the far side of the room, and Aelith says, "Not that shelf. The sterilised wraps."

The healer changes direction. No hesitation. No argument. Just instant obedience.

Aelith doesn't even seem to notice he's done it.

Which is kinda rude. Especially because he still hasn't properly left the medical bay unless someone physically forced him to.

At this point I'm fairly sure half of everyone who enters the room think he's become part of the furniture. The other half look at us like we're a developing diplomatic incident.

But also, no one should be allowed to look that good while I'm trying to eat weird soup.

"You are staring again," he says without looking up from the blade he's cleaning.

“I’m appreciating the view,” I correct.

His mouth tightens slightly, which I’ve learned is basically the equivalent of flustered for him.

Across the room, one of the younger guards glances over at the sound of my teasing and then very quickly looks away again when Aelith’s attention shifts briefly in his direction.

Apparently flustering the prince is either: A) forbidden or B) considered a dangerous sport.

The medical bay is less busy than it has been the past few days. People still move through it constantly—healers, guards, injured Riftborn—but the panic from when I first woke up is gone. I’m no longer treated like I might die if someone breathes too hard near me, which is honestly reassuring.

Though judging by the way people still keep checking where Aelith is before approaching me, I’m not entirely convinced the concern was only about my health.

Aelith notices one of the healers hovering uncertainly nearby and, without looking up, says, “Speak.”

The poor guy nearly jumps.

Okay.

Yeah.

Still the prince.

Iris—terrifyingly competent and approximately six seconds away from stabbing someone at any given moment—apparently thinks I’m stable enough to leave soon, which is exciting and mildly horrifying.

While I desperately want out of this room, I’ve also become increasingly aware that leaving means I need an actual place to sleep.

A room.

A proper one.

With privacy.

Which sounds amazing in theory, but there’s a complication.

I glance sideways at Aelith again.

A very large, blue, possessive complication.

The thought of being apart from him twists uncomfortably in my chest. Which is ridiculous.

We’ve known each other for, what, a handful of days? A month if you count the time I was in a coma. The idea of being separated from him shouldn’t hit this hard. It feels excessive.

We’ve known each other for barely any time at all, and yet my brain keeps reacting to him like separation is a genuinely terrible idea.

Honestly? Deeply distrustful behaviour from my own nervous system.

“What are you thinking?” Aelith asks suspiciously.

It’s a little too immediate. Like he’s been tracking every expression crossing my face for the past ten minutes.

“That you’re weirdly pretty,” I answer honestly before taking another bite of soup.

His markings shimmer faintly, which I find is next-level adorable.

“You say this often.”

“Because it keeps being true.”

He exhales softly through his nose, the closest he gets to expressing amusement most of the time.

I grin and shift slightly against the pillows. “Also, I’ve been thinking about snowboarding.”

That gets his attention. He lifts his gaze fully to mine, sharp and focused in that intense way he has that makes me feel like the centre of the universe and mildly prey-shaped at the same time.

“You spoke of this before,” he says. “You stand upon a board.”

“Yes.”

“And launch yourself down a mountain.”

“Yes.”

His expression remains completely serious. “This pastime seems poorly planned.”

I snort so hard, I nearly inhale soup. “No, okay, see, you’re focusing too much on the potential death aspect.”

“There is a death aspect?”

“There’s a *small* death aspect.”

“The mountain.”

“Tiny mountain death aspect.”

He sets the blade aside slowly, clearly deciding this conversation requires his full attention. “You willingly throw yourself down frozen cliffs for enjoyment.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds dramatic.”

“It *is* dramatic.”

I point my spoon at him. “You literally fight monsters with glowing weapons.”

“That is necessary.”

“Snowboarding is necessary for the soul.”

His brow furrows slightly like he’s genuinely trying to determine whether that’s a real thing.

I laugh, shaking my head. “Okay, imagine this. Fresh snow. Early morning. Everything’s quiet and bright and freezing enough that your nose hurts when you breathe.” My smile softens a little as I picture it. “Then you drop into the run, and suddenly it’s just… speed. Wind. Movement. Your whole body working with the mountain instead of against it.”

Aelith watches me carefully. I can tell when he’s fascinated because he goes very still.

“You become free,” he says quietly.

The way he says it knots my chest. Not because he sounds romantic but because he sounds like someone describing a thing he’s never actually had.

“Yeah,” I admit. “Exactly that.”

A shadow passes across his face. “I would not survive this activity.”

“You absolutely would.”

“I would break my neck.”

“You say that so confidently.”

“I am being realistic.”

I grin. “No, see, you’ve got natural advantages. Balance. Strength. And just think how much more intimidating your thighs could be.”

He blinks at me.

“…Thighs?”

“Very important for snowboarding.”

“You are inventing requirements.”

“I am not. Strong thighs save lives.”

There’s a pause. Then, very seriously, he says, “My thighs are already strong.”

I choke laughing. “Oh my god,” I wheeze. “You sound so offended.”

“You questioned my physical capability.”

“I complimented your legs!”

“That is a strange compliment.”

“It’s a great compliment.”

His markings shimmer again, brighter this time, and I’m becoming increasingly convinced they react to embarrassment. Which means I need to see if I can make them do it on purpose.

For science.

“You would enjoy the snow,” I say more softly after a moment. “You’d hate the cold for, like, an hour, but then you’d start pretending you weren’t impressed while secretly loving it.”

“I do not pretend.”

I stare at him.

He stares back.

Then his eyes narrow slightly. “You are mocking me.”

“Only a little.”

He reaches for me suddenly, fast enough that I jolt, and then his hand closes around my ankle beneath the blanket.

I yelp. “Aelith!”

“There,” he says calmly. “Now you are the one startled.”

His hand stays wrapped around my ankle a second longer than necessary.

Warm.

Steady.

Possessive enough that my pulse trips stupidly for a moment.

I gape at him, then a small laugh edged with a little tension slips out. “You absolute menace.”

His lips twitch.

Victory.

The warmth between us settles again after that, but it doesn’t feel simple anymore.

Three days ago this male was a stranger. Now he watches me like losing me would break something important inside him.

A tray crashes somewhere near the far side of the room. Everyone freezes, and Aelith lifts his head. He doesn’t do so dramatically or even aggressively, but the entire room still reacts like a predator just looked up.

Then his attention returns to me, and some of that sharpness eases away so fast, it almost feels unreal. Like I’m watching two different versions of him exist at once.

And worse? Some increasingly reckless part of me likes it.

My gaze drifts around the medical bay again, lingering on the movement beyond the curtains and partitions. “I think Iris’s going to kick me out soon,” I admit.

Aelith goes still. I'm not sure if it's visible to anyone else, but I feel it now. Every tiny shift in him. The way tension moves through his body.

"You are healed enough to leave," he says carefully.

"Yeah."

The word hangs there for a second.

I fiddle absently with the edge of the blanket. "I want to leave," I admit. "No offence to the whole almost-dying experience, but I'm kind of over smelling antiseptic all the time."

"You will not be alone."

My chest does that weird warm thing again. "I know."

And I do know. That's the problem. Because I desperately want space that feels like mine again. Somewhere quiet. Somewhere I can breathe and think and maybe process the fact that my life went completely off the rails.

But every time I picture leaving this room, Aelith is there too. Not because I have to force him into the image, but because that's just where he belongs now.

I look over at him again, the steady weight of his presence beside me. "Good," I say softly. Because the stupid truth is, I'm already starting to relax automatically whenever he's near, which feels like dangerous behaviour after knowing someone for barely any time at all.

His eyes lock onto mine, and he looks at me differently—not to something softer, exactly, just more open.

He adds somewhat intensely, "You will never have to ask for my presence."

The words settle beneath my ribs. No one has ever said anything like that to me with absolute certainty before.

And worse? Some reckless part of me wants to believe him.

I'm still staring at him a little stupidly when a shadow moves near the entrance.

The conversation around the medical bay shifts subtly before I even see him.

It doesn't become silent exactly. But there's an awareness in the change as the guards straighten, and one of the healers steps aside.

Then Kael appears.

Even before my brain catches up with the name, I recognise the vibe. Tall. Broad. Permanently carrying the energy of a man who looks like he could snap someone in half but would probably sigh about it first.

His gaze flicks briefly towards me before settling on Aelith. They start speaking in Glowranthian, the words low and fast and impossible for me to follow at the speed they're using.

Okay. Rude. Sure, I might have this keen ability to understand Aelith's language that's steadily strengthening. But not everything computing in my brain.

I try anyway, catching maybe every tenth word before the rest blur together into sharp consonants and glowing tension. Aelith's posture shifts, all the softness falling away as the prince returns.

The change is immediate enough to unsettle me. While it's not exactly louder, and definitely not crueller, it's absolutely sharper. It's like watching someone slide armour back into place.

It's weird seeing it happen right in front of me.

Kael speaks again, quieter this time, and Aelith's jaw tightens.

I glance between them. "I'm either missing something important, or you're both aggressively discussing soup."

Neither answers, which is all kinds of suspicious.

Then Aelith looks at me properly, and his expression changes. Guilt, maybe. Or consideration.

Without hesitation, he switches to English.

Kael's eyes flick briefly towards him. It's a tiny reaction but still noticeable. Like even that small accommodation matters.

Again, him doing so is ridiculously sweet.

"Shanae is preparing a supply journey," he explains. "In two days, she plans to travel towards the city."

The city.

The palace.

Right.

I straighten slightly. "Okay. That sounds… important."

"It is," Kael says.

His English is clipped, heavy around the edges and less fluid.

Honestly, everyone in this world sounds unfairly hot when accented.

Distracting.

I latch onto the important part before my brain fully derails. "Shanae's Varek's second, right?"

Kael nods once.

Yesterday, Sonny had spent almost an hour enthusiastically filling me in on everything I'd apparently missed while unconscious. Most of it had sounded vaguely insane.

Rebels.

The Queen.

Politics.

Secret missions.

The purple guy, Varek, who sounds terrifyingly competent, had apparently helped save my life before vanishing into danger and not returning. I remember talking to him before, but honestly, so much has happened since then that, though I'd tried very hard to keep up, everything pre-coma is vague.

"So she's going looking for him?" I ask.

A shadow crosses Kael's expression. "Supplies first. Information second."

Ah. That kind of mission.

I glance towards Aelith. "And this is bad because…?"

The room goes a little too quiet. Kael and Aelith exchange a look in that deeply annoying way people do when they're already deep in the conversation and you're the last one invited to it.

Then Kael exhales slowly. "Rumours are spreading through Terrafeara."

Aelith goes still beside me.

My chest tightens instinctively. "What kind of rumours?" I ask carefully.

Kael's gaze shifts to Aelith again before returning to me. "That the prince has defected."

The words land strangely at first. They're too abstract.

Defected.

It's like something out of a movie instead of a real thing attached to a real person sitting beside me.

Then my brain catches up.

The prince.

The Queen's son.

The male currently holding my hand in the middle of a rebel stronghold.

Oh.

Oh, that's catastrophically bad.

I blink once. Then again. My brain catches up slowly, buffering slowly like a computer with dial-up. “You mean…” I gesture vaguely at Aelith. “Like, joined the rebels defected?”

“Yes.”

I look at Aelith fully now. Really look at him.

The prince.

The Queen’s son.

The terrifyingly pretty guy currently sitting beside me and holding my hand like letting go would deeply traumatise him. And suddenly the pieces start connecting in ways they really hadn’t before.

The Queen.

The palace.

The way people reacted to him.

The fear.

The expectations.

“You could get hurt because of me,” I say quietly.

Aelith’s attention snaps to me. “No.”

“But—”

“No.”

The force behind it cuts straight through me.

Kael watches us silently for a moment before speaking again. “The rumours alone are dangerous. If the Queen believes he has aligned himself with the Riftborn cause—”

“She already believes it,” Aelith says coldly.

The weight of it finally hits me properly then, and real fear curls low in my stomach.

Not for me but for him.

I don’t think I’ve really understood until now what Aelith’s been risking just by being here.

I swallow hard. “You could lose everything.”

Aelith’s expression sharpens. “I already nearly lost you.”

The words—too immediate, too honest—come out rougher than anything else he’s said all afternoon.

The entire room suddenly feels too small.

Well. That’s deeply unfair to say to a person who’s already emotionally compromised.

Kael looks away first, clearly deciding this has become too personal for his continued presence. “I will inform Iris that you are awake and coherent enough to argue,” he says dryly.

“I’ve been coherent this whole time,” I protest.

Kael’s expression says otherwise.

Rude.

Kael’s gaze lingers on Aelith a moment longer before he turns away. There’s not even a glimmer of disapproval in Kael’s expression, but he appears worried, which unsettles me more.

Silence settles between us after Kael leaves.

Not comfortable silence.

Heavy silence.

The kind that comes after realising feelings are no longer existing in isolation from the rest of the world.

Aelith still hasn’t let go of my hand.

Only now does the thought occur to me that maybe it should scare me.

I stare at Aelith for a long moment while my thoughts trip over each other. The idea of him walking away from all of that should probably make me feel guilty.

Instead, mostly it makes me want to keep him close, which feels dangerously selfish.

My chest suddenly tightens with the need for contact, for reassurance, for his presence.

A couple of Riftborn pass beyond the nearest curtain. Both of them glance towards us before quickly looking away again.

Not subtle enough to miss.

Right. People are definitely watching this unfold.

Before I can overthink it, I grab his wrist.

Aelith blinks in surprise as I tug him towards the bed.

Well, “tug” is generous. He’s significantly larger than me, which means it’s less dragging and more aggressively encouraging a very dangerous mountain to relocate itself.

“Dawson,” he starts.

“Nope,” I interrupt. “Come here.”

His brows pull together, confused but compliant enough to let me guide him to the bed.

The second his butt’s on the mattress, I shift forward and climb directly into his lap.

Not gracefully.

At all.

There’s a moment where my weak legs nearly betray me, but Aelith steadies me, gripping my waist with startling speed before I can fall sideways off the mattress.

And then—

There.

I settle across his thighs, straddling him fully, arms looping around his shoulders as I press myself close.

Aelith freezes. His hands stay exactly where they first landed, like he’s afraid moving them might somehow break me. His restraint feels deliberate. Heavy. Like every careful movement is sitting on top of instincts he’s trying very hard not to unleash inside a room full of witnesses.

I bury my face briefly against his neck and exhale.

Relief hits me so fast, it’s almost embarrassing. Which probably says something deeply concerning about how attached I’m already becoming to this male.

“You were worrying me,” I mumble against his skin.

His entire body goes impossibly still. Then, slowly, carefully, one of his hands slides up my back. “I am unharmed,” he says quietly.

“Not the point.”

He exhales softly against my hair.

For a moment, neither of us moves.

Then I pull back just enough to look at him properly. “You know I’m going to panic about you now, right?”

His expression shifts slightly. “You should not.”

“Well, I am. So.” I shrug. “Welcome to mutual emotional distress.”

A tiny flicker of amusement touches his face.

The warmth between us settles after that, heavy and close and strangely easy despite the conversation we’ve just had. I stay where I am, legs bracketing his hips, hands resting loosely against his shoulders while his palms remain firm on my waist.

And suddenly, I realise this is the closest we’ve actually been.

Not just physically.

In all ways.

Before the coma, before almost dying, before waking up tangled in all this bond stuff, we'd barely had time together at all. A few conversations. A few moments. Enough for me to start reacting to him like he belongs close to me.

Which still feels vaguely insane.

Maybe it's the bond thing. Maybe it's nearly dying. Maybe my brain just broke somewhere during the whole interdimensional-coma experience.

Whatever the reason, the attachment keeps digging deeper before I can properly examine it. And the really concerning part? Some increasingly reckless part of me wants to believe him that I shouldn't worry.

Maybe sitting in the prince's lap in the middle of the medical bay while emotionally compromised is inappropriate on several levels.

But screw that. This feels good. No. Better than good.

Comfortable in a way that reaches deeper than my body. Like some tight, restless thing inside me finally unclenched the second I climbed onto him.

Aelith's hands shift slightly on my waist, big and warm and careful despite how strong he is. The movement pulls me fully into awareness of just how close we really are.

Because now I can smell him properly.

Not just the clean medicinal scent clinging faintly to him from spending days in here with me, but something darker beneath it. Warm skin. Smoke. Rain. Him. It hits me straight in the chest, then lower.

Heat curls through me fast enough to be embarrassing. My cock starts hardening almost instantly beneath the loose shorts Iris shoved me into yesterday.

I try very hard not to think about it.

Unfortunately, my body is no longer interested in cooperation.

Aelith goes still beneath me. Completely still.

His nostrils flare once. Then again.

Right… so he noticed.

The air between us changes. It becomes heavier. While it's not awkward, it's so much worse as it feels intentional.

His grip tightens on my waist, not enough to hurt, but enough to pull me a fraction closer, and then he inhales slowly, deeply.

Across the room, metal clinks softly somewhere near the supply shelves. Neither of us looks away, which honestly feels like its own kind of

problem.

Fuck.

The sound that leaves him is barely audible, but it shoots straight through me anyway. My cock twitches against him.

Okay. This is officially becoming a situation.

I should move.

Definitely.

Absolutely.

Instead, experimentally, I rock my hips forward just slightly.

Aelith groans. The sound is rough and shaky and loud enough that heat flashes through me all over again. His head tips back a fraction, dark hair slipping over his shoulders as the bioluminescent markings along his throat and chest pulse brighter.

The sight hits me hard enough to steal the breath from my lungs. This isn't just attraction. It's a far heavier emotion.

Because he looks wrecked already. Like wanting me is costing him something.

I do it again before I can overthink it. This time there's friction.

My cock presses against him through the thin fabric of my shorts, already aching, already embarrassingly hard. A sharp pulse of pleasure hits me so suddenly when I realise how hard he is, too, and my breath catches.

"Oh," I breathe.

Aelith clamps harder onto my waist. "Dawson."

My name sounds wrecked in his accent. Absolutely wrecked.

I look at him properly then. Really look.

He's stunning in a way that almost doesn't feel real. Tall and elegant even sitting down, all sharp lines and controlled power wrapped in deep blue skin that seems to glow faintly beneath the dim medical lights. The silver-white markings tracing over his body pulse softly now, brighter than before, winding over his throat and disappearing beneath the collar of his shirt like living starlight.

His beautiful eyes lock onto mine, blown wide enough to reveal raw emotion—want and need—beneath all that prince-shaped control.

His nostrils flare again as he breathes me in, and the subtle shimmer beneath his skin flickers harder when I shift against him.

God. I want to kiss him. Desperately.

The urge hits so suddenly, it almost startles me. Not because I want him—that part stopped being surprising days ago—but because wanting him already feels frighteningly instinctive.

Aelith's hands flex hard against my waist. Rather than pulling me closer, he holds himself still. His eyes stay locked on mine with an intensity that suddenly doesn't feel playful anymore.

The entire room feels too small. Too warm. Too aware. And somewhere underneath all of it, a quiet voice in the back of my head finally whispers: *This is becoming something neither of us knows how to control.*

I lean forward slightly—

"Well," a dry voice cuts through the room, "you're clearly recovered enough to be discharged."

I jerk so hard, I nearly fall off him. Aelith catches me, glaring over my shoulder with enough force to kill lesser beings.

I twist around to see Iris standing near the entrance with her arms crossed and the expression of someone profoundly unimpressed by literally everything she's witnessing.

Behind her, Sonny is visibly trying not to laugh himself unconscious.

Traitor.

I clear my throat and attempt dignity while still fully straddling the prince with an erection that could currently be used as a structural support beam.

"Hi, Iris," I say weakly.

Her gaze drops briefly to where Aelith's hands are still gripping my waist. "…Mm."

I offer a wide smile.

Iris, apparently deciding she's witnessed enough second-hand embarrassment for one lifetime, clears her throat and informs me I'm officially being released from the medical bay.

"Excellent," I say immediately, mostly because remaining here after what just happened feels medically inadvisable for everyone involved.

Aelith looks less enthusiastic about the announcement.

Actually, scratch that.

He looks like someone's personally suggested abandoning me in the wilderness with only a decorative spoon for protection.

"You are not fully recovered," he argues.

Iris doesn’t even glance up from the notes she’s looking over. “He’s stable, conscious, mobile, and significantly more irritating than he was three days ago.”

“Thank you,” I say warmly.

“That wasn’t praise.”

“It felt like praise.”

Sonny wanders over then, clearly having recovered from nearly laughing himself to death earlier. “I’ve been told I’m on room duty.”

Aelith’s eyes narrow.

Sonny ignores him with the ease of a man who long ago accepted chaos as a personality trait.

“It’s not far,” he tells me. “And before anyone gets dramatic”—he looks directly at Aelith—“yes, it’s one of the better rooms.”

“I was not about to become dramatic,” Aelith says flatly.

Sonny and I both stare at him.

“…Sure,” Sonny replies.

Leaving the medical quarters feels strangely huge.

I don’t think I realised how boxed in I’d been until I step outside properly. The air is immediately different—cooler, fresher, carrying the scent of damp stone, glowing plant life, and distant cooking fires.

Dathanor stretches around us in layers of carved stone and strange bioluminescent light, the cavern enormous enough that my brain still struggles to process it properly. Bridges curve overhead between levels carved directly into the rockface, glowing crystals embedded in the walls casting soft blue-purple light across everything.

Everywhere I look, people are on the move.

There are a few humans and Glowranth, but the rest are mainly comprised of so many other species that I don’t know the names of them. A few kids dart between structures while exhausted adults try and fail to keep track of them. It all feels so alive.

I turn slowly as we walk, trying to take everything in at once. “This place is insane,” I breathe.

Sonny grins. “In a good way or a bad way?”

“Oh, definitely good insane. Like if a fantasy novel and an underground survival bunker had a baby.”

“You compare things strangely,” Aelith mutters beside me.

“That’s because my mind is a gift.”

He makes a low sound that might be disagreement.

I grin.

Walking still takes effort, but I'm steadier now. My muscles ache in that weak, shaky way that reminds me I spent too many days unconscious instead of doing literally anything useful, but at least I no longer feel like my legs are going to abandon me mid-step.

Aelith stays close enough that our arms brush every few strides. He's most definitely hovering, but it's arguably very prince-shaped hovering.

Honestly, it's kind of nice.

"So," Sonny says as he leads us along another curved stone corridor, "what's the weirdest place you've ever stayed?"

"Oh, easy," I answer. "Tiny mountain hostel in Switzerland. Twelve people sharing a single room with a broken heater, and a guy named Lars who sleep-talked exclusively about cheese."

Sonny snorts.

"I thought it couldn't get worse," I continue solemnly, "but then Lars started sleepwalking."

"That sounds unsafe," Aelith says.

"It was deeply unsafe. One night he stood over my bunk at three in the morning whispering, *'Gruyère'* like the ghost of a haunted dairy king."

Sonny fully laughs at that, though Aelith looks absolutely horrified. Maybe I need to explain what cheese is, then he'll find it funny.

"We also had a toilet that froze solid," I add. "Honestly, after that, not much scares me."

"You lived this way willingly?" Aelith asks, sounding personally offended by the concept.

"It's called adventure."

"It is called poor planning."

I point at him. "That attitude is why you've never had a haunted cheese man."

"I do not desire one."

"You don't know what you're missing."

We continue deeper into the cavern, the pathways becoming emptier the farther we move from the busier communal areas. Eventually Sonny slows near a smaller tunnel carved into the rock wall.

"This is you," he says.

I step inside, and honestly? It's kind of perfect.

The room is cavelike but comfortable, the stone walls softened with woven fabrics and glowing lanterns that cast warm amber light instead of the cooler blue tones outside. There's a bed layered with thick blankets tucked into one corner, a small table, shelves carved directly into the walls, and what looks suspiciously like an actual door leading to a washroom.

My eyes widen. "Oh," I say softly. "This is nice."

Aelith's jaw tightens as he says, "It is inadequate."

I blink.

Sonny blinks.

Aelith walks further inside, sweeping his gaze over the room with growing displeasure. "The bed is too small. The stone remains exposed. There are no proper privacy partitions."

Sonny folds his arms. "Mate, most people here are sharing rooms with three other people and a questionable amount of fungus."

"My mate nearly died."

"And now he has a room."

"It is not suitable."

I stare at Aelith.

Aelith, meanwhile, appears to be escalating emotionally towards full royal tantrum. "There should be additional heating," he continues sharply. "And guards nearby."

Sonny raises an eyebrow. "Right, because nothing says relaxing private recovery like armed supervision."

"You are mocking me."

"I'm surviving you."

Aelith's markings flicker brighter. "You do not understand what he requires."

And—

Oh.

Oh, I really don't like that tone. Not because he's angry, but because he's being cruel.

The shift catches me off-guard so hard, it almost physically hurts.

I straighten slowly. "Aelith."

He stops immediately.

Sonny glances at me briefly but wisely says nothing.

"You need to wind your neck in," I say firmly.

Silence.

Actual silence.

Aelith turns towards me fully, surprise flashing across his face.

“He was helping,” I continue, trying very hard to keep my voice calm despite the disappointment curling low in my chest. “And you’re acting like a cockhead.”

Sonny coughs suddenly into his fist while Aelith looks genuinely horrified.

Not offended. Horrified.

“I was not—”

“You were,” I say gently.

His expression shifts rapidly then, anger collapsing inward into something else entirely. Shame, maybe. Regret.

“It is not my intention to disrespect you,” he says quickly.

“I know.”

“And this place is beneath what you deserve.”

“That’s not the point.”

He steps closer, clearly trying to fix it. “Dawson—”

“No.” I shake my head softly. “I get it. You’re worried. But you can’t speak to people like that.”

Aelith’s jaw tightens. “I was ensuring your comfort.”

“And Sonny was helping with that.”

A long pause stretches between us, and I suddenly feel tired in a completely different way than before. Not physically this time but emotionally. Because I know this behaviour. I’ve seen it before from rich clients and entitled tourists and people who thought money or status gave them the right to treat others badly.

I hated it then too.

“There was this resort in France,” I say quietly, mostly thinking out loud now. “Best pay I ever had. Gorgeous slopes. Free accommodation. Rich people throwing money around like confetti.”

Sonny stays very still nearby.

“I quit after six weeks because I couldn’t stand how they spoke to staff.” I look back at Aelith. “I can handle a lot of things. But not that.”

His composure cracks. “I would not harm you.”

“I know.” I exhale softly. “But maybe you should go walk off your tantrum for a bit.”

Aelith goes completely still. The hurt on his face hits all at once, sharp enough that I almost take it back.

"I do not wish to leave you."

"I know," I repeat quietly. "But I need a little space right now."

He clearly wants to argue. Instead, after a long moment, he bows his head slightly—to me. "I will return when you wish it." And then he leaves.

The second he disappears down the tunnel, the room feels wrong. Too quiet. Too empty. Which would be less alarming if I hadn't only known him for a matter of days.

I stare at the doorway for a second too long before forcing myself to exhale.

"Well," Sonny says carefully. "That went better than expected."

I let out a startled laugh despite myself. "That was *better?*"

"You didn't throw anything."

"Valid."

Silence settles for a moment, then Sonny steps further into the room. "You okay?"

I paste on a smile. It wobbles a little around the edges. "Yeah," I say. "I will be."

The reassurance feels slightly fake even to me. Not because I regret calling Aelith out. I don't. But because the look on his face before he left keeps replaying in my head anyway.

I rub the back of my neck and glance around the room again. "I think maybe some time by myself will do me good."

Sonny studies me for a second like he knows my smile is at least partially bullshit. Still, he nods. "All right," he says softly. "You know where we are if you need us."

I smile again, more genuinely this time. "Thanks."

Then, finally, he leaves too. And for the first time since waking up, I'm alone.

The silence after Sonny leaves feels… loud. Not actual loud. Nobody's yelling. Nothing's exploding. No monsters are trying to eat me.

But the quiet presses weirdly against my skin anyway.

I stand in the middle of the room for a long moment, staring at absolutely nothing while my brain desperately tries to catch up with my life.

Which is difficult.

Because just yesterday—okay, not literally yesterday; time's become a little slippery lately—I was in a snowstorm, wondering if my seasonal contract was worth another year of dealing with tourists who thought skiing drunk was a personality trait.

Then a magical world-rift opened.

Which, honestly, still sounds fake when I think about it too hard.

One minute: snow.

Next minute: Surprise! Monsters!

It was a very rude transition.

I move slowly towards the bed and sit down heavily, rubbing both hands over my face.

God. It's all… a lot. Like objectively, scientifically, emotionally *a lot*.

Alternate world. Deadly creatures. Glowy people with energy powers. A rebel camp hidden underground. An evil queen. Political unrest.

And apparently there's some kind of bond tying me to a prince who looks at me like I've already become essential to him. Which feels like a completely reasonable thing to emotionally process after being kidnapped into another dimension.

I stare blankly at the cave wall for a second because, okay, that part's still catching up to me too. Not just the bond itself, but him.

A very large, very blue, deeply terrifying prince who somehow went from stranger to emotionally overwhelming in what feels like five minutes.

And also—

Male.

That part probably deserves slightly more processing than I've given it so far.

"…Huh."

Because okay, yeah, that part's still catching up to me.

The really unsettling part is how quickly my body accepts him.

Every time he touches me, a deep, instinctive part of me settles, like it recognises him before the rest of me catches up. And honestly? That should probably freak me out more than it currently does. The thing my brain keeps snagging on, though, is the fact that he's a *man*.

A very large man.

A very large naked-adjacent monster man, because holy shit, these people wear approximately three fewer layers of clothing than is normal Earth standards, and it is *distracting*.

I fall backwards onto the bed with a groan and throw an arm over my eyes. The problem is, my dick is extremely on board with all of this.

Traitorous little bastard.

I think back to earlier in the medical bay and regret it. The warmth of Aelith beneath me. The sound he made when I rocked against him. The way his hands felt gripping my waist.

And—oh no.

Oh *no.*

I vividly remember feeling him through his trousers too.

Which means my brain, against all odds, has processed the fact that my terrifying monster prince has a cock.

A very real cock.

A cock my body apparently found deeply interesting.

I sit bolt upright again. “Jesus Christ.”

The glowing lantern in the corner offers no guidance. Because that’s the thing. I’ve never liked guys.

Ever.

Not once.

Sure, I’m open-minded. I pride myself on that. Try anything once, you know? Twice if snacks are involved.

Hell, there was that one threesome in Austria during a snow season after too many tequila shots that gifted me with a truly irresponsible amount of confidence.

I point accusingly at absolutely no one. “And the guy did *nothing* for me.”

Nothing.

He was a nice dude. Great hair. Very supportive emotionally.

But while everyone else was having a profound bisexual awakening during the romp, I mostly remember wondering whether there were leftover fries for afterward.

And now? Now one look from Aelith hits me hard, which would already be enough to cause a small identity crisis on its own.

Except it’s not just physical. That’s the part that keeps catching me off-guard. Because I don’t only want him when he’s touching me. I want him nearby. I want him looking at me in that terrifyingly focused way. I want the room to stop feeling so empty when he leaves it.

And honestly? That part is significantly more emotionally catastrophic than suddenly discovering I'm apparently into men under very specific interdimensional circumstances.

Maybe it's the bond. That has to be it, right? Some kind of magical soulmate override, or pheromone nonsense, or alien biology.

Because the alternative is that I'm becoming genuinely attached to him frighteningly fast.

Except…

I close my eyes. The memory of Aelith looking at me flashes behind them.

He's not just hot, and my reaction isn't just physical.

That look in his eyes when I woke up. How he held my hand like it mattered more than breathing. The way he looked at me after I told him to leave keeps replaying in my head.

He didn't appear angry. It was worse than that. Hurt practically radiated from him, like the idea of space between us physically pained him.

My chest aches unexpectedly. "Oh," I mumble to the ceiling.

That part feels more threatening somehow.

Because attraction is manageable. Attraction is just biology being embarrassing.

Feelings are different. They're dangerous. Especially when they're aimed at a prince who looks at me like he'd burn down kingdoms before letting something happen to me.

I drag the pillow over my face with a groan. "This is too much emotional damage for one month."

And somewhere beneath the panic, confusion, attraction, and interdimensional existential crisis… I already miss him.

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CHAPTER
THREE

THE NAP HELPS.

Admittedly, not emotionally.

Emotionally I'm still one inconvenient thought away from screaming into a glowing cave wall about destiny and monster dick. Which would be easier to joke about if the whole thing didn't suddenly feel alarmingly real.

But physically? Huge improvement.

I woke up disoriented for about three seconds before remembering where I am, who I am, and that somewhere nearby exists a terrifyingly pretty prince who could probably smell my emotional instability from three rooms away.

Which is another thing.

The bond.

It's… there. Not overwhelming or painful. Just constant.

It's a quiet tug somewhere beneath my ribs, like my body keeps orienting itself towards him automatically whether I want it to or not. Like some part of me notices his absence even before the rest of me does.

It's confusing and weird, and I swear it feels stronger now than it did before the coma. Which is deeply unfair considering we've barely known each other long enough to establish favourite colours.

I stare at the cave ceiling for a long moment, then groan and drag myself upright. "Nope," I mutter aloud. "We're taking a small break from the glowing prince situation." Because right now every thought about him seems to spiral directly into either emotional vulnerability or inappropriate sexual tension.

Neither feels especially manageable.

And I really need perspective.

And possibly carbs.

Honestly, mostly carbs.

Which is how I end up wandering through Dathanor, trying very hard not to think about Aelith's hands on my waist or the sound he made earlier.

Spoiler: I fail immediately.

The camp is busier now than it was earlier, clogged with people moving along the glowing cavern pathways, carrying crates, tools, and bundles of supplies. Kids dart between adults with alarming speed while a few guards pretend not to keep watch over everything.

There's life here. Messy, crowded life.

It reminds me a little of ski lodges during peak season. Different setting, significantly more bioluminescence, but same exhausted survival energy.

It should feel easier being away from Aelith for a while. Instead, I keep catching myself looking up whenever footsteps sound vaguely familiar. Which is objectively pathetic behaviour after knowing someone for less than a month.

I follow the scent of cooking along the cavern pathways until familiar sounds drift towards me—voices, laughter, metal clanging against stone.

Then the corridor opens up.

"Ohhh," I breathe.

Right. Okay. I *have* been here before.

Sort of.

The memories are fuzzy, like trying to recall a dream after sleeping too long, but I recognise pieces of it now that I'm actually conscious. The huge cavern spans two levels carved directly into the stone with glowing blue-green veins of bioluminescence pulsing faintly through the walls and ceiling.

The mess hall itself buzzes with life. Massive fire pits line the back wall beneath natural vents that somehow pull smoke upward through the cavern ceiling, and long tables are scattered across the open space, at which a few Riftborn of varying species are seated.

It smells incredible. Smoke. Spice. Roasted meat. Bread. And something fried.

Praise be.

"Look who finally escaped medical prison," Sonny calls from near the serving counter.

I grin and wander towards him.

The two cooks behind the massive plank counter both look up as I approach.

And wow. Okay. Sonny absolutely undersold them.

One of them—Decca, if I remember correctly—has four arms. Four actual arms. She's broad and intimidating and currently chopping meat aggressively enough that I instinctively respect her.

Beside her stands Molsi, who arches a truly impressive monobrow at me.

"Dawson," Molsi says slowly, their English somehow containing both elegance and exhaustion at the same time. "You appear significantly less corpse-like."

"Thank you," I reply warmly. "That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me all day."

Decca snorts and flips me off with two hands simultaneously.

Honestly?

Iconic.

I point at her. "I like you."

"She bites," Sonny warns.

"I bite too," I say.

Molsi's nose scrunches slightly. "That doesn't sound flirtatious when humans say it."

"Depends on the context," I reply.

Sonny groans. "Please don't start."

Too late.

I lean against the counter dramatically. "Okay, but genuinely, this place is amazing. I feel like I'm in some weird fantasy tavern where someone's about to offer me a side quest."

"You already got the side quest," Sonny says dryly. "It came with emotional trauma and a prince."

The way Sonny says "prince" makes my heart stumble in a deeply unhelpful way, which is annoying. More annoying is that he clearly notices with an impressive arching of his brow.

Molsi eyes me carefully. "You have been here before."

"I thought so!" I point excitedly. "My memories are all mushy, though. I remember food and vibes but not details."

"'Food and vibes' describes your entire personality," Sonny mutters.

I ignore him.

The longer I stand here, the more tiny fragments start clicking into place. Sitting at one of the tables. Someone arguing loudly nearby. Sonny flirting outrageously with everyone within a twenty-foot radius.

My gaze catches briefly on a cluster of glowing veins running through the wall near the fires.

“Those are real, right?” I ask. “The glowy things.”

“Yes,” Molsi says carefully.

“And they actually do something?”

Decca snorts. “Heat. Cooling. Energy transfer.”

“Oh my god.” I look around the cavern again, delighted. “You’re telling me this entire cave has climate control?”

“More or less.”

I stare for another second. Then, very seriously, I say, “I would like to apologise to caves everywhere for underestimating them.”

Sonny laughs loudly enough that several people glance over. “You settle in weirdly fast,” he says.

“What’s the alternative?” I shrug lightly. “Crying?”

“That is a normal response to dimensional displacement.”

“Yeah, but it sounds exhausting.”

That lands quieter than I intended.

A little too honest.

Sonny’s expression softens briefly before he nudges a plate towards me. Some kind of crispy fried spiral root thing sits piled beside strips of roasted meat dusted in glowing orange spice.

“Bloody hell.”

Sonny grins. “Right?”

“It tastes like someone looked at a potato and thought, *you know what this needs? Chaos.*”

The cook looks offended. “That is either an insult or the best compliment I’ve ever received.”

“Honestly?” I say around another bite. “Could go either way.”

A few minutes later, Sonny leads me towards one of the empty tables tucked near the edge of the cavern. Surprisingly few people are around at the moment. Most of them are still busy working elsewhere in the camp, I suspect.

Good. Because my brain is full of thoughts, and approximately none of them are normal.

I sit down across from him, still nibbling at my fried root thing.

"So," Sonny says carefully. "You look like someone about to say something deeply concerning."

I point at him. "That's because I am."

He sighs. "Excellent."

I lean forward. "Okay. Here's the thing."

"That phrase never leads anywhere good."

"I'm straight."

Sonny blinks once. "…Okay."

"And Aelith is very clearly male."

"Yes."

"And he definitely has a cock."

And somehow the part that's freaking me out most isn't even the physical attraction anymore, which feels like a whole separate problem.

There's a pause. A very long pause.

Somewhere behind us, a pan clatters portentously.

Sonny just stares at me.

I stare back.

Finally he says, "I'm not entirely sure what response you're looking for here."

"I don't know either!" I hiss. "That's the problem!"

A couple of green creatures glance over.

I lower my voice slightly. "Okay, logically, I know he has a dick because obviously he does. I *felt* it earlier." I pause. "Which was… memorable."

Sonny chokes slightly on his drink.

"And now I can't stop thinking about it," I continue helplessly. "Which feels like a major identity crisis."

Sonny rubs both hands over his face. "You know," he says slowly, "when I came down here today, this conversation was not high on my expectations list."

"I'm having a very strange week."

"You've had a very strange month."

"Valid."

I slump back in the chair dramatically. “I just don’t understand how my brain went from zero interest in men to *would absolutely climb that prince like a tree* in under a week.” And the worst part is, I don’t even think it’s just sex anymore.

Sonny goes very still. Then, very calmly, he asks, “You want to climb him like a tree?”

“Yes,” I say immediately. “Aggressively.”

He stares at me another second before bursting into laughter so sudden and violent, he nearly knocks over his cup. “Oh my god,” he wheezes. “You really do just say everything out loud.”

“I process verbally.”

“You process catastrophically.”

“Also true.”

He takes another breath, visibly trying to regain control of himself. “Okay. Right. Let’s approach this rationally.”

“Bold strategy.”

“Sexuality is complicated,” he says. “For a lot of people, it’s fluid. A spectrum. Attraction doesn’t always fit neatly into categories.”

I consider that. “Sure,” I admit. “But I’ve had opportunities before. There was this one threesome in Austria—”

“Oh, bloody hell.”

“Listen, everyone was very attractive and very enthusiastic, but the guy involved mostly made me want snacks afterward.”

Sonny covers his face briefly.

“I even tried focusing,” I continue earnestly. “Really gave it a shot. But nothing happened.” I sigh. “But Aelith?”

I pause. My brain straight away conjures up luminous eyes, glowing markings, rough blue, four-digit hands gripping my hips—

Oh no.

Heat rushes through me.

“Right,” Sonny says slowly, watching my face. “There it is.”

“What?”

“That expression.”

“What expression?”

“The one where you look like you’d let him ruin your life, willingly.”

I gasp softly. “That obvious?”

“Horrifically.”

I drop my head onto the table with a groan. “This is so weird.”

Sonny’s voice softens slightly. “Dawson. Does the thought of cock actually repulse you?”

I lift my head, scandalised. “Of course not. I have a cock. I love my cock.”

He blinks. “Okay.”

“I mean, he’s been through a lot with me.” I gesture vaguely downward. “Reliable guy. Team player.”

Sonny looks physically pained now. “Please tell me you didn’t name your dick.”

I hesitate.

His eyes widen. “Oh my god, you did.”

“Maybe.”

“Dawson.”

“It was one drunken joke that got out of hand!”

“What did you name it?”

I point accusingly at him. “You’re judging me in a deeply unsafe environment.”

“What did you name it?”

I sigh dramatically. “Sir Wiggles.”

Sonny fully folds himself over the table, laughing.

I sit there in dignified silence while he suffers. “It was funny at the time,” I mutter.

“You named your cock *Sir Wiggles*?”

“He has personality!”

“He absolutely does not!”

“You don’t know him like I do.” I laugh, too, but the sound fades quicker than it normally would because underneath all the joking, the realization still sits there waiting for me. This isn’t hypothetical anymore.

At that point Sonny’s still laughing too hard to continue functioning properly.

Honestly? Fair.

Eventually, he wipes at his eyes and takes a shaky breath. “Okay. All right. Let’s refocus before this conversation kills me.”

“Good plan.”

“So.” He points at me. “Forget your knighted penis for a second.”

“That’s a cruel sentence.”

“Does the thought of *Aelith’s* cock repulse you?”

The answer comes so fast it surprises even me.

“No.”

Not even slightly.

Honestly, the opposite.

Heat curls through me again, low and unwelcome. “I can’t wait to see it,” I admit helplessly. “Which feels insane to say aloud.” The honesty of that confession should probably alarm me more than it does.

Sonny watches me carefully now, more thoughtful than amused. “And the thought of sex with him?”

I immediately think about grinding against Aelith’s lap in the medical bay. About his groan. About how close I came to kissing him.

“Dude,” I say quietly. “If Iris hadn’t interrupted us earlier, I probably would’ve ridden his cock right there in the hospital bed.”

Sonny chokes on absolutely nothing. “Jesus Christ, Dawson.”

And the really reckless part? I’m not even embarrassed by how badly I wanted him. That probably should’ve been my first warning sign.

“What? Honesty’s important.”

“You say things with the confidence of someone who’s never heard of shame.”

“I’ve heard of it. Just never really connected with it personally.”

He shakes his head slowly, still half laughing despite himself. Then his expression softens again. “Look,” he says more quietly. “None of this is normal.”

I snort. “Understatement of the century.”

“I mean it. We got dragged into another world filled with monsters and magic-adjacent energy powers. Kael literally glows when he’s emotional.” He gestures vaguely around the cavern. “There are cave people making hash browns underground while a rebellion brews against a tyrant queen.”

“When you say it all together like that—”

“It sounds insane.”

“Very.”

Sonny leans back in his chair. “So maybe stop trying to measure this against what you thought your life was supposed to look like.”

I stare at him quietly.

“Fated mates are…” He pauses, searching for the words. “Next level. Humans don’t really have context for it. We didn’t grow up knowing bonds

like this existed."

My chest tightens slightly at that.

"You don't have to accept it," Sonny adds gently. "You know that, right?"

I blink. "What?"

"The bond." He shrugs. "You don't have to complete it. You don't have to finish the stages."

My pulse kicks at the thought of refusing, which is ridiculous, because the possibility of losing this bond shouldn't already feel frightening.

He continues, "Hell, you don't even have to sleep with him if you don't want to."

I bark out a laugh. "Oh, no, I definitely want to sleep with him."

Sonny groans.

"I'm serious! Have you *seen* him?"

"Unfortunately yes."

"He's so pretty, it's actually stressful."

Sonny rubs at his temple. "You're impossible."

"Probably."

The laughter fades slowly after that, leaving an unexpected seriousness behind.

I fiddle absently with the edge of my plate. "But it's weird, right?"

"What is?"

"That I feel this way. Like… I barely know him," I admit quietly, which is technically true. Except somehow it doesn't feel true anymore either.

Sonny's expression shifts, becoming unexpectedly warm. "Dawson," he says softly, "like I said, there's nothing normal about any of this."

I look up.

"Maybe stop trying to force yourself into the version of reality you thought existed before." He shrugs lightly. "Because clearly it didn't."

I take that in, trying my hardest to absorb his words.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," he continues, "especially because Aelith can absolutely be a prick—"

"Accurate."

"—but maybe you should just… enjoy this. Explore it. Make the most of the incredibly fucked-up situation we've all ended up in."

I stare at him for a long moment. Then slowly, a grin spreads across my face. "Okay," I say.

Sonny eyes me suspiciously. “That smile concerns me.”

“I think,” I announce, sitting up straighter, “I’m going to aggressively explore the hot monster prince situation.”

Sonny drops his head into his hands.

“Yeah,” I nod decisively. “That feels healthy.”

Sonny looks at me like he’s trying to decide whether I’m having a breakthrough or a complete psychological collapse.

Honestly? It could still go either way.

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CHAPTER
FOUR

I'VE MADE A MISTAKE. TECHNICALLY SEVERAL MISTAKES.

The first one is concluding that Sonny's advice about "exploring the situation" is actionable. The second is deciding I'm apparently going to *seduce* a prince.

A terrifying monster prince. A terrifying *alien* monster prince who could probably snap me in half accidentally when emotionally overwhelmed, which feels less like a solid romantic strategy and more like I'm actively making decisions while hormonally possessed.

Honestly, the flaws in this plan become obvious almost immediately. Mostly because Aelith is impossible to corner.

I spot him across Dathanor not even an hour after my deeply educational cafeteria conversation with Sonny. He's standing near one of the lower bridges carved into the cavern wall, speaking sharply with two guards while Shanae looms nearby, looking approximately one inconvenience away from murder.

And wow. Okay. Maybe admitting aloud that I want him has permanently altered my brain chemistry, because suddenly I'm noticing *everything*.

The way he stands. Tall and elegant in that unnervingly monstrous way unique to the Glowranth. The faint shimmer beneath his deep blue skin. The silver markings along his throat and arms pulsing softly as he speaks.

And god. His voice.

Even coming from across the cavern, it slides right under my skin.

I should probably be embarrassed by how quickly my body reacts. Instead I mostly think: *Oh no. He's hot again.* Worse, the sight of him eases

the restless knot beneath my ribs, like my instincts know him before my mind does.

Rude.

Aelith looks up suddenly and instantly finds me. Everything else disappears from his face the second our eyes meet.

The tension eases out of him so fast, it's almost visible, his attention locking onto me with an intensity that still sends a weird warm ache through my chest.

And then he starts towards me.

One of the nearby guards notices first and promptly looks away again like witnessing this interaction feels vaguely private, which is concerning. Mostly because it implies this behaviour has become noticeable enough for other people to recognise on sight.

Unfortunately, before Aelith gets more than three steps, one of the guards says something urgently in Glowranthian.

Aelith stops and slowly turns back. The look he gives the poor guy could probably peel paint.

I bite back a laugh while the guard visibly regrets existing.

Aelith responds sharply, clearly trying to end the conversation as quickly as possible, but Shanae cuts in next, crossing her arms with the energy of someone deeply unimpressed by princely bullshit.

I can't hear the words from here. I don't need to.

Aelith glances back at me again, then back at them. Then back at me. The frustration rolling off him should probably be intimidating. Instead, my stupid brain immediately translates it to *he wants to come over here.* Which feels like an incredibly dangerous thing to enjoy this much.

I lift a hand and wiggle my fingers helpfully. His nostrils flare.

Interesting. Very interesting.

Shanae follows his gaze towards me and smirks.

She says something else, and Aelith looks horrified.

I grin so hard, my face hurts. Maybe this seduction thing has potential after all.

I spend the next hour aggressively failing to get him alone. Every time I find him, someone else is there engaging him in yet another endless consultation. Meetings. Supplies. Scouts returning. Arguments about routes and guards and missing people and things I only vaguely understand

because politics here apparently operate at maximum stress levels all the time.

The whole rebel camp feels tense beneath the surface.

I catch fragments as I wander. They revolve around news from the city, the Queen, Varek still hiding away in enemy territory—enemy territory apparently meaning the royal city.

You know. Where the Queen, Aelith's terrifying mother, lives. No pressure there.

There's gossip about all the rumours spreading. Aelith is constantly being discussed like some sort of political incident instead of a person.

That part bothers me more the most.

The pull in my chest grows sharper every time I glimpse him across the cavern and don't get to touch him, which feels objectively insane. I've never been clingy in my life. Usually I'm excellent at casual. Great at distance. Great at not turning attraction into emotional dependency.

And yet every time someone else steals his attention, an uncomfortable knot forms beneath my ribs.

By late evening, I'm pacing near one of the emptier upper walkways, trying very hard not to spiral into a full existential crisis about soulmates and sexuality and otherworldly monarchies.

Again.

The thing is, I already know I want him. That part's not confusing anymore.

Confusing is the *why*.

Because attraction I understand and wanting someone isn't new.

But this? This feels bigger than attraction somehow. Like my entire nervous system has started reorganising itself around his presence.

If someone had asked me two months ago whether I'd ever end up obsessed with a giant glowing monster prince, I would've laughed so hard, I'd have pulled something. And now? Now I'm actively planning how to seduce him.

Life comes at you fast.

A familiar presence suddenly brushes against the bond in my chest. Warm. Immediate. Familiar enough now that my body reacts before my thoughts do.

I turn instinctively.

Aelith strides towards me through the dim cavern light, expression thunderous.

Oh. That's not his normal face. That's his *furious* face.

He reaches me quickly, scanning me like he's confirming I'm unharmed before speaking. "You left your room."

I blink. "Yes?" He knows this as he saw me earlier.

"I looked for you and were not there or where I saw you earlier."

"Okay?"

His jaw tightens, and I stare at him for a second. Then realization hits.

"Bloody hell," I breathe delightedly. "Did you miss me?"

Aelith goes completely still, which is basically confirmation.

Warmth blooms through my chest so suddenly, it almost steals my breath, which would probably feel less emotionally catastrophic if we'd known each other longer than five minutes. "That's adorable."

"It is not. I was worried."

My heart melts a little at that.

"You disappeared."

"I went for a walk," I clarify.

"Without informing anyone." The words come out tight, worried. Like he's been holding onto that tension since the second he realised I wasn't where he expected me to be.

I grin helplessly. "Princey, I'm pretty sure I'm allowed to roam the cave."

His eyes narrow slightly at the nickname. "You remain vulnerable."

"And you remain dramatic."

When Aelith exhales sharply through his nose, I step closer before I can overthink it. His focus sharpens fully onto me.

There it is again. That feeling. Like when he looks at me, nothing else exists. It should probably feel flattering. Instead, it mostly feels overwhelming. Because nobody has ever fixated on me this completely before.

I tilt my head slightly. "You're busy."

His expression darkens. "Unfortunately."

The word carries enough irritation to make me laugh.

"What's going on?" I ask more softly.

A hesitation follows, then he says, "Preparations."

"For the city thing?"

“Yes.”

The tension in him deepens again.

I don’t fully understand the politics here, but I understand enough to know none of this is simple. The palace. The Queen. His place in all of it.

I also understand enough to know he looks exhausted.

“You need a break,” I decide.

“I do not.”

“You absolutely do.”

“I have responsibilities.”

“And I have a plan.”

That gets his attention.

His eyes narrow slightly. “A plan.”

“Yes.”

“Why does this concern me?”

“Because you’re involved.”

Aelith looks instantly suspicious. Good. That means he’s learning.

I glance around the mostly empty upper walkway before leaning in conspiratorially. “I’m trying to seduce you.”

Silence. Actual silence.

Aelith stares at me like his brain just stopped functioning entirely. Which, honestly, is incredible for my self-esteem.

“You…” He stops, then tries again. “You are what?”

“I’m wooing you.”

His markings flicker wildly. The pulse races visibly beneath his skin now, bright enough that a passing guard glances over before she pretends not to notice.

Oh. So I really did break him.

“I consulted Sonny,” I continue helpfully.

That somehow makes his expression worsen. “You consulted *Sonny.*”

“Yep.”

He hesitates. Then his tone bleeds with caution, maybe a little dread, when he asks, “Why?”

“Because he’s experienced.”

Aelith closes his eyes briefly like I’ve just informed him I handed state secrets to a pyromaniac.

I beam at him. “This is the best day of my life.”

“You should not take advice from Sonny.”

“Too late. I’ve already taken it on board.”

He searches my face carefully now, confusion and heat and disbelief tangling visibly beneath all that rigid princely control. Like he genuinely doesn’t know what to do with the fact that I’m choosing this willingly. “You are serious.”

“Extremely.”

The bond pulses sharply between us, warm enough to feel almost alive now. Eager and restless, like whatever exists between us is becoming increasingly impatient with distance.

Aelith inhales slowly, then steps closer. Not enough to touch but enough that I feel surrounded by him. “Dawson,” he says quietly, and the way he says my name should probably be illegal somewhere.

My skin prickles.

“You continue to say dangerous things to me.”

I grin up at him. “Yeah?”

His eyes darken. “Yes.”

Oh. Oh that’s… that’s *very* encouraging.

I swallow hard, suddenly aware that this whole confident-seduction-mission thing felt significantly easier before he looked at me like that. Because now I’m remembering several important things simultaneously.

One: He’s huge.

Two: I really want him.

Three: I have absolutely no idea what I’m doing.

Still, I’m fully committed to this mission and refusing to let my sudden lack of confidence derail me now.

I reach for his hand carefully. The second our fingers touch, the tension in him visibly shifts. It doesn’t disappear, but it’s redirected. Like contact with me settles a restlessness beneath his skin.

“Come with me,” I say quietly.

His gaze flicks over my face like he’s searching for hesitation. He won’t find any.

Slowly, deliberately, his fingers close around mine. And finally… finally, I get him alone.

The second I do, all the confidence I’ve been carrying around for the past hour evaporates. Which is annoying because I’d felt very brave earlier.

Now I’m standing in front of Aelith with my heart trying to escape through my throat and my brain struggling to remember why I’d thought

any of this would be easy. Which is inconvenient because I'd been feeling extremely confident about my ability to seduce a prince.

Turns out confidence is much easier when the terrifyingly beautiful prince in question isn't staring at me like he already wants me too much.

Aelith doesn't seem to be faring much better, which is kind of reassuring, but I'm also tempted to gulp loudly, then whisper, "We're doomed!"

He's watching me with that impossible intensity of his, bright eyes fixed entirely on me as though the rest of Dathanor has ceased to exist. The look should probably make me nervous. Instead, it sends warmth spreading through my chest.

The bond hums softly between us. Or maybe that's just me. At this point, it's difficult to tell.

Neither of us speaks for a moment.

The silence isn't awkward, exactly. It's just... full. Heavy with everything that happened in the medical bay. Heavy with everything we'd almost done. Heavy with all the things neither of us seems quite sure how to say.

I take a step forwards, and Aelith's attention sharpens. Not that he'd been looking anywhere else.

My mouth twitches. "You know," I say, trying for casual and failing miserably, "when I announced I was planning to seduce you, I had a much better idea of how this was supposed to go."

His expression becomes harder to read—confusion, suspicion, possibly concern—before he says, "You announced this publicly."

"I did."

"You informed multiple people."

"I like an audience."

His brow furrows. "I'm beginning to think that's not true."

I laugh despite myself.

God, he's beautiful.

The thought arrives so suddenly and so sincerely that it steals the rest of my breath.

Before the coma, I'd known he was attractive. Anyone with functioning eyesight would know that. But this is different. This isn't noticing. This is wanting.

Wanting him to smile.

Wanting him to touch me.

Wanting to know what it feels like when all that carefully controlled restraint finally breaks.

The realization should probably scare me. Instead, it feels weirdly right.

I reach for him before I can second-guess myself. My fingers catch the front of his tunic.

Unfortunately, Aelith is significantly taller than me. The romantic effect is somewhat diminished when I have to physically tug him downward.

Aelith blinks, then without hesitation bends to accommodate me. The movement is so automatic, like he's already learned how to meet me halfway, that it sends another dangerous rush of warmth through my chest as I realise that somewhere along the way, he started instinctively adjusting himself around me.

I don't think. If I think, I'll stop, and if I stop, I'll panic. So instead, I lean forward and press my mouth to his.

The kiss only lasts a second. Maybe less.

A brief brush of lips that's soft and tentative. Enough to tell me whether this is real or I imagined the pull between us.

Enough to—

The bond snaps tight between us so suddenly, it steals the breath from my lungs. Aelith freezes. Completely. Not pulling away. Not rejecting me. He's just utterly motionless, like the kiss physically stunned him.

Every muscle in his body locks, and I pull back. "Oh shit." I wince, realising that I've apparently read everything so very wrong.

His eyes widen.

Heat floods my face as panic crashes in behind it. "Sorry," I say quickly.

"Dawson—"

"No, that was my fault. I should have asked first. That's completely on me. I got carried away and—"

"Dawson."

I stop talking. Mostly because he's looking at me like he doesn't understand what's happening. I focus on his expression, the bond feeling flimsy between us, and try to get a read on the situation.

He doesn't appear upset or even angry. Just... stunned.

My throat tightens. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." The answer came too quickly.

I narrow my eyes. “Then why do you look like someone just dropped you off a cliff?”

Aelith says nothing, which, admittedly, isn’t unusual. The problem is that now I’m paying attention. Really paying attention.

The faint shimmer racing beneath his markings. The uncertainty in his expression. The way he keeps glancing at my mouth before looking away again. And realisation flickers to life.

Oh.

Oh.

“No way.”

His jaw tightens.

I stare at him. “Aelith.”

“Dawson.”

“You’ve never kissed anyone.”

The silence is all the confirmation I need.

For a moment, neither of us moves. Warmth floods my chest so suddenly it almost catches me off-guard.

Not mockery.

Not even amusement, really.

Affection.

The words “Bloody hell, babe” escape me.

His eyes close briefly.

“You’ve never kissed anyone.”

“Dawson.”

“Not even once?”

His expression somehow becomes even more pained. And that answers another question entirely.

My eyes widen. “Babe.”

He looks away.

The silence stretches, and I clap a hand over my mouth, and through my fingers, say, “Aelith.”

“Dawson.” His jaw is tight, his expression more disgruntled than pained, though.

And I can’t help it. I really can’t. Tact was never really something I mastered. “Are you a virgin?”

The look he gives me could strip bark off trees.

Unfortunately, it also confirms the answer, and somehow that makes my heart grow three sizes. Not because there's anything wrong with being experienced, and definitely not because there's anything wrong with being inexperienced.

But because suddenly so many things make sense.

The intensity.

The uncertainty.

How he'd responded to me in the medical bay like every sensation was happening for the first time.

The way he'd looked at me like he wanted me but wasn't entirely sure what to do with that information. And suddenly the idea of this male wanting me stops feeling abstract. It feels dangerous because I don't think Aelith knows how to want anything halfway.

"You are delighted."

"I am."

"You should not be."

"I'm a little bit delighted."

"A little?"

"A lot." My grin is wide because I'm not alone in this.

Sure, I've had hookups and flirtations and enough questionable holiday decisions to fill several legal disclaimers. But never with another guy.

And one thing about Aelith is that he is unmistakably male.

Tall. Broad. Deep-voiced. Built like some terrifying fantasy warlord who accidentally wandered into my sexual awakening.

Honestly, I never stood a chance.

Aelith watches me warily. "You are thinking too much."

"Probably."

"You are smiling."

"Definitely."

His eyes narrow, which just makes me smile harder. "Come here."

"I am already here."

"You know what I mean."

Aelith looks immediately suspicious.

Good. That means he's learning.

I take his hand before he can argue and tug him towards the edge of the bed. Thankfully, sitting down solves the height problem. Mostly.

The second he settles onto the mattress, I climb up beside him and turn to face him properly. Now we're closer to eye level, and I don't feel like I need climbing equipment every time I want his attention.

For a moment neither of us speaks.

The room feels smaller than it did a minute ago. Or maybe that's just because all my attention is focused on the male sitting beside me.

Aelith watches me steadily, radiant eyes fixed on mine. The intensity should probably make me nervous. Instead, it makes my chest feel tight.

Not bad tight but dangerous tight. Because suddenly I remember that this isn't just some random hookup. This isn't some holiday fling or a guy I'll never see again after a week in a ski town.

This is Aelith.

The male who crossed half a world, looking for me. The male who sat beside my bed while I was unconscious. The male who gave away pieces of himself to keep me alive. And the male who is apparently risking everything to stay here.

I swallow hard as this no longer feels like harmless flirting with a hot monster prince. Because if this goes badly? I think it might genuinely break something in both of us.

And fuck. It hits me what's actually on the line.

If he doesn't want this? That'll hurt. The thought lands hard enough to steal my breath.

Aelith notices straight away. His brow furrows as he says my name. "Dawson."

The concern in his voice somehow makes it worse.

I laugh softly, mostly because the alternative might be panicking. "Sorry. Thinking."

"You are always thinking."

"That's not true."

His expression disagrees.

I smile despite myself. Then I reach for him slowly, giving him every opportunity to move away.

My hands settle against his face. The second they do, his breath catches. It's such a small reaction that most people wouldn't notice. I do.

His skin is warm beneath my palms. The faint glow underneath his markings shifts slightly at the contact. My chest tightens as I realise how much trust this takes.

Aelith could flatten most people without trying. He could command armies and likely has. He could probably terrify half this world with a single look. And right now? He’s letting me lead. He’s trusting me to guide him through an experience he’s never had before.

The responsibility settles heavily in my chest.

I once got lost in my own hotel corridor for twenty minutes. Nobody should trust me this much. But somehow, Aelith does.

“Relax,” I murmur.

His eyes search mine. “I’m trying.”

The honesty in those two words nearly undoes me. When I brush my thumb across his cheek, he closes his eyes. The reaction isn’t dramatic. That’s what makes it devastating. It’s clear nobody has touched him this way before. Nobody has ever been gentle with him simply for the sake of being gentle.

Protectiveness surges through me so suddenly it almost catches me off-guard, and not because Aelith is weak. He’s definitely not that. But suddenly I understand how rarely anyone has probably treated him kindly without expecting something in return.

I lean closer. Not to kiss him. Not yet. Just enough that our foreheads almost touch. “Aelith?”

His eyes open again. “Yes.”

“Can I kiss you?”

The question hangs between us.

For a heartbeat, he simply stares at me. Then his gaze drops to my mouth. His nostrils flare, and the markings along his throat pulse brighter. “Yes.”

The word came out rough, almost strained. Like it cost him something. And somehow that’s hotter than anything else that’s happened so far.

I lean in. Our lips brush. Soft. Tentative.

The kiss lasts barely a second before I pull back.

Aelith freezes when I do. I don’t think it’s because he doesn’t want it. He’s just trying too hard. Trying to understand. Trying to get it right. The uncertainty is written all over him.

I smile. “There isn’t a test.”

His brow furrows. “What?”

“You look like you’re preparing for an exam.”

For a second, he simply stares at me. Then, unexpectedly, his mouth twitches.

The tiny hint of a smile hits me embarrassingly hard, like he's just trusted me with something precious. “There you are,” I whisper.

His expression changes. Softens.

I kiss him again. This time he follows me, tentatively at first. Learning. Exploring.

Each kiss grows a little surer than the last. A little less cautious. A little more honest. Then the last of his restraint melts away.

Aelith exhales sharply against my mouth like he’s forgotten how breathing works. The sound shoots straight through me. His hand finds my waist, then his other hand joins it. There’s no trace of him being tentative anymore. No uncertainty. It’s like he’s finally stopped overthinking and started feeling.

And that should probably scare me more than it does, as I’m suddenly very aware this male feels everything intensely.

And fuck, that might make it even worse, because suddenly every carefully controlled wall inside him starts slipping. I can see it, feel it.

The prince disappears.

The warrior disappears.

The male who carries everyone’s expectations disappears.

What’s left is just Aelith.

And he wants me.

The realisation crashes through me so hard, it nearly hurts. Not because of the bond. Not even because we’re fated, but because I can feel it in the way he touches me. The way he looks at me. The way his entire body seems drawn towards mine.

Like he’s spent weeks holding himself back and finally doesn’t know how anymore.

The next kiss is deeper. Needier.

And Aelith melts. Actually melts. All that control dissolves beneath my hands until he’s leaning into me completely, following every touch, every brush of lips, every quiet encouragement.

For someone so powerful, he suddenly feels astonishingly vulnerable.

The trust of it nearly undoes me. And that’s when I know I’m in trouble. Because somewhere between teasing him and teaching him and watching

him unravel in my arms, this stopped being about curiosity or attraction. It stopped being about the fact that I'd never wanted a man before.

This is Aelith. And I'm already falling far harder than I should be.

I decide to take mercy on him before he spontaneously combusts.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You are going to regardless."

The answer comes so quickly that I bark out a laugh. He's not wrong. If there's one thing nobody has ever accused me of, it's keeping my thoughts to myself. My foster mother used to swear she always knew exactly what was happening inside my head because the words were usually halfway out of my mouth before my brain caught up.

"Fair point," I admit.

My attention is drawn once again to the glowing patterns running beneath his skin. They're still brighter than normal, pulsing softly along his throat and disappearing beneath the collar of his tunic. The more time I spend around Glowranth, the more I'm convinced their markings are incapable of lying. Every time Aelith gets flustered, embarrassed, irritated, protective, or even remotely emotional, they react before the rest of him does.

And considering I've spent the last however-many minutes making him cycle through all five emotions repeatedly, they're putting on quite the light show.

My grin widens, and Aelith immediately looks suspicious.

"You knew what kissing was."

The reaction is immediate. His shoulders tense, his markings brighten, and suddenly everything clicks into place.

I stare at him, and Aelith stares right back.

"Kael would do better remembering he's my guard and behaving appropriately."

I hold back my smirk. Knowing Sonny, I don't expect Kael stands a chance.

"He also needs to ensure he locks his door."

Then realization hits me like a runaway snowboard. "You walked in on Kael and Sonny, didn't you?"

The silence that follows tells me everything I need to know.

I clap a hand over my mouth. "Oh my god, you absolutely did."

His markings flare so brightly, they’re practically glowing. “It was accidental.”

His voice is flat, but I can hear the humiliation underneath it. That only makes it worse.

A laugh escapes before I can stop it. I lean forward, pressing my forehead against his shoulder as I try—and fail—to regain control of myself. “You poor bastard.”

“It was not amusing.”

“It’s a little amusing.”

“It was deeply inappropriate.”

The wounded dignity in his voice nearly finishes me off. I laugh harder while Aelith endures it with all the patience of a man questioning every life choice that led him here.

Eventually I manage to pull myself together enough to sit upright again. The smile remains, but the laughter fades as I notice the genuine discomfort still lingering beneath his embarrassment.

That’s when the amusement gives way to tenderness. Because underneath all of this is a male who’s trying. A male who’s clearly been carrying feelings he doesn’t fully understand and navigating them entirely alone.

Fuck, the idea of hurting him feels unbearable in a way I’m not remotely prepared to unpack yet.

When my hand finds his arm, the tension beneath my palm eases. “Aelith.”

His gaze rises to mine. The shift in atmosphere is almost tangible. “What?”

The question comes quietly. I question even asking the thing that’s been sitting in the back of my mind.

The amusement slowly fades. Not completely, because watching Aelith try to survive embarrassment is still one of my favourite new hobbies, but enough that the question sitting in my chest becomes impossible to ignore.

I trace my thumb across the back of his hand. The movement is absent-minded, but the question I’m contemplating isn’t. Because beneath the teasing and the flirting and the kissing lies everything we've been avoiding.

The bond.

The future.

Us.

It all feels far more real than I’m remotely prepared for. I swallow, suddenly nervous in a way I wasn’t a minute ago. “Aelith?”

His attention shifts. Every time. It doesn’t matter what’s happening around us or what he’s thinking about. The second I say his name, he focuses entirely on me.

It’s becoming alarmingly addictive.

“Yes?”

I draw a slow breath. “Do you want this?”

His brow furrows. “What?”

I look down briefly before meeting his eyes again. “The bond,” I say quietly. “Us. Everything that comes with it.” The words feel dangerously serious the second they leave my mouth.

Aelith looks genuinely uncertain. Vulnerable.

He’s always seemed so sure of everything. Even when he’s growling at people or pretending not to care, there’s usually an air of certainty around him. Now, though, I can see him carefully choosing his words.

When he finally speaks, his voice is barely above a whisper. “Yes.”

The simple honesty of the answer settles heavily between us.

His gaze drops briefly before returning to mine. “I want you.”

My breath catches at the sincerity weaved around the words. He’s completely, painfully genuine.

For a second, neither of us says anything. Then I smile. “Aelith,” I say quietly, “I’ve never been with another guy before.”

The relief that flashes across his face is immediate. Then, just as quickly, it disappears. A different tension replaces it.

His hands tighten slightly around mine. “You are certain?”

At first I don’t understand the question. Then I follow his gaze, and the pieces click together slowly. Not because he’s asking badly but because I genuinely hadn’t considered it.

Not once. It was honestly a no brainer for me that I didn’t have to ask myself.

The realization lands with surprising force.

Aelith isn’t worried about kissing. He isn’t worried about whether I find him attractive. He’s worried about being too different.

The thought hurts. Actually hurts. Because the idea of him expecting rejection feels worse than the idea of my own confusion ever did, and this incredible male has somehow convinced himself that this might be the thing

that sends me running. That I'll wake up one morning and remember he's not human. As though I haven't spent the last week looking at him and seeing only Aelith.

My chest tightens. Maybe because I know that feeling. Not the species part but the wondering. The waiting for someone to realise you're not quite what they wanted. The fear that eventually they'll decide you're too much of one thing or not enough of another.

I've carried that one around before, and honestly, I hate that he's carrying it now.

I move closer until our foreheads touch. The contact seems to calm both of us.

"I'm delighted," I say, meaning it.

His brow furrows. The confusion is honestly adorable.

"I know that sounds strange."

"A little."

I laugh softly. "Yeah. Probably."

His mouth twitches.

I let my thumb brush lightly across his jaw. "This isn't about species."

When he lifts his eyes to mine, the intensity there nearly steals my breath.

"It's not about you being Glowranth. It's not about fate or magic or whatever weird cosmic matchmaking system this world uses."

The markings along his throat brighten.

"It's about you."

The words feel important. Necessary.

"It's you sitting beside my bed when everyone thought I might not wake up. It's you crossing half a world, looking for me. It's you getting angry on my behalf. It's you worrying about me every five seconds."

Aelith's expression softens.

I smile. "It's you being stubborn and overprotective and occasionally a complete pain in the arse."

His eyes narrow.

My smile widens. "There he is." Then I lean forward and press a gentle kiss against the corner of his mouth. "And honestly?" I murmur, pulling away. "More than anything, it's you being Aelith."

For a long moment, he simply looks at me.

The doubt slowly leaves his expression. The tension eases from his shoulders. And when his forehead presses more firmly against mine, the tightness in my chest loosens in response.

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CHAPTER
FIVE

SEVERAL DAYS LATER, IT FEELS LIKE THE ENTIRE CAMP IS HOLDING ITS breath.

Varek returned sometime before dawn yesterday.

Without Pax.

Nobody says it outright because technically Pax stayed behind willingly. From what I've managed to piece together through overheard conversations, tense meetings, and Sonny's increasingly dramatic attempts to explain rebellion politics using food metaphors, Pax is supposedly still safe in the city, helping from the inside.

Supposedly being the important word there.

Because Varek looks like someone carved rage into a living creature and forgot to leave room for breathing.

The entire atmosphere of Dathanor has changed since he came back.

Before, the camp felt tense in a general apocalypse-adjacent kind of way. People were stressed, exhausted, occasionally bleeding, but there'd still been moments of laughter drifting through the caverns. Music sometimes. Conversations. Actual breathing room.

Now?

Everything feels tighter.

Sharper.

Like everyone's waiting for catastrophic news to arrive.

Even the guards seem more rigid. Scouts move constantly in and out, carrying reports and maps and messages while arguments flare up in corners before dying almost immediately whenever Varek walks past.

Which he does a lot.

Usually at terrifying speed.

The male barely seems to sleep. Every time I see him, he's either deep in discussion with Shanae, glaring at maps like they're deliberately foiling him, or stalking through the caverns, radiating enough controlled fury to make nearby conversations stop.

Honestly, it's impressive.

And slightly terrifying.

"Aelith nearly bit someone's head off this morning," Sonny informs me casually as we haul another crate of supplies through one of the lower storage tunnels.

I glance sideways at him. "Only nearly?"

"Growth."

"That's healthy."

"Mm. Debatable."

The tunnel opens into one of the larger supply caverns, and the noise hits all at once.

There are people everywhere. Some of them are stacking crates against stone walls. Others are checking weapons. Healers are sorting supplies at alarming speed. Several scouts are arguing near one of the tables spread with maps and glowing markers.

The entire place buzzes with stressed efficiency.

And right in the middle of it all stands Varek.

Bloody hell, the purple male is terrifying.

Not loudly. Not dramatically. If anything, that would probably be less intimidating.

Instead, he stands near one of the central tables speaking in low, razor-sharp tones while Shanae looms beside him with her arms crossed. Kael's nearby, too, his expression thunderous.

Varek says something cold enough that one of the scouts visibly swallows.

Sonny grimaces. "Yeah. That's been happening a lot."

"He okay?"

Sonny snorts softly. "No."

Fair.

My gaze drifts towards the far side of the cavern.

And there he is.

Aelith stands near one of the supply racks, speaking with two guards while reviewing some kind of inventory list. Even exhausted and irritated, he still looks unfairly beautiful in that deeply inconvenient way unique to Glowranth males.

The second I spot him, warmth bubbles in my stomach.

Annoying.

What's more annoying? He lifts his head almost immediately like he felt me looking. His attention locks onto me, and everything else disappears.

The guards are still talking. Someone drops a crate nearby. Varek's currently terrifying half the cavern. None of it matters.

Aelith looks at me like the entire room narrows down to one point and I'm it.

The tension in his shoulders eases fractionally. Then his gaze shifts to the crate in my arms before it hardens again.

Oh no. I already know that expression.

"He's about to become difficult," Sonny mutters.

"You say that like it's a new development."

Aelith starts towards us, which would probably be flattering if it didn't also carry the energy of an approaching royal intervention.

"Dawson," he says the second he reaches me.

"Princey."

His eyes narrow at the nickname. "Why are you carrying that?"

I blink down at the crate in my arms. "Because apparently people lifting things is how rebellions function."

"You should not be exerting yourself."

"I'm carrying potatoes, not scaling Everest."

"You are still recovering."

"Aelith, I was in a coma, not disassembled."

Sonny abruptly becomes fascinated by literally anything else.

Traitor.

Aelith reaches for the crate. "Give it to me."

"No."

His brows draw together. "No?"

"I'm helping."

"You are exhausted."

"I slept ten hours."

"You still appear tired."

“That’s just my face.”

Aelith looks unconvinced.

Unfortunately, before I can continue defending my perfectly reasonable potato-based rebellion contribution, someone nearby snaps sharply—

“Move those to the western stacks already.”

The command isn’t cruel, just stressed, coming from one of the younger guards, who strides past carrying an armful of weapons, clearly overwhelmed and running on approximately four minutes of sleep.

Unfortunately for him, Aelith hears it and goes still.

The entire shift in him is instant enough that my stomach drops.

The guard notices too late.

Aelith turns slowly towards him, expression flattening into cold and princely authority. “You will not speak to him that way again.”

The cavern stills.

Conversation cuts off at the nearest tables. Someone pauses mid-step. Even the sounds of crates shifting seem to stop.

The Glowranth guard pales. “I—”

“He is assisting this camp despite his condition.” Aelith’s voice remains calm, which somehow makes it worse. “You will show appropriate respect when addressing him.”

Oh no.

No no no.

The poor guard looks like he’s about to throw himself directly into the nearest cavern wall. And suddenly every single person nearby is staring at us. At me.

Heat crawls violently up my neck. “Aelith,” I say quickly.

He ignores me completely.

The guard lowers his head slightly. “My apologies.”

“You are dismissed.”

The guard leaves, silence hanging heavy behind him. And then, from somewhere across the cavern—

“That was unnecessary.”

Varek’s voice cuts through the room like a blade.

Every muscle in Aelith’s body tightens.

Oh, fantastic. Now we’re doing this publicly.

Varek stands near the central table, still holding one of the maps. His expression remains perfectly controlled, but the sharpness in it could

probably split stone.

“He disrespected Dawson,” Aelith replies evenly.

“He’s exhausted,” Varek says. “Everyone here is exhausted.”

A dangerous pause follows.

Shanae watches the exchange like she’s mentally preparing for violence, while Kael just looks profoundly tired. And me? I would quite like the ground to swallow me whole.

Aelith’s jaw tightens. “That does not excuse—”

“What exactly are you correcting here?” Varek interrupts quietly.

The question lands harder than shouting would have. Not because Varek sounds angry, but because he sounds exhausted.

The entire cavern feels suddenly brittle. Too tense. Too aware.

I glance towards the retreating guard, who now looks deeply horrified by the fact that he accidentally triggered a princely confrontation in the middle of a supply cavern.

Talk about mortifying.

Varek’s gaze shifts briefly towards me before returning to Aelith. “You think he needs protection from a stressed guard snapping during supply sorting?”

Aelith’s expression hardens further. “I think Dawson deserves respect.”

“And you think humiliating one of our people publicly helps morale right now?”

Okay. Yep. This needs to stop.

“Aelith,” I say more firmly.

This time his attention snaps towards me instantly, which honestly only makes the entire thing worse because suddenly everyone gets to watch the prince redirect all his emotional intensity onto me.

Yup, fantastic.

I force a smile that probably looks slightly deranged. “Can I borrow you for a second?”

He searches my face, concern replacing irritation so quickly, it almost gives me emotional whiplash. “Dawson—”

“Now,” I say quietly.

A pause, then he nods once.

The tension in the room doesn’t ease as we walk away. If anything, I can feel people watching us harder.

Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful.

We don’t stop until we reach one of the quieter upper corridors overlooking the lower cavern levels. The noise from below dulls into distant echoes while glowing veins pulse softly through the stone walls around us.

The second we’re alone, I turn towards him fully.

Aelith looks immediately wary.

Good. He should.

“That,” I say carefully, “was deeply unnecessary.”

His expression sharpens. “He spoke to you disrespectfully.”

“He was stressed.”

“That does not permit—”

“Aelith.” My voice comes out sharper than intended.

He stops talking.

The silence afterward feels strange. Heavy. Because this isn’t the medical bay argument. This isn’t teasing or flirtation or awkward kissing lessons.

This is different.

And worse? I can already tell he genuinely doesn’t understand why I’m upset.

“He didn’t do anything wrong,” I say more quietly.

“He raised his voice at you.”

“Yes. Because everyone is exhausted and terrified and running on fumes.”

“He still should not have spoken to you that way.”

The obstinate certainty in his tone makes frustration flare unexpectedly in my chest. “That’s not the point.”

His jaw tightens. “Then explain it to me.”

The words aren’t aggressive, just strained. Like he’s trying very hard to understand and failing.

I drag a hand through my hair roughly. “You embarrassed him.”

“He embarrassed himself.”

“No.” I shake my head sharply. “He made one stressed comment while trying to keep half this place functioning. You turned it into a public execution.”

Aelith goes still.

Not angry still.

Wounded still.

And annoyingly, that makes this harder.

“He upset you.”

The quiet certainty in those words nearly derails me completely. Because there it is. The real problem. Aelith doesn’t know how to separate someone upsetting me from something needing to be corrected.

“He didn’t upset me. I promise.” My chest tightens painfully.

“You were disrespected.”

“Aelith, I’ve worked customer service.”

His brow furrows slightly.

“I once had a drunk man scream at me for twenty minutes because a ski lift closed during a literal blizzard.”

Aelith’s expression darkens. “Why?”

“Because the weather had apparently inconvenienced him.”

“That male was an idiot.”

“Correct. But my point is that people snap sometimes when they’re stressed.”

“He still should not—”

“No.” I step closer before he can continue. “Listen to me.”

The command lands harder than intended, and Aelith falls silent.

“That guard wasn’t cruel,” I say more softly now. “He wasn’t trying to hurt me or offend me. He was stressed and overwhelmed and probably terrified about what’s happening with Varek and Pax and how that’s going to impact us all.”

At Pax’s name, Aelith’s expression shifts to understanding, maybe. Or possibly guilt.

“He’s one of your people,” I continue quietly. “And you humiliated him in front of the entire cavern because he snapped once.”

A long silence follows. The defensive edge leaves Aelith's posture, replaced by thoughtful silence before he defends, “I did not intend harm.”

“I know.”

And I do know. That’s the problem. Because none of this came from arrogance, exactly. It came from care.

Overwhelming, instinctive, uncontrolled care.

“I was worried,” he admits finally.

The words land softly enough that some of my irritation weakens.

Damn him.

“You disappeared earlier this week,” he says quietly. “Today you looked exhausted. Then someone spoke harshly to you, and—” His jaw tightens.

And suddenly I can see the logic chain perfectly.

Varek returning without Pax, his mate. Aelith nearly losing me. The camp unravelling around us. Everything sharpens painfully into focus.

“You panicked,” I realise softly.

His silence confirms it, which is worse somehow. Because now I’m not looking at entitlement anymore. I’m looking at fear wearing royal armour.

That’s still not okay, but it’s understandable in a way that aches unexpectedly.

I exhale slowly. “Aelith.”

His eyes rise to mine.

“You can’t do that.”

The words clearly hurt him. Not because I’m angry but because I’m disappointed. And somehow I think that lands harder.

“No one’s ever going to feel comfortable around me if you react like that every time someone gets short-tempered.”

His expression tightens. “I do not care if they feel comfortable.”

“I do.”

That stops him cold, and the silence stretches again.

“I don’t want people scared to talk around me,” I continue more quietly. “And I definitely don’t want them scared because of me.”

Aelith looks away briefly. The movement alone tells me he finally understands at least part of it. “The guard was frightened,” he admits reluctantly.

“Yes.”

His jaw flexes. “I dislike that he disrespected you.”

The honesty in the statement nearly undoes me a little, as there’s nothing manipulative in it or calculated. Just raw instinctive protectiveness aimed directly at me with absolutely no moderation.

God. Loving this male is going to be exhausting. And the really dangerous part? Some awful, reckless piece of me still melts a little every time he looks at me like I matter that much.

I step closer slowly. Aelith watches me carefully now, uncertainty finally visible beneath all the rigid control.

“You don’t have to protect me from everything,” I say quietly.

His expression shifts. “I failed to protect you once already.”

The words hit me like a punch.

Oh. Oh, that’s what this is really about.

The coma.

The bond.

Almost losing me.

My irritation softens painfully around the edges. “Aelith.”

He says nothing.

“You didn’t fail me.”

His eyes close briefly. And suddenly he looks exhausted too. Like he’s been carrying fear around in such a tight hold, he doesn’t know how to loosen his grip anymore.

I carefully reach for his hand. The second our fingers touch, some of the tension leaves him.

The bond hums low and restless between us. Still too intense. Still too much. But now I finally understand why.

“I need you to trust me too,” I say softly.

He lifts his gaze again.

“I can handle people being stressed sometimes. I can handle people snapping. You don’t have to go to war every time someone looks at me wrong.”

A tiny flicker of embarrassment finally appears beneath his expression.

Good. That’s progress.

“You compare things dramatically,” he mutters.

I stare at him flatly. “You publicly threatened a potato guard.”

His mouth twitches despite himself.

Victory.

A small victory.

But still.

“I overreacted,” he admits reluctantly.

“A bit.”

“A significant amount?”

“Yes.”

A long exhale leaves him. Then, more vulnerable, he says, “I embarrassed you.”

The fact that he notices actually matters more than the apology itself.

“You did.”

His shoulders tighten again, and I squeeze his hand gently before he can spiral too hard into guilt. “I know why you did it.”

“That does not excuse it.”

Well, that’s unexpectedly mature. I blink at him.

Aelith immediately looks suspicious. “Why are you staring?”

“I think you just developed emotionally.”

His expression turns deeply unimpressed.

“Never mind, my broody sunshine prince is back,” I say warmly.

A reluctant flicker of amusement finally breaks through the tension. And just like that, the frustration in my chest loosens too. Not fully, as the problem still exists, but enough.

Aelith’s love comes tangled up with power and instinct and fear in ways neither of us fully understands yet, but at least now we’re finally looking at it properly instead of pretending it isn’t there.

For a moment, neither of us moves. The cavern around us hums softly with distant noise from elsewhere—voices echoing up through the stone corridors, crates shifting somewhere deeper in the supply caverns, the constant restless movement of a rebellion that doesn’t stop simply because we’re emotionally compromised. But up here, tucked away from the chaos, everything feels strangely quieter.

Smaller somehow.

Aelith still watches me carefully, though some of the tension has finally eased from his shoulders, though it’s not gone completely. I’m beginning to suspect it never fully disappears around me anymore. Honestly, same.

“You publicly threatened a potato guard,” I remind him.

His eyes narrow slightly. “You continue repeating this.”

“Because it’s objectively funny.”

“It is not.”

“It absolutely is.”

A reluctant flicker of amusement pulls briefly at the corner of his mouth, and there it is again—that ridiculous ache in my chest every time I manage to coax a reaction out of him. It’s becoming embarrassingly rewarding. Like I’m a field scientist collecting rare emotional expressions from an extremely dangerous alien prince.

The silence that settles between us feels softer than before. Not awkward. Just close. Different.

We’ve crossed some invisible line over the past few days. The uncertainty’s still there, but it doesn’t place an insurmountable barrier between us anymore. Neither of us pulls automatically away whenever our hands brush now. We don’t hesitate quite so much when we drift too close

together. The wanting still exists. So does the nervousness. But now there's familiarity tangled up in it, too, and honestly, that might be the most dangerous part.

My thumb drifts absently across the back of his hand, and Aelith's attention drops to the movement.

Bloody hell, he reacts to touch like he's starving for it.

Understanding pulses painfully through my chest at the realisation. Before I can overthink it, I step closer, and Aelith goes still.

"You're staring again," he murmurs.

"I'm considering your punishment for emotionally terrorising supply staff."

"I apologised."

"Hmm, did you, though?"

"Several times."

I simply look at him.

When I don't say anything, he finally says, "In my head." His eyes narrow faintly when my lips twitch. "You are enjoying this too much."

Probably. Definitely.

I tilt my head slightly. "Maybe a little."

Aelith exhales softly through his nose, though his attention never leaves my face. The bond pulses warm and restless between us, milder than before but still very there. Alive. Aware of every inch separating us. It's becoming increasingly difficult to tell where my emotions end and his begin, which should probably concern me more than it currently does.

I reach up slowly this time, brushing my fingers lightly along his jaw. The reaction is immediate. His breath catches softly, and the markings beneath his skin brighten in a slow pulse of silver-white light.

And there it is again—that dangerous ache low in my chest every time he responds to me like touch means something enormous.

I kiss him before I can think too hard about it.

The second our mouths meet, Aelith exhales sharply against my lips. He's affected as much as I am.

The kiss deepens almost immediately in a way it hadn't before. Still careful. Still restrained. But less uncertain. Aelith's hand settles on my waist reflexively, pulling me closer with quiet insistence rather than hesitation.

I make a soft sound against his mouth before I can stop myself, and the bond flares warm enough to feel almost liquid beneath my ribs. Aelith

reacts instantly. His grip tightens fractionally—not controlling, not demanding. Instinctive.

The kiss turns slower after that. Less desperate than earlier. More deliberate. Like he's learning me now. The way I tilt my head. The sounds I make. The places touch lingers longest. And honestly? That might somehow be more dangerous than the frantic unravelling from before because now I can feel how intensely he pays attention to everything.

When I finally pull back slightly, Aelith follows automatically before catching himself. His eyes open slowly, fixed entirely on me, and the look in them nearly melts my spine.

"Well," I murmur breathlessly. "That's becoming a problem."

His brow furrows faintly. "Problem?"

"You kiss like you're trying to permanently alter my brain chemistry."

"I do not know what this means."

"Unfortunately, I think you do."

His markings pulse brighter again.

My grin widens slightly before light catches my attention lower down the corridor. A faint silver-blue shimmer flickers briefly beneath the stone wall beside us, almost like liquid moving through the rock itself.

I blink, trying to figure out what I just saw. "Did the wall just glow… well, more than normal?"

Aelith glances towards it without concern. "Yes."

"Okay. Cool." I pause. "Why?"

Another pulse of pale light threads softly beneath the surface of the carved stone. This time the rock shifts slightly afterward—a thin crack near the base seals itself smoothly closed.

I stare.

The wall stares back.

"Excuse me?"

Aelith follows my gaze again, then looks mildly confused by my reaction. "The structural damage was irritating."

I blink slowly. "You fixed the wall."

"Yes."

"With your mind?"

A pause follows, as does his look of confusion. "With energy."

Right. Of course. That clears everything up completely.

I stare at him another second while my brain desperately tries to catch up with the fact the Glowranth I've been making out with apparently just casually repaired a cavern wall like it was a mildly inconvenient maintenance issue.

"You can just… do that?"

Aelith's expression shifts slightly towards cautious amusement. "You have seen Glowranth abilities before."

"Not like that!" I gesture vaguely at the perfectly repaired stone. "Usually someone's glowing dramatically or nearly dying or being stabbed during it."

"That does happen often."

"I've noticed."

Another flicker of light pulses faintly beneath his markings as he watches me process this.

And suddenly I realise something. "You weren't even concentrating."

His head tilts slightly. "Not significantly."

"What do you mean not significantly?"

Aelith glances towards the wall again like he genuinely doesn't understand why I'm reacting this strongly. "The stone was unstable."

"That sentence is insane."

"It required adjustment."

"You sound like you're discussing crooked furniture."

A faint pulse of amusement brushes unexpectedly through the bond.

Not mine.

His.

Oh.

Oh, that's new.

I stare at him. "Did you just emotionally laugh at me?"

Aelith's expression turns wary. "Emotionally laugh?"

"The bond thing!" I point accusingly between us. "I felt that."

For a second, he simply watches me. Then, slowly, his expression softens. Not with amusement exactly but with quiet warmth. "You felt me," he says quietly.

The words land strangely low in my chest, because suddenly this has once again stopped feeling theoretical. The bond. The connection. Whatever terrifying magical soulmate nonsense is happening between us.

It's real.

Not metaphorically real.

Actually real.

I swallow hard, and of course Aelith notices. He lifts his hand slowly towards my face before stopping halfway, like he's still giving me room to pull away if I need it.

I don't. I meet him halfway to lean into the touch.

His reaction is instantaneous. The bond flares warmer, stronger, and somewhere beneath the emotional pull between us, faint silver-blue light curls softly along the inside of his wrist where his skin touches mine.

I jolt slightly. "Jesus Christ!"

Aelith immediately looks alarmed. "Did I hurt you?"

"No!" I stare openly at his arm. "You glowed at me."

His brow furrows. "That is normal."

"It absolutely is not normal."

"It is for me."

Fair point.

The light shifts faintly again beneath his skin, softer now. Not dramatic or showy like I've seen during healing or training. Just responsive somehow. Alive.

I stare openly this time. "That's ridiculous."

Aelith looks increasingly uncertain about whether or not he's being insulted.

"You're basically a sentient mood lamp."

His silence lasts a beat before he tilts his head. "A what?"

I laugh helplessly, pressing briefly against his chest before I can stop myself. The sound startles another pulse of warmth through the bond, and suddenly Aelith's attention sharpens fully onto me again.

Not with the alert focus of a prince or the calculated vigilance of a warrior, but with a quieter hunger that steals my breath.

I feel the shift straight away. The atmosphere changes with it, the same way it always seems to lately whenever we forget ourselves for too long. The wanting returns fast between us now. Easier than before. More instinctive.

Aelith's hand settles more firmly against my waist, and my pulse jumps hard enough that I suddenly become very aware of how alone we are up here. And for one dangerous second, I seriously consider dragging him

directly back to my room and discovering exactly how much worse this chemistry can get.

Then shouting erupts somewhere below us in the supply cavern, and the moment shatters.

Aelith goes tense, his attention snapping towards the noise while I blink hard and drag myself reluctantly back into reality.

Right.

Rebellion.

Impending political collapse.

An intense monster prince.

All still happening.

Damn it.

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CHAPTER
SIX

THE ENTIRE CAMP FEELS WRONG BEFORE ANYONE SAYS A WORD.

Not dangerous, exactly. Worse. It's quiet.

But it's not actual silence. Dathanor never truly falls silent. Somewhere deeper in the caverns, people still move supplies between storage chambers while guards rotate along the bridges carved into the stone overhead. The kitchens still smell faintly of roasted roots and smoke, and distant voices echo through the tunnels in low, tired conversation.

But beneath all of it sits tension so thick, it presses against my skin.

I feel it the second I step into the main cavern beside Aelith.

Something's happened or is about to.

Aelith feels it too. I know because the second we emerge onto the upper walkway overlooking the central command level, his posture shifts subtly beside me. He's more alert. More focused. The easy warmth that's existed between us for the past hour vanishes beneath instinctive readiness.

Below us, the command chamber doors stand open. Inside, Varek is destroying the room. Not metaphorically. Actually destroying it.

Stone cracks beneath another impact hard enough to shake the floor beneath my boots. The remains of a shattered table scatter across the chamber while maps and splintered wood litter the ground around Varek's feet like the aftermath of an explosion.

And Varek, Jesus Christ, I've never seen anything like him before.

This goes far beyond anger. It's primal and terrifyingly focused. The air itself feels wrong around him somehow, heavy and violent like the room's struggling to contain what's happening inside him.

Another crack splits through one of the stone pillars as Varek drives his fist into it hard enough that fragments explode outward across the floor. Several people nearby instinctively flinch.

Shanae doesn't. She stands directly in front of him despite the destruction, expression sharp and controlled while Kael remains several feet away, looking grim enough that my chest tightens instinctively.

"What happened?" I whisper.

No one answers immediately. Then someone below says the name.

Pax.

The realization lands almost simultaneously with the pain that twists violently across Varek's face before disappearing beneath control again.

Oh. Oh no. My chest tightens painfully.

Across the chamber, Varek goes still in that deeply frightening way people do right before violence. Not loud stillness. It's so much worse than that. It's controlled stillness, weaponized stillness, which honestly, I had no idea existed until this moment.

The destruction around him suddenly makes more sense.

I glance instinctively towards Aelith and find him already looking at me. The moment our eyes meet, there's a visible shift in his expression. Not softer exactly, but focused.

There it is again. That terrifying way he locks onto me like everything else becomes secondary.

Around us, I realize it's happening elsewhere too.

Kael's attention keeps drifting towards Sonny, who now stands frozen near the chamber entrance, looking pale beneath his usual sarcasm-infused armour. Down below, Shanae hasn't physically touched Varek, but her entire stance remains turned towards him like she's bracing herself against whatever comes next.

Everyone with a mate reacts. And I mean *everyone*.

The realization settles strangely heavy in my chest because Varek looks devastated. Not broken. Worse. Like his entire world has narrowed to one impossible point, leaving no room for anything else.

Bloody hell, I hate this. I hate people hurting.

The feeling hits hard enough that my own chest aches in response, and before I can stop myself, my hand reaches for Aelith's. The second our fingers touch, his grip closes around mine.

Warm. Steady. Certain.

And for one brief, selfish moment, relief floods through me so intensely, I almost feel guilty for it. Because Aelith's here. Beside me.

Safe.

Below us, another sharp crack echoes through the chamber. Varek's breathing sounds wrong even from here. Too controlled, like every inhale is being forced through his rage by sheer discipline alone.

Then he turns, the movement abrupt enough that several guards tense.

His eyes lock onto Aelith. "We move immediately," Varek says.

His voice itself is terrifyingly calm.

Aelith straightens beside me. "What happened?"

For a second, nobody answers.

Then Kael says quietly, "Pax was taken."

The words hit the room like a physical force.

Even though I already knew. Even though it was obvious. Hearing it aloud still feels horrible.

Danger flashes across Aelith's face before rigid control slams back into place. "How long?"

"Two nights," Shanae replies tightly.

Aelith swears softly in Glowranthian, and suddenly his grip on my hand become more forceful. His gaze flicks towards Varek again just as he slams another fist into the fractured stone pillar beside him hard enough that the entire chamber trembles once more.

"Aelith."

His attention snaps towards me. Whatever he sees on my face changes his expression instantly. "Come here."

Before I can respond, he's already pulling me back from the chamber entrance and further along the upper corridor away from the worst of the destruction.

"What—"

"You should not be near him right now."

I blink. "Varek?"

"He is losing control."

The words come out flat. Not cruel but matter-of-fact.

I glance back towards the chamber again. Varek's breathing still sounds wrong even from here while Shanae continues speaking to him in low, measured tones. The entire room feels like it's balancing on the edge of violence.

My chest twists harder. “God,” I whisper. “Pax must be terrified.”

Aelith goes still beside me. Not because I’m wrong but because I’m right.

And suddenly all I can think about is the fact that this is Aelith’s kingdom too. His mother. His palace. His people doing this.

The realization crystallises into sharp urgency. I turn towards him fully. “What can be done?”

Real pain flickers openly across Aelith’s face.

Guilt.

Because somewhere beneath all the rebellion politics and royal expectations and monster soulmate drama is still the simple truth that the Queen is his mother.

And Pax is suffering under her control.

Aelith looks away briefly towards the chamber before something in his expression hardens into decision. “It is time,” he says quietly.

The words settle heavily between us, and my throat constricts. “Time for what?”

Aelith’s gaze rises back to mine. “To end this.”

Below us, another sharp exchange erupts somewhere inside the chamber, but Aelith barely seems to hear it now. His attention remains fixed entirely on me, and the truth hits with terrifying clarity.

He’s already decided.

“You have a plan,” I say slowly.

“Yes.”

“Why do I feel like I’m not going to enjoy this plan?”

A faint pulse of tension moves through the bond. Determination.

Aelith reaches for my face carefully, thumb brushing lightly across my cheek. “You will remain safe.”

That is not remotely reassuring.

“Aelith.”

“I can end this without further bloodshed.”

The words sound rehearsed somehow, like he’s already been thinking about this long before tonight.

My pulse flutters. “You’re going back.”

His silence confirms it.

Oh, absolutely not.

I open my mouth, but before I can start what would no doubt become an extremely reasonable panic spiral, Aelith turns and walks back towards the command chamber.

I follow instantly. Because absolutely the *fuck* not.

Inside the chamber, the atmosphere feels even worse up close. The shattered remains of the table cover most of the floor now while cracks have split the nearest pillars and walls. Varek stands near the centre of it all, breathing hard enough that the markings beneath his skin pulse violently with every inhale.

Kael notices us first. His expression shifts the second he sees Aelith because apparently he knows exactly what's coming.

Wonderful.

"Aelith," Shanae says sharply.

Aelith ignores the warning in her voice completely. "We exchange me for Pax."

The entire room falls silent. Not metaphorically. Actually silent.

Even Varek stops moving.

Kael's face goes dangerously blank. Shanae stares openly. And Varek… Varek looks at Aelith like he's trying to decide whether that suggestion is brilliance or insanity.

It's probably both.

"You are the Queen's son," Varek says slowly.

"Yes."

"You believe she will trade Pax for you."

"She will."

Cold dread settles in my stomach because he means it. This isn't some desperate emotional idea thrown out in the heat of the moment. He's thought about this. Probably for a while.

Kael steps forward. "Absolutely not."

There it is.

Royal guard mode.

Aelith doesn't even look at him. "It is the fastest resolution."

"It is reckless."

"It is necessary."

"It is suicide."

Okay. Yep. I'm with Kael on this one.

Unfortunately, before anyone else can continue the apparently inevitable royal argument, my own panic catches up with my mouth. “No.”

Every head turns towards me.

I point directly at Aelith. “Absolutely not.”

His gaze locks onto mine. “Dawson—”

“No. You are not marching back into your psychotic mother’s palace alone while everyone stands around pretending this is a reasonable strategy.”

A dangerous pause follows, then Aelith says carefully, “You will remain here.”

I laugh once. Not because anything’s funny. Because apparently he’s lost his entire mind. “The fuck I will.”

Aelith looks briefly startled by the language. Good. He should be.

“You are not leaving me behind,” I continue. “That’s not happening.”

“It is too dangerous.”

“Yes,” I snap. “Exactly my point.”

The bond flares sharply between us. Fear. Protective instinct. Frustration.

All his.

Aelith steps towards me. “Dawson.”

“No.”

“You do not understand what this place will become once we enter the city.”

“Then explain it to me.”

His jaw tightens. Behind him, Varek watches the entire exchange with frightening stillness, not impatient but assessing. Like some part of him is trying to understand exactly how deep this thing between us goes.

Honestly? Same.

“You could be hurt,” Aelith says quietly.

“And you could die.”

The words land hard enough that the entire room stills around us again. For one terrible second, raw fear breaks across Aelith's face. I finally understand what truly terrifies him.

Not capture. Not the Queen. Not war.

Losing me.

My chest aches painfully around it. I step closer before I can overthink it. “I’m not staying behind while you walk into that alone.”

“You should.”

“Well, unfortunately for everyone involved, I’m emotionally attached now.”

A faint flicker of exasperation breaks briefly through his tension.

Victory.

Tiny victory.

Still counts.

Kael looks deeply unimpressed with all of us. “This is not a negotiation.”

“It clearly is,” Sonny mutters from somewhere near the doorway.

Nobody acknowledges him.

Cowards.

Aelith stares at me for several long seconds, and I can practically feel the internal war happening behind his eyes. Duty. Fear. Instinct. Love.

Shit me. The fact I can identify those things now is probably its own problem.

Finally, his expression shifts into one of acceptance.

“If you come,” he says quietly, “you remain beside me at all times.”

I immediately nod.

“Dawson—” Kael starts.

“Nope,” I interrupt. “I’m already emotionally traumatised enough tonight. We’re not adding separation anxiety to the list.”

For one horrifying second, it looks like Varek might actually laugh. Instead, he drags a hand slowly across his face before looking towards Aelith again. “When do we leave?”

Aelith’s gaze never fully leaves mine when he answers. “As soon as possible.”

The plan comes together frighteningly quickly after that.

Not because anyone particularly likes it. Mostly because nobody has a better alternative.

Varek wants to leave straight away. That much is obvious from the way he paces the ruined command chamber like violence wearing skin while Shanae forces the discussion into one vaguely resembling strategy. Kael argues with Aelith for nearly twenty minutes straight in increasingly formal Glowranthian that somehow sounds even more disapproving than English.

While I don’t understand most of the words, I understand the tone perfectly.

“You are speaking to me as though I am incapable of making decisions,” Aelith says finally, his voice calm in the dangerous way that means he’s very close to losing patience.

Kael’s jaw tightens. “I am speaking to you as your guard.”

“And I am speaking to you as your prince.”

The room stills slightly after that.

Not because Aelith raises his voice. He doesn’t.

That somehow makes it worse.

I watch the shift happen in real time. The prince emerging fully from beneath the male I’ve spent the past week kissing in quiet corridors and teasing about glowing mood-light powers. Authority sits naturally on Aelith even when he clearly hates using it.

Kael hates hearing it too.

Not because he disagrees.

Because he cares.

That part’s obvious.

Eventually the argument settles into tense acceptance rather than agreement. The rebels will escort Aelith and me into the city under the appearance of surrender while Varek remains hidden nearby with Shanae and several others, ready to extract Pax once the exchange happens.

Simple plan.

Terrible plan.

I say that aloud twice.

Nobody disagrees.

The journey towards the palace happens mostly in silence.

Not peaceful silence either.

The kind filled with too many thoughts and not enough breathing room for any of them.

People stare openly at Aelith.

Not just because he’s royalty.

Because he’s returned.

Apparently the prince possibly defecting to the rebellion has become the kingdom’s favourite horrified piece of gossip. And from his reappearance and his bound wrists, there are snippets of whispers that maybe he was actually held prisoner after all.

Everywhere we walk, people react.

Some bow immediately. Others look frightened. A few stare at me with sharp curiosity before quickly looking away again.

Aelith notices every single reaction.

I can tell because the closer we get to the palace, the quieter he becomes beside me. More controlled. More contained. Like he’s slowly locking pieces of himself away one by one.

I hate it.

By the time the palace gates finally rise into view, my stomach’s twisted itself into knots.

The palace itself is beautiful in a way that feels vaguely threatening. Massive pale stone towers curve upward towards the sky, threaded through with glowing blue crystal veins that pulse softly beneath the structure like a heartbeat beneath the walls. Elegant bridges arch between the upper towers while banners bearing the royal sigil drift overhead in the wind.

Everything about it screams power.

Not warmth.

Not home.

Power.

Standing at the centre of it all somehow feels even worse.

Queen Serresta waits for us in the central courtyard like she already owns the outcome.

Which, honestly, she probably thinks she does.

The first thing I notice about her is how much Aelith resembles her.

Not replica level.

But enough.

The same luminous eyes. The same impossible stillness when standing completely at ease. The same sense that every movement is deliberate and measured even when they appear relaxed.

Except where Aelith is controlled, Serresta feels cold.

Beautiful, too, unfortunately.

She is tall and elegant beneath layers of dark blue silk that shimmer faintly in the sunlight, her glowing markings tracing intricate patterns beneath deep blue skin that somehow looks sharper than Aelith’s. Harder.

Her gaze sweeps slowly over the courtyard before settling on Aelith, then me.

The weight of her attention hits all at once. Not physically, but somehow worse. It's like being assessed by an ancient, deeply intelligent

predator who has already decided I don't measure up.

I instinctively move closer to Aelith without meaning to. The reaction is automatic enough that his arm brushes briefly against mine in response. It’s both protective and grounding.

Serresta notices. Something unreadable appears briefly across her expression before disappearing again beneath cool amusement.

“So,” she says lightly. “The rumours were true.”

Her voice surprises me.

Not dramatic.

Not cruel.

Soft.

That somehow makes her scarier.

Beside me, Aelith straightens slightly. “Mother.”

The word lands strangely flat between them.

No affection.

No warmth.

Just recognition.

Serresta’s cutting silver gaze sweeps slowly over her son, lingering briefly on the rebel markings worked into pieces of his armour before moving towards me again.

“And this,” she says thoughtfully, “is the human.”

I suddenly feel like I’m being inspected by a particularly dangerous shark.

Still.

Commitment to personality.

I offer a small wave. “Hi.”

Aelith makes a quiet noise beside me that sounds suspiciously like regret.

The Queen’s eyebrow rises slightly.

Then, unexpectedly, amusement flickers briefly across her face.

“Oh,” she murmurs. “You are serious.”

I blink. “About?”

Her attention shifts lazily towards Aelith. “This.”

The word lands with enough meaning behind it that I immediately understand what she means.

Not me specifically.

Us.

The bond.

Aelith’s expression hardens. “Pax.”

Straight to business, which is probably smart.

Serresta sighs softly like everyone around her is making this significantly less entertaining than she’d hoped. “Alive,” she says. “Mostly intact. Though your rebel commander appears somewhat displeased by the delay.”

At the mention of Varek, I glance instinctively towards the palace guards lining the courtyard.

None of them relax.

Not one.

Beneath the polished surface, the entire place feels poised for violence.

Serresta clearly notices that too.

“I assume the commander accompanied you,” she says conversationally. “Varek never did excel at restraint.”

Before Aelith can answer, sound catches my attention near the entrance behind us.

Varek steps into the courtyard.

And holy shit.

The atmosphere changes.

The stance of every guard in the courtyard visibly tightens. Hands shift closer to weapons. Postures sharpen. Even the servants near the palace entrance suddenly look like they’re reconsidering every decision that brought them here today.

Varek doesn’t seem to notice any of it.

Or maybe he notices all of it and simply doesn’t care.

His attention locks onto Serresta with the sort of terrifying focus that makes my pulse spike instinctively. Shanae walks beside him, controlled and watchful, while Kael shifts subtly closer to Aelith in automatic response.

The Queen, meanwhile, looks amused.

Actually amused.

“Well,” she says softly. “This just became significantly more dramatic.”

Varek ignores her completely.

His gaze sweeps once across the courtyard, assessing exits, guards, distances, threats. Then it stops.

The far doors open.

And Pax walks into the courtyard, flanked by guards.

Every thought leaves my head.

Jesus Christ. Pax looks awful.

Not dying awful, which feels somehow worse.

Exhausted. Bruised. Pale beneath dark skin gone slightly grey with pain and exhaustion. One arm’s bound tightly against his chest while bruising shadows the visible edges of his throat and jaw.

The second Pax’s name had been spoken earlier, I thought I understood the situation.

Seeing Pax makes it real.

Beside me, Aelith goes perfectly still, while across the courtyard, Varek changes so abruptly it's almost visible. Not into rage or violence this time, but raw, devastating relief.

It's powerful enough to hurt just watching it.

It takes me a second before the rest of the scene clicks fully into place again because, honestly, there’s a lot happening. Varek stands several paces ahead of us, looking like he’s one bad decision away from personally starting a war. Beside me, Aelith’s wrists are still bound in front of him with dark cord—not roughly, but definitely restrained enough to make a point.

Which, frankly, feels a little performative considering he could probably snap most of these guards in half.

I’m still holding onto the edge of his tunic because apparently stress has turned me into an emotional support backpack.

Whatever.

Commitment to the bit.

Pax’s gaze sweeps across the courtyard slowly before landing fully on me. Recognition flashes across his bruised face a second later.

Oh.

Right.

Varek told him about me.

I grin and throw him a cheerful thumbs-up.

Pax stares at me like I’ve completely lost my mind.

Honestly?

Fair.

Beside me, Aelith says something low and cutting to his mother in Glowranthian.

I blink at him. “Mate,” I say brightly, “I have absolutely no idea what you just said.”

Aelith pauses before sighing softly and switching languages. “I informed my mother that her theatrics are unnecessary.”

“Ah.” I nod. “Good call.”

The Queen watches the exchange with a faintly irritated expression.

“Release him,” she says again.

Varek finally speaks then, his voice carrying easily across the courtyard. “First the human.”

Queen Serresta’s hard eyes shift towards him. “You are in no position to negotiate.”

“I disagree.”

The words are calm, but even I can feel the fury underneath them now. Not loud. Worse.

Controlled.

Aelith glances between them before speaking again, this time in English. “Mother,” he says evenly, “you have your spectacle. You have your soldiers. Must we prolong this any further?”

The Queen studies him for a long moment. For a second I genuinely think she might refuse purely out of spite. Then she lazily lifts one elegant hand. “Very well.”

The guards behind Pax move immediately.

“Walk,” one mutters.

The second Pax starts moving, it becomes painfully obvious just how badly hurt he actually is. Every step looks wrong somehow. Too careful. Too uneven. He compensates instinctively around the injury to his arm, but it throws the rest of his balance off enough that even I can tell he’s running almost entirely on stubbornness at this point.

Across the courtyard, the bindings around Aelith’s wrists are finally freed.

The second they fall away, he reaches for me straight away.

Not dramatic about it either.

Just automatic.

His hand closes around mine like he needs the contact as much as I do.

I beam at him. “See? Easy.”

Aelith mutters words under his breath in Glowranthian that definitely doesn’t sound like agreement.

We start moving at the same time.

Halfway across the courtyard, Pax's balance falters.

Pain flashes visibly across his face as he stumbles hard enough that my chest immediately tightens.

"Whoa—hang on!"

I move instinctively towards him, but Aelith catches my sleeve.

"No."

I look at him.

Then at Pax barely staying upright.

Then back at Aelith.

And yes, maybe I weaponise my eyes slightly.

In my defence, they're very expressive by nature.

Aelith stares at me for one long-suffering second before exhaling sharply through his nose. "Fine."

Victory.

I slip free immediately and jog the remaining distance towards Pax before anyone can change their minds.

"Bloody hell, mate," I say gently as I slide an arm carefully around his good shoulder, "you look like absolute crap."

"Noted," he rasps.

Up close, he looks even worse. Bruising shadows his throat and jaw while sweat sticks shorter dreads against his forehead. He's built solidly enough that he still looks strong even half-starved and exhausted, but I can feel how much effort it's taking him just to remain standing.

My chest aches painfully around it.

"Nearly there," I murmur.

I keep my voice light because everyone else in this courtyard is already carrying enough intensity to flatten a building. Somebody needs to act normal, and apparently that unfortunate responsibility has fallen to me.

Pax leans against me slightly as we walk the final distance across the courtyard together.

Then Varek's suddenly right there in front of us.

And Jesus Christ.

The air between them feels charged.

Not awkward.

Not romantic.

Something deeper. Heavier.

For a second after I release Pax, neither of them moves. Varek just stares at him with an expression so tightly controlled, it physically hurts to look at. His silver eyes move slowly over every visible injury—the bruising, the split lip, the awkward angle of Pax's arm strapped tightly against his chest.

And every single place Varek looks, fury follows.

Not explosive this time.

Focused.

Like he's cataloguing damage.

Promising something terrible in response.

He doesn't touch Pax.

Not here.

Not in front of the Queen.

The effort that takes is written all over him.

Behind them, I clear my throat quietly. "Right," I murmur, glancing between the two of them. "I feel like this is a moment, but we should probably keep the dramatic courtyard trauma moving."

Pax makes a sound that might be a laugh.

Varek doesn't currently appear emotionally available enough for laughter.

Beside me, Aelith steps forward again, towering and unmistakably royal even without ceremonial armour. Sunlight catches the faint bioluminescent markings along his arms and chest while the glowing sigil beneath his collarbone pulses softly beneath torn fabric.

His luminous eyes settle on the Queen. "Mother," he says evenly. "The exchange is complete."

Queen Serresta studies the four of us from her raised platform. Her expression hasn't changed much. If anything, she looks faintly entertained. "Is it?"

The question drifts through the courtyard like silk wrapped around a knife.

Varek shifts slightly, placing himself between Pax and the line of Crown soldiers surrounding the yard.

"The terms were clear," he says calmly. "The human has been returned unharmed."

My eyebrows rise.

Pax's eyebrows do too.

Because the man has very obviously been harmed.

The Queen tilts her head slightly. “And what,” she asks thoughtfully, “prevents me from ending this farce right now?”

Well, that seems ominous.

The courtyard goes very quiet as her calculating gaze drifts slowly across the assembled soldiers before settling briefly on Varek, then Pax, then, finally, Aelith.

“You stand within my palace,” she continues softly. “Surrounded by my warriors. You bring my son to me as though you believe this performance has any power here.”

I glance around instinctively. None of the guards move. None of them look uncertain either.

They’re waiting.

Aelith speaks before Varek can. “That seems unreasonable,” he says mildly.

The Queen’s attention snaps towards him. “My patience with you grows thin.”

“Then perhaps you should avoid making poor decisions.”

Her nostrils flare slightly.

Varek folds his arms slowly, massive shoulders drawing attention from half the courtyard in the process. His gaze flicks briefly towards the palace walls. “You forget Kael remains in our custody.”

Even I know that’s bullshit because Kael is very obviously standing twenty feet away, trying not to look like this entire situation is giving him an ulcer. But Aelith’s expression never changes. Neither does the Queen’s. It’s then I notice something else.

The soldiers.

Not one of them reacts.

No confusion. No dismissal. No amusement.

Nothing.

Huh. That’s weird, right?

Aelith notices it too. A faint smile curves his mouth slightly. “He is loyal,” he says simply.

The Queen’s lips thin. I wonder if she’s adding on “to my son” in her head.

Varek speaks again before the silence can stretch too far. “The agreement was safe passage. For all of us.”

For a long moment, Serresta says nothing, and the tension in the courtyard tightens like a drawn wire.

Then, finally, she exhales softly and gestures towards the gates. “Leave.”

Nobody moves for half a second after the Queen gives the order. Then Varek steps forward first. He spreads his hand carefully across Pax’s back, warm and steady despite the fury still simmering beneath his skin. The touch is light enough not to jar the injuries, but even from several feet away, I can see the way Pax leans into it.

Relief pulses strangely through the courtyard after that.

Aelith’s fingers close more firmly around mine. “Come,” he says quietly.

The word isn’t harsh, but there’s no room for argument in it, either, and I suddenly realise something important. He’s scared.

Not visibly. Not in any way anyone else here would notice. His expression remains perfectly composed beneath that cool royal indifference he keeps throwing on like armour whenever we’re around the Queen.

But the bond gives him away.

Tension hums sharply beneath every word, every movement, every measured breath. I squeeze his hand once in response before letting him guide me towards the palace doors.

Behind us, I can feel Varek and Pax moving too. I desperately want to look back. Not because I think they’ll stop walking. Honestly, if Varek’s touching Pax at all right now, I suspect the entire rest of the world has temporarily ceased to exist to him.

No, I want to look back because Pax looked wrecked, and some deeply annoying part of my personality apparently refuses to stop emotionally adopting injured people. But right now, all my concentration is going into keeping my knees from visibly trembling.

And keeping the grin plastered across my face.

Because if I stop smiling, I strongly suspect the reality of what I’ve agreed to might actually hit me properly, which would be unfortunate timing.

The Crown soldiers lining the courtyard watch us the entire way towards the gates. Weapons remain lowered, but nobody relaxes. The atmosphere feels stretched painfully tight, like one wrong movement would turn the entire courtyard into a bloodbath.

I keep smiling anyway. Aggressively. Possibly manically.

Aelith brushes his thumb once across my knuckles as we walk, subtle enough that nobody else would catch it. It grounds me immediately, the gesture helping embarrassingly fast.

The palace itself looms around us as we cross the courtyard, and now that I'm not singularly focused on not dying during a hostage exchange, I can actually take it in properly.

It's gorgeous—in a deeply intimidating way.

The walls rise impossibly high overhead, pale stone threaded through with glowing crystal veins that pulse softly beneath the surface like the building itself is alive. Elegant archways curve above massive corridors while banners bearing the royal crest drift lazily from the upper balconies.

Everything gleams. Not the warm kind of gleaming either. It's cold and polished, eerily perfect. It's the sort of place where people absolutely get quietly poisoned during dinner parties. Honestly, I hate how much I'd normally enjoy exploring this place under literally any other circumstances.

Aelith remains stiff beside me the entire walk. While he's not physically tense, exactly, I can feel how tightly wound he is. He's all control. And the farther we move from the courtyard, the more I feel him changing beside me. His shoulders tighten incrementally. His back straightens further. Even his expression shifts subtly into something smoother and colder with every passing corridor.

I glance up to look at him properly and realize with a sudden twist in my stomach that he's putting on a mask. Not for me but for everyone else.

Indifference has settled on his face, his royal composure intact. He's absolutely, 100 percent the prince.

The realization unsettles me more than I expect, because I've spent days seeing the real Aelith. The male who blushes beneath glowing markings when I compliment his thighs. The male who melts when kissed slowly enough. The male who holds my hand like it matters more than breathing.

This version feels untouchable. And suddenly the full reality of where we are crashes into me hard enough to make my skin prickle.

What the hell have I done? Seriously, what the actual hell have I done agreeing to come here?

Eep.

The thought must show somewhere on my face despite the smile because Aelith's attention flicks towards me.

“Dawson.”

I aim for a smile, but I’m pretty sure I look constipated. “Yep. Totally fine. Definitely not realising I voluntarily walked into the terrifying glowing murder palace.”

Something soft flickers briefly behind the mask before disappearing again. His fingers tighten fractionally around mine as he says, “I will keep you safe.”

The palpable certainty in his voice should probably reassure me more than it does. Mostly because I’m beginning to realise Aelith would personally fight an entire kingdom to protect me. It’s sweet… and deeply concerning.

I lower my voice slightly as we continue along another enormous corridor lined with silent guards. “Your mum’s terrifying, by the way.”

Aelith’s expression remains perfectly neutral. “Yes.”

“No, but like… professionally terrifying.”

“Also yes.”

I glance around the palace again, taking in the glowing stone, the watching soldiers, the endless polished hallways disappearing into the distance. Then I look back at him.

He remains composed, still unreadable as he continues holding my hand like he never intends to let go.

We are so fucked.

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AELITH

Dawson is afraid.

Most would not notice.

The smile remains firmly in place as we move through the palace corridors, bright and warm despite everything that has happened. He glances around with open curiosity, taking in the architecture, the crystal-lit walls, and the servants who hurry from one task to another while pretending not to stare at us. Every so often, he squeezes my hand or leans slightly closer, as though proximity alone might reassure us both.

Others would mistake it for confidence, but I know better. His hand has not left mine since the courtyard. Neither has the faint tremor running through it.

The realization settles heavily inside me: He came anyway. Despite every warning. Despite knowing exactly who my mother is. Despite understanding that the palace is the most dangerous place in Terrafeara for him to be. He came—for me.

The thought should comfort me. Instead, it terrifies me.

I brush my thumb lightly across his knuckles as we walk. The gesture is subtle enough that none of the soldiers stationed along the corridor react, but Dawson shifts closer.

The bond hums softly between us. Incomplete. Always incomplete.

The awareness has become a constant ache beneath my skin. Every completed bond has deepened my connection to him, sharpened my instincts, intensified my need to protect him. Yet there remains distance

between us. A final barrier I desperately want gone and simultaneously fear with every part of myself.

If my mother sees Dawson not as the extraordinary male he is, but as another source of power to exploit… I force the thought away.

No. That will not happen. I will not allow it.

Dawson glances up at me. “You’re doing that thing again.”

I lower my gaze. “What thing?”

“The brooding.”

I blink. “I do not brood.”

His grin widens. “You absolutely brood. You get this little wrinkle right here.”

Before I can stop him, he reaches up and taps the space between my brows. Several nearby servants pretend not to witness a human poking the Crown Prince in the face.

Dawson notices. “See?” he says cheerfully. “Even they agree.”

A startled noise escapes one of the younger servants. The poor female looks horrified by her mistake.

Dawson beams at her, and the servant freezes. Then, unexpectedly, she smiles back before quickly lowering her head and hurrying away.

I watch her leave, and Dawson follows my gaze.

“She looked nice.”

“She was terrified.”

“She was nervous.”

“She believed she had offended royalty.”

Dawson’s nose wrinkles. “That’s exhausting.”

The sincerity in his voice catches me off-guard. For him, it probably is.

The palace runs on fear. It always has.

As a child, I accepted that without question. Fear maintained order. Fear protected the throne. Fear ensured obedience. Now, walking these halls beside Dawson, I find myself seeing things differently.

The servants move quickly. The guards stand perfectly still. Conversations stop whenever soldiers pass.

No one laughs.

No one speaks freely.

No one truly lives.

The palace gleams around us, beautiful and polished and utterly lifeless. And while I’ve always resented the palace and the expectations that came

with it, I'd played the game and behaved as my mother demanded. Now though, with Dawson by my side, I hate it. The realization unsettles me. Perhaps because it feels like a betrayal of everything I once believed, or maybe because I know exactly whose influence is responsible.

Dawson's.

My impossible human has spent less than an hour inside these walls, and already, he is looking at every person we pass as though they matter. Not because they serve a purpose or because they are useful. Simply because they exist.

The bond pulses warmly in response to the thought.

Mine.

I no longer bother fighting the possessiveness. Not after the courtyard. Not after watching him walk willingly into danger for me. Not after hearing him tell my mother hello as though she were a neighbour rather than one of the most feared rulers in Terrafearan history.

A quiet snort escapes me before I can stop it.

Dawson immediately notices, his eyes widening. "Was that a laugh?"

"No."

"It absolutely was."

"It was not."

He gasps dramatically enough that two guards glance our way. "Oh, bloody hell, I wish I had my phone."

I already regret engaging.

"You laughed," he insists.

"I did not."

"You did."

"I assure you—"

"You found me funny."

The delight radiating from him through the bond is almost embarrassing. I feel my markings brighten, so of course Dawson notices that too.

His grin becomes downright unbearable. "I knew it."

I tighten my grip on his hand. Not enough to hurt, but enough to make him laugh. The sound follows us down the corridor. It's bright and warm and so beautifully alive.

Several heads turn to surreptitiously watch while I observe the reactions carefully.

I am curious about what they see and must be thinking, which, honestly, is something I've never even considered before.

Most appear confused, while a few seem startled. One older servant actually smiles before catching herself.

The realization strikes unexpectedly. They are not looking at me. They are looking at Dawson.

And despite knowing where he is, despite understanding the danger surrounding us, he smiles at every single person who meets his gaze.

No calculation.

No strategy.

No hidden motive.

This is simply Dawson being Dawson.

The palace does not know what to do with him. Neither, if I am honest, do I.

By the time we finally reach my quarters, relief is beginning to outweigh vigilance. The feeling unsettles me more than it should.

I spent most of my life within these walls. I know every corridor, every balcony, every hidden passage and guard route. There was a time when the palace represented certainty. Order. Stability. Yet now, standing before the doors to my own chambers, I understand that I feel more at ease in Dathanor's rough-hewn tunnels than I do here.

Perhaps because Dathanor is honest about what it is.

The palace never has been.

The guards stationed outside my rooms straighten upon seeing me. Neither speaks. Neither questions my arrival. Their training is too thorough for that. Still, I catch the brief flicker of surprise when their attention shifts towards Dawson. Rumours may spread quickly through the city, but rumours and reality are very different things. Whatever stories they've heard about the human who somehow convinced the Crown Prince to abandon the palace, I doubt they prepared them for Dawson himself.

Dawson notices their attention. Before I can stop him, he offers both guards a cheerful smile. One of them actually looks alarmed by it, while the other appears deeply suspicious.

Dawson simply smiles harder.

I have seen seasoned warriors react more comfortably to hostile negotiations.

The doors open, and Dawson steps through before I can warn him to moderate himself, but I immediately regret the thought. The last thing I want is for him to become anything other than exactly who he is.

For a moment, he simply stands there, staring.

His gaze travels slowly across the chamber, taking in the vaulted ceiling, the crystal-veined walls, the enormous windows overlooking the city below, and the furniture that has occupied the same positions for decades. The room is elegant by any standard, furnished in dark polished woods and deep blue fabrics, designed to reflect royal status without sacrificing comfort.

I have not truly looked at it in years, and definitely not the way Dawson is doing. Not with wonder or curiosity. Not as though every detail might reveal something worth knowing.

Eventually he turns back towards me. The expression on his face is so earnest that I know I am about to be subjected to one of his opinions.

“Aelith.”

The tone is concerning.

“Yes?”

“You have a bigger bedroom than some of the entire places I’ve actually lived in.”

I blink. “What?”

He gestures broadly at the room. “The bed alone could probably fit three of the apartments I rented during the season I worked in France.”

I stare at him, confused. “I do not know what that means.”

A laugh escapes him. Bright. Effortless. Entirely at odds with the tension that has followed us since entering the city. The sound fills the room far more effectively than any decoration ever has.

For a few moments, he wanders through the chamber, examining everything with the enthusiasm he usually reserves for meeting new people or discovering food. He touches the carved stone beside the windows, studies the crystal veins embedded in the walls, and peers curiously through the balcony doors at one of the walled gardens as though half-expecting another dimension to be hiding outside.

Watching him move through my rooms feels strangely intimate. No one has ever treated this space as anything other than the Crown Prince’s quarters.

A symbol.

An extension of rank.

A place that belonged to the throne more than the male occupying it.

Dawson doesn’t see any of that. He sees a room. *My* room. The realization settles unexpectedly deep.

Eventually he reaches the windows overlooking the city. The afternoon light catches in his hair as he looks out across the sprawling towers below. Silence claims him.

The city stretches to the horizon beneath us, beautiful and terrible all at once.

“It really is stunning,” he says quietly.

I should be looking at the view. Instead, I find myself watching him.

The city has never looked beautiful to me. Not truly. I see politics. Responsibility. Expectations. A thousand problems waiting to be solved.

Dawson sees something else, like, somehow, despite everything this world has done to him, he still sees possibility. The thought makes my chest ache.

When he finally turns back towards me, the smile he offers is smaller than his usual grin. Softer. More private. It feels as though it belongs only to me.

The bond responds without hesitation. Warmth spreads through my chest before I can stop it, and the door closes behind us with a heavy thud.

For the first time since entering the courtyard, we are alone.

No guards.

No servants.

No Queen.

No need for masks.

The relief hits hard.

I do not realise how exhausted I am until the weight of maintaining control begins to lift. Every conversation since arriving has required calculation. Every glance, every word, every expression carefully measured. My mother’s court survives by preying on weakness. The moment it senses vulnerability, it tears into it.

I have spent years learning how to hide mine. Yet standing here with Dawson, I find myself struggling to maintain the effort.

He notices immediately. The shift in his expression is subtle but unmistakable. The teasing disappears first. Then the curiosity. Concern takes its place, warm and genuine and entirely focused on me.

The bond hums softly between us. Dawson crosses the room without hesitation. Whatever is wrong, he intends to face it beside me. The simplicity of it nearly undoes me.

“Aelith?” The question is gentle.

I know what he is asking.

Are you okay?

Can you breathe?

Do you need me?

The truthful answer is complicated. I am terrified. Terrified of what my mother might do. Terrified of what she might discover. Terrified that bringing Dawson here may prove to be the worst decision I have ever made.

Yet beneath all that fear is my relief. Because despite everything, he is here, and despite every warning, every danger, every reason to stay behind, Dawson chose me.

“No,” I admit quietly, even though he didn’t ask a direct question.

His expression softens. “Yeah,” he says, as though the answer surprises him not at all. “I figured.”

Then he rises onto his toes and presses a kiss against my jaw. The gesture is simple. Brief. Undemanding. Yet it accomplishes something no strategy, no army, and no amount of planning has managed to since entering the city.

My lungs finally remember how to work.

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CHAPTER
SEVEN

FOR ABOUT TEN WHOLE MINUTES, AELITH'S QUARTERS ALMOST FEEL SAFE.

Not safe-safe, obviously. We're still inside the terrifying glowing murder palace, where his mum could probably have someone executed for sneezing too enthusiastically. But the doors are shut, the guards are on the other side, and Aelith is close enough that the pull in my chest has stopped being a frantic little tug and settled into something more profound.

I sit on the edge of one of his ridiculously large sofas, because apparently princes don't sit on normal-sized furniture. They lounge on things that look like they require planning permission. Across from me, Aelith stands near the balcony doors, one hand braced against the carved frame while he looks out over the city like he's trying to win an argument with the skyline.

He hasn't said much since we came in.

Which is fine.

Mostly.

I can do enough talking for both of us. I've proven that repeatedly.

Still, the quiet is different now. In Dathanor, Aelith's silence started to feel comfortable, like a weighted blanket made of blue alien prince. Here, it feels sharpened at the edges. His stillness isn't peace. It's preparation.

I hate that I can tell the difference.

"You know," I say, stretching one leg out, before remembering I'm still recovering and probably shouldn't sprawl like a man with functioning dignity, "if you keep glaring at the city like that, it might apologise."

Aelith doesn't turn, but I catch the faint shift of his reflection in the glass. "The city has done nothing wrong."

“Fair. The city’s innocent. Your palace, though? Suspicious as hell.”

His mouth tightens slightly, which I choose to interpret as amusement because optimism is a lifestyle, not a hobby.

I glance around the room again, taking in the carved walls, the glowing crystal threads pulsing softly under the stone, and the enormous bed that I am absolutely not staring at. I’m not. I’m simply aware of it. Deeply aware. Like any normal person would be aware of a massive bed belonging to the male they’ve been kissing. That’s just spatial awareness.

Aelith finally looks at me.

The second his silver-lit eyes meet mine, my entire brain goes a bit fuzzy at the edges.

“You are thinking too much,” he says.

“I’ve been accused of the opposite, actually.”

“That does not surprise me.”

I gasp. “Mean.”

His expression barely changes, but the markings at his throat brighten a fraction. I’m getting better at spotting those tiny tells. He can keep his face all cold and princely if he likes, but his glow-bits are traitors, and I love them dearly.

Before I can tell him that, a knock sounds at the door.

Not a polite knock.

A hard, official one.

Aelith transforms. The softness vanishes from his face so fast, it makes something in my chest clench. His spine straightens, his shoulders settle, and that smooth royal mask drops into place like armour. The male who looked at me with quiet warmth a second ago is gone, replaced by the Crown Prince of this deeply unsettling place.

“Enter,” he says.

His voice isn’t loud. It doesn’t need to be.

The door opens, and a Glowranth guard steps inside. He’s taller than me because apparently everyone here is taller than me except children and possibly one elderly lizard-looking lady I saw in Dathanor. His skin is a darker blue than Aelith’s, his armour polished and severe, and his expression suggests he once heard about joy and filed a formal complaint.

He doesn’t look at me first.

He looks at Aelith.

Good survival instincts, probably.

“My prince,” he says, bowing at the neck. The movement is stiff enough to make it clear respect and enthusiasm are not the same thing. “Her Majesty summons you to the evening meal.”

Aelith remains motionless. “I will attend when I choose.”

The guard’s jaw tightens, but he keeps his eyes lowered. “Her Majesty specifically requested the presence of your mate.”

Ah. There it is.

The air in the room drops about five degrees.

Aelith doesn’t move, but the bond between us snaps tight with sudden, sharp fury. It hits me hard enough that I stop breathing for a second.

“No,” he says.

One word.

Flat.

Final.

The guard’s gaze flicks towards me then, quick and assessing. I try to look harmless. Given I’m sitting on a sofa in borrowed clothes and probably still have coma hair, I think I nail it.

“Her Majesty’s request was clear,” he says.

Aelith takes one step forward.

That’s all.

One step.

The guard goes rigid.

I probably shouldn’t find it hot. In fact, I’m almost certain this is one of those moments where the correct emotional response is concern. Aelith is being cold and arrogant and a little bit terrifying. But I also know he’s scared. I can feel it under the fury, buried deep but very much there. He isn’t angry because someone has challenged him. He’s angry because the Queen has reached for me.

Again.

“She may make her requests to me,” Aelith says, each word shaped with lethal precision. “Not around me.”

The guard swallows.

His expression doesn’t change much, but I see the movement at his throat. Aelith sees it too. Of course he does.

“We will be down presently,” Aelith continues.

The guard hesitates.

Bad choice.

Aelith’s luminous eyes narrow slightly. “Leave.”

The command cracks through the room.

The guard bows again and retreats so quickly, he almost hits the doorframe on the way out. I would laugh if my stomach wasn’t currently trying to turn itself into a decorative knot.

The door shuts, and silence rushes back in behind it.

For a moment, neither of us speaks.

Then I lift a finger. “So dinner sounds fun.”

Aelith turns towards me slowly. The look he gives me should probably make me stop smiling. It doesn’t. Mostly because if I stop smiling, I might start panicking, and nobody needs that. Least of all him.

“I know,” I say before he can speak. “That was not helpful. But I’m committing to the brave face, and unfortunately my brave face comes with commentary.”

His expression shifts, only slightly, but enough that I see him. Not the prince or the mask. Him.

He crosses the room quickly, then lowers himself in front of me until we’re closer to eye level. He’s not kneeling, exactly, because I suspect Aelith has never willingly kneeled in his life, but it’s close enough that my chest does something stupid about it.

His hands settle carefully over mine. “Do not leave my side,” he says.

“I wasn’t planning to.”

“Dawson.”

The way he says my name makes the smile slip a little. I squeeze his fingers. “I won’t.”

He searches my face like he’s trying to measure whether I understand the full shape of the danger. I probably don’t. Not really. But I understand enough.

His mother wants power. She wants control. She wants the Riftborn, the bonds, the talents, the strange things that happen when people from different worlds get dragged here and find each other. I don’t know all the details, and honestly, half the politics still sound like someone threw fantasy words into a blender, but I understand the important part.

Queen Serresta looks at people and sees tools.

And apparently bonded mates make excellent tools.

Aelith’s thumb brushes over my knuckles, and the sensation steadies me even as his next words make my nerves spike.

“I do not know who can be trusted within these walls,” he says. “There were once guards loyal to Kael. Some may still be. Some may be loyal to me. Others will follow whoever appears strongest, and many will choose fear because it has kept them alive.”

“That’s cheerful.”

“It is true.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

His jaw tightens. “I need time to learn where support remains. Until then, we assume every word spoken near us may reach my mother.”

I nod, and for once, I don’t make an insta-joke. The effort of not making one is considerable, but I manage. “Okay.”

“You do not promise her anything,” he continues. “You do not agree to anything. You do not accept food or drink from anyone unless I approve it.”

My eyebrows lift. “Poison dinner… for real?”

His expression darkens.

“Sorry,” I say quickly. “Not making light of it. Well, I am, but only because the alternative is me screaming into one of your very fancy cushions.”

His gaze softens for half a heartbeat, then hardens again. “If she asks you a question, answer carefully. If you are uncertain, look to me.”

I nod again. “Carefully. No promises. No mystery drinks. Don’t sign any glowing contracts. Got it.”

“This is not a game.”

“I know.” The words came out softer than I intend.

Aelith stills.

I swallow and force my smile back into place, though it probably looks a bit crooked now. “I know, okay? I’m scared. I’m properly, full-body, might-throw-up scared. But if I act scared, you’ll go all murder prince, and while that’s weirdly attractive in a psychologically concerning way, I’m trying not to make this worse.”

He stares at me, his markings flickering once, bright and sharp beneath his skin. “You think my fear is yours to manage?”

“No,” I say softly. “But I care about you, so apparently my brain has decided your feelings are also my problem now. Congratulations. Here’s your terrible prize.”

For a second, I think he might argue. Instead, his hands tighten around mine. “You are not a prize,” he says.

I blink at him. “That is absolutely not what I meant, but weirdly sweet.”

His brow furrows like he’s trying to decide whether I’ve insulted him, complimented him, or accidentally invented a third possibility.

I lean forward and press a quick kiss to his forehead because I can reach him like this and because the temptation is right there. When I pull back, I see that his eyes are closed. Not for long. It’s barely a second, but it’s enough to make my heart ache.

Then he rises.

The prince returns as he straightens, the shift subtle but unmistakable. His face smooths out, his shoulders are set, and the male who melts under kisses disappears behind royal composure.

I hate that I miss him immediately.

Aelith offers me his hand.

I take it. “Dinner with your terrifying mother,” I say, pushing myself up to my feet. “Excellent. Very normal couple activity.”

“We are not a normal couple.”

“True. Most couples meet on dating apps, not during medical emergencies in monster dimensions.”

He pauses, clearly deciding not to ask.

Smart male.

We’ve just reached the door when he stops so suddenly, I almost walk into him.

“There is another matter,” he says.

I look up at him. “That sounds ominous.”

“My siblings may be present.”

I stare.

Then stare harder.

“Your what?”

“My siblings.”

“You have siblings?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re only telling me this now?”

His expression remains painfully composed. “It did not seem relevant before.”

I open my mouth, close it, then open it again. “Aelith, we have discussed hydration juice, long drops, your thighs, my coma, your mother’s

public execution vibes, and whether I’m allowed to wander a rebel cave unsupervised. At no point did you think siblings should maybe come up?”

His jaw shifts slightly. “There has been much to discuss.”

“Bloody hell.”

“One is Jithusian,” he continues, as though powering through my reaction is the best option. “He is not to be trusted.”

“Fantastic. Starting strong.”

“He has always believed he should have been born eldest.”

“And let me guess. Being crown prince is a big deal?”

Aelith looks at me like I’ve stated that snow is cold.

“Right,” I say. “Stupid question.”

“It was not stupid.”

“It was a little stupid.”

His mouth tightens, but I think he’s fighting a smile. Maybe. I’m choosing to believe that because it helps morale.

“Jithusian is ambitious,” Aelith says. “He is charming when it serves him, cruel when it does not, and patient enough to wait for others to make mistakes he can use. Do not allow him to draw you into conversation alone.”

I nod slowly, the nerves in my stomach gaining a few new friends. “Avoid murder brother. Got it.”

Aelith’s expression suggests he dislikes the phrase but can’t entirely refute it. “Fithrust may also attend. They have tried to remain outside political conflict, but neutrality within the palace is rarely as innocent as it appears.”

“They/them?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Okay. Don’t trust them either?”

“Watch them,” he says. “Do not assume malice. Do not assume safety.”

I exhale through my nose. “So, basically, trust no one, eat nothing, promise nothing, stay next to you, don’t get kidnapped, and try not to offend your evil mum or your possibly evil siblings.”

“Yes.”

I give him a bright thumbs-up. “Nailed it.”

Something pained crosses his face. “Dawson.”

“I know.” My smile softens this time. “I know. I’ll be careful.”

The fear in his eyes doesn’t disappear, nor do I imagine it does from mine either. But his fingers close around mine again, firm and warm, and when he opens the door, I step through it beside him with my smile firmly in place.

Because we’re going to dinner, and apparently I’m the main course.

The corridor outside Aelith’s quarters seems longer than it did coming in.

Which is rude.

Corridors should not change length based on emotional distress. That feels like something that should be illegal in at least three dimensions.

I walk beside Aelith with my hand in his, my smile fixed in place so firmly, my cheeks are starting to ache. The palace gleams around us, all polished stone and glowing blue crystal veins, and every guard we pass watches us with the kind of careful interest that makes my skin itch. I try not to stare back. I mostly succeed. There is one guard with cheekbones so sharp, I briefly wonder if Glowranth are born with built-in intimidation settings, but I keep that thought to myself because apparently tonight is all about diplomacy and not accidentally asking someone if their face is classified as a weapon.

Aelith’s hand tightens around mine the second my steps falter.

I glance up at him, and he doesn’t look at me, not fully. His gaze remains fixed ahead, his expression cold and perfect and princely, but his thumb brushes across my knuckles once.

That tiny touch nearly undoes me because I know what it means. I know him well enough now to understand the difference between Aelith performing control and Aelith actually feeling calm. Right now, he’s one wrong comment away from turning this entire dinner into a royal incident, and honestly, same.

“You know,” I murmur, keeping my voice low as we turn down another corridor wide enough to land a small plane in, “when people talk about meeting the family, this is not usually what they mean.”

His jaw flexes. “You should not attempt to charm them.”

“I wasn’t planning on charm. I was planning on not choking on my own fear.”

“That would be preferable.”

I blink at him. “Me not choking?”

“Yes.”

“That’s sweet.”

His gaze flicks to mine then, quick and sharp, and for one tiny second, the prince mask cracks enough for me to see the male underneath. Worried. Protective. Mine.

Then he faces forward again.

We reach another set of doors, taller and wider than anything needs to be unless the goal is making everyone feel tiny before dinner. They’re carved with the royal sigil and threaded through with glowing silver-blue patterns that pulse faintly under the polished surface. Two guards stand on either side, both of them watching Aelith like he’s either their prince or the start of a natural disaster.

Possibly both.

The doors open without anyone knocking.

Of course they do. Apparently dramatic entrances are compulsory here.

I step inside beside Aelith and immediately forget how to breathe properly.

This is not a dining room.

I mean, technically there’s a table, and I assume food will happen here at some point, so, yes, okay, it’s dining-room adjacent. But this place has absolutely nothing in common with any dining room I’ve ever seen, including the fancy photos of Buckingham Palace I once saw online when I fell down a royal-family rabbit hole at two in the morning. This is what would happen if a cathedral, a throne room, and an extremely rich dragon’s private event space had a baby.

The ceiling arches impossibly high overhead, disappearing into shadows where floating crystal orbs drift lazily like tiny moons. Long ribbons of light move through the walls, not fixed like decoration but alive somehow, pulsing beneath dark blue stone and throwing soft colour across the floor. The table itself is enormous, carved from some glossy black material that catches the glow and reflects it in strange, rippling patterns. It’s long enough to seat twenty, but only five Glowranth are currently present.

Five very intense, very beautiful, very not-human Glowranth.

No pressure.

I take them in quickly, because apparently terror makes me observant.

Two of them have markings that remind me of Aelith’s. Not identical, but similar enough that I clock them as royal. There’s something in the patterning, in the way the silver lines trace beneath their skin, curling

around throat, temple, and wrist with an elegance that feels too deliberate to be random. Royal bloodline, then. I remember Aelith saying something about markings, though, honestly, there has been a lot of information lately, and my brain is currently running on panic, bond feelings, and whatever snacks I managed to hunt down earlier.

One of the royals reclines with lazy confidence near the far end of the table. His hair falls in a sleek dark wave over one shoulder, his features beautiful in a sharper, meaner way than Aelith's. He looks like someone who knows exactly how attractive he is and has made it everyone else's problem.

I don't need Aelith to tell me who he is.

Jithusian.

Murder brother.

Possibly not a literal murder brother.

But an emotional one?

Definitely.

The other royal sits straighter, their posture elegant but not stiff. Their skin is a touch deeper blue than Aelith's, their markings softer in shape, and their gaze settles on me with open curiosity rather than immediate disdain. Fithrust, I'm guessing. They don't smile, exactly, but there's something less hostile about them, which in this room makes them my current favourite.

The remaining three Glowranth do not carry the same royal markings. One is a stunning woman with pale, bright eyes and a gown made of layered silver fabric that catches the room's light like water. She sits with the relaxed confidence of someone who has never once had to raise her voice to ruin someone's day. Beside her is a stern older male whose armour is more decorative than functional but still looks like it could stop a spear. The last is another male, younger than the armoured one but older than Aelith, with dark blue skin, no royal glow-patterning, and one hand resting on the back of Jithusian's chair in a way that feels intimate.

Ah. Mate, maybe.

I glance at Aelith, but his expression has gone dangerously blank.

Fantastic.

Jithusian's gaze slides over me in a way that makes me want to shower. "So this is him."

"Careful," Aelith says.

One word.

Quiet.

Lethal.

I squeeze his hand because we've been here for approximately twelve seconds, and I can already feel him approaching murder-prince mode. Commence everyone's favourite game: dinner with emotional landmines.

Jithusian's lips curve. "I have said nothing offensive. I even spoke in human for your… mate."

"You were considering it."

"Oh, brother, must you be so dramatic?"

Aelith's shoulders shift minutely. I don't think anyone else would notice. I do, of course, because I am becoming a reluctant expert in the body language of emotionally repressed alien royalty.

I beam at the room because apparently my role tonight is "human-shaped distraction grenade."

"Hi," I say brightly. "I'm Dawson. The human. Obviously. Unless there's a secret second human hiding under the table, in which case, exciting twist."

Silence.

Fithrust blinks once.

The stunning woman's brows rise.

Jithusian looks vaguely offended that I'm speaking.

Aelith makes a quiet sound beside me. It might be an expression of pain.

Worth it.

Before anyone can decide whether I'm charming or an immediate political liability, the doors behind us open again.

Every person in the room stands. The entire atmosphere changes with barely a whisper of movement.

Queen Serresta enters like she's never once hurried in her life. She wears deep blue tonight, darker than the room itself, the fabric flowing around her in elegant layers that shimmer whenever she moves. Her glowing markings trace intricate patterns along her throat and down the backs of her hands, sharper and more complex than Aelith's, and her crown isn't a crown so much as a delicate arrangement of silver and crystal that curves between her horns like the universe personally approved her authority.

She is beautiful.

I hate that.

I also hate that seeing her makes Aelith’s hand go colder in mine.

“Ah,” she says softly as she approaches the table. “Everyone has arrived.”

“Mother,” Aelith says.

Again, no warmth. No softness. Just a word with a history I don’t fully understand and probably don’t want to.

Serresta’s gaze drifts to me. “And our guest remains cheerful.”

“My face does this automatically under stress,” I say before I can stop myself.

Aelith’s fingers tighten.

Right.

Careful.

Dinner rules.

No promises, no mystery drinks, no glowing contracts, and maybe don’t tell the tyrant queen your coping mechanisms.

Serresta’s smile is faint. “How honest.”

“That happens too,” I mutter.

Fithrust’s mouth twitches.

The Queen takes her seat at the head of the table, and everyone else follows. Aelith guides me to the place beside him without asking anyone, which I appreciate because I would absolutely sit in the wrong spot and accidentally start a succession crisis. Servants appear almost instantly, moving so quietly, I don’t hear them until they’re already setting bowls and plates in front of us.

The food looks incredible, which is deeply inconvenient because I do not trust any of it.

Aelith glances at my plate first, then at the servant pouring something dark and steaming into a delicate cup. His expression doesn’t change, but the servant’s hand shakes once.

That’s enough for me.

I do not touch the cup.

Gold star, me.

Jithusian notices. His smile widens. “Does the human fear our hospitality?”

Aelith doesn’t look at him when he answers. “The human has intelligence.”

“Debatable,” I say under my breath.

Fithrust definitely hears me, because this time they actually smile.

Jithusian, unfortunately, does too. “How refreshing. At least one of you has humility.”

Aelith finally looks at him. “Do not mistake humour for weakness.”

The table goes still.

Serresta lifts her cup slowly, watching them over the rim. The movement is casual, almost bored, but I can feel the attention beneath it. She wants this. She wants Aelith provoked, wants him sharp and exposed, wants him making mistakes in front of everyone.

Nope. Not today, evil mother-in-law.

I slide my free hand under the table and set it firmly on Aelith’s thigh. He goes utterly still, which indicates this is possibly not the calming gesture I intended.

I glance at him and widen my eyes slightly in what I hope reads as *please do not explode at dinner* and not *hello, remember what we were doing earlier?*

Judging by the faint flare of his markings, it might be a bit of both.

Still, he breathes.

Good. Breathing is progress.

Serresta’s attention flicks down for half a second, and I have the horrible feeling she notices everything anyway. “So,” she says, setting her cup down, “tell us about the rebel settlement.”

There it is.

Straight in.

Aelith answers before I can. “There isn’t much to tell.”

“Isn’t there?” Her smile remains mild. “You were there long enough to form loyalties.”

The temperature around the table seems to drop.

“I was there long enough to find my mate,” Aelith says.

Nobody moves. Nobody speaks. Even I know that wasn’t really an answer.

The Queen’s smile remains perfectly composed. “And yet your discovery somehow resulted in you abandoning your responsibilities, disappearing from the city, and returning in the company of rebels.”

Aelith’s leg tenses beneath my hand. I press down gently. Not to stop him but to remind him I’m here.

“You ordered Dawson’s capture,” Aelith says evenly, and I know he’s refering to the orders to find and capture any Riftborn who travel through the rifts. “You made your intentions towards him clear.”

“He is Riftborn.”

“He is my mate.”

The words land with enough force that several people at the table look away.

Serresta studies her son for a long moment. “You continue to place one human above the needs of an entire kingdom.”

“I place my mate above your ambitions.”

Well… shit.

The old armoured Glowranth shifts slightly in his chair. The beautiful woman beside him lowers her gaze, though not before I catch a flicker of interest there. Jithusian looks delighted by the confrontation, while Fithrust’s expression tightens with what might actually be concern.

The Queen’s smile finally cools. “Be careful, Aelith.” The warning is soft, which somehow makes it worse. “You speak as though those ambitions and the kingdom are not one and the same.”

“And you speak as though Dawson is a resource rather than a person.”

The silence that follows feels sharp enough to cut skin.

Beside me, Aelith remains perfectly still. Only the rigid tension beneath my hand betrays how close he is to snapping, Aelith’s leg tensing so hard beneath my hand, it feels carved from stone.

I press down gently, trying to anchor him and remind him he’s not alone.

He doesn’t look at me, but one of his hands drops beneath the table and covers mine. His grip is firm, warm, and just this side of desperate.

My throat tightens.

“I’m not great with directions,” I say brightly, because if there was ever a time to weaponise himbo energy, it’s now. “So if anyone’s expecting useful geography from me, just know I once got lost inside a hotel where all the hallways were numbered.”

Fithrust blinks. “Numbered hallways should prevent one from becoming lost.”

“You’d think.”

Jithusian stares at me like I am a puzzle he deeply resents being forced to solve.

Serresta’s eyes narrow slightly. “You were conscious during travel?”

“No,” I say, grateful for once that the lie is simple. “I was unconscious going in and knocked out coming back. Honestly, it’s becoming a bit of a theme for me here. I should probably start rating unconsciousness experiences.”

Aelith’s fingers flex over mine.

The Queen’s gaze slides to him. “And you?”

“The same,” he says.

“Convenient.”

“Necessary,” he replies. “Varek does not trust me.”

The lie lands smoothly.

Too smoothly.

Something about it makes the armoured Glowranth’s eyes flick briefly to the Queen, then away again. I store that little reaction for later, mostly because I have no idea what it means, but it feels important. Look at me, doing politics. Terrifying.

Jithusian leans back in his chair, studying Aelith with lazy cruelty. “How humiliating for you. The great Crown Prince led blind like livestock.”

Aelith turns his gaze slowly towards him.

I feel the shift before he speaks.

Not rage this time.

Authority.

“I returned with my mate,” Aelith says, voice quiet and cold. “I secured Pax’s release without surrendering rebel territory, rebel lives, or strategic intelligence. If humiliation is your interpretation of that outcome, Jithusian, then your understanding of diplomacy remains as underdeveloped as it was in childhood.”

Oh, wow. Okay. That was hot.

Also mean.

But deservedly mean? Probably.

Jithusian’s face hardens.

The male sitting beside him shifts closer, one hand touching Jithusian’s shoulder.

Mate.

Definitely mate.

The assumption pops out of my mouth before my brain can stop it. “Oh, are you two fated mates too?”

The silence that follows is… not ideal.

Aelith closes his eyes, just briefly, which is not reassuring.

Jithusian’s expression goes flat. “No.”

I smile weakly. “Regular mates. Also lovely. Ten out of ten. Love a committed situation.”

Fithrust makes a small sound that could be a laugh disguised as a cough.

The male besides Jithusian looks less offended than Jithusian does, though he watches me with narrowed eyes.

Serresta smiles properly for the first time.

It’s awful.

“Aelith is the only one of my children fortunate enough to receive such a bond,” she says. “And with a human no less. How extraordinary.”

Nothing about the way she says extraordinary makes me feel extraordinary. It makes me feel like a menu item. I keep my smile steady anyway.

“Yeah,” I say. “Bit wild.”

“Have all of the bonds been completed?”

The question drops into the room like a knife.

Aelith’s hand tightens over mine, and my pulse jumps. This is one of those questions with teeth. I know it even without fully understanding why. Aelith warned me she would reach for anything she could use, and here it is, reaching wrapped in polite curiosity.

Aelith answers before I can. “No.”

The Queen’s gaze remains on me. “And why is that?”

Because your son is terrified you’ll use me as a magical battery, probably.

Because he looks at me like I’m something precious and breakable, even though I keep telling him I’m very sturdy.

Because we got interrupted before things got properly interesting.

I say none of that.

“Honestly?” I lift one shoulder. “I was in a coma for a bit, so my schedule’s been all over the place.”

Jithusian looks disgusted, while Fithrust’s eyes widen, and this time they definitely laugh, though quietly.

Aelith makes a tiny strangled sound beside me.

The beautiful woman near the Queen finally speaks. “You are… unusual.”

“Thank you,” I say warmly, because I choose to take that as praise.

Her mouth curves faintly. “I am Lyrentha, oldest companion to Her Majesty.”

Queen’s best friend.

Great.

Definitely dangerous.

“Lovely to meet you,” I say. “Under terrifying circumstances.”

Lyrentha’s eyes gleam. “Honest indeed.”

The armoured male sets his cup down. “Varuth,” he says, apparently introducing himself because everyone seems to have decided this dinner needs more structure. “High Marshal of the Eastern Forces.”

I nod. “Dawson. Snowboard instructor. Currently dimensionally displaced.”

Varuth stares, and Fithrust releases another tiny laugh into their cup.

I decide I like them.

Serresta doesn’t look amused by the shift in mood. “You make light of grave matters.”

“Only because grave matters are heavy,” I say, then regret it almost straight away because that sounded smarter in my head. “Which is… kind of the point, I suppose.”

Aelith’s thumb strokes once over the back of my hand beneath the table.

Approval.

Or reassurance.

Either way, I cling to it.

The meal continues in slow, painful waves of tension. Servants place more dishes in front of us, and I only eat what Aelith touches first or nudges towards me. Jithusian asks questions that sound polite until they hit the air wrong. Fithrust asks about Earth with genuine curiosity, though they keep glancing towards the Queen as if measuring how much interest is permitted. Lyrentha watches me with unnerving amusement, while Varuth says little and misses nothing.

The Queen keeps circling.

Not physically.

Conversationally.

She asks about the rebels' numbers, their species, their weapons, their living conditions. Aelith answers with cold precision, offering nothing useful while somehow still sounding respectful enough that she cannot accuse him of defiance without revealing her own impatience. I answer when I have to, mostly by being aggressively unhelpful in the most cheerful way possible.

"How many dwell within the settlement?" Serresta asks at one point.

I blink at her. "More than twelve."

Jithusian scoffs. "That is your answer?"

"It's accurate."

"It is useless."

I brighten. "Oh good, I was worried I'd accidentally helped."

Aelith's leg jumps beneath my hand. And I'm sure I can feel his amusement this time.

The Queen's patience thins as the meal drags on. I can see it in the tightening around her eyes, the way her fingers rest too still beside her cup. She is used to people giving her what she wants. Aelith refuses by being precise. I refuse by being me. Together, apparently, we're very annoying.

It's romantic, honestly.

Eventually she sets her utensils down. The sound is delicate. The effect is not. "This game grows tiresome," she says.

Aelith's posture shifts, and I tighten my hand on his thigh. He doesn't look at me, but his hand covers mine again.

"I agree," he says. "Which is why I will see you in the morning for an official briefing. If there are matters of governance to discuss, they will be discussed properly. Not over dinner. Not with my mate treated as entertainment."

Jithusian laughs softly. "You presume much for someone who returned under suspicion."

Aelith turns his head to look at him.

The entire table seems to hold its breath.

"I returned," Aelith says, "because I chose to. Do not mistake that choice for weakness."

Jithusian's jaw tightens, but he says nothing. For once.

Serresta studies Aelith for a long moment, and I can almost feel the battle happening between them. Not loud. Not visible. But there, sharp and ugly beneath every polite expression.

Finally, the Queen smiles. “Very well,” she says. “Morning, then.”

Aelith stands so immediately, I nearly fumble my napkin like a complete muppet. He closes his hand around mine, pulling me up with him with the energy of a male who has reached the absolute end of his tolerance.

I manage one last bright smile at the table. “Dinner was terrifying. Thank you.”

Fithrust presses their lips together very hard. Lyrentha’s eyes gleam again, and Jithusian looks like he wants me removed from existence.

Aelith doesn’t wait for anyone to respond. He leads me out of the room so quickly, I have to lengthen my stride to keep up, his hand still firm around mine, his face set in cold, beautiful fury.

The doors close behind us. Only then does he breathe.

I squeeze his hand. “So,” I say softly, because my voice is the only thing I can offer right now, “I think that went well.”

Aelith stops walking. Slowly, he turns his head and looks at me. His expression is still terrifying, but beneath it, I see him.

My prince.

My Aelith.

And then, against all odds, his mouth twitches. “Dawson.”

“Yeah?”

“You are impossible.”

I grin, even though my knees are shaking. “Honestly, I’ve been called worse.”

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CHAPTER
EIGHT

I SLEEP LIKE THE DEAD.

Honestly, after surviving multiple near-death experiences, a terrifying family dinner, a rebel exchange, an evil queen, and whatever emotional category “falling for a giant glowing prince from another world” belongs under, I feel like I’ve earned it.

The first thing I become aware of is warmth. Not blanket warmth. Not sunlight warmth. A very specific kind of warmth that comes from having somehow migrated across an entire bed during the night and attached myself to Aelith like a particularly affectionate koala.

The embarrassing part is that when I wake, I have absolutely no intention of moving.

I keep my eyes closed for another minute and simply enjoy the steady rise and fall beneath my cheek, the warmth radiating from his skin, and the familiar hum of the bond that seems stronger every day.

Slowly, I crack one eye open.

Morning light filters through the enormous windows, painting soft patterns across the room. The crystal veins running through the walls glow faintly, dimmer than they do at night, and somewhere beyond the room, I can hear distant activity beginning within the palace.

Aelith hasn’t moved. His arm remains draped across my back, and his face is relaxed in sleep. And wow, he really is unfairly attractive.

The prince who stalks around looking intimidating all day disappears when he’s asleep. The hard edges soften. The tension vanishes. Even the permanent mild irritation he wields like a personality trait is gone.

I smile despite myself, then lean forward and press a kiss against his chest.

The reaction is immediate.

A low sound vibrates through him. It's not quite a hum and isn't really a growl. It's something in between that makes every nerve ending in my body sit up and pay attention.

I lift my head. "Aelith?"

The sound comes again.

Oh, that's interesting.

My grin widens, and his eyes open. The moment he realises I'm awake, something warm settles into his expression. I don't think I'll ever get tired of that.

"Morning," I say.

His hand slides slowly up my back. "Good morning."

The deep rumble of his voice does absolutely nothing to help my concentration. Not one thing.

I shift slightly, settling more comfortably against him. "A question."

Aelith immediately looks suspicious.

Good instincts.

"Would this be a terrible time to suggest that completing our bond sounds like an excellent way to start the day?"

The words leave my mouth before I can overthink them. My morning wood kind of, maybe—okay, most definitely—is the driving factor here, but still, I'm horny, and Aelith looks delectable.

For half a second, hope flashes across his face. Then he freezes.

The change is so sudden, my pulse skips. All the confidence I'd built vanishes. "Oh."

Aelith's eyes widen. "No."

"No?"

"No."

That doesn't help. I push myself up onto one elbow. "That was a very confusing no."

His hand tightens briefly against my side, and for several long seconds, he doesn't speak. When he finally does, his voice is almost a whisper. "I am afraid."

The answer catches me completely off-guard. Not because I don't understand fear—I absolutely do—but because I never expected him to

admit it so openly. Relief rushes through me so quickly, I almost laugh. For the past thirty seconds, I've been trying not to spiral into wondering whether I'd misread everything between us, whether I'd pushed too hard or moved too fast. Instead, it turns out we're both sitting here terrified for entirely different reasons.

"Oh, thank god."

Aelith blinks. "You are relieved?"

"Mate, have you seen yourself?"

His brow furrows. "I am currently looking at myself considerably less than I am looking at you."

I wave a hand vaguely between us. "The size difference alone is intimidating."

The confusion deepens, then understanding arrives. Very slowly. Colour darkens beneath his blue skin. "Oh."

"Yeah, oh."

His markings brighten dramatically, and I grin. Unfortunately, the grin fades when I realise he's still tense, still worried.

This isn't embarrassment. Not really.

I shift closer. "What are you actually scared of?"

His gaze drops briefly, then returns to mine. "The completed bond."

The answer isn't what I expected.

At all.

I wait.

Aelith exhales slowly. "You do not fully understand what it may mean."

"That's fair. I barely understand how this place has plumbing."

A tiny flicker of amusement crosses his face. "You are already in danger because of me."

The words land heavily between us.

"I do not wish to increase that danger."

I study him for a moment. Really study him.

The prince.

The warrior.

The male who keeps placing everyone else's safety ahead of his own.

Including mine.

Especially mine.

"I know there's danger. Trust me, that part's very clear. Your mother practically glows with villain energy."

“Dawson.”

“I’m serious.” I reach for his hand. “But the danger doesn’t magically stop because we wait.”

The words come easier than I expect. Maybe because they’re true. Maybe because I spent years learning that life doesn’t pause until you’re ready.

Aelith remains silent, thoughtful. I think concerned too.

Beautiful.

Which is deeply inconvenient because now I’m distracted again.

Eventually, I squeeze his fingers. “We don’t have to decide today.”

The look he gives me is almost pained, which is ridiculous. Because I’m literally agreeing with him.

“You would wait?”

The question hurts a little. Not because he’s asking but because he genuinely sounds surprised.

I lean forward and press a quick kiss against his jaw. “Of course I’d wait.”

A softness flickers through his expression, something vulnerable. Then, before I can say anything else, he cups my face.

The kiss that follows is slow.

Not urgent.

Not desperate.

Just deliberate.

Like he’s trying to memorise me.

The warmth of his mouth. The careful way he holds me. The tenderness in every touch. And for a little while, the palace disappears, and so do the Queen and the politics.

There is only this. Only us. Only the certainty growing between us every day.

When he finally draws back, neither of us speaks. The bond hums warmly, content and peaceful.

Eventually, reality begins forcing its way back into the room. I see the exact moment it happens. Aelith’s attention shifts towards the adjoining washroom before flicking briefly to the chamber door, and the warmth in his expression dims beneath the weight of responsibility. The palace is still waiting outside. The Queen is still waiting outside.

“The briefing,” he says quietly.

I let out a dramatic groan and flop backwards onto the mattress. “The briefing,” I repeat mournfully, as though saying the words aloud might somehow dispel them.

His mouth twitches. A full smile remains rare enough that I feel strangely proud every time I earn even a fraction of one.

Reluctantly, he climbs from the bed, and I miss the warmth, which feels unhealthy. Possibly adorable, though definitely annoying.

Aelith disappears into the adjoining washroom while I remain sprawled across the bed, staring at the ceiling.

The silence lasts less than a minute before my brain abandons all attempts at maturity. I tell myself I’ll use the time productively. Think about the palace. Think about the Queen. Think about how not to accidentally trigger an international incident before lunch.

Instead, my thoughts drift right back to Aelith.

To the warmth of his body beneath mine while we slept. To the kiss we just shared. To the low purring sound he made when I kissed his chest. Honestly, my brain is demonstrating a shocking lack of professionalism given the circumstances.

And the fact that Aelith looks unfairly attractive first thing in the morning.

And the fact that the palace somehow expects me to function normally after all of that.

I cover my face with both hands. “This is ridiculous.”

The ceiling offers no useful advice, so my hand does what it wants and slips past the waistband of my underwear. A groan escapes me the second I wrap my fingers around my cock, frustration and relief warring inside me.

I really, *really* wish this was Aelith’s hand, but fuck it all to hell, I’m so damn hard, and I need the release. If I can’t have his large blue hand wrapped around me—or, better yet, his wet, hot mouth—then my own hand will have to do.

I squeeze once, not caring that my palm is dry. The friction feels good, especially when my imagination immediately betrays me. I picture Aelith on his knees, silver eyes fixed on me, his mouth around my cock as he sucks and licks me down.

“Nngh... fuck.”

My hand slides over my length as I shove the covers away with the other. I’m committed now, determined to make quick work of it before

Aelith returns.

Free of the blankets, I pick up the pace, my wrist catching against the elastic of my underwear. “Fucking stupid things,” I mutter.

I shove them down impatiently, and the relief is immediate. This way, I can press two fingers against the root of my cock, adding exactly the pressure I like. My hand tightens, and I groan, glancing down at just how red and angry I look.

By the time I hear movement from the washroom, I’ve convinced myself I can finish before Aelith comes back. The thought of being caught doesn’t slow me down. If anything, it does the exact opposite. The idea of Aelith watching me, of those brilliant eyes fixed on me, only makes everything more intense.

“Fuck,” I groan just as the door opens.

I glance up and completely forget whatever sensible thought I was having.

My hand stills for barely a second before my cock throbs insistently. Aelith pauses in the doorway, his gaze snapping first to my face and then dropping to where my hand is wrapped around my cock.

“Fuck.” The word spills out before I can stop it.

I don’t stop.

Not now.

I stroke myself and watch him closely.

His breathing deepens. The silver of his eyes seems to brighten. A muscle jumps in his jaw before he swallows hard, while the markings along his throat flare. “Dawson.”

My name is a groan.

A plea.

It’s also the detonator to my orgasm.

Pleasure rips through me, fast and hot. I slam my eyes closed, my toes curling as my back arches. My hand continues its frantic movement as release pulses through me, painting my stomach and chest while I ride out every last wave.

Movement catches my attention.

I open my eyes, my breath hitching when I find Aelith beside the bed, close enough to touch.

The expression on his face is unlike anything I’ve ever seen before.

I’ve seen desire. I’ve seen longing. I’ve seen him look at me like he wants to crawl beneath my skin and stay there.

This is something deeper. Something that steals the air from my lungs.

His next words come rough and unsteady. “May I?”

I have no idea what exactly he’s asking, but I nod anyway.

Relief flashes across his face. A heartbeat later, he drops to his knees on the mattress, hovering over me.

“Holy fucking fuck.” I nearly jack-knife off the bed, but one of his hands settles against my hip, steadying me. The sight alone is enough to short-circuit my brain. Aelith on his knees between my legs is sexy as hell.

But Aelith licking me clean is hands down the hottest fucking image I’ve ever seen, let alone experienced.

My cock gives a hopeful twitch. All it would take is for him to lower his head a little more, and I know my body would be entirely on board with whatever happened next.

The temptation to ask is overwhelming.

The desire to beg is even worse.

But I won’t.

I told him I’d wait.

And I will.

No matter how difficult that promise becomes.

My hand finds his hair instead. The dark strands are impossibly soft beneath my fingers. At the touch, he looks up, and something in my chest squeezes painfully when I see the emotion in his eyes.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t wait,” I say quietly.

The words feel inadequate.

I should have waited until he’d left for the meeting. I shouldn’t have added another complication to a morning that’s already carrying more tension than either of us needs.

Then again, it’s difficult to regret anything when Aelith is looking at me like that.

A small smile appears on his lips. It’s soft. Genuine. Entirely for me.

Before I can say anything else, he leans forward and presses a kiss against my chest. “You taste exceptional,” he murmurs, his accent thickening around the words. “Though I admit I may be biased.”

A startled laugh escapes me.

His smile grows fractionally. Only fractionally. For Aelith, that's practically a grand romantic gesture. "I should find a way to bottle this so I can have a taste whenever I feel the urge and you are not near."

A huff of air escapes me in a loud burst of laughter. "I'm not sure how hygienic that would be. But it's sweet of you to say. How about I just give you tasting rights whenever we both feel the urge?"

His gaze is all heat, and so is the bond threading us together.

The moment doesn't last, though.

Regret creeps back into his expression, followed quickly by his sense of duty. I watch the change happen in real time, hate every second of it, and wish I could lock the palace doors and keep him here instead.

"I must go." The words are reluctant. Painfully so.

"I know."

He cups my jaw. The touch is warm, careful, lingering longer than it needs to. "I will ensure food is brought from the kitchens I trust."

The statement sounds less like a promise and more like a military operation.

I smile. "That's reassuringly paranoid."

"It is necessary."

The warmth vanishes from his expression. Not because of me but toward the palace and everything waiting beyond these walls.

"Dawson." His voice drops lower. "Do not leave this room."

My smile fades. "Aelith—"

"Please."

That stops me. The word is so rare from him that it lands with surprising force.

He draws a slow breath before continuing. "I do not yet know who can be trusted. There are those who remained loyal to Kael. Others remain who may support me. Some fear my mother more than they value honour." He brushes his thumb across my cheek. "Until I know the difference, I need you here."

The concern in his eyes strips away any temptation to argue. "I'll stay."

He searches my face as though verifying the truth of what I say. Then, finally, he nods. "Thank you."

Aelith leans forward, presses one last kiss against my forehead, and closes his eyes briefly. The gesture feels strangely intimate, almost reverent. When he finally pulls away, neither of us is particularly happy about it.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Try not to start a civil war before lunch.”

His mouth twitches. “No promises.”

And somehow, despite everything, that makes me smile.

THE FIRST TEN MINUTES I SPEND ALONE IN AELITH’S QUARTERS ARE FINE.

Great, actually.

I wander around, touch absolutely nothing important because I am capable of self-control when sufficiently terrified, and stare out the enormous windows like I’m in some dramatic fantasy film where the hero contemplates his destiny.

Except my destiny currently involves being told not to leave the room by my very serious monster prince boyfriend-mate-person, who then disappeared to have a meeting with his terrifying mother while I stayed behind like a hostage with excellent views.

By minute fifteen, I’m bored.

By minute twenty, I’m very bored.

By minute twenty-two, I’m considering whether trying to balance a decorative fruit bowl on my head counts as “leaving the room” in spirit, if not legally.

I flop backwards onto the sofa and stare at the ceiling. It is, admittedly, a very nice ceiling. There are carved patterns winding through the stone, and the faint blue glow from the crystal veins gives the whole room a dreamy underwater vibe, which would be more relaxing if I didn’t keep remembering I’m inside a palace where people might poison soup for political reasons.

“Right,” I say aloud. “We are not spiralling.”

The room, obviously, does not respond.

Rude.

I sit up again because staying still is a terrible idea. Staying still means thinking about Aelith. Thinking about Aelith means thinking about his meeting with the Queen. Thinking about the Queen means contemplating how badly she wants control of the Riftborn and how very shiny her eyes got when she asked about the bond.

Nope.

Absolutely not.

I need entertainment.

Human beings need enrichment. I’m pretty sure I read that somewhere, though it was probably about dogs, but honestly, same thing. Put me in a room with no one to talk to, and I will eventually start making bad decisions just to see what happens.

Which is exactly why, five minutes later, I end up standing in front of the door.

Not opening it.

I’m behaving.

Mostly.

I lean close and clear my throat. “Hello?”

There’s a discernable pause on the other side. Then a low voice says, “Remain inside.”

Interesting.

Not the grumpy guard from earlier. Different voice. Deeper, but not as growly as Aelith’s. Nobody growls as well as Aelith. Which is probably not something I should be thinking about while trying to make friends with the people currently responsible for keeping me alive.

“I am inside,” I call back. “Very inside. Extremely obedient. Practically a statue.”

No answer.

I wait.

Nothing.

Okay. Challenge accepted.

“I’m Dawson, by the way,” I add, because introductions are important even when you’re talking to a closed door. “But you probably know that. Human mate. Terrible sense of self-preservation. Recently told not to leave the room, which is honestly fair.”

Another pause.

Then, quieter, a different voice says, “We know who you are.”

Female, I think. Low, dry, and already carrying the faintest hint of regret.

Excellent.

Two of them.

“Great. Lovely. Since we all know who I am, can I know who you are? Because calling you Door Guard One and Door Guard Two feels impersonal, and I’m trying to make compassionate choices.”

Silence stretches long enough that I start to wonder if they’ve simply decided ignoring me is an official strategy. It probably is. Aelith would absolutely approve of ignoring me as a tactic, though he’s terrible at it, which is one of my favourite things about him.

Finally, the male voice says, “Prithan.”

A beat follows before the female voice adds, “Rowgr.”

I brighten immediately, even though they can’t see it. “Prithan and Rowgr. Excellent names. Strong. Very fantasy-adventure-party. I approve.”

“We did not request approval,” Prithan says.

“No, but you got it anyway. Free gift.”

Rowgr makes a sound.

It’s tiny.

Almost nonexistent.

But I’m choosing to interpret it as a laugh because morale is important.

I lean a shoulder against the doorframe and lower my voice like we’re all conspiring together, even though they’re on the other side and are probably armed. “So here’s the situation. Aelith told me not to leave the room, and I promised him I wouldn’t. Very noble of me. However, I’m also extremely bad at being bored, and if nobody helps me, I may start exploring the room in ways that could end with damage, injury, or accidental political embarrassment.”

“You should sit quietly,” Prithan says.

“I hear you, and I respect that as a concept. But it’s not going to happen.”

“You are not a child.”

“Correct. I’m an adult with poor impulse control and a deep need for social interaction.”

Silence again.

Then Rowgr says, “That is worse.”

I gasp. “Rude. Accurate, but rude.”

The door remains closed for another few seconds before I hear movement. A lock shifts, and then the door opens so I can see them properly.

Oh.

Okay.

They are very much guards.

Prithan is tall, broad, and carved from the same intimidating blue muscle situation as most Glowranth soldiers, with the usual luminous eyes and an expression that suggests fun has long eluded him. Rowgr stands slightly behind him, slimmer but no less dangerous-looking, her hair pulled tight away from her face and her gaze sharp enough to pin me to the floor.

Neither of them smile.

Naturally, I smile enough for all three of us. “Hi.”

Prithan looks at me like I’ve already given him a headache. “You are unharmed.”

“Yes. So far. But the day is young, and I’ve spotted at least six objects in here that look breakable and expensive.”

Rowgr’s gaze flicks past me into the room. “Do not touch them.”

“See? That right there is exactly the kind of guidance I need.”

Prithan’s eyes narrow. “You want us to enter?”

“Want is a wishy-washy word,” I say. “Need is probably more accurate. If you two come in, you can keep me from doing anything stupid, and I can ask you questions. Everyone wins.”

“No,” Prithan says.

I nod slowly. “Okay. Counterpoint. If you don’t come in, I will still ask questions, but I’ll do it through the door, loudly, for however many hours Aelith is gone.”

Rowgr stares at me.

I stare back, smiling pleasantly.

A muscle jumps in Prithan’s jaw.

Victory is close. I can feel it.

“You are difficult,” he says.

“I’ve heard lovable.”

“I have not.”

“Give it time.”

Rowgr looks away for half a second, and I swear to every weird glowing god in this world, her mouth twitches.

They enter.

Not far into the chamber.

Barely beyond the threshold, really, like they’re expecting the room itself to judge them for crossing into royal territory. Prithan closes the door

behind them, but he remains near it, posture stiff and formal. Rowgr stands beside him with her hands folded behind her back, looking like she'd rather face a weaponised cave beast than make casual conversation with me.

Honestly, fair.

I clap my hands together once. "Amazing. Okay. First question. How do you both speak English?"

They exchange a glance.

"Human," Rowgr says.

I point at her. "See, I nearly called it that, but then I worried it would sound weirdly speciesist."

"It is called Human," Prithan says.

"Right. Good. Love when I accidentally avoid being offensive for no reason." And sure, I have questions. Is every Earth language called Human?! How does that work? I think bringing that up may just push my new friends over the edge.

Rowgr studies me for a moment. "We were taught."

"As part of guard training?" I ask, genuinely curious now.

Prithan's expression tightens slightly, like he's not sure whether answering me counts as violating twelve protocols. "Since the rifts began increasing, certain ranks are required to learn common Riftborn languages. Human is one."

That catches my attention hard enough that I forget to be funny for a second. "Wait. So there are enough humans—or Earth people, I guess—for that to be a thing?"

Another glance passes between them.

Oh, that glance is delicious.

That is definitely a *we shouldn't say too much* glance.

I lean forward, delighted. "Interesting."

Rowgr's eyes narrow. "Do not say it like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you have found a loose thread."

"I love loose threads."

Prithan exhales slowly through his nose. "There have been many Riftborn over the years."

"Humans specifically?"

"Some."

"That is a deeply unhelpful number."

“It was not meant as a number.”

“Yes, I gathered.”

Rowgr shifts her weight, her gaze moving briefly around Aelith’s quarters before returning to me. “Most do not survive long outside settlements.”

And there it is.

The humour sharpens around the edges.

Because I know that.

I know it in the bruised memory of heat and mud and too many limbs coming at me through trees. I know it in the way my body still sometimes expects claws when shadows move too quickly. I know it in the fact I only survived because of luck, panic, and a rock that happened to be exactly where I needed it.

“Yeah,” I say quietly. “I almost didn’t.”

Neither of them speaks.

For a few seconds, the room feels different. Not heavy, exactly, but less like I’m trying to entertain my reluctant babysitters and more like the three of us have accidentally found the same uncomfortable truth from different sides.

Naturally, I ruin it.

“So, are there classes?” I ask brightly. “Like, do you sit in rows and learn how to say, ‘Please do not lick the glowing mushroom’ in Human?”

Rowgr blinks.

Prithan looks pained.

“We learn useful phrases,” he says.

“That is useful. I absolutely would need that phrase.”

“You should not lick mushrooms,” Rowgr says.

“See? Already useful.”

Her mouth presses into a line.

This time I’m certain she’s fighting a smile.

I wander back towards the sofa because standing near the door makes them both look like they’re about to herd me away from it. Sitting feels more comfortable. Less jailbreak-y.

I drop onto the sofa and tuck one leg under me, then gesture grandly at the room. “You can sit, you know.”

“No,” they say together.

“Wow. Very united front. Respect.”

Prithan’s attention flicks to the balcony doors. “You should remain away from the windows.”

“Because I might climb out?”

“Yes.”

“That’s offensive.”

“You threatened to explore.”

“Exploring is not climbing.”

Rowgr tilts her head. “Would you climb if you thought it was possible?”

I open my mouth, pause, then close it again. “Not the point.”

Prithan gives her a look that very clearly says, *See?*

I feel unfairly judged.

“So what are the rules here?” I ask, partly because I’m curious and partly because talking keeps my brain from drifting back to Aelith with his mother. “Not palace rules like which fork to use, because, honestly, if there are forks, I’m already winning. I mean guard rules. Are you assigned to Aelith? To the Queen? To the room? To me?”

The shift is tiny, but I catch it.

Prithan’s shoulders square.

Rowgr’s expression shutters.

Ah.

Big question.

“Royal guards serve the Crown,” Prithan says carefully.

“That sounds like an answer designed to avoid being an answer.”

“It is the answer.”

“Sure.”

I rest my elbow on the back of the sofa and prop my chin on my hand, studying them. It occurs to me then that they’re probably not much older than Aelith, though it’s hard to tell with Glowranth. Everyone here looks carved out of pretty blue intimidation, which makes age guessing difficult.

“But Aelith is the Crown Prince,” I say.

Neither responds.

“He seems to think he doesn’t know who he can trust,” I continue, keeping my tone light even though I’m watching closely now. “Which is a horrible thing to feel in your own home.”

Rowgr’s gaze flickers.

Not much.

Enough.

Prithan says, “The palace is complicated.”

“That is also an answer designed to avoid actually being one.”

“It is also true.”

“Fair.”

The silence that follows is careful. Not unfriendly, exactly, but cautious in the way people become when they’ve survived by not saying the wrong thing. I recognise that more than I want to. Different world, different stakes, same basic principle.

I soften my voice. “Talking to me won’t get you in trouble.”

Prithan looks unconvinced.

“Okay, that’s not strictly true,” I amend. “I might *accidentally* get you in trouble. But I’m not trying to. There’s a difference.”

Rowgr’s lips twitch again. “A poor one.”

“But a difference.”

This time, the faint sound she makes is definitely a laugh.

It’s tiny. Barely there, really, but it’s real.

I grin at her like she’s just handed me treasure. “Ha. Got you.”

Her expression goes flat. “No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Rowgr, that was absolutely a laugh.”

“It was breath.”

“Joy breath.”

Prithan looks between us as though wondering when he lost control of the situation.

The answer, obviously, is the second they opened the door.

I lean back into the sofa, feeling lighter than I have since Aelith left. Not safe, exactly. Safe is too big a word for this place. But less alone. That matters more than I expect.

“So,” I say, “do all Glowranth do the energy thing?”

Prithan stiffens. “The energy thing?”

“The shimmer. The force. The invisible cup-catching, possible murder-zap situation.” I wiggle my fingers in what I hope is an illustrative manner. “You know. Energy.”

Rowgr’s gaze sharpens. “Who told you of that?”

“I’ve seen it.”

That is true enough.

Also, I am not about to mention Sonny, Kael, Aelith, or anything about bonds and life force to two people I met seven minutes ago, even if I have already decided they're probably friend-shaped.

Prithan studies me for a long moment. "All Glowranth are capable of some manipulation. Strength varies."

"Ohhh," I say, leaning forward despite myself. "So it's like being sporty."

He frowns. "What?"

"You know, everyone can technically run, but some people are fast and some people look like they're being attacked by their own legs."

Rowgr blinks slowly. "Your comparisons are strange."

"I've been told that."

Prithan's brow furrows like he's unfortunately engaging with the analogy. "Training matters."

"See? Sporty."

"It is not sport."

"But training matters."

"Yes."

"So, sporty."

He looks at Rowgr as if silently asking for assistance.

She gives him none.

Traitor. I like her.

"And Aelith?" I ask before I can stop myself.

Their expressions change.

Just enough for me to detect.

It's not fear exactly.

Respect, maybe.

Something complicated either way.

"Aelith is powerful," Rowgr says.

The words are careful. Measured. There's more beneath them.

"How powerful?"

Prithan's jaw tightens. "Very."

I nod slowly. "That's another nonanswer."

"It is the only answer I will give."

"Okay."

I let it go even though curiosity gnaws at me. For once, I can tell pressing harder would shut them down completely, and I don't want that.

Not when they’re already giving me more than they probably should.

A sound drifts from outside the door then—footsteps, low voices, the distant hum of palace life. Both guards react instantly, attention snapping towards the corridor. Their posture changes so fast, alarm crawls across my skin. They’re not relaxed. They were never relaxed. They were only briefly less rigid, and even that can vanish in a heartbeat.

I wonder how long they’ve lived like this. How long Aelith lived like that.

The thought makes my chest ache.

When the footsteps pass, I exhale slowly. “This place sucks.”

Prithan looks at me sharply.

I hold up both hands. “Sorry. Official review from a visiting human. Beautiful architecture, terrible vibes.”

Rowgr glances towards the door, then back at me. “You should not say such things aloud.”

“Probably not.”

“You will anyway,” she says.

“Almost definitely.”

The absurdity of it softens something in her face. It’s not a smile, not really, but closer than before. Prithan still looks like I’m a problem he hasn’t been trained to solve, which is fair because I’m also a problem I’ve not been trained to solve.

The door opens a second later.

All three of us turn.

Aelith steps inside.

For one very long second, nobody moves.

Prithan and Rowgr snap upright, their earlier almost-ease vanishing beneath formal discipline. I stay exactly where I am on the sofa, one leg tucked under me, expression hopefully innocent. Aelith’s gaze moves from them to me, then back again, and I brace myself for irritation.

Or growling.

Possibly both.

Instead, something sharp and thoughtful flickers behind his eyes.

Calculation.

Not cold. Not directed at me. Just quick, assessing, prince-level thinking.

He takes in the fact the guards are inside his quarters. He takes in how I'm not injured, escaped, poisoned, or dangling from the balcony. Then he takes in Prithan's rigid posture and Rowgr's carefully blank face.

Finally, his gaze returns to me. "You remained in the room."

I brighten. "I did."

"With company."

"Yes. They were very helpful."

Prithan looks like he would prefer I not say that, while Rowgr looks like she might deny everything under questioning.

Aelith's mouth almost twitches. Then he turns his attention to them. "Prithan. Rowgr."

Both guards bow their heads.

"My prince," Prithan says.

Aelith studies them for another beat, and I can practically see the trajectory of his thoughts. He doesn't know who he can trust. He told me that himself. But here are two guards who came inside because I annoyed them into it, answered my ridiculous questions, and did not immediately drag me to his mother.

It's not loyalty.

Not yet.

But it's something.

"Thank you," Aelith says.

The words are simple, quiet. They land harder than I expect.

Prithan's eyes flicker with surprise before he lowers his gaze. Rowgr stills beside him, and I wonder how often Aelith thanks anyone in this palace. Not because he's cruel. Because he was raised in a place where gratitude probably looks like weakness.

"We were ensuring he did not leave," Rowgr says.

Aelith glances at me.

I smile bigger.

"That was probably necessary," he says.

Accurate, but rude.

Prithan's mouth twitches.

Aelith notices, and so do I.

Oh, excellent. Progress.

"You may return to your posts," Aelith says, but his voice is different now. Still formal, still princely, but less cutting than it had been with the

guard who summoned us to dinner. “If my mother sends for Dawson while I am away, you will inform me first.”

That isn’t a request. It also isn’t quite the same kind of command I’ve heard from him before.

Prithan hesitates for half a second before bowing again. “Yes, my prince.”

Rowgr follows suit. “Yes, my prince.”

They leave without another word, though Rowgr glances at me once before the door closes. It’s quick, almost nothing, but I grin at her anyway.

The second we’re alone, Aelith turns fully towards me.

I prepare myself.

Possibly for a lecture. Possibly for kissing. Honestly, with him, it could go either way.

“You invited palace guards into my private quarters,” he says.

“I did.”

“After I told you not to leave.”

“I didn’t leave.”

His eyes narrow slightly.

I hold up a finger. “Technically, I obeyed perfectly.”

“You are dangerous.”

I grin. “Only socially.”

For a moment, he simply stares at me. Then, to my absolute delight, he exhales something that might almost be a laugh.

I stand and cross the room towards him because the pull in my chest has gone from niggle to demand now that he’s back. His expression softens as I reach him, and when I slide my arms around his waist, he folds me into him.

No hesitation.

No mask.

Just Aelith.

“You found something,” I murmur against him.

His arms tighten fractionally around me. “Perhaps.”

“In them?”

“Perhaps,” he repeats.

I tip my head back and grin. “You’re welcome.”

His kind eyes settle on mine, warm and tired all at once. “You are impossible,” he says.

“Lovable,” I correct.

This time, his mouth definitely twitches. “Yes,” he says quietly. “That too.”

For a moment, neither of us moves.

I hadn’t realised how tense I’ve been until he stood in front of me again. Everything about the palace feels easier when Aelith is nearby. Which is ridiculous because he’s technically part of the reason I’m in danger in the first place. If he’d been a normal bloke from Earth, I wouldn’t be trapped in an alien palace with a homicidal queen and enough political drama to fuel several seasons of reality television.

Instead, he’s a prince.

A glowing, intimidating, gorgeous prince.

My life choices continue to be questionable.

“So?” I ask eventually. “How many threats did your mother make?”

His expression darkens.

Ah. More than zero.

I tighten my hold around his waist. “That many, huh?”

Aelith exhales through his nose. “None directly.”

I stare at him. “That sounds suspiciously like a politician’s answer.”

“It is the truth.”

“Which means there were indirect threats.”

His silence confirms it.

“Mate.”

Aelith closes his eyes briefly, as though searching for patience. When he opens them again, the weariness there hits me harder than any answer could. “My mother rarely threatens openly,” he says. “She prefers implication. It allows her to deny intent later.”

“That’s somehow worse.”

“Yes.”

I grimace. Yep. Definitely worse.

Aelith guides me towards one of the sofas, and I let him. We sit together, his arm settling across the back behind me. The gesture is casual enough that an observer might miss it, but I don’t. It’s protective. Possessive, too, if I’m being honest, though somehow it never feels suffocating from him.

It just feels... nice.

“My brother was present.”

I groan. “The ambitious one?”

“Jithusian.”

“Right. Evil eyebrows.”

Aelith blinks. “Evil... eyebrows?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

His expression suggests he does.

“And Fithrust was there as well.”

I brighten slightly. “The chill sibling.”

Aelith actually laughs. It’s brief and soft and gone in less than a heartbeat. “Chill sibling?” he repeats.

“They seem nice.”

“They are not particularly invested in murdering anyone for political gain.”

“See?” I point at him. “That qualifies as nice in this family.”

When his expression turns pained, I regret the joke. Not because it isn’t funny. It is. But because I see the truth of it in his eyes. This is normal for him. This is his family, his childhood, his home.

And suddenly I understand why he looked so different in Dathanor. Why some of the constant tension I’d noticed in him had eased there.

He’d been breathing.

Actually breathing.

Maybe for the first time in years.

I reach for his hand, and his fingers close around mine.

“What happened?” I ask more gently.

Aelith studies our joined hands for a moment before answering. “My mother asked many questions.”

“About the rebels?”

“About the rebels. About the bonds. About you.”

That last one makes my stomach dip. “And?”

“And I answered very few of them.”

I can’t help smiling. “Good.”

He brushes his thumb over my knuckles.

“She was particularly interested in the newest Riftborn.”

That catches my attention. “The latest who’ve arrived?”

He nods.

Jack and Jamie are at least two who arrived while I was unconscious. I have no idea if there were more lightning shows while I was knocked out.

“Did she say why?”

“No.”

The answer comes too quickly. Too firmly. But I don’t think it’s because he’s hiding something from me. I just think he genuinely doesn’t know, which worries me, as Aelith is smart. If he can’t work it out, that means there aren’t enough pieces yet.

“What kind of questions?”

His gaze sharpens slightly. “Numbers. Circumstances. Whether they possess unusual abilities.”

That sends a chill through me. “That’s creepy.”

“It is concerning.”

I shift closer to him without really meaning to.

Aelith must see something in my expression because his grip tightens. “I do not believe she understands what she is searching for.”

“I hate this palace.”

His mouth twitches. “I know.”

“I really do.”

“I know.”

“And your mother is terrifying.”

“I know.”

I lean my head against his shoulder. “Okay, good. As long as we’re on the same page.”

For a few moments, we sit in comfortable silence. Then Aelith sighs. It’s the sigh of a man about to ruin my day. I recognise it straight away.

“No.”

His eyebrows draw together. “No?”

“Whatever you’re about to say—no.”

His expression becomes deeply suspicious. “You do not know what I was going to say.”

“You’re right. But I know that sigh.”

Aelith actually looks offended, which is adorable. “I need to meet someone.”

I point dramatically. “There it is.”

His eyes narrow. “Drigthon.”

That gives me pause. The name sounds vaguely familiar. Then it clicks. “The guard Kael likes.”

Aelith looks surprised.

“Sonny talks,” I explain.

Understanding dawns. “Ah.”

“Yep.”

Aelith shakes his head slowly. “I have learned that Sonny talks about everything.”

“Correct.”

“He should not.”

“Also correct.” The corner of my mouth lifts. “Still love him, though.”

Aelith makes a noise that sounds remarkably similar to a growl. I decide to interpret it as affection. The alternative is funnier, but less productive.

“Drigthon commands a section of the royal guard,” Aelith explains. “He was close to Kael over the years, is loyal to him. If there are allies here, he may be one and know where to find more.”

That makes sense, annoyingly. Because I was preparing to pout.

The pout is already halfway loaded, so I upcycle it as I say, “You’re leaving again.”

Aelith reaches for my face. “I was going to ask you to come with me.”

The pout vanishes so quickly, it probably breaks some sort of record. “What?”

His expression softens. “I want you with me.”

“Oh.” My entire chest warms. “Oh, okay.”

Something equally warm appears in his eyes. “Is that surprising?”

“Aelith.” I lean forward and kiss him before I can stop myself.

It’s just a quick kiss. Soft, happy, and maybe a little relieved. It’s the kind that happens because keeping it inside would require far more self-control than I possess.

When I pull back, his markings have brightened. Mine probably would, too, if I had any.

Instead, I settle for grinning. “That is significantly better than being abandoned.”

“I was not abandoning you.”

“I know.”

“You were pouting.”

“I absolutely was.”

His expression suggests this is both ridiculous and expected.

Honestly? Fair.

“But before we meet Drigthon,” he continues, “there is somewhere else we must go.”

I narrow my eyes. “Please don’t say family lunch.” Though I am hungry. I only snacked a little on the weird-looking fruit earlier.

“No.”

“Good.”

“It is the market.”

I blink. “The market?”

“There is a small market within the palace grounds.”

Now I’m interested. Dangerously interested. The kind of interested that usually leads to me buying something I don’t need and later having to explain why.

“What kind of market?”

Aelith hesitates. I know that hesitation. He’s deciding how much truth to give me. “The kind where people will see us.”

Oh. Right.

Politics.

I should have known.

He rises from the sofa and offers me his hand. I take it automatically.

“My mother expects me to hide you.”

That surprises me. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“That’s rude.”

“It is.”

I brush imaginary dust from my shirt. “Well. Joke’s on her. I’m delightful.”

Aelith’s expression grows warmer. “Dawson.”

“I am.”

“You are.”

The certainty in his voice catches me off-guard. Because he means it.

No hesitation.

No qualification.

No joking.

Just certainty.

For one stupid second, I feel ten years old again, standing in yet another foster home, wondering whether this one would stick, whether I’d done enough to be worth keeping around.

Then Aelith looks at me. Just looks at me. And the feeling disappears.

Gone.

Like it never existed.

Because nobody has ever looked at me the way he does. Like choosing me was the easiest decision in the world.

His hand slides to the small of my back. “We will go together.”

I smile. “Okay.”

“I will also ensure Prithan and Rowgr accompany us.”

I smile. “My new friends?”

“They are not your friends.”

“They’re definitely becoming my friends.”

“They are royal guards.”

“Friend-shaped royal guards.”

Aelith closes his eyes briefly. When he opens them again, resignation has settled firmly into his expression. “They are loyal.”

That gets my attention. Not because of the words. Because of how carefully he chooses them.

Not trusted.

Not proven.

Loyal.

A possibility.

A hope.

The beginning of something.

The same thing I’d seen in his eyes when he walked into the room and found them with me.

He isn’t just gathering allies. He’s building them. I realise he isn’t reacting anymore. He’s planning.

The thought sends a flicker of excitement through me.

Because if there’s one thing scarier than Prince Aelith angry, it’s probably Prince Aelith organised. And judging by the small smile currently threatening the corner of his mouth, the palace hasn’t realised that yet.

I suspect they’re about to.

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CHAPTER
NINE

THE MARKET IS NOT WHAT I EXPECT.

Which, to be fair, has become the unofficial theme of my entire time in Terrafeara.

When Aelith said market, my brain naturally supplied a picture of stalls, noise, people shouting over each other, questionable meat on sticks, and maybe someone trying to sell me a fake watch out of a suitcase. That's what markets are supposed to be, right? Messy. Loud. Slightly chaotic. Full of smells that make you hungry and suspicious at the same time.

This is not that.

This is… fancy.

Annoyingly fancy.

We step through a wide archway at the rear of the palace into an open courtyard so bright and polished that for a second, I genuinely wonder if I'm allowed to breathe on the stone. Pale columns curve overhead, supporting delicate awnings made from some shimmering fabric that shifts colour whenever the breeze catches it. The stalls aren't rough wooden counters or blankets spread over cobblestones either. They're sculpted platforms of white stone and dark crystal, arranged in perfect curving rows around a central fountain where silver water flows upward before falling back down in sparkling ribbons.

Because apparently gravity is optional when rich people shop.

"This is the market?" I ask, trying not to sound too impressed and failing immediately.

Aelith's hand rests lightly at the small of my back as he guides me forward. "It is a palace market. The common markets are outside the walls."

“Ah,” I say, nodding like that explains everything. “So this is the posh market.”

His brow furrows. “Posh.”

“Fancy. Expensive. Probably smells better than the average market.”

“It is attended by nobles, ranking officials, and those granted access to the inner grounds,” he explains. “Goods from other worlds are often brought here first. Food, textiles, trinkets, salvage. Anything considered unusual or valuable.”

I am sort of listening.

I mean, I hear the words. They enter my ears. Some of them even attempt to settle in my brain.

Unfortunately, my brain has already wandered off to gape at everything.

The place is ridiculous.

Beautiful, yes, but ridiculous in that way only extreme wealth seems to manage. There are fruits stacked in careful pyramids, glowing faintly beneath their skins like tiny edible lanterns. There are bolts of fabric that move as if underwater, even while folded, their colours shifting between gold and blue and deep wine-red. One stall has glass jars filled with what looks like suspended lightning, each flicker making my skin prickle from several feet away. Another sells jewellery made from shells, bone, crystal, and tiny pieces of what I sincerely hope is not tooth.

The smells hit me next.

Sweet smoke drifts from a stall roasting something over blue flame. Spices curl through the air, sharp and warm and unfamiliar, mixing with the scent of polished stone, fruit, perfume, hot oil, and something bright and citrusy that makes my mouth water. Somewhere nearby, someone is grinding herbs with a rhythmic scrape, and beyond that comes the soft music of chimes moving in the breeze.

It should be magical.

It is magical.

It’s also full of people staring at me like I’ve walked in wearing only socks and confidence.

To my left, two Glowranth nobles pause mid-conversation when they spot us. One of them doesn’t even bother hiding the way her gaze travels from my head to my feet, taking in my human face, my very human body, and Aelith’s hand resting on my back. Her mouth tightens with clear disapproval.

Nearby, someone snickers.

Aelith’s fingers press more firmly against my spine.

Prithan and Rowgr walk close behind us, their presence solid enough that I feel it even without turning around. I didn’t think I’d feel safer because of two guards I’d met by annoying them into friendship, but here we are. When I sneak a peek at them, Prithan looks like he’d rather be anywhere else than escorting me through high society, while Rowgr’s gaze keeps sweeping across the crowd with sharp, disciplined attention. Neither of them reacts to the stares, the whispers, or the little laughs that follow us.

But I notice. Of course I notice. I’m cheerful, not oblivious.

The thing is, sneers don’t exactly knock me over.

I’ve had rich tourists look down their noses at me while needing me to teach them how not to break their legs on beginner slopes. I’ve had people decide I was too loud, too much, too easy to dismiss. I’ve spent half my life being underestimated by people who mistook friendliness for stupidity.

So, yeah, I notice the disapproval.

I just don’t let it win.

Besides, Aelith is beside me.

More than beside me.

His attention is divided between the crowd and me, but every few steps, his thumb moves against my back in a small, grounding caress. It feels deliberate. Protective. Like he’s making sure I know exactly where he is and that I’m not facing any of this alone.

And I’m not facing it alone.

I feel safe with him.

With them.

More than that, I feel loved.

Not claimed. Not protected. Not fussed over in that growly, terrifying prince way he does.

Loved.

The realisation sneaks up on me so suddenly that my chest tightens.

Maybe he hasn’t said it. Maybe we haven’t had time to say most of the things we probably should. But I feel it in the way he keeps me close, in the way his body angles between me and anyone staring too long, in the way he stands beside me in front of half the palace and doesn’t so much as flinch.

He wants them to see.

That matters.

A lot.

“Your thoughts have gone loud,” Aelith murmurs.

I blink up at him. “I’m not sure that’s possible.”

“It is for you.”

“Rude.”

“Accurate.”

I grin, and his mouth almost twitches.

Behind us, Rowgr makes a tiny sound that might be breath and might be amusement. I decide not to call her on it because I’m generous and also because she has a sword.

Aelith guides me past a stall selling delicate metal cages full of fluttering, glowing insects. One lands on the inside of its cage and stares at me with a tiny triangular face that looks weirdly judgmental.

“No,” Aelith says before I can even ask.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were considering it.”

“It looked lonely.”

“It is venomous.”

“Oh.” I glance back at the insect. “Well, that’s unfortunate branding.”

Prithan mutters something in Glowranthian behind us.

I understand enough now to catch the tone, if not every word.

It sounds suspiciously like despair.

The next stall has bowls of colourful stones arranged by size and glow level. The vendor explains something to a noble couple in a voice like honey while holding up a deep green crystal that pulses gently in her palm. Aelith keeps walking, and I follow because I promised to stay with him, but my head is basically on a swivel.

Everything here is strange.

Wonderful.

Dangerous.

Which, honestly, is a confusing combination for a man with impulse-control issues.

We’re near the far curve of the courtyard when I see it.

At first my brain refuses to recognise it.

It’s tucked at the back of a stall between a cracked Earth coffee mug, a bundle of faded plastic hair ties, and what looks like the broken handle of a saucepan. Compared to everything around it, the thing is hilariously

ordinary. Scuffed red plastic. White string. Two round halves pressed together around a narrow groove.

I stop so suddenly, Aelith's hand tightens on my back.

"Dawson?"

"Oh my god."

His attention sharpens. "What is wrong?"

I point. "That."

Aelith follows my gaze, then frowns. "The small red object?"

"It's a yo-yo."

The vendor, an elderly Glowranth with three silver rings around one horn and a robe covered in tiny stitched symbols, perks up instantly. "Ah. You recognise the ceremonial Earth pendulum."

I stare at him.

Aelith looks at the vendor.

Prithan goes very still behind us.

Rowgr's mouth presses into a line.

I take a slow breath. "Ceremonial," I repeat.

"Yes," the vendor says, clearly delighted to have an audience. "Recovered from an Earth dwelling brought through a southern rift twelve cycles past. It is believed to be used in rites of descent and return, representing the soul's journey into the lower realms before rising again."

I open my mouth.

Close it.

Open it again.

"That is…" I swallow hard because laughing would be rude, and I genuinely do not want to hurt this old man's feelings. He looks so proud. "That's a really beautiful interpretation."

Aelith turns his head slowly to look at me, but I refuse to meet his eyes. If I do, I will lose it.

The vendor beams. "You confirm its sacred use?"

"I confirm it's very important," I say, which is not technically a lie. "To childhood development."

Aelith's fingers flex against my back.

I still don't look at him.

The vendor nods wisely. "Yes. Initiation of youth."

"Exactly."

Rowgr makes a strangled sound. I cough to cover it.

Aelith, traitor that he is, says nothing at all, which somehow makes it worse.

“How much?” he asks.

I whip my head towards him. “Wait, no. You don’t have to—”

“I am buying it.”

“I don’t even know what currency you use.”

“That is why I am buying it.”

The vendor names a price that means absolutely nothing to me but makes Prithan’s eyebrow twitch.

Aelith pays without hesitation.

Of course he does.

My chest does something stupid.

It’s a yo-yo. A scuffed, probably overpriced, very ordinary yo-yo. But Aelith buys it for me like it matters because I looked at it like it mattered.

The vendor places it reverently into my hands.

I stare down at it for a second, my throat unexpectedly tight. Then I grin. “Oh, this is dangerous.”

Aelith frowns. “It is dangerous?”

“Only socially.”

“That does not reassure me.”

“Good. Stay alert.”

I loop the string around my finger, testing the weight. It’s old, and the string probably needs replacing, but it’s not bad. Not bad at all. I haven’t played with one of these since I was a kid. There was a boy in one of my foster placements who had a blue one, and I remember being wildly jealous until he taught me how to use it, mostly because he liked having an audience and I was very good at being impressed.

I toss it down.

The yo-yo drops cleanly, spins at the end of the string, then snaps back up into my palm.

Muscle memory hits so hard, I laugh. “Oh, mate.”

Aelith watches with immediate suspicion. “You have used this ceremonial object before.”

“Extensively.”

I throw it again, this time letting it sleep at the bottom of the string before flicking my wrist to bring it back. The movement is smooth enough

that a couple of nearby nobles pause. One of them leans in slightly, curiosity overcoming disapproval.

The vendor gasps softly. “Yes,” he whispers. “The descent.”

I bite my lip so hard, I almost hurt myself.

I send the yo-yo down again, then out to the side, letting it swing in a basic around-the-world arc before catching it. Not fancy, but good enough after years of neglect. The sound of the spinning plastic cuts softly through the market noise, and when I glance up, there are more people watching.

Glowranth nobles.

Servants.

A couple of guards who are pretending not to be interested.

Even Prithan looks focused now.

Rowgr definitely is.

“Oh, I used to be better at this,” I say, mostly to myself. Then I try walking the dog.

The yo-yo hits the smooth stone floor, rolls forward perfectly for three glorious seconds, then hops back into my hand.

Someone laughs.

Not meanly.

A delighted little burst from a young Glowranth standing beside a fabric stall. She clamps her mouth shut when her companion looks at her, but the damage is done.

I grin at her and do it again. This time, three people laugh. Aelith has gone very still beside me.

At first I worry he’s annoyed. Maybe royal mates aren’t supposed to perform toy tricks in a noble market. Maybe I’m accidentally causing another diplomatic incident. Wouldn’t be my first this week. But when I look up at him, his expression steals the thought from my head.

He isn’t annoyed. He’s watching the crowd, watching them watch me. While his face remains composed, I know him well enough now to see the faint softness beneath it. The calculation too. The understanding.

Dawson being Dawson. Making people smile in a place that clearly doesn’t encourage smiling.

The thought makes me weirdly self-conscious for about half a second. Then I remember I’m holding a yo-yo and absolutely cannot take myself seriously.

“Okay,” I announce to the growing crowd. “This one might fail spectacularly, so please set your expectations accordingly.”

Aelith murmurs, “Dawson.”

“I’m managing expectations. It’s mature.”

“It is not.”

“Shh. I’m concentrating.”

I try the cradle.

The first attempt tangles. The crowd makes a collective noise of disappointment that is honestly adorable.

“Yep, okay. Warmup. We don’t judge the first one.”

I shake it loose, reset the string, and try again. This time, the yo-yo drops, swings, and lands in the little string triangle exactly as it should. It’s not perfect. It wobbles. My hand placement is rusty. But it works.

The reaction is ridiculous.

A few people clap. Actually clap.

The vendor looks like he might cry. “The soul held between worlds,” he breathes.

I cannot. I absolutely cannot.

“Sure,” I manage weakly. “Exactly.”

Rowgr turns away. Her shoulders shake once. Prithan stares straight ahead like a man clinging to duty by his fingernails, while Aelith’s hand slides from my back to my waist, and his thumb presses there briefly.

Pride.

I feel it through the bond before I understand it.

Warm.

Bright.

So completely sincere, it almost knocks me over.

He’s proud of me… for a yo-yo trick. For being myself. For turning a courtyard full of sneers into something softer.

My smile changes then. Not for the crowd but for him.

Aelith meets my gaze, and for a second, the market fades. The whispers, the disapproval, the glowing stalls, the ridiculous vendor with his ceremonial Earth pendulum. All of it slips away beneath the quiet intensity of the male beside me.

Then someone asks, “Can you make it descend again?”

The moment breaks, and I blink and turn back to the little audience now gathered around us. “Oh, absolutely,” I say. “Prepare yourselves. The sacred

descent is about to get wild.”

Aelith closes his eyes. Just briefly. But his mouth definitely twitches.

And I know right then that this stupid little yo-yo was worth every whatever-currency-he-paid for it.

The crowd eventually disperses, though not before the vendor insists on telling at least three different versions of the sacred history of the ceremonial Earth pendulum. By the end of it, the yo-yo has apparently represented the cycle of seasons, the journey of the soul, and—somehow—the migration patterns of an extinct aquatic species.

I don’t correct him.

Honestly, I kind of love it.

Aelith guides me away before the poor man can invent any more mythology, and we continue through the market at a much slower pace than before. More people greet him now. Not warmly, exactly, but there are fewer sneers and more curiosity. Several of the nobles openly stare at me, particularly when they notice the yo-yo still hanging from my hand.

One older Glowranth actually nods approvingly.

The vendor has probably convinced him I’m carrying some sort of sacred artefact.

We round another curve in the marketplace when Aelith slows unexpectedly.

My attention follows his.

The stall looks fairly ordinary compared to some of the others. Delicate glasswork covers most of the display: bottles, jars, ornaments, and small crystal containers arranged on dark velvet cloth. Sunlight catches the glass and scatters tiny rainbows across the stone beneath our feet.

“What are those?” I ask.

The vendor immediately brightens. “Preservation vessels,” she says proudly. “Each threaded with energy. They maintain freshness far longer than ordinary storage.”

I blink. “Freshness?”

She nods. “For herbs, medicines, rare ingredients, perfumes, oils, and other valuable substances.”

That sounds useful enough.

I glance at Aelith. He’s still looking at the display, specifically at a collection of very small glass vials.

Very small.

Suspiciously small.

My brow furrows. “What do you need one of those for?”

Aelith turns towards me.

The instant our eyes meet, understanding slams into me.

Oh.

Oh.

OH.

The bond practically hums with embarrassment and desire all at once.

Aelith’s cheeks darken to a deeper shade of blue, which somehow makes everything worse.

Or better.

Possibly both.

I stare at him.

He stares at me.

The vendor stares between us.

Rowgr suddenly becomes very interested in examining a nearby display of woven baskets, while Prithan looks like he wishes the ground would open and swallow him. Which only leads me to wonder whether or not they overheard what Aelith said to me in bed this morning about bottling up my cum.

“You can’t be serious.” I absolutely do not squeak the words out.

Aelith clears his throat. “I am merely observing.”

“You are absolutely not merely observing.”

The blush deepens. A miracle I didn’t think possible.

“You said I had tasting rights.”

A laugh bursts out of me so suddenly, I nearly drop the yo-yo. “Aelith!”

“What?”

The fact that he sounds genuinely confused only makes me laugh harder.

The vendor’s eyes narrow. “I feel I have entered the middle of a conversation.”

“You really have,” I assure her.

Aelith picks up one of the tiny vials and studies it with entirely too much interest. Meanwhile, my face is on fire.

Part of me wants to be mortified. Unfortunately, a much larger part of me finds the whole thing ridiculously endearing.

And a little bit hot, which feels unfair. Because he’s standing there looking like a royal portrait come to life while discussing storage solutions.

“Would this not be practical?” he asks.

I cover my face with one hand. “Bloody hell.”

“It appears well made.”

“Aelith.”

“It would solve the distance issue.”

The vendor slowly lowers another vial. “I am now certain I do not want context.”

Rowgr makes a choking sound, and Prithan closes his eyes.

I point accusingly at Aelith. “You cannot just stand there and casually say things like that.”

“Why not?”

The genuine confusion is somehow the worst part, because he’s not teasing.

Well, not entirely.

There’s a spark of amusement in the bond now. A warmth that definitely wasn’t there a few moments ago. The bastard is learning.

“I think you’re enjoying this.”

His expression remains perfectly composed. The bond says otherwise.

“I do not know what you mean.”

“Liar.”

Aelith’s mouth twitches.

Just once.

Tiny.

Victorious.

My pulse flutters.

I can’t believe I’m attracted to a man whose version of flirting apparently involves discussing magical storage containers. Then again, I bought a yo-yo five minutes ago.

Maybe we’re both hopeless.

Aelith glances back towards the display. “Should I not purchase it?”

The question is innocent. Far too innocent. He’s absolutely doing it on purpose now.

I narrow my eyes, and he waits.

The vendor waits.

Rowgr is pretending not to listen, while I’m pretty certain Prithan has abandoned all hope.

“You should absolutely get it.”

Aelith’s eyes brighten. “Really?”

“You never know when a preservation vial might come in handy.”

The answering smile that appears on his face is small, soft, and entirely for me. And suddenly I don’t care that half the palace might be staring.

The vendor sighs heavily. “I am charging extra.”

Neither of us argues.

Honestly, I’m too busy trying—and failing—not to grin every time I glance at the tiny glass vial Aelith has tucked away. The entire exchange leaves me ridiculously happy. Not because of the vial itself, although that is objectively hilarious, but because Aelith is changing. He’s letting pieces of himself out into the open, pieces hidden beneath years of palace politics, duty, and whatever emotional damage comes from being raised by the Queen.

He teased me.

The Crown Prince of the Glowranth kingdom teased me in public.

That’s progress.

Dangerous, wonderful progress.

Aelith catches me smiling for perhaps the fifteenth time. “What?” His tone is suspicious.

I beam at him. “Nothing.”

“It is not nothing.”

“It is absolutely nothing.”

His eyes narrow. The bond tells me he doesn’t believe a word coming out of my mouth. I laugh and bump my shoulder against his arm.

For all the attention we’re drawing and the whispers that still follow us through the market, I feel strangely content. People stare. Some openly disapprove. Others seem fascinated. A few whisper behind elegant hands. None of it really lands. Maybe it should. Maybe I’m supposed to care more about being judged by palace nobles.

Instead, I keep noticing how Aelith stays close enough that our shoulders occasionally brush. How his hand keeps finding the small of my back. How every few minutes, his gaze sweeps the crowd before returning to me. It feels less like being guarded and more like being treasured.

The thought settles warmly in my chest. Then my stomach growls loudly. The sound cuts through the market noise with impressive determination.

Aelith's gaze snaps to mine. "Dawson."

"What?"

"You are hungry."

I open my mouth to deny it, but my stomach chooses betrayal and growls again.

Aelith raises an eyebrow, and I sigh dramatically. "Fine. Perhaps I'm a little hungry."

"You have not eaten since morning."

"I was distracted."

His expression suggests he finds that explanation deeply inadequate. To be fair, he's probably right.

Without another word, he changes direction and guides us towards one of the larger food stalls built around the edge of the market square.

The smell hits me before we even arrive.

Warm spices drift through the air alongside the scent of roasting meat and something sweet enough to make my mouth water. Large metal trays sit above glowing blue stones that radiate heat. Several dishes simmer gently while a pair of cooks move between them with practised efficiency.

I have absolutely no idea what any of it is.

It smells amazing. It also looks slightly alarming.

One dish contains bright purple noodles. Another appears to be covered in glowing orange sauce. A third contains something that resembles roasted vegetables until one of them blinks.

I stare. The vegetable blinks again.

"What was that?"

Aelith follows my gaze. "Oh. That species does that."

"That species?"

"Yes."

I blink slowly. "That explanation raises significantly more questions than it answers."

His mouth twitches. "It is harmless."

"I appreciate that, but I'm still emotionally processing being observed by my lunch."

A small snort escapes Rowgr behind us.

The stall owner greets Aelith, bowing low enough that I worry for his spine. Unlike some of the nobles, he doesn’t stare openly at me. He does, however, avoid looking directly at me altogether.

It’s subtle. Most people probably wouldn’t notice. I do, as I’ve spent enough of my life reading rooms to spot discomfort when it appears.

Maybe it’s because I’m human. Maybe it’s because I’m Aelith’s mate. Hell, maybe it’s both. Whatever the reason, I decide not to let it bother me. The poor guy looks nervous enough already.

Aelith orders for both of us while I examine the menu written in Glowranthian symbols I can mostly understand but absolutely cannot read quickly.

The language thing remains weird.

Useful.

But weird.

After ordering, we settle at one of the stone tables positioned beneath a shaded awning. The sounds of the market continue around us, softer here but still present. Music drifts from somewhere nearby. Merchants call out prices. Conversations overlap and blend together.

It’s almost peaceful.

Aelith reaches across the table and takes my hand. The gesture feels surprisingly intimate in public. Not because he’s possessive, but because he doesn’t seem to care who’s watching.

My chest tightens. “Thank you.”

He brushes his thumb across my knuckles. “For what?”

I gesture vaguely. “The market. The yo-yo. The weird sacred-soul pendulum story. The fact that you’re trying.”

Confusion flickers across his face. “I am not trying.”

I laugh. “Mate. You’re absolutely trying.” His eyes narrow, and I squeeze his hand. “It’s okay. I like it.”

The bond floods with embarrassed affection so quickly, I almost choke on my own smile.

Before he can respond, the vendor returns, carrying two steaming plates. The food somehow smells even better up close. A pile of purple grains sits beneath slices of roasted meat glazed with something sweet and spicy. Bright orange sauce pools along one side, while several pieces of crystallike fruit sparkle faintly beside it.

My gut practically cheers.

The vendor places the food down and still doesn’t quite meet my eyes.

I offer him my brightest smile anyway. “Thank you.”

He startles, then gives a brief nod before retreating. I wonder how many humans he’s actually met. Maybe none. Maybe I’m the first. The thought lingers as I pick up my utensil.

“Moment of truth.”

Aelith watches me with amusement. “You will enjoy it.”

“Bold claim,” I say as I spear a piece of meat, but the aroma alone is enough to make my mouth water.

I’m just lifting it towards my mouth when something slams into my wrist. The utensil flies from my hand, the plate crashes sideways, and food explodes across the table.

For one utterly bewildered second, my brain refuses to process what happened. Then I look up.

Prithan stands over the shattered meal, breathing hard. His hand is still extended from where he struck the plate away.

The entire market seems to freeze.

“What the fuck?” The words leave my mouth before I can stop them.

Aelith is on his feet instantly, his chair crashing backwards. The easy warmth that had surrounded us vanishes so completely, it’s like watching a storm roll across the sky.

One moment he’s my mate. The next he’s a prince raised in a palace where mistakes get people killed.

“What did you see?” he demands.

The Glowranthian comes so quickly, I struggle to follow it.

Prithan answers, fast and urgent, his gaze sweeping across the crowd while he speaks.

Aelith turns sharply. Scanning. Searching.

The market no longer feels peaceful. I notice people moving. Too quickly. Too deliberately.

A figure disappears between two stalls.

Rowgr sees it too and bolts. One second she’s beside us. The next she’s sprinting through the crowd.

People leap aside. Someone shouts. Several merchants begin pulling their goods closer.

Panic ripples outward.

“Aelith?”

No answer. His eyes are fixed on the retreating crowd.

Energy flickers briefly beneath his skin. Not enough to release but enough that I see it. Enough that everyone nearby sees it too.

Prithan says something else, and Aelith's expression darkens. Whatever the guard says, he doesn't like it. Not even slightly.

The bond suddenly floods with emotion.

Fear.

Rage.

Protectiveness.

The intensity of it nearly steals my breath.

Aelith grabs my hand, the touch firm and possessive. "Dawson. We are leaving."

The tone leaves absolutely no room for argument, so I stand.

Questions can wait. Aelith can't.

The market is changing around us now. Conversations have stopped. Nobles stare openly. Vendors watch with growing concern. Whatever happened, people know something is wrong.

Prithan positions himself slightly ahead of us, while Aelith remains glued to my side. Together we move quickly towards the palace entrance.

I manage perhaps ten steps before my confusion finally wins. "What happened?"

Neither male answers.

I try again. "Aelith."

His jaw flexes.

"Aelith."

This time he looks at me. The expression in his eyes makes my skin prickle.

I've seen him angry. I've seen him scared. I've even seen him ready to fight. This is all three at once.

"What happened?" I ask quietly.

For a moment I don't think he'll answer. Then he draws a sharp breath, his fingers tightening around mine. And in a voice so controlled, it's almost frightening, he says, "Someone poisoned your food."

The world seems to tilt.

The market.

The crowd.

The noise.

Everything fades beneath those four words.

Someone attempted to poison your food.

I stare at him. Blink once. Twice. Then, because apparently my brain short-circuits in life-threatening situations, the first thing out of my mouth is “I didn’t even get a bite.”

Prithan closes his eyes, and Aelith stops walking. For one long second, he simply stares at me. Then a sound escapes him—half laugh, half despair.

And somehow that reaction terrifies me far more than if he’d shouted.

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AELITH

By the time we reach my quarters, my fury has become a thing with teeth.

It sits beneath my skin, sharp and ravenous, demanding release with every step I take through the palace corridors. I keep one hand at Dawson's back the entire way, staying close enough to feel the warmth of him through his clothing and reassure myself that he is alive. He walks beside me, more subdued than usual, though his mouth still curves every time a passing servant glances too long in his direction, as though he might soothe the entire palace by smiling hard enough.

I do not understand how he does that.

I do not understand how anyone can look at a world that has repeatedly tried to devour him and still choose softness.

Prithan moves ahead of us, clearing the path with a cold efficiency I respect more with every passing breath. Rowgr vanished in pursuit of the would-be assassin, and though my instincts scream to follow, to hunt, to tear answers from the culprit myself, I force myself to remain beside Dawson. Leaving him exposed, even for a moment, would be foolish.

Worse, it would be exactly what my enemies want.

The palace watches us return.

Servants avert their gazes. Nobles step out of our path. Guards straighten in the halls and pretend not to notice the rage I am no longer bothering to hide. Let them see it. Let them carry whispers back to my mother. Let every traitorous coward within these walls understand that the human at my side is not vulnerable because he is mine.

He is untouchable because he is mine.

When the doors to my quarters close behind us, Dawson exhales.

The sound is shaky enough to cut through the worst of my fury.

“Okay,” he says, forcing brightness into his voice. “So market day got a bit spicy at the end there.”

I turn towards him.

He stands in the centre of my rooms with his sacred Earth toy still clutched in one hand, his face too pale beneath the smile he keeps offering me. The attempt at humour is for me. I know that now. Dawson makes light because he believes it gives others somewhere safer to stand.

It should soothe me. Instead, it makes me want to destroy someone.

“You were almost poisoned,” I say.

“Nearly,” he corrects.

Silver edges my vision. “Do not.”

His smile falters. Only then do I realise how harshly I spoke. The knowledge lands with immediate shame.

Dawson does not deserve my anger. He deserves gentleness, warmth, safety. He deserves a world where food placed before him is food and not another weapon hidden beneath politeness.

I cross the room to him, slower now, and cup his face before he can pretend again. “Forgive me,” I say.

His eyes soften in a way that makes my chest ache. “Nothing to forgive. I know you’re scared.”

“I am not scared.”

He lifts his eyebrows.

I close my eyes briefly. “I am terrified.”

The confession costs less than it once would have. Perhaps because Dawson has already seen too much of me to believe any lie I might offer. Perhaps because with him, truth has begun to feel less like weakness and more like something I am allowed to offer.

Dawson leans into my touch. “Me too.”

I hate that.

I hate this room. This palace. The mother who raised me to recognise poison as politics and fear as discipline. Most of all, I hate that Dawson is here because of me.

A hard knock strikes the door.

Prithan opens it before I speak, one hand already near his weapon. Rowgr steps inside, breath controlled but posture sharp with purpose. There

is a smear of dark fluid across the edge of her armour and a shallow cut along her cheek that has already begun sealing.

“I found him,” she says.

Every thought inside me stills.

Dawson straightens.

I do not look at him. If I do, I may falter, and I cannot afford to falter now.

“Alive?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Lower holding room. Old east passage.”

Prithan’s gaze shifts towards me. He understands what comes next. So does Rowgr.

Dawson does not.

Not fully.

That is probably for the best.

I turn to Prithan. “You remain here.”

He inclines his head. “My prince.”

“You protect my bonded with your life.”

The words come out colder than I intend, but I do not soften them. There are moments when rank matters. There are moments when fear is useful.

Prithan meets my gaze and does not look away. “With my life,” he says.

Only then do I look at Dawson.

His expression is uncertain now, his brightness dimmed beneath worry. He knows enough to understand I am not going somewhere gentle and to fear what I may do there.

“Aelith,” he says quietly.

My name in his mouth almost breaks me.

Almost.

“I will return.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

No. It would not be.

Dawson is afraid for the parts of me I may leave behind in that room.

The understanding strikes deeper than it should.

I step close and press my mouth to his forehead. For one breath, I allow myself to linger there, breathing him in, memorising the warmth of him. He

smells of the market still, of spice and sun-warmed stone and the faint sweetness of the fruit stall he wanted to revisit before everything went wrong.

“I will get answers,” I tell him.

His fingers catch mine for only a moment before I force myself to let go.

Rowgr follows me into the corridor.

Neither of us speaks as we descend through the palace. The old east passage is rarely used now, half abandoned and kept alive only by servants who know which routes evade attention. I know it well. As a child, I used these corridors when I wished to escape lessons, ceremonies, and my mother’s careful watch.

Now I use them to reach a prisoner without alerting half the palace.

The holding room lies beneath a narrow stair, hidden behind a door of plain stone. Two guards stand outside, both wearing my mother’s colours.

Rowgr steps ahead of me before I can speak. “Leave,” she orders.

One guard begins to protest until his gaze lands on me. Whatever he sees in my face ends the argument, and they depart.

Smart.

Inside, the room is cold. The stone walls drink sound, and the only light comes from a single crystal sphere suspended above a metal chair. The prisoner is bound to it with energy-thread restraints, his arms fixed behind him, his ankles locked to the chair legs. He is Glowranth, young enough to still think fear can be hidden by hatred.

He looks up when I enter. Then he looks away.

That is his first mistake.

Rowgr closes the door behind us and takes position near it.

I walk slowly to the chair.

The prisoner’s markings flicker along his throat. Not royal. Not high rank. A palace runner, perhaps, or a minor guard’s son raised near enough to privilege to be useful and far enough from power to be disposable.

“Name,” I say.

He says nothing.

I stop before him. “Name.”

His jaw tightens. “Corthan.”

“Who gave you the poison?”

Silence.

I wait.

Patience is a weapon my mother taught me well.

Corthan keeps his mouth closed, but his breathing shifts. Too fast. Too uneven. His gaze flicks once towards the door before returning to the floor.

He is not trained for this. Good.

“I will ask once more before I make this unpleasant,” I say. “Who gave you the poison?”

His mouth twists. “You have no authority here.”

The answer almost makes me laugh. I crouch before him so our eyes meet. He flinches despite his attempt not to.

“I am Aelith Serrestaen,” I say softly. “Crown Prince of this kingdom, heir to the throne you were foolish enough to involve in your little errand. If you intend to insult me, you should choose to say something less absurd.”

He works his throat.

I reach out and rest two fingers against the restraint binding his wrist. Energy hums beneath my touch, responding to mine without pause. With the slightest push, I tighten the thread.

Corthan gasps.

Not enough pain to damage.

Enough to warn.

Enough to remind.

“I do not wish to draw this out,” I tell him.

That is a lie.

Some dark, vicious part of me wants exactly that. It wants him screaming. It wants his fear. It wants him to understand what it means to reach for Dawson’s life and fail.

Then Dawson’s face rises in my mind.

His smile when the market crowd laughed. His hand smoothing over my chest when I admitted fear. His voice, gentle with disappointment when I spoke down to Sonny in Dathanor.

I breathe once. Slowly.

I will not become my mother in this room, but I will get answers.

“Again,” I say. “Who gave you the poison?”

Corthan shakes his head.

I stand up and move behind him. The chair scrapes faintly beneath my hand as I turn it away from the door, away from Rowgr, away from any

point of focus but my voice. Isolation creates pressure. Darkness would do more, but I do not need theatre.

My mother is the one who enjoys theatre.

I prefer efficiency.

The crystal light dims at my command until only a thin glow remains above us.

Corthan’s breathing stutters.

“You attempted to poison my bonded in a public market,” I say, circling him slowly. “That was not clever. It was not subtle. It was not even brave. It was desperate, and desperate acts usually belong to those acting under threat.”

His eyes close.

There.

A thread.

I stop beside him. “Who threatened you?”

Nothing.

I tighten the restraint again, this time around his ankle. He jerks against it, breath hissing between clenched teeth. The energy-thread leaves no wound, no blood, nothing my mother can later parade as cruelty, but every nerve beneath it will feel the pressure.

Still, I release it before damage can begin.

“You are not loyal,” I say. “If you were, you would be calmer. You would have expected capture. Perhaps even death. Instead, you are afraid.”

“I am not.”

“You are trembling.”

His face twists. Humiliation burns hotter than pain in men like him.

“Someone used you,” I continue. “You may protect them if you wish. They will not protect you.”

His breathing changes again.

Behind me, Rowgr remains silent.

I crouch once more, lowering my voice. “Do you know what my mother will do when she learns you failed?”

His eyes snap to mine.

There it is.

Not loyalty.

Fear.

“You will disappear from this room,” I say. “Not officially. Not with trial. Not with record. One day your family will ask where you went, and no one will answer. Perhaps they will be warned not to ask again.”

Corthan’s lips part.

I lean closer. “I can prevent that.”

His laugh is sharp and brittle. “You? You cannot even protect your human.”

The words strike precisely where he means them to, and for one instant, fury blinds me.

Energy flares beneath my skin, bright enough that the room flashes silver-blue. Corthan recoils as much as the restraints allow, and Rowgr shifts behind me, but she does not interfere.

I could break him.

Easily.

The knowledge is not satisfying.

It is dangerous.

Dawson would look at me differently if I crossed that line. Perhaps he would try not to. Perhaps his kind heart would search for reasons and context and wounds beneath the violence. But he would see it. He always sees more than people expect.

I close my hand into a fist until the energy settles.

“You are alive,” I say, voice low, “because he would want you to remain so.”

Corthan stares at me.

Confusion cuts through his fear.

Good. Let him wonder about the human he tried to kill. Let him live with it.

I step back and change tactics. “Your family,” I say.

His face shutters too quickly.

A weakness.

“Who are they?”

Nothing.

I turn to Rowgr. “Find them.”

Corthan jerks against the restraints. “No.”

I look back at him. “Then speak.”

“You cannot—”

“I can,” I say. “I can protect them. Or I can leave them to whoever sent you. Since you failed, they’ve become loose ends. You know this.”

His eyes shine now. Not with tears but with terror.

There are many kinds of leverage. My mother taught me the cruellest forms. Dawson reminds me there are other ways to use what we know.

“I will not harm them,” I say. “But I need a name.”

Corthan looks at Rowgr. Then at me. His resolve breaks all at once. “Jithusian.”

The name enters the room like a blade.

I do not move, do not speak, while inside me, something ancient and cold opens its eyes.

My brother.

Of course.

Not my mother. Not directly. She would not yet waste a move so crude unless she wished to test me. Jithusian, however, has always mistaken cruelty for intelligence and ambition for destiny. He must have seen Dawson beside me in the market. No doubt he saw the way the nobles watched. He saw them smile.

And he decided to remove the source of it.

Corthan begins speaking quickly now, as though the first truth has dragged all the others behind it. Jithusian sent word through an intermediary. Poison from the eastern stores. A payment promised. A threat made against Corthan’s younger sister, who serves in one of the outer laundries. The food vendor was not involved; the poison was added after the dish left the fire, slipped into the sauce during the short walk from stall to table.

Prithan must have seen the hand.

Rowgr must have seen the runner.

My guards.

Dawson’s guards.

The thought settles.

“He said the human was weakening you,” Corthan says, voice shaking now. “He said the kingdom could not survive a prince led by a Riftborn pet.”

The room goes very still.

Rowgr’s hand moves to her blade.

Mine does not.

Because if I move now, I may kill him.

Corthan seems to realise his mistake. “Those were his words.”

“I know.”

My voice sounds distant even to me. Calm.

I step closer, and Corthan shrinks back.

“Listen carefully,” I say. “You will remain here. You will speak to no one except Rowgr, Prithan, or me. You will give every name, every route, every message. If you lie, I will know. If your family is in danger, I will move them before Jithusian can reach them.”

His eyes widen. “You would do that?”

“Yes.”

He does not understand, which is fine. I barely understand it myself.

Once, I would have used the sister as leverage and considered the matter efficient. Now, I think of Dawson telling a venomous insect it had unfortunate branding. I think of him thanking servants who cannot look at him. I think of his ridiculous smile in a market that had forgotten how to welcome anything soft.

I think of Jithusian trying to take that from the world.

From me.

“I will not punish your sister for your cowardice,” I say. “But understand this, Corthan. If you ever come near Dawson again, there will be no room left in me for mercy.”

He believes me.

I straighten and look at Rowgr. “Secure him. Quietly. Move his sister before nightfall.”

Her eyes meet mine. There is surprise there. Respect, too, perhaps. “Yes, my prince.”

I pause at the door when, behind me, Corthan whispers, “What will you do about Prince Jithusian?”

For a moment, I say nothing.

My brother’s face appears in my mind: his lazy smile, his cruel amusement, the envy he has never been skilled enough to hide. I cannot strike immediately. My mother would use it. The court would fracture. Dawson would become the centre of every accusation, every whisper, every blade.

No. Jithusian must remain alive for now. But only for now.

“I will be careful,” I say.

It is the truth. It is also a promise.
By the time this ends, my brother will not survive what he has begun.

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CHAPTER
TEN

FIVE DAYS IS APPARENTLY ALL IT TAKES TO ACCIDENTALLY BECOME PRIMARY palace gossip. Not bad gossip either. Good gossip. Which is honestly more unsettling.

I lean against the stone railing overlooking one of the inner courtyards and watch two servants pretending not to stare at me. The moment I catch one of them looking, she ducks her head and hurries away, carrying a basket of laundry. The other one lingers just long enough to offer me a small smile before following.

I grin after them. “That one smiled.”

Aelith doesn’t even look up from where he’s seated. “They are always smiling at you.”

“That’s because I’m delightful.”

“You are exhausting.”

“Also true.”

His mouth twitches despite him.

The sound of distant conversation drifts up from the levels below. Palace life continues around us, though differently than it did when we first arrived. People are watching even more carefully now. Guards appear in pairs where once they stood alone. Servants lower their voices whenever certain names are spoken.

Everyone knows something is happening, though no one seems entirely sure what. Not that it stops them talking.

“I think they’re telling stories about me.”

Aelith finally glances over. “They are.”

“Good stories?”

A pause follows before he settles on: “Mostly.”

I brighten immediately. “Excellent.”

His eyes narrow. “One story claims you defeated a market thief with a sacred Earth weapon.”

I consider that. “The yo-yo?”

“The yo-yo.”

I nod solemnly. “To be fair, I could absolutely weaponise it if necessary.”

The sigh that escapes him is long-suffering enough to make me laugh.

For a while we sit in companionable silence. It’s becoming easier to do that around him.

When we first met, every conversation felt important. Every moment carried weight because neither of us knew what we were doing or where we stood. Now there are stretches where neither of us speaks, and somehow those moments feel just as intimate.

His hand rests on my thigh while mine rests over his. The contact has become so normal, I barely think about it anymore.

Below us, the palace gardens glow softly beneath the evening light. The sight still feels unreal. Everything here does. Between the impossible architecture, the glowing plants, and the mountains carved into homes and halls, it’s very much a world stitched together from pieces of other worlds.

Sometimes I still wake up expecting snow. Instead, I find Aelith. Honestly, I’m not complaining.

“Drigthon likes you.”

The observation catches me off-guard. I turn. “What?”

Aelith looks faintly annoyed by the fact. “Drigthon.”

“The giant scary guard?”

“He is not scary.”

I stare at him, and Aelith stares back. Neither of us speaks.

Eventually his shoulders slump. “Fine, he’s a little scary.”

“Thank you.”

His expression suggests I should appreciate how difficult that concession was. I absolutely do.

“What makes you think he likes me?”

“He volunteered to remain on your detail.”

That surprises me. Over the past few days, I’ve learned enough about palace politics to understand that nothing is ever accidental here. Nothing.

Not where people stand. Not who attends meetings. Not who guards which doors. Every choice means something.

“Really?”

Aelith nods. “Rowgr and Prithan did as well.”

Warmth spreads through my chest. I didn’t realise how much that means until now. Not because I need people to like me. Well, okay. I do enjoy people liking me, but that’s not it.

The important thing is that these are Aelith’s people now. People choosing him and willing to risk things for him.

The realisation settles slowly.

“Your network.”

His gaze sharpens. “You know about that?”

I shrug. “I’m pretty. Not stupid.”

That finally earns a genuine laugh. A rare one. The sound catches me completely by surprise, and for a moment I just stare at him.

The laugh fades. “What?”

“You should do that more.”

His expression turns suspicious. “I dislike where this conversation is going.”

“You have a nice laugh.”

“Dawson.”

“It’s true.”

The tips of his ears darken.

I settle more comfortably against the backrest as the laughter fades, leaving something quieter behind, something thoughtful.

“People miss your father.” The words leave before I can stop them.

Aelith’s amusement disappears the same way sunlight slips behind clouds.

Despite that, below us, the gardens continue to glow while somewhere in the distance, a bell rings.

Aelith looks out over the city rather than at me. “People miss what they think he was.”

The answer surprises me.

“My father has become a symbol.” His voice is calm, but there’s something old beneath it, tired. “The kingdom remembers stability. Strength. Prosperity.” He pauses before adding, “They remember certainty.”

I think about that. It’s easy to romanticise the past when the present hurts. Earth did it all the time. Every generation seemed convinced the previous one had somehow known what it was doing. “Was he really that different from the Queen?”

Aelith is quiet for several seconds, but the answer arrives without hesitation. “No.” “No. He was merely less cruel.”

Not kinder.

Less cruel.

The distinction matters.

“My father believed power existed to be used. He believed weakness invited disaster.” His jaw tightens slightly. “He, too, was fascinated by the rifts.”

I glance over. The expression on his face tells me everything before he speaks again.

“I don’t think Terrafeara would be different if he had survived.” His gaze remains fixed on the city below. “The faces might change. The methods might change. But the outcome?” He shakes his head. “No.”

For a long moment, neither of us speaks.

I think about my own childhood, about foster homes, temporary bedrooms and families. People who weren’t necessarily bad, but weren’t mine either.

While Aelith had a palace, I had borrowed couches and shared rooms and suitcases. By every measure imaginable, our lives should have been completely different. Yet somehow...

“They didn’t love us much, did they?” The words slip out softly, and Aelith turns to look at me.

For a second, something vulnerable flashes across his face. It’s gone almost immediately, but I see it because he lets me.

“No,” he says quietly.

I reach for his hand, and he takes mine without hesitation. Somewhere along the way, we’ve both learned what it feels like to be chosen, and maybe that’s why this works.

Not because we’re from different worlds or because fate decided it. But because beneath all the titles, species categorisation, and impossible circumstances, we’re two people who’ve spent most of our lives searching for somewhere to belong.

And somehow, against all logic, we found each other.

The thought makes me want to kiss him again.

So I do.

I throw my arms around his shoulders, partly because I want him closer and partly because I want to pull him down to me, then press my mouth to his. He grunts at the impact before the sound melts into a quiet, pleased hum when I suggest something I never imagined wanting with another person.

“Pick me up,” I whisper.

I know he can. The male could probably lift a boulder twice my size without breaking a sweat.

And fuck, he does—lift me that is.

One moment my feet are on the floor. The next, his hands are under my arse and I’m being lifted effortlessly. I grin against his mouth and hook my legs around his waist.

“You know,” I say between kisses, my mouth wandering across his jaw and down to his neck, “making out is a very human pastime, and I’m absolutely on board with experiencing it with you.”

His grip tightens. I half expect him to set me back down. Instead, he holds me more firmly and takes me inside.

I smile against his skin, breathing him in before dragging my tongue slowly up the side of his neck. He tastes like sunshine and fire and—

Mine.

The thought hits me so hard, it steals my breath.

“I know you want to wait until we complete the final bond.” I press a light bite to the junction of his neck and shoulder, right where the markings dance beneath his skin. His gasp is delicious. The answering roll of his hips even more so. “And I respect that.”

I draw back enough to meet his gaze.

I need him to see that I mean it.

The want pulsing through me is fierce enough to make my hands shake, but this matters more.

“We can wait until the time is right.” I brush my thumb over his cheekbone. “But you know there are other things we can do in the meantime.”

Aelith swallows hard. The sound is loud in the otherwise quiet room. “There are?” he asks, voice rough. “More than me watching you?”

My cock throbs. Because, okay, he's watched me get myself off more than once, and every single time has been ridiculously hot. At the same time, keeping my hands to myself has been slowly driving me insane.

"Yes," I say, wriggling slightly in his hold. "Lots of things that don't involve us completing the bond."

Even if the thought of finally having him leaves me breathless.

His eyes drift closed for a second, and I swear his scent deepens.

"And, you know..." I clear my throat. "I'd really like to see your dick too."

The admission should feel awkward. Instead, it feels honest. I'm too curious. Too needy. Too consumed by wanting to know every part of him. More than that, I want to see all of him. This beautiful, stubborn, uptight Glowranth prince who would probably hand me the world if I asked.

"I could try sucking it."

A growl tears free from him. Before I can react, he's moving.

One second we're standing near the doorway of our suite. The next he's carrying me back into the bedroom so quickly that a startled squeak escapes me as I cling to him.

"No." The word bursts out of him as he sets me on the bed.

My eyes widen. Fuck. Did I push too far?

It's not that he doesn't want me. I know that. But—

"O-okay," I manage, my voice cracking slightly. "We don't have to do any—"

"I will suck you." His voice has dropped low enough to vibrate through my entire body.

"Fuck. Okay." I scramble out of his arms and start stripping. "But, you know, we could totally do both."

By the time my last piece of clothing hits the floor, I'm completely exposed and painfully hard. My cock jumps under his attention, and heat rushes through me at the way he's looking at me.

"Dawson."

The intensity in his voice has my gaze snapping back to his, and his gaze drops briefly before returning to mine.

The heat is still there. If anything, it's worse.

I can see it in the tension running through him and the way his hands flex at his sides as though he's fighting every instinct he possesses.

"Dawson," he says again.

The way he says my name should be illegal.

I grin. “Yeah?”

His throat works. “I want you.”

The words come quietly, but they hit like a punch. Not because they’re surprising, as I’ve known that for weeks, but because of how vulnerable they sound.

Because this is Aelith. A prince. A warrior. A male raised to command armies and carry the expectations of an entire people on his shoulders. And right now he looks almost uncertain. Almost shy.

My heart does a stupid little flip.

“You know,” I say softly, “for someone who keeps growling at me, you’re actually kind of adorable.”

A faint flush spreads across his markings.

I stare, then start grinning wider. “Oh my god. You’re embarrassed.”

His expression turns pained. “Dawson.”

“No, wait. This is *adorable*.” And yes, I’m teasing but this male needs joy and fun and so much teasing in his life.

His hands settle on my hips, steady and warm. “I am not embarrassed.”

“You absolutely are.”

Aelith closes his eyes briefly, as though summoning patience from the stars themselves. When he looks at me again, the affection in his gaze is so open, it steals the rest of my teasing. “I want our final bond to be right,” he says quietly.

The humour drains from me.

His thumb brushes across my hip. “I have waited my entire life for you.” The words settle heavily between us before he continues, “Waiting a little longer is not difficult.” His jaw tightens slightly. “Releasing with you...” He pauses, searching for the right words. “It means something to my people. To me.”

My chest squeezes, because suddenly this isn’t about rules or tradition. It’s about him. About a male who wants this just as badly as I do and is choosing restraint because the moment matters to him.

“But that does not mean I do not want to touch you,” he continues. The intensity in his voice returns. “Or kiss you.” His gaze drops briefly before finding mine again. “Or make you feel good.”

Heat rushes through me, fast and powerful enough that my breath catches.

Aelith steps closer, his expression softening. “Until that day comes,” he says, “allow me to worship what is already mine.”

The tenderness in his voice nearly undoes me. Not because of the possessive words, but because of everything behind them.

The patience.

The reverence.

The certainty.

The promise that he isn’t withholding himself from me. He’s simply saving one part of us for later.

And in the meantime, he intends to give me absolutely everything else.

“Okay,” I say more softly, with a reverence I hope he feels deeply when he hears it.

His smile, for the first time, is wide and brilliant. My heart thuds loudly at the sight. I’m witnessing something precious.

Every smile he’s given me until now has been small. Careful. The sort of thing that sneaks onto his face when he thinks I’m not paying attention. Tiny curves of amusement. Fleeting moments of affection.

This?

This is joy.

Unrestrained and dazzling.

It transforms him.

The weight he always carries seems to slip from his shoulders for a heartbeat. The prince disappears. The expectations disappear. Even the bond and all the complications surrounding it fade into the background.

For one perfect moment, he’s simply Aelith.

Happy.

Because of me.

The thought hits hard enough that my throat tightens.

“Well,” I say weakly, because apparently my brain has abandoned me, “that’s wildly unfair.”

His brow furrows. “What is?”

I gesture vaguely at all of him. “That.”

The smile only grows. “Dawson.”

“No, seriously. You should’ve warned me.”

A soft laugh escapes him.

A laugh.

I freeze.

Aelith freezes, too, as if he hadn't expected the sound either. Then his expression softens into something almost shy. "You make me happy," he admits quietly.

My chest absolutely caves in on itself.

That's it.

That's the end of me.

Gone.

Buried.

No recovery possible.

"Mate… Aelith," I whisper, staring at him. "You can't just say things like that."

His expression softens further. "Why?"

Because nobody has ever looked at me like this.

Because nobody has ever said it as though it was the simplest truth in the universe.

Because after everything he's survived and everything he's sacrificed, the fact that I can still bring him joy feels like a gift I'll never stop being grateful for.

I reach for him again, needing the contact. "Come here," I murmur.

He does. Immediately. Like there was never any possibility of him doing anything else.

As soon as his lips touch mine, I sigh, content and feeling more seen than I ever have before. That and harder than I've ever been before. So fucking hard that just the scrape of the material from his pants has my hips surging for more. The smile against my mouth is delicious, almost as wonderful as the hand he trails over my chest and all the way to my cock with no buildup and no stopping.

This is the first time he's touched me so intimately, and I need to look. Need to see. Just as much as he apparently does, thank fuck.

He leans back and repositions himself, giving me the perfect view of his large blue three-fingered hand and opposable thumb on my shaft. His hand is so big, it engulfs me wholly. Hell, I don't even give a shit that my cock looks dwarfed in comparison. It's impossible to feel anything but elation, the tingling already building at the base of my spine. My balls draw tight when he strokes my cock, exactly the way he's watched me do to myself.

But this is so much hotter, sexier. I'm already close, already thrusting into his hand. Any possible hesitation I possibly could have had disappeared

long before this moment.

Aelith's gaze locks onto mine as he lowers himself. His warm breath dancing across my dick is nearly too much stimulation, but it's everything that makes the dirtiest, neediest groan tear free from somewhere deep in my chest. The determined set of his shoulders, the heat in his silver gaze, the delicate points of his ears… and his markings that pulse with a brilliance that has my cock throbbing.

"I can't wait to taste you," he all but purrs before he opens his mouth and lowers his head. My dick is engulfed in heat, which is quickly followed by suction.

"Fuck… how…?" I can't manage the full question. How he knows to suck me down like he's gulping dehydration juice is the smallest of thoughts as I fall into his touch. I inhale sharply, struggling to keep my hip still as he bobs his beautiful blue head up and down, sucking perfectly while holding onto the root of my dick like he's taken lessons from a porn star.

Pleasure surges through me, bright and overwhelming, stealing every coherent thought. His attention never wavers, silver eyes fixed on me as though every sound I make is something precious. The look on his face is what destroys me most. Not confidence. Not pride. Wonder.

I'm unraveling far too quickly. My whole body feels wound too tight, every touch threatening to snap the last thread of control I have left. My thighs shake, and I know I'm not fooling either of us.

"Holy fuckballs, Aelith. That's—yeah. Just like…." The words dissolve into a broken groan. I tip my head back against the mattress, chasing enough composure to warn him. "I'm gonna—Aelith… I'm—"

The pleasure crests so suddenly, it steals the breath from my lungs. I release, my cum spurting deep in his mouth. He hums and groans, swallowing and drinking me down. For a moment, there's nothing but warmth and light and the impossible feeling of being cherished so completely, my whole body trembles with it. Another pulse of my seed empties from my balls.

Contentment settles in my chest as Aelith slowly pulls away, licking the underside of my dick with such reverence, I prise my eyelids open and stare at him.

Satisfaction glows in his silver gaze, while the markings across his skin shine brighter than before, pulsing softly beneath the blue. He looks

pleased. Not with himself.

With me.

Like giving me pleasure was the reward all along.

For a few precious moments, neither of us moves. I lie sprawled across the bed, pleasantly boneless, while Aelith remains beside me, one hand resting lightly on my stomach as though he can't quite convince himself I'm real.

The silence is far from awkward. It's the most comfortable I've ever being with another living being.

My fingers find his and thread between them, and Aelith drops his gaze to our joined hands before lifting it back to my face. The careful control in his expression eases.

"What?" I ask.

His thumb brushes over my knuckles. "Nothing."

Which is prince-speak for *absolutely something*. I grin. "You're doing that thing again."

One dark brow rises. "What thing?"

"The staring."

Aelith doesn't even have the decency to look embarrassed. "I enjoy looking at you."

My chest does an annoyingly affectionate little squeeze. "You're ridiculous."

"So I've been told."

"Mostly by me."

"Frequently by you."

I laugh, and his expression relaxes further at the sound.

For a heartbeat, it feels like we're nowhere else. Not in a palace balanced on the edge of disaster. Not a prince and a Riftborn. Not two people carrying the weight of a bond, a rebellion, and an entire realm's worth of problems.

Just us.

The moment doesn't last.

Moments in this palace apparently have the life expectancy of a snowball in summer, which feels unfair considering how hard it is to find the nice ones.

No sooner are we dressed and presentable, our hands linked, and just stepping into the gardens as I've been begging to explore a little, when a

servant appears at the edge of a small fruit bush. I don’t hear them approach. Nobody in this palace seems to make normal footstep noises, which is both impressive and deeply annoying. Back on Earth, you could usually hear someone coming if they weren’t actively trying to sneak. Here, people drift in and out of rooms like ghosts.

The servant stops several paces away and bows low, holding out a folded slip of pale parchment.

“My prince,” they say softly.

Aelith changes before he even takes it.

Not hugely. Not in a way most people would notice. His fingers remain threaded through mine, his posture still relaxed enough that anyone watching might think we’re simply enjoying the view, but the warmth in him tightens. I feel it through the bond, a subtle shift from quiet to alert.

He accepts the note with his free hand.

The servant retreats without looking at me.

Still, before they disappear, I smile at them because I’m apparently incapable of not doing that. They startle slightly.

Aelith unfolds the parchment and reads. His expression becomes very still. His mask settles into place, but I can feel the sharp edge under it, the calculation, the ugly recognition.

“What is it?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer straight away. His eyes move over the note twice, then a third time, before he folds it with careful precision. The movement is so controlled that it makes my heart tighten.

“My brother.”

Ah. The day was going too well. I try not to react too obviously. “Evil eyebrows?”

Aelith’s mouth should twitch at that. It doesn’t.

Okay. Worse than I thought.

“I need to respond immediately.”

The words hit me with a small, childish flash of disappointment before the grown-up part of my brain catches up and tells me to stop being ridiculous. Aelith has a rebellion to quietly organise from inside his murderous mother’s palace. He can’t spend every second holding my hand and making me feel safer, even if my insides think that would be a brilliant use of everyone’s time.

I nod. “Okay. Do prince things.”

He lifts his gaze to mine. “I do not like leaving you.”

“That makes two of us.”

Aelith steps closer, and for a moment, the palace falls away again. He cups the side of my face, thumb brushing over my cheekbone in a gesture so gentle, it makes my throat close. I lean into it straight away because I have exactly zero dignity when it comes to this male.

“I will send you back to our quarters with Prithan and Rowgr,” he says. “You are not to leave them.”

“*Our* quarters,” I repeat, because apparently my brain catches on the important things even when danger is happening.

His eyes soften. “Yes.”

Ridiculous warmth blooms through me. Absolutely terrible timing. I blame him.

Aelith reaches inside a pocket and draws out a narrow strip of parchment along with what looks like a pen but has no visible ink. It’s made of dark metal, slim and elegant, with a tiny crystal embedded near the point. When he presses it to the parchment, faint lines appear in a deep blue shimmer, as if the words are being burned into place by light rather than written.

I lean closer before I can help myself. “That’s cool.”

His mouth twitches this time. Barely. But I’ll take it. “It is common.”

“To you. To me, it’s a magic pen.”

“It is not magic.”

“Everything here is magic until proven otherwise.”

He gives me a look, and I smile innocently.

He writes quickly, the symbols flowing smoothly from the tip of the device. I recognise a few words now, though not enough to understand the message. Brother. Meeting. Delay. Trust. That last one makes my shoulders prickle, but Aelith folds the parchment before I can squint any harder at it.

“You will go straight to our rooms,” he says again. “Straight there. No detours. No accidental markets. No heroic yo-yo demonstrations.” His eyes narrow slightly. “Especially no heroic yo-yo demonstrations.”

“You say that now, but one day it’ll save us all.”

“It had better not.”

I laugh softly, but the sound fades when he doesn’t look any less worried. “Aelith.” His attention snaps fully to me, and I add, “I’ll be careful.”

“I know you believe that.”

“Wow. Hurtful.”

“Dawson.”

“I know.” I soften my voice because the fear beneath his control is starting to ache against my ribs. “I won’t make this harder. I promise.”

The word is out before I remember all the rules about promises in this palace, but his expression doesn’t sharpen the way it does when I accidentally say something dangerous. Instead, his thumb traces my cheek again.

“That promise I will accept.” Then he kisses me.

It’s brief because it has to be. A press of lips, warm and firm, gone almost before I’m ready. Still, I cling to the feeling of it as he pulls away, because I’ll take whatever I can get.

Prithan and Rowgr appear as if summoned by the bond itself, though realistically one of them has probably been standing nearby, waiting for orders. Aelith hands the folded parchment to another passing attendant, murmurs words too low and fast for me to follow, then turns to my guards.

His voice changes as the prince returns.

“Escort Dawson to my quarters. No delays. No alternate routes. If anyone attempts to separate him from you, you refuse unless the order comes directly from me.”

Prithan bows his head. “Yes, my prince.”

Rowgr does the same. “Yes, my prince.”

Aelith looks at me one last time, and the bond pulls tight. So do my fingers. But then I let go.

I hate it.

I’m mature about it, obviously. Very dignified. I don’t pout, despite wanting to. I simply walk with Prithan and Rowgr away from the garden, down a corridor lined with glowing stone, and tell myself repeatedly that this is fine.

Which means, naturally, I start talking.

“So,” I say, glancing between the two guards as we turn into one of the wider palace halls, “on a scale from one to absolutely not, how much are you allowed to respond to casual conversation while escorting me through public areas?”

Neither answers.

“Right,” I continue. “Absolutely not. Clear. Very professional of you.”

Prithan walks slightly ahead and to my left, while Rowgr stays a step behind my right shoulder. It's an arrangement I've noticed before, though I didn't understand it at first. Now I know enough to realise they're boxing me in without making it look like I'm boxed in. Protective formation. Palace-friendly version.

I'm learning things. Admittedly terrifying things, but still.

"Blink once if you can hear me," I whisper.

Rowgr does not blink, and Prithan says nothing.

"Wow. Elite training."

We pass a pair of servants carrying folded linens. Both bow quickly and keep their gazes down, but one sneaks a glance at me as they pass. I smile. She almost smiles back before fear catches up with her face and drags her expression flat again.

The palace does that to people. It makes them swallow things before they can become real.

Laughter. Curiosity. Kindness. It's all there, buried under caution.

I hate it more every day.

"Are you two always this quiet when Aelith isn't around?" I ask, because if I stop talking, I'll start worrying. "Or is this a special 'don't encourage the human' strategy?"

Rowgr's mouth tightens.

Oh, that's close. Very close.

I brighten. "Ha. Nearly got you."

Her eyes flick towards me for half a second, and there's definitely warning there, but also maybe amusement. Or indigestion. With Glowranth, it can be tricky to interpret.

Prithan murmurs, "Public corridors."

That's all he says, two words, but I understand them. They can't be seen being too friendly here. Not where every wall probably has ears and every passing noble might carry a story back to the Queen or Jithusian. They're helping us, or close to helping us, or at least considering helping us, and that means they have to survive long enough to keep doing it.

The thought sobers me, slightly. "Got it," I say quietly. "Stoic death march it is."

We make it almost halfway to Aelith's rooms before the corridor ahead changes.

Not physically.

Atmospherically.

Prithan slows first. Rowgr shifts behind me, the movement subtle but immediate. My body notices before my brain does, all the tiny hairs along my arms rising.

Then I see him.

Jithusian steps from an adjoining corridor like he's been waiting for his cue.

Of course he has.

He looks exactly as awful as I remember from dinner. Beautiful in that sharp, glossy, deeply punchable way. His dark hair is swept back from his face, his royal markings gleaming faintly beneath his skin, and his smile is soft enough to be polite if you don't know what he is.

Unfortunately, I do. My throat tightens.

"Well," he says, voice smooth as polished glass, "there you are."

Nope. Absolutely not.

I smile anyway. Because apparently smiling at people who want me dead is becoming a hobby. "Here I am."

His gaze flicks briefly to Prithan and Rowgr before returning to me. "Dawson, isn't it?"

"Yep. Human. Yo-yo enthusiast. Occasional dinner guest."

Amusement touches his mouth, though it doesn't reach his eyes. "I heard about the unfortunate incident at the market."

I bet you did, you smug blue fuck.

Out loud, I say, "Yeah. Bit dramatic."

"Palace life can be unpredictable."

"Apparently so."

Prithan steps half a pace forward. "Prince Jithusian."

The warning is respectful. Barely.

Jithusian's attention slides to him with sudden coldness. "You are dismissed."

Prithan doesn't move. Neither does Rowgr.

Oh, that seems bad. Very bad.

Jithusian's lips thin. "Did you not hear me?"

"We are under the Crown Prince's orders," Prithan says.

The corridor goes very quiet. There are other guards nearby. Servants too. I notice them suddenly, though none of them look directly at us. Heads lower. Bodies angle away. People become very busy studying walls and

trays and absolutely anything other than the royal confrontation happening ten feet from them.

Jithusian's eyes brighten maliciously. "Your Crown Prince appears to have confused indulgence with authority."

Rowgr's hand shifts slightly closer to her weapon, and my heart gives a horrible little kick. And I absolutely heard that he referred to Aelith not as his crown prince. He's such a tosser.

No. Nope. I'm not letting them get hurt because of me.

"It's fine," I say quickly. "Honestly. If Prince Jithusian wants a quick word, that's okay."

Both guards turn their attention to me at once, their expressions pained, and I know I've made their lives worse.

Sorry, team.

Jithusian's expression warms, and it's somehow the least comforting thing I've ever seen. "How generous of you."

"Generous. Terrified. Same ballpark."

He laughs softly, which makes my skin crawl.

Prithan says, "Dawson."

I glance at him, and for one second, his stoic guard face cracks.

Don't.

I see it. I understand it. But Jithusian is still watching them, and I can feel the danger sharpening. If I refuse, he'll push. If they stop him, he'll punish them. Maybe not here. Maybe not now. But later, when nobody is looking.

This palace is built for later.

"I'll be fine," I say, which is possibly the stupidest sentence ever spoken by anyone in any world.

Rowgr's jaw tightens, and Jithusian offers me his arm.

I don't take it. It's a small rebellion, tiny, and probably not enough. But he still notices.

His smile remains as he turns, clearly expecting me to follow. I do because my options are currently limited to bad or worse, and Aelith will absolutely lose his mind when he hears about this.

We walk.

The first few steps are the worst because I can feel Prithan and Rowgr behind me, blocked from following by two of Jithusian's guards, who

emerged from nowhere. I don’t look back. If I do, I might change my mind, and if I change my mind, this could become very bloody very quickly.

Jithusian talks as we move down the corridor, his voice light and conversational, as if we’re two acquaintances taking a pleasant stroll rather than one prince casually abducting his brother’s mate.

“My brother has become possessive.”

I keep my eyes forward. “He’s protective.”

“There is little difference in men like Aelith.”

“Pretty sure there’s a huge difference.”

“You know him so well?”

The question is soft and cruel.

I shrug. “I know enough.”

He hums, and the sound makes my stomach clench. “Do you?”

We pass three guards stationed near a side entrance. All three look away. One seems guilty about it, which somehow makes me feel worse. Cowardice makes sense in this place. I don’t even blame them. The Queen has taught everyone exactly what survival costs.

Still, watching them choose not to see me is horrible. It’s like being erased in real time.

Jithusian continues speaking, apparently enjoying himself. “My brother has always mistaken intensity for depth. He finds something, decides it belongs to him, and then dares the world to take it away.”

“I’m not a something.”

“No.” He glances at me. “You are a problem.”

The smile stays on my face through sheer bloody-mindedness. “Been called worse.”

“I’m sure you have.” His gaze drifts over me with enough calculation to make my skin prickle.

I keep walking because stopping feels worse, even though the corridor ahead narrows towards a set of dark doors I definitely do not want to enter.

Absolutely not.

No, thank you.

Hard pass.

My pulse starts thudding harder. The nearer we get, the more every instinct in my body screams that going through those doors will be a mistake I might not get to undo.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Somewhere private.”

“See, that sounds murdery.”

This time his smile bares teeth. “You are amusing.”

“I’ve been told.”

“Do you amuse my brother this much?”

“I like to think so.”

The doors are close now. Too close. My feet slow without permission.

Jithusian notices immediately. His hand closes around my arm. Not painfully, but honestly, so much worse—possessively. It feels like a warning disguised as guidance.

I go cold.

Not because he’s stronger than me, though he absolutely is. Not because we’re alone, though we absolutely are alone enough for anyone to be able to help. It’s because his touch is wrong. Every instinct that softens under Aelith’s hand recoils under his brother’s.

Before I can decide whether to shout, bite, or make a truly terrible decision, another voice cuts across the corridor.

“Brother.”

Jithusian stops.

So do I.

Fithrust stands at the far end of the hall, draped in pale silver robes that shimmer softly with each step as they approach. Their expression is calm, almost bored, but their eyes move quickly from Jithusian’s hand on my arm to my face.

Sharpness flickers there.

Not anger.

Not yet.

But close.

“Fithrust,” Jithusian says smoothly. “How unexpected.”

“Mother requests the human.”

Relief hits so hard, my knees almost go. Which is absurd because being summoned by the Queen should not be comforting. That says a lot about the situation and none of it good.

Jithusian’s grip tightens a fraction before he releases me. “She can wait.”

Fithrust lifts their eyebrows. *Can she?* The words aren’t spoken, but they hang in the air anyway.

Jithusian’s composure cracks. Irritation flashes across his face. “She did not inform me,” he says.

“She rarely informs you of everything.”

Oh, nice. I like them. A lot.

Jithusian’s lip curls. “I require a few moments with Dawson.”

“The Crown Prince’s mate,” Fithrust says, voice still mild. “Whom Mother has requested.”

The corridor seems to hold its breath. While this isn’t a fight with weapons—not yet—it’s still a fight. And Fithrust is winning by being annoyingly calm.

Jithusian looks at me, and whatever mask he’s been wearing slips for just a second. Hatred flashes beneath it. It’s small and ugly and deeply personal. Then he smiles again. “Another time, then.”

I force my mouth to move. “Looking forward to it.”

Lie.

Huge lie.

World-class lie.

Fithrust steps aside, and I don’t wait for Jithusian to change his mind. I move towards them with a speed that’s probably undignified but very sensible.

We walk in silence until we turn two corridors away.

Only then does Fithrust exhale. “My mother does not wish to see you.”

I stop so abruptly I almost trip over my own feet. “What?”

Their mouth curves faintly. “You looked relieved when I said it. I thought the lie would be effective.”

For one wild second, I genuinely think I might sit down on the floor. Instead, I bend forward, hands on my knees, and suck in a breath. “Oh, bloody hell.”

“Are you unwell?”

“No. Yes. Maybe.” I straighten slowly, one hand pressed to my chest. “I just became grateful for a fake Queen summons. That’s how bad your brother’s vibes are.”

Fithrust’s expression tightens. “Jithusian should never be trusted.”

“Yeah, I got that when he tried to lead me into a murder room.”

“It was likely not murder.”

I stare at them.

They consider. “Not immediately.”

“Not helping.”

“No.”

To my surprise, their expression softens.

“You must not go anywhere alone in this palace, Dawson. Not with Jithusian. Not with any servant who claims to carry orders. Not with anyone who cannot prove they have been sent by Aelith directly.”

“I had guards.”

“Jithusian was prepared to challenge them.”

I’m not even surprised they have that information. “I know.” The admission comes out barely above a whisper.

Fithrust studies me carefully. “You tried to protect them.”

I look away. “They would’ve got hurt.”

“Yes.”

They begin walking again, and I follow because my legs have remembered their job.

“This palace rewards cruelty,” Fithrust says after a moment. “Jithusian learned that lesson eagerly. Aelith learned it reluctantly. The difference matters.”

I swallow. “What did you learn?”

Their gaze flicks to mine. “To be overlooked.”

That answer lands heavily with its honesty.

We reach Aelith’s wing faster than expected, though maybe that’s because I spend the rest of the walk quietly trying not to shake. The second we turn into the final corridor, Prithan and Rowgr appear.

No. Appear is too gentle. They surge forward.

Prithan’s expression is the closest I’ve seen to panic on him, which is still extremely controlled but absolutely obvious to me now. Rowgr sweeps her eyes over me from head to toe, checking for injuries, restraint marks, anything out of place.

“I’m fine,” I say without hesitation.

Neither looks reassured.

Fithrust inclines their head. “I intercepted Jithusian before he could isolate him fully.”

Rowgr’s jaw tightens, and Prithan closes his eyes for half a second. That somehow scares me more than if he’d cursed.

“He should not have gone,” Rowgr says.

“I know,” I answer before she can continue. “I know. I’m sorry.”

Both guards properly look at me then.

I force a weak smile, saying, “I was trying to stop him hurting you.”

Prithan’s expression shifts. Conflict crosses his face before duty swallows it again. “That is not your task,” he says.

“No,” I agree softly. “But I’m bad at watching people get hurt for me.”

Fithrust looks between us, and I get the distinct impression they’re filing away every single detail.

Lovely. More politics. Exactly what my blood pressure needs.

Rowgr opens the door to Aelith’s quarters, and I step inside so quickly, I nearly stumble. Only once I’m across the threshold do my knees decide to get creative. They wobble. Hard.

Prithan catches my elbow before I can make full dramatic contact with the floor.

“Thanks,” I breathe.

He says nothing, but his grip is steady until I’m upright again.

Fithrust remains in the corridor. “Tell Aelith exactly what happened.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I say weakly. “I suspect he’ll know before I finish blinking.”

Their mouth twitches. “Likely.” They turn to leave, then pause. “Dawson.”

I look back.

Their expression is careful now. “Do not let my brother make you feel foolish for being kind.”

For a second, I don’t know what to say. That one lands somewhere tender, somewhere old. I swallow and nod. “I’ll try.”

Fithrust inclines their head once, then walks away.

The door closes behind them, and for several seconds, nobody speaks. Then Rowgr says, very quietly, “Aelith will be furious.”

I laugh once, which sounds slightly hysterical. “Yeah,” I say. “That feels fair.”

Prithan releases my elbow only after he’s certain I’m steady. “You are safe now.”

The words are simple—soft, for him—and that’s what finally breaks through my composure.

My smile slips. “Good,” I whisper, staring at the closed door, because I can still feel Jithusian’s hand around my arm. Still see the guards looking

away. Still hear the smooth, awful certainty in his voice when he said, *“Somewhere private.”*

I wrap my arms around myself and force in a slow breath. I’m safe—for now. But as Prithan and Rowgr take position near the door, closer than before, I realise something with horrible clarity.

Jithusian wanted me afraid, and the fucker succeeded. And the worst part is, when Aelith finds out, Jithusian might have given him exactly what he needs to become dangerous.

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CHAPTER
ELEVEN

The day after Jithusian tried to lead me away, Aelith nearly lost his entire mind.

Not in the loud, dramatic way people sometimes do either. That would have been easier. He didn't shout. He didn't throw anything. He simply went very still, very cold, and informed the room that he was going to remove his brother's head from his body.

Calmly.

Politely, almost.

Which was significantly worse.

I had to talk him down from murder, which is not a sentence I expected to be relevant to my life when I was teaching tourists how not to face-plant on beginner slopes. I used all my best arguments. Strategic timing. Political consequences. Possible civil war before lunch. The fact that I personally preferred my mate not to be executed, imprisoned, or forced into some dramatic royal duel because his brother has the survival mechanisms of a poisonous handbag.

None of that worked especially well.

In the end, distraction did.

Specifically, I may have reminded him that he still had a very particular vial waiting to be filled. That worked. Spectacularly so.

Even now, days later, heat crawls up my neck whenever I think about it. Aelith on his knees, utterly focused, treating the whole thing like devotion and possession and worship all tangled together. Watching him gather every drop with that careful intensity of his should probably not live rent-free in my brain, but it does. It very much does.

Since then, he’s been more controlled. Not calm, though—never calm. Not about Jithusian.

Aelith still intends to tear his brother apart. I know because I feel it whenever Jithusian’s name enters a conversation, a sharp and ugly pulse through the bond before he forces it back down. The important thing is that he knows he can’t rush in. Not yet. Not while the Queen is waiting for him to make exactly that sort of mistake.

He’s also grateful to Fithrust.

He doesn’t say it often, because Aelith and emotions are still in a complicated long-distance relationship, but I see it. Every time their name comes up, some of the tension leaves him. It’s not trust, not fully, but the beginning of it. And in this place, beginnings feel enormous.

The network is growing too. That part is incredible and also terrifying.

Drigthon has become a regular shadow near Aelith’s meetings. Prithan and Rowgr have apparently decided I’m a problem worth protecting, which is flattering in a deeply alarming way.

Messages are passed through servants, guards, laundry carts, food trays, folded cloth, and once, incredibly, through the hollow handle of what I thought was a decorative spoon.

I’m learning a lot about rebellion logistics.

Mostly that everyone involved should be drinking more water.

Sorry.

Hydration juice.

Aelith has been gone since early morning, moving between secret meetings and official appearances and whatever terrifyingly polite conversations he has to keep having so his mother doesn’t realise half her palace is slowly slipping out from under her. He kissed me before he left, pressed his forehead to mine for one quiet moment, then told me not to leave the quarters unless Prithan or Rowgr were with me.

I told him I would behave.

He looked deeply unconvinced.

Rude, but fair.

Time inside the palace is also starting to feel weird.

Not weird like Terrafeara itself, where entire chunks of land apparently get dragged through rifts and stitched into existence like reality is a drunk quilter. This is different. Palace time is slippery in a more muted, nastier way. Hours stretch while Aelith is gone, then disappear the second he

comes back. Days pass in little bursts of meetings, whispers, locked doors, coded messages, and me trying very hard not to climb the furniture purely for stimulation.

Which, for the record, has only happened once.

Twice if you count the balcony rail, but I maintain that was more “leaning with enthusiasm” than climbing.

Now I’m standing at the window, bored enough to start narrating the lives of the guards in the garden below.

“That one’s definitely named Bronth,” I say to no one, watching a broad-shouldered Glowranth cross the path with enormous seriousness. “Looks like a Bronth. Probably enjoys polishing weapons and judging soup.”

Behind me, Rowgr makes a sound that is definitely not a laugh.

I turn immediately. “Was that joy breath?”

“No.”

“It absolutely was.”

“It was disappointment breath.”

“Still an emotion. It totally counts.”

Prithan stands near the door, his expression carefully blank, though I swear his mouth twitches. Public corridors mean stoicism. Private quarters mean they get to suffer me slightly more openly. Honestly, our friendship is thriving.

I turn back to the window with a grin still on my face, and that’s when I see him.

Aelith.

He steps onto one of the lower garden paths with two guards beside him and another several paces behind. Even from this height, I know him instantly. Not just by the way he looks, though that helps because he remains unfairly spectacular from any distance. It’s the way he moves. The controlled strength. The measured pace. The way people instinctively make room for him even before they seem to realise they’re doing it.

My whole chest lights up. “Oh,” I breathe, already smiling.

As if he feels me looking, Aelith lifts his head, and our eyes meet across the distance. I know he can’t see every detail of my face from down there, but somehow the bond doesn’t care. Warmth unfurls between us, bright and immediate, and his posture shifts in the smallest way. Less prince. More mine.

I wave, and not at all subtly. Both hands are employed, full idiot commitment, because if you can't embarrass your terrifying royal mate from several floors up, what is the point of having one?

Aelith tilts his head.

Even from here, I know he's judging me. I grin harder.

Then I move for the balcony doors because seeing him isn't enough. I want to hear his voice. I want to call something ridiculous down to him and watch him pretend not to be amused. I want one tiny normal moment in the middle of all this palace nonsense, even if I have to shout loud enough for half the kingdom to hear.

"Dawson," Prithan says behind me.

"I'm not leaving," I call back. "Just balcony-ing."

"That is not a word," Rowgr says.

"It is now."

I slide the balcony door open and step outside, warm air brushing over my face. Below, Aelith is still looking up, and for one second, everything feels almost light.

Then Jithusian appears in the garden.

The world stops. Not actually, obviously. The wind still moves. The crystal leaves below still shimmer. Somewhere, a bird or bird-adjacent creature makes a sharp, trilling sound.

But inside me, everything freezes.

Jithusian steps from behind a columned archway near the garden path, and he's not alone. At first, it looks like only two guards move with him. Then more appear. From behind the hedges, from the covered walkway, from the path leading towards the eastern doors.

There are far too many.

Aelith is still looking at me, still focused upward, still not seeing them.

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

For one awful heartbeat, I'm back in another hallway with Jithusian's hand around my arm, being led towards a door I knew I should not enter. That same cold fear grabs my spine and yanks hard enough that I nearly stumble.

Then Aelith's expression changes. Concern flashes through him so clearly, I feel it in my chest.

"Dawson?"

His voice doesn’t reach me, not properly, but I know the shape of my name on his mouth.

That finally breaks me free. “Aelith!” I scream it. The sound tears out of me, sharp enough that my throat burns.

He turns, but it’s too late. The guards converge all at once.

Aelith moves instantly, fast enough that one of them goes sprawling before I can even track what happened. Energy flares along his arms, bright silver-blue under his skin, and for one wild second, I think they’ve made a terrible mistake. This is Aelith. My Aelith. Crown Prince of this whole terrifying kingdom and absolutely capable of making a lot of people regret being born.

Then Jithusian steps in close behind him. A blade flashes. Not at his throat but his chest. Right over that glowing sigil beneath his collarbone.

Aelith goes still while my heart drops through the floor.

Even from the balcony, I can see the point of the dagger pressing into him, held with careful, deliberate precision. Jithusian speaks close to his ear. I can’t hear the words, but I see Aelith’s head tilt slightly, see the calculation flicker across his face, see the exact moment he chooses not to fight because whatever threat Jithusian makes lands.

No. No, no, no.

“Aelith!” I’m shouting again, but it doesn’t matter.

The guards bind his arms. Not easily. Not without several of them looking like they deeply regret being involved. But they do it, which won’t win them anymore fucking smiles from me. Jithusian keeps the dagger pressed to Aelith’s chest the entire time, smiling with a satisfaction so bright and vicious, I feel sick.

Aelith looks up. Our eyes meet, and the bond surges with one clear command.

Stay.

Absolutely fucking not.

Jithusian follows his gaze. Then he looks at me. That delighted glance is worse than any threat could be. It says he wanted this, wanted me watching, wanted Aelith knowing I was watching.

Then the guards drag my mate away.

I don’t think. I move.

The balcony door slams behind me so hard, it probably cracks the stone. Maybe the door. Maybe the wall. Maybe me. I don’t know. I’m already

running through the room, vaguely aware of Prithan and Rowgr snapping into motion.

“Dawson!” Prithan catches me before I reach the door.

One arm locks around my waist and hauls me back with ridiculous ease, which is infuriating because adrenaline should absolutely come with temporary super-strength.

“Let go!”

“No.”

“They took him!” I twist hard, but he doesn’t budge. “They took Aelith. His brother—Jithusian—there were guards and a dagger and they dragged him—” My words collapse over each other, breathless and frantic.

Rowgr is already at the balcony doors. She looks down, and her entire body goes rigid. That scares me almost as much as what I saw.

Prithan’s grip loosens just enough for me to turn, but not enough for me to bolt. “Where?”

“Garden. Below us. Near the arch thing. The pretty one with the plants that look like glowing jellyfish. I don’t know what anything is called here!”

Rowgr swears. Not in English. Not even in Glowranthian words I fully understand. But I do understand the feeling.

“Please,” I say, and that single word comes out broken enough that both guards look at me. “Please take me to him. I don’t know where they’d go. I don’t know the palace. I don’t know anything, but you do.”

Prithan’s jaw tightens. Rowgr turns from the balcony, and the look she gives him carries an entire argument I’m not invited to. It’s the same silent-guard communication they keep doing, except this one is sharper. Faster. More afraid.

“You were ordered to remain here,” Prithan says.

“By him,” I shoot back. “And he’s just been taken.”

“That may have been done to lure you out.”

“I know!” The admission rips out of me, because I do know. Of course I know.

I’m not completely stupid, despite what several people on Earth and at least one poisonous prince in Terrafeara may think. Jithusian looked up at me after they took Aelith. He wanted me to see. He wanted me to run.

And I’m going to do exactly that because the alternative is standing here doing nothing while my mate is dragged somewhere terrible.

“I know it’s probably a trap,” I say, forcing myself to breathe even though my chest feels too tight. “I know he wants me moving. But Aelith is alone with him, and if you think I can just sit on a sofa and wait politely for updates, then we have not been bonding as friends the way I thought we were.”

Rowgr’s mouth tightens, and Prithan closes his eyes for half a second.

“He would come for me,” I say.

Neither of them answers. They don’t have to. We all know he would burn the palace down brick by glowing brick if someone took me.

“I’m not saying we do something stupid,” I add, which is a lie because I’m absolutely suggesting something stupid. “I’m saying take me somewhere useful. Take me to someone who knows. Drigthon. Fithrust. Anyone. But don’t make me stay here and stare out the window where I watched them take him.”

That last part makes my voice crack. I hate it. I hate how scared I sound. I hate that my hands are shaking. I hate that the bond feels like a wire pulled too tight, vibrating with panic and fury and Aelith’s command to stay safe even as distance stretches between us.

Prithan looks at Rowgr.

Rowgr looks back. Then she nods once. “Drigthon first,” she says.

Relief hits so hard, my knees almost give out.

Prithan releases me fully, though he steps in front of the door like he expects me to launch myself at it. “Listen carefully,” he says. “You do not run ahead. You do not shout unless instructed. You do not attempt to bargain with anyone. You stay between us.”

I nod rapidly. “Yes. Absolutely. Perfect. Guard sandwich. Love it.”

Neither laughs. Not the time.

Rowgr draws her weapon, and Prithan does the same. That tiny sound of metal clearing its sheath makes everything feel suddenly, horribly real.

We’re not sneaking out to find a lost friend. We’re moving through enemy territory to find the kidnapped Crown Prince before his brother can do whatever he planned.

My mouth goes dry as Prithan opens the door and checks the corridor before glancing back at me.

For a second, his expression softens. Only a fraction. “If we find him,” he says, “you must let us act first.”

“*When*,” I say.

His brow furrows. “When we find him.” Determination flickers in his eyes. Then he nods. “When.”

I step between them, my heart hammering so hard, I can barely hear anything else.

Aelith is out there.

Bound and taken.

With Jithusian’s blade at his chest and that awful, delighted smile aimed at me like a promise.

I force one breath into my lungs, then another. And when Prithan leads us into the corridor, I follow, because Aelith told me to stay, but he should have known by now.

I’m really bad at doing what I’m told when someone I love is in danger.

The corridor outside Aelith’s quarters feels wrong.

Not wrong in the usual palace way, where every polished surface looks expensive enough to judge you and every passing servant moves like they’ve been trained since birth not to breathe too loudly. This is sharper. Faster. The wrongness is kinetic, like someone has kicked the entire palace in the ribs and now everyone is pretending not to flinch.

Prithan moves ahead of me with his weapon drawn low at his side, not raised, not obvious unless someone knows what they’re looking for. Rowgr keeps close enough behind my shoulder that I can feel her presence without turning. For once, neither of them bothers pretending this is a normal escort. We move quickly through the corridor, and while I manage not to run, it is only because Prithan keeps setting the pace with the kind of grim determination that suggests he will physically stop me if I try to bolt ahead.

Which is fair. I absolutely would.

The bond feels like a live wire in my chest. It pulls in a direction I can’t name, towards Aelith but not directly enough that I can follow it. It isn’t a map. It isn’t a compass. It’s just panic stretched thin, a desperate awareness of him somewhere beyond the walls, alive but not close enough, and the more distance I feel between us, the harder it is to breathe.

We turn down a narrower passage lined with dark blue stone and recessed lights that glow faintly beneath the walls. Two servants at the far end see us coming and step aside. One lowers their head. The other glances at me, and the worry on their face disappears so quickly, I almost convince myself I imagined it.

“Everyone knows something’s happened,” I whisper.

“Do not speak,” Prithan murmurs back.

“I’m whispering.”

“That is speaking quietly.”

“Now is really not the time to be technically correct.”

He doesn’t answer, which is probably for the best because I’m dangerously close to losing the very small amount of composure I have left.

We’re halfway down the corridor when a figure turns the corner ahead of us so abruptly that Prithan stops dead. Rowgr’s hand closes around my arm at once, pulling me back behind them, and for one awful second, I think we’ve walked straight into another trap.

Then I recognise him.

Drigthon.

He looks nothing like the steady, controlled guard of rank I’ve seen moving through Aelith’s network over the past few days. His armour is slightly out of place, one fastening at his shoulder not quite secured, and there’s a cut along his jaw that has already darkened around the edges. His expression is controlled, but only barely, and when his gaze lands on me, relief and alarm collide so violently across his face that my gut drops all over again.

“What happened?” Prithan asks.

Drigthon doesn’t answer in the corridor. He glances behind him, then towards the adjoining archway, and gestures sharply for us to follow. We move into a side alcove half hidden behind a screen of carved stone, where the glowing veins in the walls pulse low and dim. It’s private enough that anyone passing would have to deliberately look in to see us, which means it’s also exactly the kind of place where terrible information gets delivered.

Lovely.

Big fan.

Drigthon leans close, keeping his voice low. “They pulled me from the west hall under suspicion of assisting rebels.”

Rowgr’s mouth tightens. “On whose order?”

“Jithusian’s.”

The name hits me like a shove, and my hands curl into fists before I realise I’m doing it. I have never been a violent person. Not really. I’ve defended myself when I had to, and I’ve absolutely wanted to throw a snowboard at a few entitled tourists in my time, but I’m not someone who walks around looking for a fight.

Right now, though, I want to hit Aelith’s brother with something heavy.

Possibly the palace.

Drigthon continues before I can say anything profoundly unhelpful. “They searched Aelith.”

Prithan goes still, and Rowgr’s grip on my arm tightens.

My mouth goes dry. “What does that mean?”

Nobody answers fast enough.

“What does that mean?” I repeat, louder this time.

“They found a note,” Drigthon says.

The words land with horrible, simple finality.

A note.

One of the notes.

The messages.

The network.

The carefully passed whispers that have been moving through this place like sparks waiting for dry wood.

My throat constricts. “No,” I breathe.

Drigthon’s gaze flicks to mine, and the sympathy there makes everything worse. “Jithusian brought him before the Queen.”

My fear sharpens in frantic focus. “In the throne room?”

The question comes out too quickly, too hopefully. The throne room is awful, but it’s public. There are guards, witnesses, servants, nobles. Terrible things can still happen in public—I know that; I’ve seen enough of this palace to know that—but public means rules. Public means masks. Public means Aelith might have space to be prince-shaped and controlled and terrifying.

Drigthon looks pained.

My blood goes cold before he even answers. Not the throne room, then.

“No.”

The single word seems to suck the air out of the corridor. Prithan’s expression hardens. Rowgr looks away for a heartbeat, and that more than anything tells me how bad it is. These two have stood beside me through the most stressful market trip of all time, through poison attempts, and Jithusian’s creepy hallway games, and they don’t look away from much.

“Where?” I demand.

Drigthon’s jaw works once. “The lower east chamber.”

I look between them. “What is that?”

Nobody answers.

“Guys.”

Rowgr’s face is carefully blank now, which is how I know she’s hiding something. Prithan looks furious in a way that has nowhere to go. Drigthon just looks sick.

A horrible, crawling understanding works its way through me.

It’s not a courtroom. Not a meeting room or somewhere political.

“Take me there,” I say.

“No,” Prithan clips.

I turn on him. “Prithan.”

“No.”

“Take me to him.”

“You cannot help him by walking into whatever trap this is.”

“Then take me close. Take me somewhere useful. Take me—”

“No,” he says again, and there’s real regret in his voice now. That almost breaks me. “If Jithusian arranged this, he may have arranged for you to move exactly as you are moving.”

“I don’t care.”

“You should.”

“I don’t care!” The words crack through the alcove louder than I intend, and Drigthon looks towards the corridor. I lower my voice, but the panic remains, sharp and shaking. “They have him. You said they have him somewhere that made all of you look like someone kicked your hearts in. Don’t stand there and tell me to care about tactics.”

Rowgr’s expression flickers, while Prithan flinches almost imperceptibly.

Good. I’m not above emotional blackmail right now. Not when Aelith is somewhere below us with Jithusian and the Queen.

Drigthon steps closer. “Dawson, listen to me. You need to leave the palace.”

For a second, I think I mishear him. “What?”

“You need to leave the city if possible. Now.” His voice drops further, urgent and rough. “I can arrange a route through the service tunnels. Not all the way, not safely, but far enough that rebel contacts might get you beyond the inner wall. Aelith would want you out.”

“Aelith would want a lot of things,” I say, my voice shaking. “He would also absolutely come for me.”

“He is the Crown Prince.”

“He is my mate.”

The words leave me before I can think about them.

Drigthon’s expression tightens, and for one awful moment, I think he’s going to keep arguing. Maybe he should. Maybe the smart thing is running. Maybe that’s the move that keeps the rebellion alive, keeps whatever Aelith has built from collapsing, keeps me from being used as bait in a game I don’t understand.

But I can still see Jithusian’s blade pressed to Aelith’s chest. Still see the look he threw me and still feel Aelith’s command through the bond: *Stay.*

No. Not this time.

Before any of them can decide my future for me, movement sounds near the alcove. Rowgr reacts first, blade coming up, but she lowers it a fraction when Fithrust steps into view.

They look ashen. Actually ashen.

Their usual calm is still present, but barely. Their silver robes are immaculate, their markings softly glowing, yet their face has lost so much colour that fear surges through me all over again.

“Mother demands Dawson attend,” they say.

For half a second, relief hits me so hard, I almost laugh. It’s ridiculous. Being summoned by the Queen should not feel like good news, but if she wants me there, then at least I might see Aelith. At least I might know. At least I won’t be trapped here, guessing what’s happening to him.

Drigthon doesn’t look relieved. He looks horrified. “No,” he says.

Fithrust’s gaze slides to him. “It was not a request.”

“He should run.”

The words drop hard and flat between us. Prithan’s head snaps towards Drigthon, and Rowgr goes still.

Fithrust closes their eyes briefly, and when they open them again, their expression is bleak. “If he does not attend presently, Aelith forfeits with his life.”

Everything inside me stops.

Not slows.

Stops.

There it is. The choice that isn’t a choice.

My pulse pounds once, hard enough to hurt, and then a strange calm settles over me. Not real calm. Definitely not that. More like my body has

decided panic is too inefficient and shoved it into a corner until later.

“Okay,” I say.

Prithan turns towards me. “Dawson.”

“No.” I shake my head, and my voice sounds steadier than I feel. “No, that’s my decision made. I’m going.”

Drigthon looks like he wants to physically drag me in the opposite direction. “This is exactly what they want.”

“Probably.”

“You understand that?”

“Yes.”

“Then—”

“If I don’t go, Aelith dies.” My throat tightens around the words, but I force them out. “So I’m going.”

No one argues after that. Maybe because there’s nothing left to debate.

Fithrust studies me for a moment, and the grief in their eyes makes them look far less royal than usual. Younger, somehow. Trapped in this palace like everyone else, just in a prettier cage. “We must move,” they say.

Drigthon catches their arm before they can turn. “Where?”

Fithrust’s mouth tightens. “Lower east.”

Drigthon swears under his breath.

I don’t ask again what the lower east chamber is. I don’t need to. Their faces have told me enough, and anything more will probably make my legs stop working.

We leave the alcove in a tight formation. Fithrust walks slightly ahead, calm and composed as if escorting me to some perfectly ordinary royal summons. Prithan and Rowgr flank me, while Drigthon falls back after a murmured exchange with Rowgr that I only half catch. I make out fragments. Routes. Witnesses. Getting word out.

Good.

Let the network know.

Let everyone know.

If the Queen wants a private little nightmare, maybe we can at least make sure it has echoes.

The palace corridors blur as we descend. We move away from the light-filled halls and polished balconies, away from the parts of the palace designed to impress visiting nobles and intimidate anyone beneath them.

The air cools as we take a narrower staircase down, the glowing crystal veins in the walls thinning until the shadows between them seem deeper.

My breath gets louder, or maybe I'm just noticing it more.

Fithrust glances back at me. "You must be careful what you say."

"I'm getting that."

"I mean it."

The sharpness in their voice makes me look at them properly.

Their face is still pale, but their gaze is fierce now. "Do not offer yourself. Do not agree to terms without hearing them in full. Do not challenge my mother if you cannot afford the consequence, and do not react to Jithusian unless you choose that reaction deliberately."

That last one makes my stomach roll.

"What am I walking into?"

Prithan makes a low sound.

Rowgr says nothing.

Fithrust's expression shifts with what looks too much like apology. "A performance."

Cold spreads through me. That word again. This family and their performances.

"What kind?"

"The kind designed to make Aelith forget himself."

Ah, for fuck's sake. That's exactly what Jithusian wants.

Aelith controlled is dangerous. Aelith furious is useful to them. If they can make him lash out, if they can make him look unstable or treasonous or too bonded to a Riftborn to rule, then they get exactly what they want.

And if they use me to do it….

The sensation hits hard enough that I nearly stumble. Rowgr's hand steadies my elbow. I force a breath in, then another.

"Try not to react," I say, mostly to myself. "Cool. Great. Very much my brand."

Fithrust's mouth twitches despite everything. "It is not."

"No, it really isn't."

Even Prithan makes a tiny sound that might have been a laugh in a world where we weren't walking towards possible execution.

We reach a final corridor. This one is older than the others. The stone beneath my feet is darker, worn smooth in the centre by years of use, and the walls carry no decoration beyond the faint, irregular glow of embedded

crystal. At the far end stands a set of heavy doors guarded by four Crown soldiers.

My steps slow. I can’t help it.

The bond twists painfully in my chest.

Aelith is beyond those doors.

I know it.

I feel him.

Fear.

Rage.

Pain, maybe.

Or maybe that’s mine.

Fithrust stops just before the guards can hear us clearly. They turn to face me fully, and for the first time since I met them, every trace of careful detachment is gone.

“Dawson,” they say quietly, “look only at Aelith first. Let him see you standing. Let him know you are not harmed. Whatever else happens after that, give him that before you speak.”

My throat closes, and I nod because I don’t trust my voice.

Prithan moves closer on my left. Rowgr on my right.

The guards at the doors straighten as Fithrust approaches. One reaches for the handle. My heart pounds so hard, I swear the whole corridor can hear it.

The door begins to open, and I force myself to lift my chin.

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AELITH

The lower east chamber has many names, but none are spoken above ground.

Officially, it is a private interrogation room reserved for matters concerning state security. That is the term written in the old records and spoken by those who wish to pretend the palace remains civilised. In practice, it is where the Crown brings witnesses when it wants fear to travel faster than truth. It is not the chamber for quiet torture. Not the hidden cell where prisoners disappear without ever being seen again.

This room is for performance.

Witnesses sit in shadowed alcoves behind carved screens. Guards line the walls in formal positions. The stone floor has been polished until it reflects light, though not clearly enough to illuminate faces. Everything in the chamber is designed to remind whoever stands at its centre that they are being watched, judged, and remembered.

I have seen this room used three times.

Never for a savoury reason and never from the centre.

Until now.

The guards drag me inside with my wrists bound behind my back and enough bodies pressed close that resistance would only waste energy. I do not give them the satisfaction. If my brother expects me to thrash, snarl, or throw myself against the restraints like an animal, then he will be disappointed. I walk where they push me. I lift my head and breathe evenly.

I remain Crown Prince.

Even here.

Especially here.

Jithusian stands near the edge of the light when they position me before the raised dais. He looks pleased with himself in a way he has always failed to disguise. His elegant blue robes are too formal for this hour, his markings polished to a faint gleam, and his dark hair falls perfectly against his shoulders as if he dressed specifically for my humiliation.

Knowing him, he did.

“Brother,” he says softly.

I look at him without expression. “You have overreached.”

His smile widens. “Have I?”

“Yes.”

The answer strips the pleasure from his face for half a breath before he regains it. He has always wanted my place, but he has never understood the burden of being seen so clearly. I was born beneath expectation. He was born staring at it from the sidelines, convinced proximity should have been enough to make it his.

The chamber doors open again, and the air changes. My mother enters without haste.

Queen Serresta does not need ceremony to command a room. The guards straighten. The hidden witnesses behind the screens go stiller. Even Jithusian’s posture alters, the smugness sharpening itself into something more reverent, more eager. He has chosen his role well. Devoted son. Loyal servant. The prince who did not betray her.

She descends the shallow steps to the dais and studies me with disappointment so precisely arranged that I almost admire the artistry of it.

“Aelith,” she says. “I hoped this would not be necessary.”

“No, you did not.”

A faint irritation touches her eyes.

Jithusian steps forward, unable to let silence remain unoccupied. “The note was found on him, Mother. Written in his hand. Instructions concerning guard routes and rebel contacts within the palace.”

The guards forced the note from my inner pocket when they searched me in the garden. I knew the risk of carrying it. I also know precisely who had enough knowledge to place men along the path at that exact moment.

My brother may have found the note, but he did not find it by accident.

Serresta’s gaze remains on me. “Is it true?”

I say nothing.

Jithusian makes a soft sound of triumph. “He will not deny it.”

“I do not answer accusations levelled by cowards.”

His face tightens.

My mother lifts one hand, and the chamber stills further. “You have been in league with rebels.”

Again, silence.

The truth is irrelevant now. They have the proof they need for the audience they have chosen. Denial would make me look desperate, and desperation is blood in water within these walls.

Jithusian circles slowly, his boots whispering over polished stone. “I suspected it from the moment you returned with that human at your side. A fated mate found among rebels, a sudden devotion to Riftborn causes, messages being passed between factions that once obeyed the Crown. Treason wears many faces, but yours has always been disappointingly obvious.”

I meet his gaze. “And yours has always been envious.”

The blow comes from my right.

Not from Jithusian.

From one of his guards.

A hard strike across my ribs, precise enough to steal breath without cracking bone. Pain flashes bright beneath my skin. I shift with it, absorbing what I can, and straighten before the guard fully steps back.

His expression remains blank.

My mother watches closely. “You will share everything you know.”

“No.”

Jithusian’s smile returns. “Still so proud.”

“No,” I repeat, looking only at my mother. “I will not hand you names of people to slaughter.”

Another strike lands, this time across my back. The restraints bite into my wrists as the force drives me forward a step. I taste blood where my teeth catch the inside of my mouth, copper sharp against my tongue, but I do not make a sound.

The chamber waits for one, so I give them nothing.

Serresta’s expression cools. “You always did mistake silence for strength.”

“And you always mistook obedience for loyalty.”

For a moment, something ugly passes between us. Not grief. Not love twisted into anger. There has never been enough love between us for that. What exists instead is recognition. She sees what I am becoming. I see what she has always been.

Then she changes the shape of the blade.

“The child,” she says.

Every thought in me stills.

Jithusian turns his head slightly, curious now. “What child?” he asks.

Serresta ignores him. Her attention remains fixed on me. “The human boy who arrived. Small. Dark-haired. Protected by the Pyronox and the other human.”

Jamie.

The name rises too quickly, too instinctively. I catch at it an instant too late.

“Jamie has nothing to do with this.”

Silence follows, and my mother smiles. It’s a cold, satisfied smile that makes the mistake settle heavily in my gut. “Jamie,” she repeats.

I close my hands into fists despite the restraints. “Why do you want him?”

“Because children who cross between worlds are rare.”

Her voice takes on a quality I recognise, though I have not heard it directed at me in years. It is the tone she uses when discussing old rift reports, damaged artefacts, displaced species, and the strange fluctuations that precede storms. Fascination polished into certainty. Ambition pretending to be scholarship.

“Adults are shaped,” she continues. “They arrive with their bodies fixed, their strengths already established, their limitations known. Children are different. A body still becoming. A mind still forming. A soul not yet fully anchored to one world’s rules.”

Jithusian watches her now with bright interest.

I feel ill.

“The rifts do not choose randomly,” she says. “Your father believed that. He lacked patience, but he was not wrong. Every arrival carries purpose. Every bond reveals potential. Riftborn mates have already proven capable of amplifying power beyond known limits.”

“He is a child.”

“For now.”

The words strike colder than any blow.

I stare at her, trying to understand how she can even sound so calm while speaking of a boy that way. “You cannot be serious.”

Her calculating eyes sharpen. “When he comes of age, he will bond.”

“No.”

“You do not know that.”

“I know he will not bond to you.”

Jithusian’s mouth curves.

My mother descends one step from the dais, her movements smooth and measured. “You say that because you are limited by sentiment. A child who crossed young, who survived a violent rift, who has already formed attachments to powerful protectors, may become even more extraordinary when his body matures enough to complete what the rift began. If I guide that. If I claim that bond before lesser forces interfere, the kingdom will have access to a strength no rebellion can challenge.”

The chamber feels suddenly airless. Not because of fear for myself, but because she believes this. Every word. Every obscene conclusion.

“You intend to make a child your mate.”

“When he is no longer a child,” she says, as though that distinction absolves everything.

It does not. It never could.

I look to Jithusian, not because I expect decency, but because some part of me still needs confirmation that the rot has reached him completely.

He lifts his chin. “I will always support our Queen’s path.”

I let my disgust show. “Then you are even weaker than I believed.”

His guard hits me again. Harder. This time the pain drives me to one knee.

I push myself back up to my feet before anyone orders me dragged there. “No,” I say, voice rough but clear.

My mother’s expression does not change. “No?”

“I will not help you capture the boy. I will not give you Varek’s location. I will not betray the rebels, the Riftborn, or my mate.”

At the mention of Dawson, her expression shifts into expectation.

I sense the danger a heartbeat before the doors open. The sound turns every nerve in my body sharp, and I glance over my shoulder.

Dawson.

For one impossible second, relief nearly breaks through me.

He is standing and unharmed. While pale, frightened, and flanked by Prithan and Rowgr with Fithrust just behind him, his eyes find mine, and the bond surges with such force that I nearly stagger.

He lifts his chin.

Brave, impossible man.

My mother's voice cuts through the moment. "Remind my son why he cannot refuse me."

No.

I turn before the first strike lands.

Too late.

Energy slams into my back, sharp and searing, driving fire through every nerve. My body locks against the impact, muscles convulsing as the force digs beneath skin and bone. I bite down until blood fills my mouth again.

I will not cry out. Not in front of Dawson. Not for them.

Another burst hits, lower this time, and the world fractures at the edges. My knees hit stone. The polished floor is cold beneath me, but the energy burning through my body is not. It crawls through my markings, twisting them against me, turning what should be mine into a conduit for pain.

Dawson screams my name, his voice breaking around me. The sound nearly undoes me—not because of the pain, but because of his fear.

I force my head up enough to find him. Prithan has an arm across his chest, holding him back. Rowgr stands rigid beside them, her face carved from horror she cannot show. Fithrust has gone ashen.

Dawson fights to reach me. Of course he does.

"Stop!" he shouts. "Stop it! Please, stop!"

Another strike follows. This one physical.

A boot into my ribs while the energy still gnaws through my spine. Breath leaves me in a rush, but the sound I make is swallowed before it becomes enough to reverberate the chamber.

I focus on Dawson. Only Dawson.

His eyes are wet. His mouth trembles around words I cannot fully hear. He is shaking so hard, Prithan has to hold him upright, and guilt tears through me more viciously than any energy ever could.

I did this. I brought him here. I placed him within reach.

The assault stops. For a moment, the silence rings louder than the pain.

My mother's voice reaches me through the haze. "Lift him."

Hands seize me beneath the arms and drag me upright. My legs threaten to fail, but I lock my knees. Blood runs warm down my side beneath my clothing. My breath rasps too loudly in the chamber.

Serresta studies me with detached patience. “Let us see how weak a human body is without a fully sealed bond.”

The world narrows to a point.

“No.” The word tears out of me, and this time, I do struggle.

The guards tighten their hold, and energy snaps through the restraints at my wrists, forcing my arms rigid behind my back. I throw my weight against them anyway, uselessly, because Dawson is here and my mother is looking at him like an experiment.

Dawson’s eyes widen. He understands too late.

The guard nearest him raises a hand, and a single pulse of energy strikes Dawson in the chest.

It is not powerful—not by Glowranth standards. It does not need to be. His body jerks as if the force has ripped the air from him. The colour drains from his face. His knees fold, and he hits the floor before Prithan can fully catch him.

“No!” I do not recognise my own voice.

The chamber erupts around me, but none of it matters. Not the guards, not Jithusian’s satisfaction, not my mother’s careful stillness. Only Dawson on the floor. Dawson unmoving. Dawson harmed because I refused quickly enough.

“I’ll tell you,” I say. The words come out broken. I hate them, but I mean them. “I will tell you everything. Stop. Do not touch him again.”

My mother watches Dawson for another moment before looking back at me, then smiles. And I know before she speaks that I have lost something I cannot yet name.

“I have changed my mind.”

A cold sensation moves through my chest, worse than pain.

“You will return to the rebel camp,” she says. “You will bring me the boy.”

I stare at her.

Her expression remains serene. “Jamie,” she says, savouring the name now that she has it. “You will bring him to me.”

“No,” I breathe.

Dawson whimpers. The sound is small. He’s barely conscious. The noise is enough to destroy me.

My gaze drops to him. His lashes flutter, his body curled slightly as if trying to protect itself from pain it cannot understand. Prithan has squatted beside him, one hand hovering uselessly because touching him without permission, without knowing the damage it may cause, could make everything worse.

Serresta follows my gaze. “Actually,” she says thoughtfully, “bring Varek as well.”

My attention snaps back to her.

Jithusian looks pleased.

“Alive, if possible,” she continues. “He would be useful. If not, his corpse will serve as proof enough.”

“You cannot expect—”

“I can expect whatever I wish.” Her voice hardens, her tone becoming ice. “You will do this by any means necessary. You will return with the boy and Varek, living or dead, and you will do so quickly.”

Dawson makes another sound, half breath, half pain, and I feel the bond flicker as he claws towards consciousness.

My resistance breaks. Not because I agree and not because I will obey, but because he is here. Because she has him, and I need him alive long enough to undo this.

“I agree,” I say.

The chamber stills, and my mother studies me. “Say it properly.”

Hatred fills me so completely, it becomes calm. “I will return to the rebel camp,” I say, forcing each word through blood and fury. “I will bring you Jamie. I will bring you Varek.”

Dawson’s eyes open a sliver. Confusion clouds them, quickly followed by pain. His gaze searches blindly until it finds mine.

I cannot move towards him, cannot touch him. I cannot even promise him that every word I just spoke is a lie shaped for survival. The truth is, I will do it all, if it comes to it. So I hold his gaze and give him the only thing I can.

I breathe.

Slowly.

Once.

Twice.

The way he does when he is trying not to panic.

My mother claps her hands softly, once. “Excellent.”

The sound makes my skin crawl.

“Do not delay,” she says. “Do not disappoint me.”

She descends the final step, moving close enough that only I can hear the softness in her next words. “Rest assured, Aelith. I will take very good care of Dawson while you are gone.”

The world inside me goes silent in the way a blade is silent before it falls. I lower my head slightly, as if in obedience.

Let her think she has won. Let Jithusian smile. Let every witness in this chamber carry the story of my surrender. Because the moment I leave this palace, I will no longer be her son standing beneath her throne.

I will be Dawson’s mate.

And I will come back with fire.

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CHAPTER
TWELVE

"NOOOOOO!" I SCRUNCH UP MY NOSE AND SHAKE MY HEAD. "ANY POINT OF contact on the floor is lava. The material still counts. You'll be incinerated to a crisp if you touch it with any part of your body. Instant crisp."

My knees wobble a little on the high storage cupboard I've claimed as my safe zone. It was absolutely not designed for a person—or any species, honestly—to perch on like this. One wrong shift and I'm toast. Literally.

Worth it.

Prithan exhales slowly, deep and long—like I've personally aged him. I'm pretty sure he didn't sigh like that before he met me.

Hard to say, though. I've been here without Aelith… nine days and seven hours, which means they have my undivided attention, as I need constant distraction.

If I had a phone, I'd absolutely be keeping track of the minutes too. Seconds, even. I'm that guy.

"But you said any object is safe, Dawson," he says, fixing me with that steady, glowing-eyed look of his. The one that feels like he's deciding whether I'm worth tolerating.

He hasn't snapped me in half yet, so I'm counting that as a win. And funnily, his already impressive use of English has got so much better—as in snide with the side of casual—since I decided he should be my friend.

"I did," I agree, bright as anything. "Gold star for listening."

For some reason, he doesn't look like he loves that for himself.

"But," I continue, pointing dramatically at the rug under his very large, very planted blue feet, "that is not an object."

"It's a rug."

“Exactly. Not an object.”

Silence.

Rowgr snorts from where she’s balanced on a three-foot candlestick like some kind of nightmare flamingo. “That makes no sense.”

“It makes perfect sense,” I say. “Objects are, like… solid choices. Chairs. Tables. Walls. Reliable things. Rugs are betrayal waiting to happen.”

Prithan’s jaw tightens. “It’s on the floor.”

“Which is lava-parallel,” I shoot back. “Very dangerous category.”

The cupboard loudly creaks under me. I ignore it.

“Okay,” I add, because I’m generous like that, “new rule. Objects have to be at least ten centimetres off the ground.” I hold my palms out to what I think is ten centimetres. “That way there’s no confusion.”

“I’m not confused,” Prithan says flatly.

“You *were* standing in lava,” I point out.

Rowgr bobs her head. “He was.”

He glares at her.

I grin. “See? Rowgr gets it.”

A low, rumbling sound builds in his chest. Not quite a growl. Not quite *not* a growl. Honestly, I think it’s growth.

“How about,” I say quickly, diplomatic king that I am, “that was a practice round?”

He looks deeply offended.

I lean down a little, lowering my voice like I’m letting him in on a secret. “Everyone needs a trial go. Even legends.”

Rowgr makes a noise that might be a laugh.

Prithan pinches the bridge of his nose.

For a second, it’s just… this. Them. Me. A ridiculous game. No one trying to kill anyone. No one yelling. No one afraid. And then it hits me.

Nine days since Aelith left is too long. He should have been back by now. Not that I want him to return with Jamie or Varek, but still, missing him lands sharp and sudden, right under my ribs.

I miss him. Like, properly miss him. Not just a passing thought, but a constant, low ache that flares whenever I stop distracting myself… which is why I don’t stop.

Because if I stop, I see him—on his knees, blood running down the side of his face, too bright against his blue skin. Shoulders forced back, posture

rigid not because he wants it to be, but because he *has* to hold it. Because collapsing would be worse. Because *they'd* make it worse.

And his eyes—

Not on her but on me.

Steady. Sharp. Telling me without words to stay still. To stay quiet. To not make this worse.

The recollected crack of impact echoes in my head loud enough that, for a second, the cupboard under me feels like it jolts in response.

I blink hard.

Nope. Not doing that.

He'll come back. I know he will. Not just because this is his home and his terrifying mother rules it with a fist full of nightmares—but because I'm here.

And… yeah. I've never really had someone who was mine before. Not properly and not until him. Not until the bond. Even if it's not… 100 percent finished yet. Fuck, I wish we'd had time before he left.

But also, a small, traitorous part of me hopes he takes his time. Because if he comes back, he comes back to *her* and potentially with an innocent kid, which would not be okay.

I shove that thought down fast.

Nope. Not thinking that either.

I clear my throat, dragging myself back into the moment. "Right. Reset positions!"

Rowgr hops down with a soft thud, completely ignoring the lava situation, which is frankly illegal.

"Oi! You died!"

She just shrugs.

Rude.

Prithan doesn't move.

"Come on," I say, softer this time. "One more round."

He studies me for a long second. Then—very deliberately—he steps off the rug and onto a low chest situated beside him.

Not lava.

I beam. "Yes! Growth! We love to see it."

"Again," he says.

"Again," I echo, delighted.

We’re mid-jump—me trying to get from the cupboard to a narrow wall ledge without dying dramatically—when the door slams open hard.

All three of us freeze.

Two more guards stand in the doorway, armour sharp, expressions sharper, and the air shifts.

Gone is the reluctant amusement. Gone is the patience. Prithan straightens, stepping down from the chest like none of this ever happened. Rowgr drops from her new perch, her posture snapping into rigid formality.

I don’t move. Mostly because if I move, I *will* fall into lava and that feels like a bad look right now.

“The Queen summons the human,” one of them says in Glowranth, which honestly is a little extra rude, as they don’t know I can understand my mate’s language. That third bond that snapped into place when I was on my deathbed really did have an impressive perk.

But back to the rude guard. He said “*summons*” rather than “*asks.*” Yeah. That’s… not great. I’ve been lucky that she’s been ignoring me so far since she had her son beaten and sent off to do her bidding.

I glance between them. “Is this immediate, or do I have time to not die first?”

No one laughs.

Tough crowd.

Prithan looks up at me, a tightness in his expression now. He’s back into guard mode rather than the new bestie status he’s getting closer to committing to.

“Come down,” he says quietly.

I hesitate. Not because of the height, but because of what comes next.

“The floor is still lava,” I try weakly.

Rowgr’s mouth presses into a line.

One of the guards steps forward. “Now.”

Right. Cool. Following the orders of a gruff guard who doesn’t like me and thinks I’m some sort of insect it is. Love that for me.

I carefully climb down, making a big show of avoiding the floor until the very last second. If I’m getting marched off to a possibly terrible fate, I’m committing to the bit. My feet hit the ground. No incineration. Honestly, a little disappointing. Third-degree burns might’ve bought me time before facing Aelith’s mother.

Now *she’s* a Glowranth who doesn’t even rank me as equal to an insect.

What’s lower than an insect?

I don’t have time to think it over, as the moment I’m down, everything changes.

Prithan moves behind me—not close enough to touch, but close enough to guide and control. He’s no longer simply my guard but my escort. My cage with legs.

It doesn’t hurt, really. That’s the weird part. Because I know the difference. I’ve known people who wanted to own me before. People who saw kindness and thought it meant easy.

Foster care wasn’t bad. Not really. I got lucky. Not a horror story. Just… temporary. Always moving. Always trying to figure out where I fit.

Turns out the answer might be in another dimension with monsters. I didn’t see that one coming.

“They don’t have to be so intense, you know,” I say as we start walking. “I’m not exactly planning a jailbreak.”

Prithan snorts under his breath.

Rowgr mutters, “You tried to climb a wall three days ago.”

“In my defence,” I say, “it looked climbable.”

“It was not.”

“Debatable.”

Prithan’s mouth twitches, and I sensibly shut up, knowing my guards also have a part to play. We move along the palace corridors, and the further we go, the heavier it feels. It’s subtle at first, then most definitely not.

Servants don’t look up, guards don’t speak unless they have to, and everyone moves like they’re trying not to be noticed because being noticed is dangerous. Long gone are the tentative smiles. They disappeared the moment the rumours spread about Aelith’s fall from grace.

I swallow my emotion down, keeping my expression easy.

We finally stop outside a set of massive doors, the kind that scream *important decisions and probably trauma*.

Prithan steps closer, voice low enough that only I hear it when he urges, “Do not speak unless asked.”

I glance at him. “That feels unrealistic.”

“Dawson.” There’s a thread of concern in his tone.

I nod, just once. “Okay.”

The doors begin to open, and just like that, the game is over, and I have to deal with the joy that is my mother-in-law.

The first thing that hits me is the light. It isn't natural—not sunlight or anything close to it. It pours down from above through floating crystal structures that shift slowly in the air, scattering colour in rippling waves of gold, violet, and a deeper tone that's almost molten. The entire space glows with it, like the room itself is alive and breathing.

The hall stretches out far wider than it should, with towering columns that look carved from stone, but there is faint movement beneath the surface, as though made from partially frozen liquid. The polished floor reflects everything back like a warped, gleaming mirror, making it feel like we're walking through something unreal.

And at the far end sits a throne. My eyebrows rise high, as we're definitely not in the formal throne room. What, does she have thrones in every room? Does she insist on them in order to make herself feel extra intimidating and evil?

This one wasn't built so much as it has grown up from the floor, shaped from dark, jagged material that curves around the figure seated within it. Faint light pulses through it, as if emitted from embers buried deep beneath the surface. The throne frames her perfectly, placing her at the centre of everything whether she moves or not.

Queen Serresta doesn't need to move.

She sits as though the world bends around her.

Her shimmering marks catch the strange light, her horns sweeping high and elegant. Her silver, glowing gaze, sharp and assessing, fixes on me the moment we step forward, and I have the distinct impression that I've already been assessed and found lacking.

Her fingers rest lightly on the arm of the throne. The material beneath them shifts. A faint, almost imperceptible sound follows—like something tightening under pressure.

And just like that, my shoulders tense before I can stop them.

For a split second, I'm not here. I'm back in another room, watching red streak down blue skin that shouldn't be marked, hearing the crack of impact that echoed long after it should have stopped.

I force a slow breath in through my nose.

Focus.

Now is not the time.

We stop several paces away. I'm aware of Prithan behind me, of the guards lining the chamber, of how quiet it is in a way that feels strategic.

I then notice Fithrust.

They stand several paces to the Queen's left, dressed in silver and dark blue, hands clasped loosely behind their back. Their expression is carefully neutral, but when our eyes meet, relief flickers there for half a second before disappearing again.

Huh. If I'm being honest, I've been a little miffed with them, which probably isn't fair. They saved my arse, quite possibly Aelith's too. Then, after all that, they basically vanished.

I'd asked Prithan about it two days ago while attempting—and failing—to teach him the difference between a game and a challenge. Apparently, Fithrust couldn't be seen visiting me, couldn't be seen supporting me, and definitely couldn't be seen supporting Aelith.

Not publicly, anyhow, especially while the Queen was already suspicious.

The explanation made sense, but it didn't mean I had to like it.

Fithrust catches my gaze again. Their eyes widen slightly before they glance meaningfully towards the floor.

Ah.

Behave.

Right.

That's probably a bad sign.

Another thing becomes obvious after a few seconds. Jithusian isn't here.

Relief hits first. It's immediate and instinctive. Then the feeling fades almost as quickly as it arrives because the more I think about it, the less I like it.

Jithusian enjoys being seen. He enjoys making people uncomfortable and standing around looking pleased with himself while everyone else suffers. If he's missing, then either he's busy doing something dastardly or he's already done everything he wanted to do.

Neither possibility improves my mood.

Across the room, Fithrust catches my eye again. This time their expression tightens almost imperceptibly. It feels an awful lot like confirmation.

Fuck. What if he's gone with Aelith… or followed him? What if—?

"Human," the Queen says, cutting through my panic. Her voice is smooth, controlled, and carries effortlessly across the space. "Have you received any messages?"

I blink once. “Messages?”

“From my son.”

Right. Straight to it, then.

“Secret ones?” I ask before I can stop myself. “Because they wouldn’t be very secret if I told you.”

The silence that follows stretches long enough to make me reconsider every life choice I’ve ever made.

The Queen doesn’t react straight away, but the atmosphere in the room tightens. It’s subtle, like the air itself has drawn in a breath and is waiting to see what happens next.

Her eyes narrow slightly, and up close, they’re worse—brighter than they should be, catching the strange light and throwing it back sharp and cold. There’s nothing soft in them. No warmth. Just calculation layered over irritation.

“You think yourself amusing,” she says.

It isn’t a question.

“Not especially,” I reply, because apparently I’ve decided honesty is still the way to go here. “It just… happens sometimes.”

Prithan shifts behind me, and I feel it more than see it. Not a warning. Not quite. Just… tension. A reminder.

I don’t need much reminding. I’ve seen how things go when she’s displeased.

The memory hits whether I want it to or not. Aelith on his knees. Blood where it shouldn’t be. The sound of impact—again, and again, and again—while I stood there, useless and furious and very, very aware that anything I did would make it worse.

That’s why I’m standing here now instead of locked in a cell. Because I kept my mouth shut. Because I learned.

The Queen exhales softly, and the sound carries. It isn’t loud, but it lands with weight. “You have been here alone for nine days,” she says. “And in that time, you have received no word from him.”

“No,” I say, more carefully this time. “I haven’t.”

That part is the truth. There’s no way Aelith would risk something like that. He’s too deliberate, too aware of what’s at stake. He wouldn’t send messages that could be intercepted, twisted, or used against anyone.

Especially not me.

And a part of me—one I don't particularly like—hopes he doesn't come back at all. Because if he does… he comes back to *this*. To her. To that.

My chest tightens, and I force the thought down before it shows on my face.

Her gaze sharpens anyway, like she's caught an emotion flickering there. "And the child," she says.

A cold weight drops through me.

"Jamie," she continues, watching me closely now. "You have also received no word of him?"

Every instinct I have snaps into place while I'm left wondering why the fuck she'd think the kid would be contacting me. Hell, maybe she thinks it's what humans do.

I swallow once, forcing my expression to stay easy. "Jamie's… not exactly the messaging type," I say, aiming for light. "He's more of a 'run around, get into trouble, ignore adults' kind of kid."

The Queen's expression doesn't change, but the irritation beneath it sharpens. "Where is he?" she asks, which honestly seems a strange thing to ask considering she's sent her son to collect him.

Maybe she's simply hedging her bets in case Aelith doesn't carry out his part of the deal.

I shrug, like it's nothing. Like my heart isn't suddenly trying to punch its way out of my chest. "Last I saw him, he was with people who know how to keep him safe," I say. Which is technically true. Just missing… most of the important details.

Her eyes narrow further. "Which people?"

"Good ones," I say, smiling a little because that's easier than thinking about what happens if she gets her hands on him. "Bit intense, maybe. Definitely armed. But good."

Her fingers tighten slightly on the arm of her throne. The material beneath them shifts, like it's reacting to her mood. "You are being deliberately vague."

"I'm being honest," I say. "Just… not detailed."

That earns me another long look. The kind that feels like she's trying to peel me apart layer by layer and see what falls out.

The thought of Jamie here—of him in this room, under that gaze—sends cold dread twisting through my gut.

No way. Not a chance he's her mate. That's not how this works. It can't be. He's a kid. Just a kid. I force that thought down before it shows on my face.

"I don't know that much about him," I add, softer now, because that part matters. "He's strong. Smarter than he should be, honestly. Bit of a menace." That last part slips out before I can stop it.

For a second, the Queen just watches me. Then her lip curls faintly. "You speak of him fondly," she says.

"Yeah," I answer simply. "I do." It doesn't matter that we only had a handful of conversations. In the time we chatted, I knew enough to like him.

Annoyance flickers in her expression—or impatience. "Attachment," she says, like the very concept is unpleasant. "A weakness."

I shake my head slightly before I can stop myself. "Or a reason not to be a terrible person."

The words hang there, which makes me start to think that saying them might have been a mistake. The temperature in the room drops. Her gaze hardens, and for a moment, I forget to breathe.

"I did not summon you for your opinions," she says, her voice losing that smooth edge and sharpening. "I summoned you for answers."

"Right," I say quickly. "Answers. Yes. I'm a big fan of answers." I clear my throat. "But no, I haven't heard from him. And if I had, he wouldn't be dumb enough to send anything that could get intercepted."

Her eyes flash at that. "You presume much about my son."

"I know him well enough," I say before I can stop myself.

That earns me another look. Even sharper. More dangerous.

My thoughts drift anyway, because apparently my survival instincts take breaks. Back to him. The way he looked at me when I woke up after being on the brink of death. Both times. Each time, he was there. Solid and steady. His hands careful like I might break, even after everything.

Even after *this place*.

He's tender in a way that doesn't make sense. Sweet, even, beneath the layers of grumpy restraint and low, growling intensity he hides behind. And I hate that part of me is relieved he's not here to see this.

I don't realise how still I've gone until something slams hard into my back.

Pain cracks across my shoulders, sharp enough to steal the breath from my lungs and knock me forward. I catch myself before I hit the ground, balance kicking in on instinct, years of staying upright on unstable boards saving me from eating polished palace floor.

I inhale slowly, forcing control back into my body, and glance over my shoulder. One of the Queen's personal guards lowers his hand, his expression blank, as though striking me was nothing more than routine.

Heat flares in my chest, immediate and hot. I part my lips, ready to tell him exactly how badly that decision is going to go for him when Aelith finds out, but then I catch Rowgr's eyes.

She's rigid where she stands, her gaze locked on mine, and there's no mistaking the silent plea there. *Don't.*

I swallow the words down, hard, and turn back to the throne. "My apologies," I say, forcing the words out evenly.

The Queen studies me with an expression bordering on amusement. "Nine days," she says, her tone deceptively soft. "And no word." Her lip curls faintly. "Perhaps you are not my son's mate after all. Perhaps you are merely… an inconvenience."

The word lands harder than the blow.

It isn't new. I've heard it before, in quieter places and smaller rooms, in voices that made it sound like fact rather than opinion. It took me years to unlearn that. Years of moving, of finding my own footing, of carving out a life that proved I wasn't something to be tolerated and discarded.

I straighten slightly, meeting her gaze. "I'm not an inconvenience," I say, keeping my voice steady. "And I am his mate."

Her eyes narrow, unimpressed. "Then he will prove it," she replies. A pause stretches between us before her expression hardens. "If we have not heard from him by this time tomorrow, you will be taken to the *velkrae*."

The word settles into my understanding with uncomfortable clarity. I don't know how I know what it means, but I do, and that makes it worse.

Gallows.

Ones that are public and absolutely final.

I risk a glance at Fithrust, whose eyes are wide, practically begging me to shut up already.

The Queen doesn't linger on the subject. Instead, she turns her attention away as though I've already ceased to matter. "Send the *chalka* birds," she orders.

An attendant bows and moves to carry out the command.

“Return him,” she adds, dismissing me without another glance.

Just like that, it’s over.

Prithan steps in behind me again, that careful distance returning as he guides me away from the throne. We retrace our path across the gleaming floor and through the towering hall, the weight of the room pressing down less with every step until the doors close behind us.

Only then do I realise I’ve been holding my breath. I let it out slowly. “Well,” I say, aiming for light and not quite hitting it, “that went great.”

No one responds.

The walk back is quiet, the palace corridors closing in again with their muted tension and careful silence. People don’t look up as we pass. No one wants to be noticed here.

We reach my room without incident. The door opens, and I step inside before turning back. “Thanks,” I say, because it feels wrong not to.

Prithan’s gaze flicks to mine, lingering for the briefest heartbeat before the door shuts. It locks a second later.

I stand there for a moment, staring at the wood, before turning slowly back into the room. While it’s not a cell, not yet, and I’m grateful for that, I’ve got just twenty-four hours before the shit hits the fan.

That should be plenty of time for everything to go spectacularly wrong.

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CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

EVENING IN THE PALACE IS… WEIRD.

It isn't quiet—not really. It's something else entirely. The kind of muted that feels curated, like someone decided what sounds are acceptable and quietly strangled the rest before they could exist. There's no wind rattling against anything, no distant chatter, no hum of life carrying on in the background. Even the light behaves differently here, dimming from that molten, almost liquid glow into a softer radiance that's no less unnatural, as if the building itself is always easing into sleep without ever truly resting.

I sit on the edge of the bed and stare at the wall like it might offer answers if I look at it long enough. It doesn't. The Queen's voice keeps replaying in my head anyway, filling the silence whether I invite it or not.

If we have not heard from him by this time tomorrow…

Yeah. Big fan of that. Really comforting stuff. There's nothing like a ticking clock attached to your very public demise to round out the evening.

I fall back onto the mattress and drag a hand over my face, exhaling through my fingers. "Cool," I mutter to the ceiling. "Super cool. Love a deadline that ends in public execution."

Velkrae.

The word still sits heavy in my chest.

I don't know how I know what it means, but I do. That's the bond, apparently. Free language upgrade with a generous side of existential dread.

I continue focusing on my new friend, the ceiling, instead. It stretches too high above me, too smooth, faintly glowing like everything else in this place. Nothing here feels normal. Not even in a "new place, new rules" kind

of way. It’s all just slightly off, like reality got edited and no one thought to send me the updated version.

Which, honestly, tracks with how my life’s been going.

I huff out a breath and swing my legs over the side of the bed again, because lying still isn’t helping. It never really has. Sitting still gives my brain too much room to wander, and when it wanders, it tends to go backwards.

And backwards is… not great.

I push myself up to my feet and brace my hands on the edge of the table, letting my head drop for a second as I stare at the grain of the wood.

I remember the cold.

Not actual cold—more like the absence of everything else. One second I was somewhere that made sense. Mountains. Snow. Air that burned your lungs in a way that felt clean and alive. The next… nothing.

And then everything at once.

Heat slammed into me, thick and wet, clinging to my skin. The ground came up harder than expected, knocking the breath out of me like it had something to prove, and the smell hit a second later—earth and rot the unmistakable scent of a living thing that had no business existing.

I’d stumbled to my feet, heart racing, brain trying and failing to catch up, and the only thought that made it through the noise was simple and immediate.

This isn’t right.

Then I heard it. Something moving.

Not human. Not anything I could name.

I’d grabbed the nearest thing I could find—a rock, because apparently I’m very resourceful under pressure—and turned just in time to see it come at me. It moved too fast, all wrong angles and too many limbs, closing the distance like I wasn’t even worth the effort.

I swung without thinking. Slipped. Hit the ground hard enough to rattle my teeth.

And for a second, I genuinely thought—

This is it.

Proper fear. The kind that strips everything else away until there’s just instinct and panic and the very real understanding that you’re about to die somewhere no one will ever find you in a world that doesn’t care that you exist.

I press my hands harder into the table now, grounding myself in the present.

But I didn't die. By sheer luck, questionable decision-making, or whatever cosmic joke is currently running my life, I didn't die. I've been running, adapting, surviving ever since.

Out there, something wanted to eat me. In here… something wants to own me.

I'm not entirely sure which one I prefer.

A soft knock cuts through the thought before it can spiral any further.

I straighten quickly, dragging myself back to the present. "Yeah?"

The door opens, and Prithan steps in first, Rowgr just behind him with a tray of food.

Right. That's a thing people need…. Each and every species does, in fact. Eating. Staying alive. Basic survival. It's all still relevant, apparently.

I straighten a little, dragging myself fully back into the present. "Evening," I say, because politeness feels important right now. "You brought snacks. You're officially my favourite people again."

Neither of them smiles, and I try to keep the disappointment off my face.

They move further into the room, and Rowgr sets the tray down on the table with careful precision, like even the act of placing food has rules I don't know about. Everything about them feels tighter than it did earlier. More controlled and distant.

Yeah, a meeting with the Queen will do that to a person.

I lean back against the table and cross my arms, watching them for a moment. "You can stay, you know."

Neither responds or even makes eye contact.

I tilt my head, studying them like they're the confusing ones here. "Or stand there silently. That's also an option. Not my favourite, but I respect the commitment."

Rowgr glances at Prithan. He doesn't look at her.

Right. So that's where we're at.

I sigh lightly and push off the table, trying for casual even though the air in the room still feels a little too tight. "Just because you think I'm going to die tomorrow doesn't mean we can't hang out."

That gets a reaction. Not a big one. But enough.

Prithan's jaw tightens, and Rowgr's gaze drops briefly to the floor before she catches herself. Her expression screams guilt.

"I don't think—" Rowgr starts, then stops, like she's already said too much.

I raise an eyebrow. "You don't think I'm going to die?"

She hesitates, and that hesitation says more than anything else could.

Prithan steps in smoothly, his voice steady. "You were given terms."

"Yeah," I say, nodding once. "Pretty clear ones."

Silence settles again, heavier this time, pressing in from all sides.

I let it sit for a second, then soften my stance a little. "Look, I get it. Not exactly a fun situation for anyone. But you liked me earlier."

Rowgr huffs out a quiet breath that might almost be a laugh before she reins it in.

"I'm very charming," I add helpfully.

"That's… debatable," she says.

"There it is." I grin. "See? We're back."

Prithan exhales slowly, and while he doesn't relax, the tension in his shoulders eases just a fraction. At this point, I'm willing to argue that's progress.

I reach for the cup on the tray and take a sip. It's warm. Not amazing, but not terrible either. Honestly, I'm counting it as a win. "You can stand there and pretend you don't like me," I say, watching them over the rim, "but I'm still going to talk."

"We're not here to talk, Dawson," Prithan replies.

"Tragic." I stick out my bottom lip for extra "but look how adorable and disappointed I am" energy, but all that gets from both of them is a concerned look. Okay, so maybe some expressions haven't caught on yet.

I take another sip, then lower the cup as I study them more carefully. They're still off. Careful. Like they've been reminded exactly where they stand.

And where I stand.

"Hey," I say, softer. "I'm not going to make things worse for you."

Prithan shifts slightly, drawing a sharp look from Rowgr. It's subtle, but I catch it. There's tension there that wasn't before. Not the kind directed at me—more the kind that comes from knowing exactly how far things can go if someone steps out of line.

“I saw what happens when she’s… not in a great mood,” I add, keeping my tone light even as my heart stumbles. “I’m not exactly keen to be the reason that happens again.”

Neither of them responds, but the silence shifts. It settles heavier, like we’ve all just acknowledged something we’re not supposed to say out loud.

Prithan studies me for a long moment. “You understand more than you appear to.”

“Story of my life,” I say, offering a small shrug.

Rowgr reaches for the edge of the tray, and her hand brushes too close to the cup. It tips, tilting dangerously towards the edge of the table.

Before I can react, Prithan moves.

He doesn’t reach for it. He doesn’t touch it at all.

The cup stills mid-wobble, as though an invisible hand has caught it. A faint shimmer flickers in the air, subtle but unmistakable, before everything settles back into place as if nothing happened.

I blink. “That,” I say slowly, pointing at the cup, “was very cool.”

Rowgr straightens immediately. “It was nothing.”

“Pretty sure it wasn’t,” I reply.

My attention lingers on the space where the shimmer had been, my mind already trying to make sense of it. It isn’t tech. It isn’t anything I recognise. It feels… raw. Like it comes from the person using it rather than anything external.

It’s the same energy that was used to fry my insides when Aelith was tortured. I glance down at my hands, flexing my fingers slowly, as if concentrating hard enough might let me feel it again.

Sonny’s voice comes back to me, clearer now than it had been at the time.

“He had to push his energy into you… his life force. It was the only thing that kept you alive.”

Back then, I hadn’t really understood it. I’d been too busy trying to build my strength while figuring out how to cope with having a hot blue prince declare his devotion to me. It had sounded important, sure—Sonny’s words. Serious. But also distant. Like it was happening *around* me rather than *to* me.

Now, watching that cup steady in mid-air without a single touch, it clicks: Aelith didn’t just stand there and watch me as the doc tried to make me better. He gave up a piece of himself to keep me alive.

The realization squeezes painfully at my chest, and I draw in a slow breath, grounding myself back in the room.

"He… Aelith used that on me." My chest tightens. "He kept me alive," I say quietly. A fact I'm only just catching up to.

The room feels smaller for a second. Aelith gave part of himself. A part that mattered. And I didn't even know what it really meant.

I swallow and look back up at them, curiosity cutting through the weight of it. "So how does it work?" Sure, I've asked Aelith about this, but super generally, and I kinda got distracted by the way his lips moved.

They both go still.

"The energy thing," I clarify. "You just… think it? Or is it like flexing a muscle? Or—" I gesture vaguely. "I don't know. Interdimensional magic?"

Rowgr's mouth twitches despite herself.

Prithan hesitates. Then, slowly, he says, "It is not magic."

"Okay." I nod, really wishing I'd pushed Aelith for details. "Great. That clears that right up."

He ignores that. "It is… a current. Within us. Around us. We learn to shape it."

"Like breathing?" I ask.

His gaze flicks to mine, surprised. "Yes."

"That's… actually kind of cool."

"It's also dangerous," Rowgr cuts in sharply.

Prithan glances at her. She shakes her head once, subtle and firm. Whatever he was about to say dies there.

Ah, right. Secrets a lowly human can't know.

"Okay," I say lightly, holding up my hands. "We're not sharing trade secrets. I get it. Very exclusive club."

No one laughs this time.

Prithan steps back. "You should rest."

"Yeah," I say. "Big day tomorrow. Possible death and all that."

Rowgr's expression tightens again before they turn to leave.

"Hey," I call after them.

They pause.

"Thanks," I say. "For the food. And… earlier."

For not letting it get worse. For not being like the others.

They don't answer, but Rowgr gives a small nod before they step out.

The door shuts and locks, and just like that, I'm alone again.

I stare at the cup on the table. At the place where the air shimmered. At the idea forming in the back of my mind whether I like it or not.

Energy.

Aelith gave his to me and kept me alive. The bond isn't finished, but it's there. It's why I can understand and speak Glowranthian.

I flex my fingers again, slower this time. "Can it go the other way?" I murmur.

The room, unfortunately, doesn't answer, but the thought doesn't disappear.

I end up sitting at the table a minute later, because apparently existential dread pairs really well with dinner.

The food smells decent enough. Not amazing, not terrible, just… edible. There's some kind of roasted meat, something green that might be a vegetable or decorative, and a strange piece of fruit that looks like it could either be juicy and refreshing or immediately dissolve my internal organs. Fifty-fifty odds, really.

I pick up the fruit and turn it in my fingers, studying it like I might unlock its secrets through sheer observation. "You look suspicious," I tell it. "But I respect the mystery."

It doesn't respond, which feels like a missed opportunity. Still, I take a cautious bite. It's sweet, a little tangy, and apparently not poison. Always a win. I chew slowly, my gaze drifting back to the table, to the cup, to that exact spot where the air shimmered as though an invisible hand reached out and caught it.

Energy. Right.

I swallow and sit up a little straighter, suddenly convinced I'm figuring this out. "Okay," I murmur, brushing my hands together like I'm a scientist instead of a bloke making this up as I go. "Energy manipulation. Easy. No problem."

Prithan confirmed it was like breathing. Which sounds simple. Breathing is simple. I've been doing that my entire life with, I'd say, moderate success.

Except…

I pause, chewing thoughtfully. Breathing is actually not simple. Breathing is one of those things that works perfectly fine right up until someone tells you to think about it.

And then it's a disaster.

Every single time I go to the dentist, without fail, the hygienist leans back and says, “Just breathe through your nose,” like she hasn’t just fundamentally altered the function of my entire existence.

And suddenly I’m aware of my nose. Of the fact that air is meant to go in and out of it. Of whether I’m doing it right or not.

And then I panic because what if I forget? What if this is the moment my body decides breathing is optional and I die in a reclining chair while someone aggressively flosses my gums?

That would be embarrassing.

I take another bite of fruit, frowning slightly. “Okay,” I say around it, “so maybe not *that* simple.”

Then there’s the sleep thing. That’s worse.

There’s regularly that moment where I wake up in the middle of the night, completely disoriented, my mouth dry, my tongue stuck to the roof like it’s been glued there for structural support, and my brain just… empties.

No thoughts. No logic. Just a single, horrifying question: *How do I breathe?*

And then I’m lying there, gasping like a fish, trying to remember something I’ve been doing automatically since birth. Honestly, the human body is a design flaw.

I swallow, shake my head, and refocus. “Right. Energy. Not breathing. Similar, but hopefully less stressful.”

I place my hand flat on the table and fix my attention on the piece of fruit sitting in the centre of the plate. “Okay,” I say, leaning in slightly. “We’re going to move. Just a little bit. Nothing dramatic. No pressure.”

The fruit remains exactly where it is, which feels like a personal attack.

I inhale slowly through my nose, because apparently I’m committing to this, and try to imagine what Prithan described. A current. One flowing through me. One surrounding me. One I can shape.

I focus. Really focus. “Move,” I whisper.

Nothing happens.

I narrow my eyes at it. “Okay, that was a warmup. We don’t judge the first attempt.”

I try again, this time putting a little more effort into it. Not physically, but mentally, like I’m trying to push something out of my chest and into the space between me and the fruit.

Still nothing.

“Come on,” I mutter. “You saw what happened earlier. Very impressive display. I feel like I deserve for us to give a follow-up performance.”

The fruit continues to sit there, unmoved, unbothered, thriving.

I shift in my seat and plant both hands on the table this time, like that might help. “All right,” I say, gearing myself up. “We’re committing. Big energy. Big effort.”

I take a deeper breath, hold it, and then push—not with my hands, but with everything else. Every ounce of focus, every scrap of determination, every vague understanding of “current” and “force” I’ve managed to piece together in the past five minutes.

For a split second, I think—

And then—

A loud, echoing fart breaks the silence with impressive clarity.

I freeze. The room freezes with me. Then I blink and follow up with a snort. Which turns into laughter far quicker than it probably should. “Oh my god,” I wheeze, covering my face. “That is not the kind of release I was going for.”

I lean back in my chair, still laughing under my breath, shoulders shaking slightly as the absurdity of it sinks in. “Okay. Good. Good to know. Body’s functioning. We’ve confirmed that.”

I glance back at the fruit, which has not moved even slightly and now seems like it’s judging me. “Right,” I say, pointing at it. “Round one to you. But this is not over.”

Another small snort escapes me before I can stop it, and I scrub a hand over my face, still grinning. “Although,” I add thoughtfully, “maybe we take a short break. Regroup. Strategize.”

Because if I’m being honest, that felt less like energy manipulation and more like… internal pressure management. Which is probably not the same thing. I push back from the table and stand, stretching slightly as I glance towards the adjoining room. “Yeah,” I decide. “We’re going to handle that situation first.”

I cast one last look at the fruit. “Don’t get comfortable,” I tell it. “I’m coming back.”

It remains entirely unimpressed. Still, I head off, feeling oddly better for the attempt. Because, okay, maybe I can’t move fruit with my mind yet, but I’m thinking about it, and that’s a start.

I WAKE TO HANDS ON MY SHOULDERS.

For one awful second, I'm back in the forest after the rift, heat pressing against my skin and a creature with too many limbs coming at me through the dark. I jerk hard enough that my head cracks against something fabric rather than stone, and a strangled sound leaves me before my brain catches up with the room, the bed, the dim glow of palace walls, and the very intense Glowranth guard crouched beside me.

Prithan's hand tightens on my shoulder. "Dawson. Wake fully."

"I'm awake," I whisper, though, honestly, that feels generous. My heart is trying to climb out of my throat, my mouth tastes like stale fruit and panic, and I'm fairly sure I fell asleep in my clothes after attempting to move fruit with my mind and accidentally weaponising my arse instead. "What's happening?"

"You need to dress quickly."

That wakes me properly.

The tone does it more than the words. Prithan isn't being his usual long-suffering, mildly haunted self. His voice is low, sharp, and stripped of everything except urgency. The room remains mostly dark around us, the crystal veins in the wall dimmed to that strange molten glow the palace gets at night, but I can see enough of his face to know something is very wrong.

I push upright too fast and regret it when the room tilts. "Dress for what?"

"Leaving."

My pulse stutters. For a moment, all I can hear is the Queen's voice again.

"If we have not heard from Aelith by this time tomorrow…"

"Leaving as in going to the scary public execution thing?" I ask, because apparently terror has not improved my ability to phrase things normally.

Prithan's jaw tightens. "No."

That one word should be comforting. It isn't. If anything, it makes the whole situation feel worse because Prithan looks like someone who's decided to break a rule with consequences large enough to eat him.

He stands and turns away while I scramble for the clothing laid out over the chair near the bed. My hands shake badly enough that it takes two tries

to get my shirt on the right way around, and I only realise I've shoved both legs into the same trouser opening when I almost topple sideways into the table.

"Fuck," I hiss, yanking them off and starting again. "Cool. Great. Really helpful legs. Love the teamwork."

Prithan doesn't tell me to hurry. Somehow, that makes me hurry more.

The last time he was this quiet, the Queen had summoned me. The time before that, Rowgr had stopped me from talking back after one of the Queen's guards struck me. So far, every time my guards have gone very still and very formal, my life has got considerably worse within minutes.

Still, I trust them.

Which is probably ridiculous. I have known them for not even a month, and technically they were assigned to keep me prisoner. But they also fed me, taught me things they shouldn't have, stopped me from eating poisoned food, played the floor is lava with more seriousness than the game deserved, and looked at me like I mattered when the Queen threatened to hang me.

So when Prithan tells me to move, I move.

I shove my feet into my boots, grab the yo-yo from the table because priorities remain important even in a crisis, and look around for anything else that seems useful. Unfortunately, the room mostly contains furniture too large to carry and one suspicious fruit that has already defeated me in combat.

"Can I ask where we're going?" I whisper.

"No."

"Because you don't know or because I'm not allowed to know?"

"Quiet until we are safe."

Ah. That's not actually a comforting answer.

Prithan opens the door a sliver and looks out. The corridor beyond is dark, lit only by faint veins of blue-white crystal threaded through the stone. Rowgr stands outside, one hand on her weapon, her posture so rigid, it makes my chest tighten. She turns when she sees me, and for a second, her gaze flicks over my face the same way it did after the market poisoning.

Checking.

Counting breaths.

Making sure I'm still here.

"You kept watch?" I ask softly.

Her expression doesn’t change. “Yes.”

That single answer settles heavily inside me.

I want to make a joke. I want to say something about how this is the most dramatic sleepover I’ve ever had, or thank them for not letting me die before breakfast, or ask if secret midnight escapes come with snacks. The words rise automatically because that’s what my brain does when fear gets too big.

But Prithan looks at me, just once, and I swallow them down.

We leave the room without another word.

The corridor feels colder than before. Not physically, maybe, though the air does have a damp bite to it, but emotionally. During the day, the palace is all polished intimidation and controlled movement. At night, it feels like the building has stopped pretending to be anything other than a trap.

Prithan moves ahead of me. Rowgr stays behind. I walk between them, my steps too loud no matter how carefully I try to place my feet. Their movements barely whisper against the floor. Mine sound like I’m wearing cooking pots for shoes.

I wish I had Aelith’s grace.

Or Prithan’s silence.

Or Rowgr’s ability to look like she could murder shadows before they get ideas.

Instead, I have adrenaline, human knees, and a growing certainty that I’m about to trip over absolutely nothing at the worst possible moment.

We stick to the edges of the corridors, avoiding the main stretch of light wherever possible. Twice, Prithan lifts a hand and we all stop so suddenly, I nearly walk into his back. Both times, guards pass at the far end of adjoining halls, their armour catching the dim glow before disappearing again.

I hold my breath until my chest hurts.

Only when Prithan moves do I remember breathing is recommended.

We turn down a narrow passage I don’t recognise. That isn’t saying much because I recognise approximately three places in this palace: Aelith’s quarters, the room where the Queen threatened me, and the corridor where I confronted death by awkward royal sibling. Still, this passage feels older. Less polished. The crystal veins here are duller, buried deeper in the stone, and the walls seem to lean in as if listening.

At the end is a door so narrow, I almost miss it.

Rowgr slips ahead to open it.

Darkness waits beyond.

“Oh, good,” I whisper before I can stop myself. “A murder stairwell.”

Prithan gives me a look over his shoulder. He doesn’t look impressed. I press my lips together and mime zipping them shut.

Then we descend.

The stairwell is steep and tight, curving down through stone that smells of dust, damp, and minerals that coats the back of my throat. There are no proper lights here, only occasional faint glimmers where threads of crystal break the surface of the wall. I skim my hand along the stone as we move, and it’s cold enough to make my fingers ache.

All I hear is my breathing, my boots, my heartbeat, and the soft, almost nonexistent footfalls of the two guards who’ve apparently decided tonight is the night we do something incredibly dangerous.

I want to ask questions so badly, it becomes a physical ache.

Where are we going?

Who sent you?

Is Aelith back?

Does he know?

Is he safe?

Instead, I keep my mouth shut because Prithan asked me to and because if I start talking, I’m not sure I’ll stop.

We reach a landing, then turn down another corridor, this one even narrower than the last. Rowgr leads now, blade drawn low and close to her thigh. Prithan walks behind me, and I realise after several steps that he’s placed himself between me and anything that might come from above.

That thought makes my throat tight.

We descend another staircase.

This one is worse.

Not longer, exactly, but older and more uneven, with steps worn down in the centre and slick in places beneath my boots. My breath catches twice, and the second time, Rowgr’s hand shoots back to steady me before I can fall. She doesn’t look at me, doesn’t say anything, just waits until my balance returns.

“Thanks,” I whisper.

Her fingers squeeze my wrist once before she lets go. That almost undoes me.

Eventually the staircase opens into a tunnel.

A proper tunnel.

Not a corridor pretending to be fancy. Not palace stone polished into obedience. This is rough-hewn and narrow, the ceiling low enough in places that Prithan has to duck. The air changes, becoming cooler and thicker, carrying the scent of wet earth and old roots. Somewhere ahead, water drips in a steady rhythm.

Only once we're several metres along does Prithan stop.

He turns to face me. "We can speak here, but quietly."

I almost sag with relief. "Thank fuck. I was about three seconds away from exploding."

Rowgr huffs something that might, in another universe, become a laugh.

Prithan ignores both of us. "This tunnel leads beyond the palace wall."

I stare at him. "Out of the palace?"

"Yes."

"Out-out? Like, no more evil mother-in-law architecture?"

"It opens into the lower city."

For a second, my entire body goes light with relief.

Then reality catches up.

"The city," I repeat. "Not the place where Pax lived?"

"No," Rowgr says.

My hope wobbles but doesn't fall. "But Aelith?"

The two guards exchange a look. Not the bad kind but the careful kind. The kind that tells me whatever they're about to say matters.

Prithan lowers his voice further. "Prince Aelith is in the city."

The words hit me like sunlight. I actually grab the wall because my knees go soft. "He's here?"

"Yes."

"No bloody way." A laugh bursts out of me before I can stop it, too breathless to be properly happy, too shaky to be anything else. "He's here. He's back. He's—" I swallow hard, because my throat is suddenly full of every feeling I've spent ten days trying not to drown in. "Is he okay?"

Rowgr's expression tightens. "He lives."

That is not the same thing. I know that and hate it. But I cling to it anyway.

He lives.

Aelith is in the city, not dead, not halfway across Terrafeara, not forced to return with Jamie or Varek or anyone else the Queen wants to destroy.

“Where?” I ask. “Take me to him.”

“That’s the plan,” Prithan says.

The relief that surges through me is so intense, I almost miss the tension beneath his words.

“What else?” I ask.

He hesitates.

Rowgr answers instead. “The rebels have entered the city.”

My breath catches.

The tunnel seems to narrow around us.

“They’re here?”

“Yes.”

“With Aelith?” I ask.

“Yes,” Prithan says. “And to take the palace once you are out safely.”

Those words should scare me. They do scare me. But underneath the fear is bright and wild hope.

Actual hope.

The kind that makes me want to laugh and cry and possibly vomit.

I press a hand to my chest, feeling the bond there, pulling through all this stone and darkness. “He came back.”

Prithan’s face softens by the smallest amount. “He came back.”

Of course he did.

My stupid, brave, terrifying prince. Of course he came back to the Queen’s city after she tortured him and threatened me. Of course he did it with rebels at his back and a plan sharp enough to cut through palace walls.

I can almost feel him now.

Not clearly.

Not like speech.

But closer.

Closer than before.

The ache in my chest shifts from grief to anticipation so quickly, it hurts. “I need to see him,” I whisper.

“You will,” Rowgr says. “But not if we delay.”

Right. That’s a great plan: Escape first, reunion later. I can do that.

We continue along the tunnel faster now. My fear changes shape with every step, excitement tangling through it until I can barely tell one from

the other. I imagine Aelith waiting somewhere beyond the wall, furious and relieved and gorgeous. I imagine his arms around me. His forehead against mine. His voice telling me I should have stayed in the room and mine telling him absolutely not because he should know better by now.

The tunnel begins to slope upward, and fresh air drifts towards us.

Not palace air but real air. Damp, dirty, smoky city air. It smells incredible.

Rowgr slows as we near the end. A narrow seam of light outlines what looks like a stone panel set into the tunnel wall. She presses her hand against one side, and for a moment, nothing happens. Then the stone shifts inward with a muted scrape, and cool night air spills in.

Beyond is a back alley, cramped and shadowed between tall buildings. The ground is uneven beneath a layer of damp grit, and somewhere nearby I hear distant shouting, the clatter of wheels, and the low hum of a city that has no idea it might be on the edge of war.

Rowgr steps through first, and Prithan nudges me forward.

I take one step into the alley, then another. For one glorious second, I am outside the palace. Then Rowgr stops so suddenly, I nearly walk into her.

Prithan's hand closes around my shoulder and pulls me back.

The alley ahead is not empty.

Jithusian stands beneath the shadow of an overhanging balcony, dressed in dark blue and silver, his smile faint and delighted in the weak spill of light from the tunnel behind us. Two guards stand with him. No, three. One in the alley mouth, one to the left, one half hidden behind a stack of crates.

Waiting. Of course he's fucking waiting.

My stomach drops so hard, it feels like I'm falling.

"Well," he says softly, "how touching. The pets have learned how to open doors."

Rowgr moves before I understand what's happening.

She throws out one hand, energy flaring sharp and bright in the darkness. Prithan shoves me behind him with enough force to knock the breath from my lungs. The alley erupts into motion, blue-white light flashing across stone walls as Jithusian's guards surge forward.

I stumble, catch myself against the tunnel wall, and try to make sense of too much at once.

Prithan shouting.

Rowgr’s blade catching the light.

Jithusian smiling.

Always fucking smiling.

“You were so close,” he says, and his voice somehow cuts through everything. “That is what makes it beautiful.”

Rowgr lunges for him. She’s fast. So fast, I barely track her.

For one wild second, I think she’ll reach him. Then Jithusian lifts his hand, and energy strikes her square in the chest.

The blast is silent, almost elegant, a narrow spear of light that hits with enough force to stop her mid-step. Her body jerks. The glow from her markings flares wildly, bright and wrong, and before she can recover, one of Jithusian’s guards steps in close.

The dagger goes in under her ribs.

No.

No.

No.

“Rowgr!” My scream tears through the alley.

She staggers back, eyes wide, one hand going to the blade as though she can’t quite understand how it got there. Prithan makes a sound I’ll hear in my nightmares. Not a word. Not a shout. A broken roar ripped from deep in his chest.

He starts towards her.

Rowgr looks at him for only a second before turning her gaze to me. There’s blood on her lips. Her mouth moves, but I don’t hear the first word. The second, I do.

“Run.”

Then she falls.

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CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

FOR A SECOND, I FORGET HOW TO MOVE.

Rowgr is on the ground. That's the only thing my brain can hold.

Not the alley. Not Jithusian. Not the guards surrounding us. Not the cold night air or the stink of damp stone and metal and smoke. Just Rowgr, who balanced on a candlestick like a terrifying flamingo and pretended she didn't laugh at my jokes. Rowgr, who told me not to lick mushrooms. Rowgr, who had squeezed my wrist on the stairs like she was silently saying everything she couldn't out loud.

I've forgotten how to move.

"No," I whisper.

It isn't loud enough to matter.

Maybe nothing is.

Prithan's hand clamps around my arm hard enough to hurt, and then I'm moving because he yanks me back with brutal force. My feet nearly go out from under me. I stumble, catch myself, and choke on a breath that tastes like panic and dust and blood.

"Move," Prithan snarls.

I've never heard his voice like that.

Not flat. Not dry. Not long-suffering because I've asked whether Glowranth have board games or whether his armour chafes.

This is grief with claws.

He doesn't let me stop. He drags me backwards towards the tunnel we came from because there's nowhere else to go. The alley is too narrow. Jithusian and his guards block the way forward, and the buildings crowd close on either side, their overhanging balconies turning the strip of sky

above us into a thin black wound. The only choice is back into the tunnel, back through the dark passage, back into the palace that wants me dead.

Which says a lot about how terrible our options are.

We make it three steps.

Maybe four.

A guard steps into the tunnel mouth. He's broad, blue-skinned, armoured in dark silver, and already lifting his hand.

Prithan shoves me behind him so fast, my shoulder smacks the wall. Pain shoots down my arm, but I barely feel it. Energy blooms in the guard's palm, pale and crackling, bright enough to paint the alley in sharp shadows.

Prithan lifts his own hand, and the air between them buckles.

I don't know what I'm seeing, not really. It isn't lightning, not exactly, and it isn't fire, though my body understands heat and danger well enough to flinch. The two bursts meet with a sound like stone cracking underwater, and pressure slams into my chest. I hit the wall harder this time, all the breath punched out of me.

Prithan staggers but stays upright. The other guard does too.

Which is rude and so deeply unfair. If someone's going to dramatically block our escape, the least they can do is fall over when blasted.

Jithusian laughs.

The sound slithers through the alley, too pleased, too bright, and I suddenly hate it more than anything I've ever hated. More than the Queen's calm voice. More than the polished palace floors. More than the way people look away when something terrible happens right in front of them.

"Oh, this is almost better than I imagined," he says.

I twist enough to see him over Prithan's shoulder. He stands several paces away, untouched by the blood on the ground, the fear in the air, the body of the guard he just had killed. Rowgr's body. His robes are immaculate, his markings softly glowing, his smile sharp enough to cut.

"You were so close," he continues. "A few more steps and you might have believed yourselves free. That hope in your eyes, Dawson… exquisite."

The ground seems to tilt beneath me.

Prithan shifts in front of me, blocking more of my body with his. His weapon is drawn now, though I don't remember seeing him pull it out. The blade catches the weak light spilling from the tunnel and turns it silver-blue.

"Run if I tell you," he says, low enough that only I hear.

I stare at the blocked tunnel. “At him?”

“If necessary.”

“That seems like a poor plan.”

“It’s the plan we have.”

Fuck. How I love a strategy with built-in death.

Jithusian sighs as though disappointed by our lack of appreciation. “You should not glare, Prithan. It makes you look common. Then again, loyalty to my brother always did seem to attract those with limited imagination.”

Prithan says nothing.

Good. Because I suspect if he opens his mouth, it will be to say something that gets both of us killed. Unfortunately, I’ve never been as skilled at silence.

“You killed her,” I say.

My voice sounds wrong, small and rough and nothing like me.

Jithusian’s gaze slides to Rowgr, then back to me. “She chose poorly.”

“She chose me.”

The words land harder than I expect, because she did.

She chose me. Maybe not first. Maybe not easily. Maybe not over everything else in the world. But tonight, she walked me down those tunnels. She put herself between me and danger. She died for it.

For me.

Grief rises so fast, I nearly choke on it.

Jithusian’s smile thins. “Yes. That seems to be a disease spreading through the palace. My brother’s human smiles, babbles nonsense, performs tricks with a child’s toy, and suddenly soldiers forget duty. Servants forget fear. Even my sibling forgets neutrality.”

Fithrust.

My pulse jumps.

“Where are they?”

His eyes brighten because of course he hears the worry. “Concerned for another traitor? How sweet.”

Prithan shifts again.

The alley grows tighter somehow, though no one moves. One guard at the far end has his weapon angled towards us. Another circles slowly to the side, boots scraping over damp stone. The third remains at the tunnel mouth, blocking the only escape we had.

Jithusian spreads his hands slightly, enjoying the shape of the moment.

“My brother ruined everything by bringing you here. Do you know that? He could have remained useful if he’d simply taken his pleasure, hidden you away, and returned to his responsibilities. But no. Aelith has always been dramatic. Always convinced his feelings are principles.”

I hear something then.

Not outside.

Inside.

The bond gives a sudden, violent pulse.

Heat.

Fury.

Terror.

Aelith.

My chest seizes.

Jithusian keeps talking because apparently all evil princes are powered by monologues. “The Queen believes she can still use him. I am less sentimental. Once he has served his purpose and returned with the boy, he will be too compromised to rule. Too weak. Too bonded. Too—”

A blast of energy tears through the alley.

It doesn’t come from Prithan.

It comes from above and behind Jithusian, a silver-blue strike so fast, it seems to split the night open. It hits the guard at the alley mouth first, lifting him off his feet and throwing him into the wall hard enough to crack stone. The guard crumples without a sound.

Jithusian spins.

So do I.

Aelith drops from the low roof of the adjoining building like something out of a nightmare. A beautiful, furious nightmare.

For one second, I can’t breathe. He’s here.

He’s actually here.

His clothes are dark and travel-worn, his hair loosened around his face, and there’s blood dried along one side of his jaw that makes my vision pulse red. Silver energy crawls beneath his skin in branching lines, brighter than I’ve ever seen it, illuminating the markings along his throat and arms until he looks less like a prince and more like judgement given shape.

His gaze finds me first. The relief that flashes through him is so intense, I feel it in my bones.

Then he sees Rowgr, and his entire focus shifts. The air around him seems to tighten.

Jithusian takes one step back.

Smart. Not smart enough, obviously, because he's still breathing, but smart.

"Aelith," he says, recovering quickly. "How theatrical."

Aelith doesn't answer.

He moves.

The first strike comes so fast, I barely track it. Jithusian gets his blade up in time, metal ringing against metal, but the impact drives him back several steps. Aelith follows without hesitation, energy flickering along his forearm as he swings again. Jithusian blocks, twists, and sends a burst of energy towards Aelith's ribs.

Aelith takes it.

Takes. It.

He barely flinches. Then he slams his shoulder into his brother and sends him crashing into the alley wall.

Holy shit.

I've never wanted to cheer and vomit at the same time before.

Prithan grabs my arm and pulls me farther from the centre of the fight. "Stay behind me."

"Gladly," I say, because my survival instincts have made a—no doubt brief—return.

Another guard lunges at Prithan, who meets him head-on. Which leaves me standing in the alley with absolutely nothing useful in my hands except my yo-yo.

Brilliant.

Perfect.

What am I supposed to do? Around-the-world someone to death?

I should have learned a weapon. Any weapon. Sword. Dagger. Big stick. Small stick. Aggressive spoon. Instead, I spent my time learning three yo-yo tricks and attempting to move fruit with my mind, which resulted in one fart and absolutely no combat readiness.

A guard breaks away from Prithan and staggers towards me. My entire body locks.

He's wounded, one arm hanging strangely, but he's still enormous and armed, and I'm very much not. I yank the yo-yo from my pocket because

apparently panic chooses comedy, and the guard's eyes flick down to it with genuine confusion.

Same, mate. Same.

Before he reaches me, something purple-black slams into him from the side.

Varek.

I know him instantly even though I've barely spent time with him while conscious. He moves with brutal elegance, all sharp lines and lethal grace, his purple iridescent skin catching the alley light as he drives the guard to the ground. There's no wasted motion in him, no dramatic flourish. One strike. One twist. The guard doesn't get back up.

Varek looks at me. "You alive?"

I blink. "Currently."

"Stay that way."

"Trying."

He turns back into the fight like that settles everything.

A massive roar shakes the alley. It's not Aelith and not Varek. It's bigger.

Red.

Flame-bright.

Solan charges in from the alley mouth, and suddenly, Jithusian's remaining guards look like they've collectively realised they made several very poor career choices. I've seen Solan before, obviously, but seeing him in motion in a confined alley while absolutely furious is an entirely different situation. He's huge, red-skinned, horned, and built like a war god who decided subtlety was for cowards.

One of the guards actually trembles.

I see it.

So does Solan.

His lips peel back from his fangs.

The guard drops his weapon.

Good call. Truly excellent self-preservation.

Aelith and Jithusian clash again, blades scraping as energy snarls between them. Jithusian is skilled. I hate that. He's fast, precise, and cruel in the way he fights, always aiming for injuries that distract rather than end. But Aelith is stronger. Not just physically, though yes, absolutely that.

There’s a sharper edge to him now, as though every moment of fear and pain and restraint has found one clear target.

Jithusian knows it too.

I see the exact moment he realises.

His arrogance cracks.

Aelith drives him back another step, then another, until Jithusian’s heel catches on a loose stone. He recovers, barely, but fear flashes across his face before the mask slams down again.

“You cannot kill me here,” Jithusian says, breathless now. “Not in the street. Not before witnesses.”

Aelith’s voice is low and terrible. “Watch me.”

My knees nearly give out, because that should not be hot.

No. Absolutely not. It’s so very much the wrong time.

Also Rowgr is—

My gaze snags on her body again, and the tiny inappropriate spark of heat dies instantly as grief punches through me.

Prithan is still fighting, but he sees too. I know he does. Every movement he makes has become sharper, more violent, as though each strike is carrying what he can’t stop to mourn.

Jithusian glances around and seems to really *look* for the first time.

His guards are down. One dead. One unconscious. One trembling at Solan’s feet with no weapon. Varek blocks the far side of the alley. Prithan holds the tunnel. Solan fills the mouth like a living wall.

And Aelith stands between him and me.

Jithusian’s made a mistake. He knows it. Hell, everyone knows it. He brought enough guards to stop two palace loyalists and one human. He didn’t bring enough for Varek, and he absolutely didn’t bring enough for Solan.

Slowly, Jithusian lowers his sword.

The motion draws everyone’s attention.

“I submit,” he says.

Aelith doesn’t lower his weapon.

Smart.

The one remaining conscious guard sees his prince surrender and drops to his knees, weapon clattering to the stone.

“I submit,” Jithusian repeats, louder this time. “To the Crown Prince.”

Aelith’s jaw flexes, and I swear the alley holds its breath. For a terrifying second, I think he’s going to kill him anyway. Part of me wants him to, which scares me.

Then Aelith turns from his brother just enough that his gaze finds me. Everything in him changes.

The fury doesn’t disappear. It folds back, held at bay by something bigger, something desperate and terrified and mine.

He crosses the alley in three strides, and then his hands are on my face, my shoulders, my arms, checking me so fast I can barely keep up. “Are you hurt?” he asks. His accent thickens around the words. His hands shake.

“No.” My voice breaks, which is rude because I’m trying to reassure him. “No, I’m okay. I mean, I’m not okay, obviously, because—” My gaze flicks to Rowgr, and the words collapse.

Aelith pulls me into him, hard. I go willingly, crashing against his chest, and the second his arms wrap around me, everything I’ve been holding together splits apart. I clutch at him, fingers digging into fabric and muscle, trying to convince myself he’s real. He’s here. He’s alive. He came.

Of course he came.

His mouth presses against my hair, then my temple, then my forehead. Each kiss is rough, urgent, frantic in a way he rarely lets himself be. I tip my face up, and he kisses me properly then, hard enough to steal the breath I don’t have anyway. It isn’t sweet. It isn’t careful. It is relief and terror and possession and apology all at once.

I kiss him back with everything in me, and for a second, the alley disappears. The blood. The bodies. The danger. All of it blurs beneath the feel of him holding me.

Then a sound cuts through—a yell of warning.

Aelith breaks the kiss and turns, putting me behind him so fast, I stumble.

Jithusian has moved.

Of course he has.

The bastard has snatched a fallen blade from the ground and lunges with all the desperate fury of someone too arrogant to understand when he’s lost. His eyes are fixed on Aelith’s back.

I shout, but the sound tangles with others.

Prithan moves.

Varek moves.

Aelith turns.

And then a voice cuts through the alley. “Stop.”

One word. It’s not shouted. It doesn’t need to be. The entire alley freezes, and Jithusian stops dead.

The point of his blade hovers uselessly in the air, inches from where Aelith had stood a heartbeat before. Jithusian’s face drains of colour beneath the blue of his skin. He looks genuinely afraid.

I peer around Aelith’s shoulder, wide-eyed and breathing too fast.

A Glowranth stands at the mouth of the alley.

He’s older than Aelith, but not diminished by age. Tall. Broad. Still powerful in a way that fills the space around him without effort. His skin is a deep, elegant blue, his horns sweeping back from a face carved in stern lines, and the markings beneath his skin glow with a pattern I recognise.

They’re not identical to Aelith’s but close enough that a sick feeling washes through me.

Royal.

More than royal.

The similarities are there in the shape of his eyes, the line of his jaw, the way he holds himself as if the world will move if he simply waits long enough.

Aelith has gone utterly still. So has Jithusian.

Then Jithusian says one word. Broken. Impossible. “Father.”

Holy shit. The thought hits so hard, I’m genuinely surprised I don’t say it out loud. Actually, maybe I do. It’s hard to tell because the entire alley seems to have stopped breathing.

Jithusian stands frozen with a blade still half raised, his face stripped of every smug, poisonous little expression I’ve come to associate with him. He looks younger, suddenly. Not softer, exactly, because I’m not handing him that much credit, but cracked open in a way I’ve never seen before. His mouth is parted. His eyes are wide. The word he just said hangs in the cold night air between us like a dropped knife.

Father.

Aelith doesn’t move, which is worse somehow.

The father I thought was dead—who everyone thought was dead because Aelith spoke about him like a ghost and a warning and a history lesson all at once—stands at the mouth of the alley with enough presence to make every living thing nearby reconsider its posture. He’s taller than

Jithusian, closer to Aelith's height, with deep blue skin and royal markings that glow beneath his throat and along the backs of his hands. They look similar to Aelith's, but older somehow. More intricate. Sharper at the edges.

Behind him, the alley mouth fills with rebels.

Some species I recognise from Dathanor, and some I absolutely do not. A broad-shouldered Riftborn with stone-grey skin and moss growing along their jaw stands beside a slender creature with four amber eyes and a curved blade in each hand. A human woman I've never seen before carries a compact weapon that looks like someone built a crossbow after having a nightmare about plumbing. Behind them, more figures press in, quiet, tense, ready.

Then there's Solan, who looks like he could eat the alley if it annoyed him.

Varek stands slightly in front of Solan, scanning every rooftop, doorway, and shadow like he's already counted every possible death angle and found most of them insulting.

This was planned.

Not the Rowgr part.

Not Jithusian's ambush.

But the city. The rebels. The King.

This is really happening, and right now, it seems.

The King—shit, is he still the King?—steps forward, and the entire alley shifts with him. Even Varek tracks the movement. Even Solan's posture adjusts. Not in obedience exactly, not the way palace guards move around the Queen, but recognition. Power recognising power. History suddenly walking into the present like it was late to a meeting.

"Lower your weapon, Jithusian," the King says.

His voice is deep and controlled, with the same natural authority Aelith has, only heavier. Older. The kind of voice that has given orders and expected worlds to bend around them.

Jithusian's hand trembles, just once, and then the blade clatters to the ground.

The sound is small. Pathetic, really. I hope Rowgr hears it somehow.

The thought hits like a punch, and my gaze drags back to her body before I can stop it. She's still on the ground where she fell, one arm bent awkwardly beneath her, blood dark against the stone. Prithan is near her

now, caught between duty and devastation, his expression locked into rigid composure that hurts to look at.

He doesn't kneel.

He doesn't touch her.

He stands between her and everyone else, like guarding her body is the last thing he can do.

My chest cracks open all over again.

Aelith's arm tightens around me. I hadn't realised he still had me tucked partly behind him until his hand shifts against my hip, grounding, steadying, silently reminding me that I'm not alone. He turns enough to look down at me, and the fury in his face gives way to such naked relief it almost breaks me completely.

"We must move," Varek says.

His voice slices through the moment cleanly.

Right… of course. Because apparently dramatic dead-king reveals do not pause rebellions.

Jithusian's head jerks towards him. "You dare—"

Solan growls. That's it. That's all he does, and Jithusian shuts up.

Honestly, it's all very relatable.

The King's gaze moves to Jithusian's remaining guard, who's wisely stayed on his knees and looks like he might pass out. "Bind them both."

Two rebels move immediately. Jithusian recovers enough to attempt dignity as his wrists are pulled behind his back, but it doesn't work. Not with his face still pale, his eyes repeatedly flicking back to the King like he expects him to disappear if he looks away too long.

One of the rebels produces a narrow band of dark metal from a pouch at their belt. It looks unremarkable until they snap it around Jithusian's wrists. The metal comes alive with faint blue-white lines that spread across its surface before sinking into his skin like glowing veins.

Jithusian flinches, a whole facial jolt.

The reaction is so unexpected that I blink. "What was that?" I ask.

"Energy restraints," Varek says without looking away from the alley. "The metal disrupts a Glowranth's ability to gather and shape energy."

"You have handcuffs for magic?"

Varek glances at me. "Essentially."

"That seems like information I should have had earlier."

"You weren't being arrested."

“Debatable.”

Jithusian’s jaw tightens as he tests the restraints. Nothing happens. No glow forms beneath his skin. No crackle of energy answers his frustration. He looks genuinely vulnerable.

Good. Let him sit with that for a while.

“You cannot simply return and claim authority,” Jithusian says, voice shaking beneath the arrogance.

The King’s expression doesn’t change. “I’ve never relinquished authority.”

“You were dead.”

“Clearly not.”

I make a small sound. I can’t help it. Aelith glances at me.

“So,” I whisper, because apparently my survival instincts remain deeply flawed, “family reunions here are really intense.”

His mouth doesn’t twitch, which is fair. Timing and all that.

The King hears me anyway.

His gaze shifts to me, and I’m pinned by those bright royal eyes. There are similarities to Aelith there. The luminous silver. The set of the brow. The faint narrowing, like he’s assessing seventeen different things about me before I’ve finished blinking.

I should probably bow or introduce myself. Or not say anything at all. Naturally, I manage, “Hi.”

Aelith makes a pained sound.

The King studies me for a beat longer. Then, to my surprise, his mouth curves faintly. “You are Dawson.”

“Yes. That’s me. Human mate. Very confused right now.”

“So I imagine.”

Since that’s not an explanation, I look at Aelith.

He doesn’t look at all stunned that his father is alive, that his supposedly dead father is standing in an alley beside rebels and Riftborn, while his evil brother gets tied up and Rowgr lies dead on the ground.

“We cannot remain here,” Varek says again, sharper this time. “Jithusian’s absence will be noticed. So will the dead.”

The King nods once. “Secure my son.”

My brain trips over that.

My son.

Which son?

Jithusian, apparently, because two rebels haul him back towards the alley mouth despite his immediate protest. The remaining guard is bound beside him. Jithusian looks furious now that the initial shock is wearing off, but beneath the fury is fear, and that fear seems to grow every time the King looks at him.

Prithan finally crouches beside Rowgr. The movement is slow, like he has to force every joint to obey. I take a step towards him, but Aelith stops me gently.

“Dawson.”

“I can’t just—”

“I know.” His voice is rough. He knows. Of course he does. Rowgr died protecting me.

The thought is a blade I cannot pull free.

A Riftborn female with greenish skin and dark braids steps forward from the rebel group. She kneels beside Rowgr with the kind of careful respect that makes my eyes sting. After a brief examination, she looks up at Prithan. “We’ll secure her body,” she says. “She will not be left here.”

Prithan doesn’t answer. For a second, I think he might refuse to move, but then he stands. His face is utterly blank. “I remain with Dawson.”

My head snaps up. “Prithan—”

“I remain with Dawson,” he repeats, not looking at me.

Aelith studies him for one long moment, then inclines his head. Not prince to guard. Not exactly. This is something deeper. “Thank you.”

Prithan’s throat works. He nods once. That’s all, but it still feels enormous.

The rebel woman signals two others, and they lift Rowgr with astonishing gentleness. I have to look away before I completely lose it, and when I do, my gaze lands on the King again.

The King.

Alive.

Standing with rebels.

Returned from the dead.

I look at Aelith, then back at him, then at Aelith again. “Okay,” I say quietly. “I know we’re in a rush, and I’m not trying to be difficult, but your dead father being alive feels like something we should probably circle back to.”

Aelith’s jaw tightens. “Yes.”

The King steps closer. “There will be explanations.”

I stare at him. He might be royal and impressive and very much not dead, but unfortunately, I have questions and limited self-preservation.

“Will those explanations include why everyone thought you were dead?”

“Yes.”

“And why you’re with the rebels?”

“Yes.”

“And whether you can be trusted?”

Aelith goes still beside me. So does everyone else within earshot.

The King’s gaze sharpens. For one horrible second, I wonder if I’ve just insulted a supposedly dead ruler in front of an entire rebellion and several armed monsters. Which, honestly, is very on brand for me but not ideal.

Aelith says my name quietly. “Dawson.”

“No,” the King says.

Aelith’s attention shifts to him.

The King studies me, and his expression grows thoughtful. Maybe with respect. Maybe with regret. “It is a fair question.”

Well, that’s unexpected. I swallow. “Aelith told me about you.”

“I assumed he would.”

“He said you weren’t exactly cuddly.”

The faintest twitch moves across the King’s mouth. Aelith closes his eyes briefly, which I choose to ignore.

“He was generous,” the King says.

Oh. That shuts me up. For once.

The King’s gaze moves briefly to Aelith, and a shadow crosses his face. Pain, maybe. Or memory. Or the very awkward realisation that your son has spent years thinking you were dead and also kind of terrible.

“I was not a good king,” he says.

The alley goes impossibly quiet. Even Jithusian stops struggling.

“I ruled harshly. I believed strength justified itself. I valued control because I feared what would happen without it. Those were not virtues, whatever my court once told me.”

Aelith says nothing. Neither do I.

The King turns his gaze back to me. “I was taken through a rift many years ago and carried to Earth. I survived because of a human. I lived because of a human. Eventually, I loved because of one.”

My mouth falls open. “You have a human mate?”

“Yes.”

“Huh.” I blink. “Go figure.”

This time, Aelith definitely makes a sound that I choose to ignore.

The King’s expression softens slightly. “She taught me many things I should have learned long before I wore a crown. I will not ask you to trust me just because I say I have changed. I will earn what trust I can, if we survive tonight.”

That is… annoyingly reasonable. I hate when morally questionable royal figures make good points.

“Okay,” I say slowly. “That’s not nothing.”

“No,” the King agrees. “It is not.”

Varek cuts in before anything else can be said. “Sentiment later. Palace now.”

“Yes,” Solan growls. “Move.” He spares a single glance for his mate, Jack, who bobs his head, determination in his gaze, and I wonder for a moment where Jamie is, and Caly, the enigmatic Riftborn who rarely left the kid’s side.

The alley becomes motion.

Rebels fan out in organised silence, moving like they’ve done this a hundred times in dreams and are only now getting to make it real. Aelith keeps me close as we head towards a narrow service entrance at the rear of a building that apparently connects back into the palace grounds through older tunnels. Prithan stays on my other side, too quiet and too rigid, his grief locked somewhere he can’t touch until we’re safe.

If we ever become safe.

The plan, as much as anyone will explain it to me while we move, is to infiltrate quietly. Which seems ambitious given Solan is the size of a small building and glows red in moonlight like violence with horns.

Still, apparently they have support.

Servants who will open doors. Guards who will look away. Officials who have waited years for the right moment.

And now the king is back. That part changes everything.

I see it the first time we slip through a hidden archway and emerge into a service corridor beneath the palace. A pair of guards wait there, hands tight on their weapons. When they see Aelith, they straighten. When they see the King behind him, one of them actually drops to a knee.

The other whispers, “Your Majesty.”

The King doesn’t pause for ceremony. “Rise. Secure the west passage and wait for Drigthon’s signal.”

Both guards obey instantly.

Aelith watches the proceedings while I watch Aelith.

I can feel the shift in him, the complicated tangle of anger, hope, and something like grief. His father’s return isn’t simple. Nothing in this world ever is. But there’s no denying what is happening around us. The moment people see the King, fear changes shape. It doesn’t vanish, not completely, but it gains direction.

The Queen suddenly looks less inevitable.

That matters.

We move through the palace like a rumour becoming a storm. Quiet at first.

A servant opens a gate and presses both hands to her mouth when she recognises the King. A guard at the end of a corridor starts to challenge us, sees Aelith, then sees the King, and silently steps aside. Two rebels peel off to secure a stairwell. Varek murmurs orders too quietly for me to catch. Solan and Jack disappear down a side corridor with three others, and I briefly feel sorry for anyone who decides to be a problem in that direction.

All the while, I keep trying to do something useful. Specifically, I try to use energy.

Because yes, fine, maybe now is not the ideal time to experiment with mysterious bond-related abilities I don’t understand, but when exactly is the ideal time? Later, when everyone is dead? Tomorrow, if there is a tomorrow? During a nice, supervised lesson where Aelith says things like “feel the current” and I get distracted by his mouth?

No. I’m trying now.

I keep flexing my fingers as we walk, focusing on the tug in my chest, the warmth of the bond, the memory of Prithan describing energy like a current. I stare at a loose pebble near the edge of the corridor and try to nudge it.

Nothing.

I try again with a hanging strip of fabric near an alcove.

Still nothing.

Unless making myself slightly dizzy counts.

Aelith glances down at me. “Dawson.”

“What?”

“You are attempting to use energy.”

I blink at him. “No, I’m walking.”

His eyes narrow.

Traitorous bond.

“It is not the time.”

“Respectfully, this feels exactly like the time.”

“You do not know what you are doing.”

“That’s never stopped me before.”

His expression darkens with worry, not anger. “You could harm yourself.”

“I could also help.”

“You already help.”

That lands harder than it should, mostly because he means it, but I refuse to be distracted by emotional sincerity while trying to become useful.

“Lovely,” I whisper. “Very sweet, but I’m still gonna try.”

Aelith exhales slowly, clearly fighting the urge to throw me over his shoulder and carry me somewhere less rebellion-shaped. “After this, I will teach you.”

“You promise?”

“Yes.”

“Properly? Not the boring, complicated bit where I get distracted?”

His mouth tightens. “I know you get distracted.”

“Your lips move when you talk.”

Even now, even here, with a rebellion slipping through palace corridors and his undead father walking behind us, Aelith’s markings flare faintly.

“Focus on staying alive,” he says.

“I’m multitasking.”

“You are not good at multitasking.”

“Deeply rude.”

Prithan, beside me, makes the smallest sound. It might be grief cracking. It might be a laugh. Either way, I take it and hold on.

We climb another staircase, this one emerging into a wing I recognise with a horrible twist of my stomach. The air here smells different. Cleaner. Perfumed. The stone is polished darker, and the crystal lighting has that warm, molten glow I associate with the Queen’s spaces.

Aelith’s entire body hardens, and the King’s expression goes cold.

Varek raises a hand, and the rebels slow.

No one speaks.

We move down the corridor in a tight formation, weapons ready, energy held close enough that the air prickles against my skin. My heartbeat grows louder with every step. I expect guards to burst from alcoves. I expect the Queen's voice to drift out from nowhere. I expect Jithusian to somehow reappear with another smug comment and a death wish.

But the corridor remains empty.

Too empty.

We reach the Queen's quarters.

I recognise them even before Aelith stops.

The doors are enormous, carved with royal markings and threaded with dark crystal. Two braziers burn on either side with pale blue flame, though there are no guards standing beneath them.

No personal guards.

No attendants.

No one.

Aelith's hand tightens around mine, while Varek mutters under his breath.

The King steps forward and places his palm against the door. It opens.

Inside, the Queen's chambers are vast, elegant, and completely still. The air smells faintly of smoke and bitter flowers. Furniture remains in place. Curtains drift near an open balcony. A cup sits untouched on a low table.

But the room is empty.

The Queen is gone.

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CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

THE REALITY OF THE QUEEN BEING MIA SETTLES OVER THE PALACE LIKE A storm that never quite arrives.

For hours, every corridor, chamber, storage room, and forgotten corner of the royal residence is searched. Trusted guards move in organised patrols while rebels fan out alongside them. Servants are questioned. Noble guests are quietly accounted for. Hidden passages are checked, then checked again. More than once, I find myself holding my breath every time a door opens, half expecting her to be standing behind it with that terrible smile on her face.

She never is.

By the time the search has expanded beyond the palace itself and into portions of the surrounding grounds, it becomes impossible to ignore the truth.

The Queen has vanished.

No one knows how.

No one knows when.

No one knows where she's gone.

And somehow, that uncertainty feels worse than knowing.

The palace itself seems caught between two worlds. Fear still lingers in every hallway, woven into years of habit and obedience, but hope has started creeping in alongside it. The King walks openly through corridors where his portrait once hung draped in mourning cloth. Guards who spent years pretending not to see injustice now stand taller. Servants exchange cautious smiles when they think nobody is watching.

The old order isn’t gone yet, but it has cracked. And once something cracks, it rarely fits back together the same way.

Unfortunately, none of that helps locate Fithrust.

The absence nags at both of us.

Aelith tries not to show it, but the bond catches every shift in his emotions. Each time a report comes back without news, disappointment brushes across our connection before he shoves it behind a wall of discipline and responsibility.

I notice anyway. I always notice.

“They’ll turn up,” I tell him for what might be the fourth time.

We’re standing near one of the central courtyards while another group of guards reports in. The courtyard itself is beautiful in that weird palace way where everything looks expensive enough that you feel guilty breathing near it. Pale blue flowers climb carved stone walls, and a fountain threaded with glowing crystal sends water spilling down polished black rock.

Normally, I’d be distracted by it. Today, not so much.

Aelith folds his arms across his chest as another guard shakes his head.

“No sign of them.” The guard bows and moves away.

I watch Aelith stare after him. His jaw tightens.

“You think something happened,” I say, deliberately not phrasing it like a question.

He exhales slowly. “I do not know.”

“That’s not—” I pause when his gaze slides towards me.

For a moment, neither of us says anything. Then he admits quietly, “Yes.”

The honesty hurts. Mostly because I agree.

Fithrust helped us. Saved us, really. Then disappeared.

That doesn’t feel like coincidence.

I step closer and slip my hand into his. The movement is automatic now, neither of us thinking about it anymore. His fingers close around mine. “We’ll find them.”

Aelith studies me. Some of the tension leaves his shoulders. Admittedly not much, but it’s enough to allow him to say, “I hope so.”

It’s not certainty, but it’s the closest he can manage.

As the day wears on, the palace transforms into a place I barely recognise. Orders fly in every direction. Messengers race through corridors.

Guards who once served the Queen are either reassigned, detained, or quietly removed from sensitive positions.

Meanwhile, the King's return continues sending shockwaves through the kingdom.

The first few times I see palace staff realise he's alive are honestly fascinating. One elderly servant nearly drops an entire tray. Another stares so hard, I become genuinely concerned she might forget how blinking works.

The reactions are different every time, but they're all built around the same impossible truth: The dead King has come home.

At some point during the afternoon, I finally spot Kael. I'm honestly not sure how I missed him earlier. Maybe because the past twenty-four hours have consisted primarily of attempted murder, secret tunnels, dead kings turning up alive, and enough emotional trauma to power a small country.

Whatever the reason, I suddenly notice him standing at the centre of a growing cluster of guards. And somehow he's running half the palace.

"Kael!"

His head lifts, a brief smile appearing. It's tiny. Blink and you'll miss it. But it still counts.

"Dawson."

"You're alive."

One silver eyebrow arches. "That is generally the objective."

Fair.

Beside him stands Drigthon, who somehow manages to look both exhausted and terrifying at the same time. The older guard is issuing assignments with calm efficiency while Kael handles patrol routes and security reports.

Together, they look like two people who have decided sleep is optional, which is concerning. Mostly because everyone else appears to have made the same decision.

"How long have you been awake?" I ask.

Kael glances at Drigthon. Drigthon glances at Kael. Neither answers.

"Oh, that's horrifying."

"We have work to do," Kael replies.

"You both look like work is what has it out for you."

Drigthon's mouth twitches.

Nearby, Aelith is already discussing security concerns with his father, but I catch him watching the interaction. The tension that has lived beneath his skin ever since we returned to the palace isn't gone, but something has changed.

He's breathing easier.

The difference is subtle. Small enough most people would miss it. I don't.

The burden isn't entirely his anymore.

His father's here. Kael's here. Drigthon's here, and the rebellion isn't a dream anymore. It's real, and somehow that makes the impossible feel slightly more possible.

Unfortunately, it also makes exhaustion impossible to ignore.

By late afternoon, my body decides it's had enough. The yawn sneaks up on me. One second I'm listening to Varek talking about patrol rotations and supply routes, the next, my jaw practically dislocates itself.

The yawn keeps going.

And going.

And somehow continues.

By the time it finally ends, my eyes are watering, and the room has gone suspiciously quiet.

I lower my hand, and everyone is staring at me. "Right," I say. "In my defence, it's been a big week."

Aelith steps closer. "Dawson."

"No."

His eyes narrow. "You do not know what I was going to say."

"You were going to tell me to sleep."

"I was."

I point triumphantly. "Exactly."

The King folds his arms. "You should sleep."

I stare at him. "Your Majesty, respectfully, I preferred you before you joined Team Sensible."

His mouth twitches, and Aelith looks deeply unimpressed.

Good. Someone should suffer with me.

"I'm fine."

Aelith raises an eyebrow. "Dawson."

"I am."

"You nearly fell asleep standing."

“That was meditation.”

“It was snoring.”

Damn it. That does weaken my argument. Slightly.

Unfortunately, both royals seem to recognise the opening.

“You need rest,” Aelith says.

“*You* need rest,” I fire back.

“We are discussing you.”

“*We* are discussing *us*,” I sass, on a roll now.

The King looks between us. Then, with the confidence of a man who has apparently spent years parenting difficult royal children, says, “Go to bed.”

I glance at Aelith. He glances back at me, but neither of us speaks.

Eventually I sigh dramatically. “Fine.”

Aelith visibly relaxes, but it’s far too soon, as then I grin, saying, “But only if he comes with me.”

His expression freezes, while the King doesn’t even hesitate. “You should.”

Aelith turns towards him. “Father.”

“You have been awake nearly two days.”

Aelith opens his mouth. When the King raises one eyebrow, Aelith closes it again.

I beam.

Glorious. Absolute victory.

By the time we finally leave, the palace has begun settling into a steadier rhythm. Patrols continue. Reports continue. Plans continue. But nobody can function forever on adrenaline.

Not even princes.

Not even kings.

The walk back to Aelith’s quarters feels strangely intimate after everything that’s happened. No guards accompany us this time. No advisors. No nobles.

Just us.

The corridors are quieter now, lit by softly glowing crystal veins running through the walls. Their pale blue light paints silver highlights across Aelith’s skin as we walk.

I keep sneaking glances at him.

He’s beautiful. Ridiculously so. And apparently, despite multiple assassination attempts, political upheaval, and discovering his dead father is alive, my brain remains fully capable of appreciating that fact.

Priorities.

The moment we step inside his quarters and close the door behind us, everything shifts.

The palace remains outside. The kingdom remains outside, and we’re truly alone.

Aelith releases a slow breath, and I watch tension leave his shoulders. His expression softens.

The change hits me harder than expected. “You’re exhausted.”

His gaze slides towards me. “So are you.”

“I know.”

The admission earns a faint smile. “I am glad you know.”

I move closer before I can stop myself. Not because I’m scared. Not because I need reassurance, but because I want him near. Those are different things. At least I think they are. Sometimes.

My hand finds his chest, warm skin beneath dark fabric, and his heart beats steadily beneath my palm.

Still here.

Still alive.

Still mine.

The bond hums softly in response, and Aelith covers my hand with his. “You should wash.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Are you saying I smell?”

“You smell like tunnels.”

“That’s fair.”

His smile grows. Only slightly. For Aelith, that’s practically a public declaration of affection.

We separate long enough to clean up.

The hot water feels incredible. I hadn’t realised how tense my muscles were until it starts easing the stiffness from my shoulders and back. By the time I finish, I feel marginally more human.

Possibly.

The jury is still out.

When I step back into the bedroom wrapped only in a towel, I find Aelith sitting on the edge of the bed. His hair is still damp, and his markings

glow softly beneath clean skin.

And the moment his eyes land on me, they stop and his breath goes shallow.

Interesting. Very interesting.

I grin.

His expression suggests he knows exactly what I'm thinking. "Dawson."

The warning does absolutely nothing. I walk towards him anyway, slowly and oh so deliberately. Because despite everything that has happened, despite the grief and fear and uncertainty still hanging over us, one truth remains: I want him.

Not because of the bond or because we're fated. But because he's Aelith. The stubborn, terrifying, protective prince who crossed a kingdom for me. The man who looks at me like I'm precious. The man who somehow became home.

When I stop directly in front of him, neither of us speaks. The silence doesn't feel awkward. It feels weighted.

His gaze travels slowly up my body before returning to my face, and heat stirs between us. It's gentle, steady, and patient.

When I hook my fingers into the edge of the towel, Aelith's breathing deepens further, and fuck it, I let the towel fall.

For a moment, neither of us moves. His eyes close briefly, then open again, much slower this time, like he's savouring the sight. Like he's choosing me all over again.

Warmth blooms through the bond, and I climb onto the bed beside him and settle close enough that our thighs touch. The contact sends a pleasant shiver through me, becoming more pronounced when Aelith reaches for me first.

He settles his large hand carefully against my jaw, and I lean into the touch. When he brushes his thumb across my cheek, the tenderness of the gesture nearly undoes me.

"Needy." The word comes out rough and affectionate.

I grin, no argument in me. "Very."

"I noticed."

"I've had a stressful week."

A soft huff escapes him, and my chest squeezes. Bloody hell, I love that sound. I love him. The certainty settles quietly and comfortably.

Aelith must see my emotions shift across my face, because his expression changes too. The space between us disappears naturally, effortlessly as he rests his forehead against mine, and we shift so we're pressed against each other.

Our breaths mingle, the bond brightens, and warmth spreads through my chest and spills into his.

Shared.

Connected.

Certain.

When his lips finally brush mine, the kiss begins softly enough to steal every remaining thought from my head. It's slow and tender at first, building gradually through the swipe of tongues and stolen breaths.

I rock against him, earning a strangled moan that I capture with my mouth. Another glide of my bare cock against his towel-covered one has my pulse kicking into overdrive. I pull back to see his eyes. "I'm done waiting," I whisper. "I—"

Whatever argument I'd been preparing about why it's finally time to seal the deal dies the second he claims my mouth again.

Our lips move together as his large hand settles against my lower back and tugs me closer. The shift presses our bodies together and drags my cock harder against his.

Fuck. Finally.

A needy moan escapes me as desire slams through my system. My cock thickens so quickly, my head spins, and suddenly breathing feels optional. I break the kiss with a gasp, saying, "I need you naked."

Aelith looks torn, as though he doesn't want to put even an inch of space between us. I make the decision for him, climbing off his lap and reaching for his towel.

He gets on board quickly.

His gaze never leaves mine as he undresses, and fuck me, he's glorious. Not simply because he's naked, or because he's mine, but because I'm not sure I've ever seen anyone so completely focused on another person.

My fingers twitch with the urge to touch him.

To explore.

To learn every part of him.

"Can I touch you?" I ask, my voice rough with need. "I want to feel you."

And fuck, I really want to climb straight back into his lap.

“Always.” His answer comes out as a rasp. “You can have anything you want from me.”

The sincerity of it hits me square in the chest.

I smile and reach for his hand, squeezing once before tugging him fully onto the bed. He follows without resistance, settling onto his back while I guide him there.

Only then do I notice the tremor running through his fingers.

Carefully, I lift his hand and press kisses across his clawed fingers. They’re curved and unmistakably inhuman, yet I’ve seen enough to know how gentle they can be. These are the same hands that carried me, protected me, and held me together when everything else fell apart.

I trail my lips higher, following one of the intricate silver markings winding up his arm. By the time I reach his chest, Aelith is already trembling beneath me.

A breathy moan escapes him.

“You’re so perfect,” I murmur.

His entire body jolts. Immediately, his hands find me again, holding me close as though he can’t bear the distance. “Dawson…” His voice catches. “I need… I need—”

“I know.” I brush a soft kiss across his lips, letting it linger for a moment before continuing my exploration. Because right now, there’s nowhere else either of us needs to be, and he’s all that matters.

Instinct guides me as I continue exploring him. My hands drift across his chest, broad and solid beneath my palms, each measured breath lifting and lowering the powerful muscles beneath. Warmth radiates from his skin, and every pass of my fingers seems to stir something beneath the surface, a faint current that makes him feel vibrant and impossibly alive.

When I finally reach for him, a visible tremor runs through his body. His cock is thick and full and the colour of twilight blue, the tip already glistening with a pale, faintly luminescent fluid. The differences between us should feel strange, should remind me of just how far from Earth I am, but they don’t. Not when he’s looking at me like this. Not when every reaction tells me he wants me just as desperately as I want him.

I move my hand over him with deliberate care, captivated by every response. His head tips back, exposing the elegant line of his throat as the markings across his chest brighten and pulse. His hands bunch, looking for

something to cling to, and each unsteady breath seems harder won than the last.

“Dawson...” The sound leaves him in a rough exhale. Whatever words he intended to say next disappear beneath another helpless groan.

I take my time learning him, letting my hands and mouth linger wherever they please. The muscles along his abdomen tense and release beneath my tongue, while the glowing patterns woven through his skin seem to answer every brush of my lips. Even the taste of him is uniquely Aelith—warm, comforting, and unmistakably his. It wraps around me like coming home after being away too long. Different from anything I’ve known, yet somehow exactly right.

Aelith finally reaches for me, his fingers settling between the strands of my hair. Not gripping or guiding but touching me like I’m his tether. The muscles of his stomach tighten as I continue downward. I follow the glowing path that disappears beneath his ribs and curves towards his hip, brushing kisses along it as though committing every line to memory. The sound that leaves him is rough and unguarded, vibrating through the room and settling somewhere deep inside me.

His breaths grow increasingly uneven, each one catching as though he’s struggling to draw enough air into his lungs.

“Dawson...” My name falls from his lips in a strained whisper for the second time. Whatever he means to say dissolves once more, swallowed by another helpless sound that seems torn from somewhere deep inside him.

“I’m here,” I murmur.

Leaning forward, I press a kiss to the centre of his chest. Beneath my lips, his heartbeat races hard and fast, matching the frantic rhythm pounding through my own body. The bond stretches between us like an invisible thread, pulling tighter with every shared breath and each touch.

When I shift over him, settling astride his hips, his hands find my waist. The grip isn’t possessive. It’s careful. Almost reverent. Like some part of him still can’t quite believe I’m real.

“Let me ride you,” I whisper.

Aelith nods, his expression open in a way I’ve rarely seen before. Wonder, need, and an emotion dangerously close to devotion flicker across his face as he looks up at me. The faint glow of his arousal catches the light, lending him an almost otherworldly beauty that steals the breath from my lungs.

He’s beautiful.

Not because he’s perfect.

Because he’s Aelith.

And somehow, impossibly, he’s mine.

Aelith stops me with a gentle touch against my thigh. The contact is light, almost hesitant, but it still manages to halt me.

“Can I...?” His voice comes out rough and low. “Can I make sure you are ready?”

The question catches me off-guard because of how he’s asking it. There’s a carefulness to the words, a concern that pulls my attention away from everything else. For a moment, I simply stare at him, my pulse still racing for entirely different reasons.

Then something clicks. “Wait.” I blink. “How do you know I need that?”

Aelith goes very still. His gaze flicks away for the briefest moment before returning to mine, and somehow that tiny reaction tells me everything I need to know. A laugh escapes before I can stop it, warm and surprised. “Oh my god.”

The markings beneath his skin brighten. “Dawson.”

“You asked Kael.”

The tips of his ears darken.

The sight almost undoes me.

Here is Aelith—prince, rebel, future king, professional menace—and at some point during all this chaos, he’d apparently gone to Kael for advice. Not because he was uncertain about himself. Not because he lacked confidence. Because he wanted to make sure I was comfortable.

“You actually asked him,” I say, my voice softening.

His jaw tightens slightly. “Yes.”

“Specifically about me?”

“Yes.”

The answer is immediate, and somehow that makes it worse. Or better. Honestly, I’m not sure anymore. All I know is that my chest feels ridiculously full.

Aelith shifts, looking almost uncomfortable beneath my stare. “I wished to ensure your comfort.”

The sincerity in his voice lands somewhere deep inside me. There’s no embarrassment in the admission now. No attempt to hide it. Just honesty.

Just Aelith caring enough to ask questions he didn’t know the answers to because he wanted to get this right.

Not for himself.

For me.

I reach down and cup his face, brushing my thumb across the warm blue skin of his cheek. “You absolute sweetheart.”

His eyes widen fractionally, and for a moment he looks completely caught off-guard. It’s such a rare expression on him that I feel another wave of affection crash into me.

“I wanted to know what would make this easier for you,” he says quietly.

And that’s it. That’s the final blow.

Between the rebellion, the palace, the danger, and everything else we’ve survived together, this might be the thing that makes me fall a little harder. The fact that he cared enough to ask. The fact that he listened. The fact that, even now, his first instinct is making sure I’m okay.

“Yeah,” I murmur, unable to stop smiling. “You somehow just got even hotter.”

Aelith releases a strangled sound that might be embarrassment and might be frustration.

I grin wider, then lean forward and press a kiss to his mouth, because, yep, honestly, I think I just fell a little bit more in love with him.

Before I can respond, his hand slips between us. When I glance down, I realise he’s already gathered some of the faintly glowing fluid coating him.

Honestly, his cock is the gift that already keeps on giving.

Aelith’s attention remains fixed on me as he works with careful precision, every movement deliberate. Suddenly, I can practically picture the conversation with Kael. The questions. The awkward determination. The absolute refusal to leave until he’d learned everything he needed to know.

The thought makes my chest ache.

Not because it’s funny—okay, it’s a little funny—but because he cared enough to ask.

“Do you need me to help you?” I ask softly.

My breath catches when his fingers shift lower.

Aelith lifts his gaze to mine, and despite the flush darkening his cheeks and the obvious strain in his expression, all his concentration remains

locked on me. There isn’t a trace of uncertainty now. Only determination.

Only care.

Only Aelith doing everything in his power to make sure I’m comfortable.

The intensity of that focus threatens to unravel me.

Every reaction earns his complete attention. Every shift in my breathing as he slides first one finger inside me, then moments later, a second. He registers every movement, every sound, and he adjusts accordingly, patient and thorough, as though nothing matters more than learning exactly what I need.

His own desire clearly isn’t making things easy. The rise and fall of his chest grows increasingly uneven, and his breaths roughen with every passing moment. Even so, he never rushes. Never loses focus.

When he finally finishes and withdraws, I don’t hesitate. Need crashes through me too hard and too fast for patience.

I reach for him, guiding us together as I brace myself. Aelith’s breath catches sharply the moment I begin to lower myself.

Slowly.

Carefully.

Every inch feels significant.

The sensation steals the air from my lungs. It’s intense, overwhelming, and unlike anything I’ve experienced before. Heat floods through me while my body struggles to adjust, and through it all, Aelith never looks away.

His silver eyes are impossibly bright.

Reverent.

Awestruck.

“Dawson….” My name leaves him like a prayer as he tightens his grip on my hips, trembling with the effort of holding himself still.

A shaky laugh escapes me. “So good,” I murmur. My voice sounds as wrecked as I feel. “I feel… Fuck, I feel everything.”

When I finally settle completely, the reaction that tears from both of us is immediate. For one stunned heartbeat, neither of us moves.

I stare down at him.

He stares up at me.

The world narrows to shared breath, racing heartbeats, and the bond humming between us like a living thing.

My mouth falls open, and Aelith’s grip tightens fractionally.

I glance down, half expecting to discover some impossible Glowranth secret that explains how one male can occupy quite so much of my attention all at once.

“Aelith,” I pant, struggling for breath, “your… I didn’t think—” I shake my head, struggling to get on top of my emotions and the desire flaming through my body. “I’ve never felt anything like this before.”

The sound he makes is somewhere between a plea and a groan, low and wrecked enough to send another wave of heat through me.

“I’m serious,” I continue, dropping my forehead briefly to his shoulder. “I’m pretty sure I can feel you in places that don’t even have official names.”

That earns me a breathless huff of amusement.

His hands tighten their hold on me once again, and when I lift my head, his expression is open in a way I’ve never seen before. The careful prince is gone. The calculating leader is gone. There’s only Aelith looking at me as though I’m the most extraordinary thing he’s ever encountered.

“Then stay with me,” he says, the words rough with emotion. “Stay right here.”

My chest squeezes painfully. Bloody hell. How is that somehow hotter?

A laugh escapes me, though it quickly dissolves into a sound far less coherent as I lean forward and bury my face against his neck. The scent of him surrounds me, familiar, comforting, and intoxicating all at once.

We find a rhythm together.

Not rushed.

Not desperate.

Just connected.

Every movement seems to draw us closer to something neither of us can quite put into words. The bond thrums steadily beneath everything else, wrapping around us until I can’t tell where my emotions end and his begin.

His hands move over me as though committing every inch of me to memory. Like he’s afraid that if he doesn’t learn me now, he won’t get a second chance.

As if that could ever happen.

“You’re everything,” Aelith says, the words escaping him on a shaky breath.

The raw honesty nearly undoes me.

The bond surges in response, carrying affection, devotion, relief, and a love so fierce, it steals the air from my lungs. For a moment, I don’t know whether the emotions are mine or his.

Maybe they’re both.

Maybe that’s the point.

I brace myself against him and lose myself in the feeling of being known. Truly known. Not judged. Not measured. Not found wanting.

Just loved.

Completely.

Aelith’s breath grows uneven. His focus narrows until there’s nothing left in his world except us. I recognise the look—the same certainty is building inside me.

“Dawson,” he whispers.

It’s my name and his prayer.

I lower my forehead to his neck and smile. “I’m right here.”

The words seem to break whatever fragile restraint remains.

The bond flares.

Not painfully.

Not overwhelmingly.

Just brilliantly.

Warmth floods through me, followed by a sense of rightness so profound, it feels like coming home after spending my entire life lost.

Pleasure crashes through me in a sudden, unstoppable wave. My release tears through my body, painting his deep blue skin, leaving me trembling as the world tilts around the edges. For a heartbeat, I can’t think, can’t breathe, can’t do anything except feel.

Aelith follows a moment later with a final thrust deep inside me.

A rough, broken sound escapes him, equal parts relief and wonder, as he buries his face against my shoulder. The bond surges between us, bright and fierce, carrying emotions almost too large for words—love, devotion, gratitude, and the quiet certainty that we belong to each other.

For several long seconds, neither of us moves. We simply cling to each other, breathless and shaking, while the connection between us settles into its final shape.

Complete.

For several long moments, the rest of the world simply ceases to matter.

No palace.

No rebellion.

No missing Queen.

No danger waiting beyond these walls.

There’s only Aelith.

Only us.

Eventually, the intensity eases. Neither of us moves very far. Neither of us wants to.

We remain tangled together, breathing hard, my face buried in the crook of his neck while the bond hums quietly beneath our skin. His fingers drift across my back in slow, absent circles, and every now and then, I catch him looking at me as though he’s still making sure I’m real.

Honestly, I’m doing exactly the same thing.

For a long time, neither of us speaks.

The room is warm around us, carrying the lingering scent of sweat, clean skin, and the faint mineral tang that always seems to cling to Aelith. Beyond the thick stone walls of his quarters, an entire kingdom is shifting beneath our feet. Guards are searching for the missing Queen. Rebels are helping to secure the palace. His father has reclaimed a throne everyone believed lost.

In here, though, the world has narrowed to the steady rise and fall of Aelith’s chest beneath my cheek and the strong arm wrapped securely around my shoulders.

At some point, he shifts us both onto our sides. The movement is careful despite his size, as though he’s worried I’ll break if he’s not gentle. I end up tucked against him, one leg tangled with his, his body curved around mine like a shield. The difference between us should feel ridiculous. He’s all broad shoulders, long limbs, and impossible strength. I’m... well, me.

Yet somehow I fit.

Not just physically.

Everywhere.

The realization settles over me with startling clarity.

For the first time in my life, not only since I fell through a rift and landed in this insane world, I don’t feel displaced.

I feel found.

Aelith’s fingers sift slowly through my hair. The motion is absent-minded, soothing. His touch traces the same path repeatedly, and every pass seems to send a ripple of contentment through the bond.

The bond.

I close my eyes and focus on it.

Something has changed.

Before, it had always felt like a connection. A pull. A certainty sitting quietly in the background of everything else. Even when I was unconscious, I'd felt it. Even when I couldn't open my eyes, I'd known him.

Now, though, the bond feels deeper.

Wider.

Like a door that has finally been opened.

"You feel it." Aelith's voice rumbles through his chest beneath my ear.

I tilt my head enough to look at him, finding his silver eyes already on me. "Yeah," I admit quietly. "I was trying to figure out how to describe it."

His brow furrows slightly. "I have been doing the same."

That makes me smile. Of course he has. We're apparently both lying here conducting emotional research.

Very romantic.

Very us.

"It feels..." I search for the right words. "Before, I knew you were there. Now I feel you there."

The moment I say it, understanding flashes across his face. "Yes." The answer comes fast, like he'd been trying to articulate the same thing.

I shift slightly, propping myself up on one elbow. The bond responds instantly, brushing against my awareness with a warmth that wasn't there before. Not emotion, exactly. Presence.

Aelith's presence.

Steady.

Constant.

Comforting.

"What are you feeling right now?" I ask.

His lips twitch. "Curiosity."

I laugh. "Okay, that's creepy."

"You asked."

"Yeah, but I didn't expect such a fast answer. Like, you seriously knew my emotion straight away."

Aelith studies me for a moment before his expression turns thoughtful. "I know when your attention changes."

My amusement fades. "What?"

His hand settles on my waist. “I noticed it while you were speaking. Your focus shifted towards the bond. I felt it.”

The words send a shiver of wonder through me because I know exactly what he means.

A few moments ago, when I’d started thinking about him, about us, I’d felt something stir through the connection. At the time, I’d assumed it was my imagination.

Apparently not.

“Did Kael ever mentioned anything like that?” I ask.

Aelith slowly shakes his head. “No.”

The answer hangs between us.

Neither of us needs to say the next part out loud: This might be different. The possibility settles heavily into the silence.

Maybe it’s because he’s a prince.

Maybe royal bonds work differently.

Maybe generations have passed since anyone completed one and the knowledge has simply been lost.

Or maybe it’s something else entirely.

I think about the life force he poured into me while I lay unconscious. About waking to his voice. About knowing him before I truly knew him.

About understanding a language I should never have been able to speak.

The bond pulses warmly, as though listening.

“Maybe we broke it,” I suggest.

Aelith blinks. “What?”

I grin. “You know. Maybe there was a normal way to do all this and we absolutely ignored it.”

The look he gives me is long-suffering. “Dawson.”

“I’m serious.”

“You nearly died coming into this world.”

“Exactly. Not standard bonding procedure.”

Despite himself, a quiet laugh escapes him. The sound wraps around me like sunlight.

Bloody hell, I love that laugh.

The bond brightens. Not because of me but because of him. Because he knows exactly what that reaction means.

Aelith’s expression softens as he raises his hand to cup my cheek. The warmth of his palm spreads through me, chased almost immediately by a

flood of affection so strong, I briefly forget which one of us it belongs to.

Maybe both.

Maybe that’s the point.

Neither of us speaks after that. Words feel unnecessary.

The bond settles around us like another blanket, humming quietly beneath our skin. Outside, a kingdom waits for us. Tomorrow will bring questions, responsibilities, and probably several new disasters.

For tonight, though, none of that matters.

For tonight, I listen to Aelith’s heartbeat. I feel his fingers moving through my hair. And somewhere between one breath and the next, wrapped in warmth and certainty and the steady presence of my mate, sleep finally begins to pull me under.

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CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I DISCOVER THAT SUCCESSFULLY HELPING overthrow a queen does not, in fact, mean everyone gets a holiday.

Honestly, rude. The rudest thing I've ever heard frankly.

If anything, the palace seems busier than it ever did under her rule. The corridors are packed from sunrise on, though not with the suffocating kind of movement I've grown used to here. Under Queen Serresta, everyone seemed to glide around like they'd been trained not to breathe incorrectly. Today, people hurry. They whisper. They argue in corners with arms full of documents, maps, keys, weapon belts.

There's still fear in the palace. Of course there is. You don't undo years of terror because one terrifying royal woman disappears overnight and her supposedly dead husband returns like the plot twist of the century. But the fear feels different now. Less like a lid pressed over everyone's heads and more like steam escaping from cracks.

Honestly, everything has changed.

Aelith walks beside me, one hand at the small of my back, because apparently we're both pretending he isn't quietly checking that I'm still here every few steps. I let him. I kind of need it too. Since completing the bond, being near him feels like standing in sunlight after being cold for too long. Not that he'd appreciate being described as sunlight, because he's far too growly and dramatic for that, but facts are facts.

The council chamber is on one of the upper levels of the palace, which means we have to climb an unreasonable number of stairs before entering a room clearly designed by people who believed meetings should feel like judgment day. Crystal windows stretch from floor to ceiling, flooding the

space with pale blue light that scatters across the polished floor. A circular stone table dominates the centre. It’s wide enough to seat half a kingdom and intimidating enough that I want to sit on the floor out of spite.

I don’t, which feels like growth.

By the time we arrive, the room is already crowded. The King stands near the table speaking quietly with Kael and Drigthon, while Varek and Shanae study a map spread across one section of the stone surface. Pax sits beside Varek, looking tired and sore but upright, which feels like a win considering everything he’s been through. Sonny is here, too, leaning back in his chair like he’s attending an unusually hostile brunch rather than a meeting that might decide the future of several worlds.

Aelith pulls out a chair for me, and I sit without even making a joke about royal service. Mostly because the bond hums with enough quiet affection that my chest goes stupidly warm.

Then I see her.

Chelsea May.

The King’s human mate.

I know it’s her, despite Aelith’s less than accurate description during our whispered conversations last night.

Honestly, she doesn’t look like the mate of a king. She looks like the kind of woman who’d accidentally adopt six injured animals on the way home from the shops and somehow convince everyone it was a sensible decision.

There’s something instinctively comforting about her. Not because she’s human. Not because she’s smiling.

It’s the way she pays attention.

The adviser speaking to her has her complete focus, like nobody else in the room exists.

When she eventually glances up and catches me watching, her smile arrives so fast and is so warm that I feel it from across the chamber.

Oh.

Oh no.

She’s one of those people.

The nice ones.

The genuinely nice ones.

Those are far more dangerous than assassins because before you know it, they’ve got you drinking tea and discussing your feelings.

“Oh,” I say before I can stop myself. “You’re lovely.”

Aelith makes a sound beside me.

Chelsea laughs. “That’s a very generous assessment.”

“I’m Dawson,” I say, even though she definitely already knows that. “Sorry. I’m usually more normal after breakfast.”

Sonny snorts. “No, you’re not.”

“Rude but accurate.”

Chelsea’s smile widens as she crosses the room. “I’m Chelsea. And for the record, normal is wildly overrated.”

That’s it. I love her.

Not romantically, obviously. I have a giant blue prince for that, and he’s already a full-time emotional project.

But there’s something about Chelsea that settles a part of me I didn’t even realise was restless. She has the kind of energy that makes me want to sit beside her and tell her things. Not because she demands them. Not because she’s prying. Because she feels like she’d listen. Like she’d hold whatever I gave her carefully and never once make me regret it.

The thought catches me off-guard. Because, if I’m being honest, I don’t really know what that’s supposed to feel like.

I’ve never had a mum. Not really.

I’ve had carers. Foster placements. Adults who were decent. Adults who absolutely weren’t. I’ve had people responsible for me, people paid to look after me, people who tolerated me, and even a handful who genuinely cared.

But I’ve never had a mother or had someone look at me and see their kid.

Chelsea laughs at whatever one of the advisers says, and for a moment, I get the ridiculous urge to walk over there and ask if she’s proud of me.

The realisation is so unexpected that I almost choke.

Bloody hell, that’s a terrifying discovery. Because unless I’m very much mistaken, I’ve somehow acquired a mother-in-law.

A human one.

Who is mated to a king.

In another world.

Honestly, when I was a kid, I had much simpler dreams.

Chelsea glances up and catches me staring again. Instead of looking uncomfortable, she smiles warmly. Like she’s happy to see me. Like I

belong here.

The feeling that rushes through my chest is embarrassingly powerful. Then my gaze drifts to King Ithius. Not because I'm trying to compare them. That's impossible. They're completely different people. But because yesterday's conversation comes rushing back.

Aelith's stories. The mistakes King Ithius admitted to. The kingdom he's trying to rebuild. The trust he hasn't quite earned from me yet.

Apparently my face gives away more than I realise, because the King's eyes meet mine across the room, and one corner of his mouth rises. "You still have doubts about me."

Beside me, Aelith stiffens, and I grimace, saying, "Was I being subtle?"

"No."

"Cool. Great."

A surprising flicker of amusement passes through King Ithius's expression.

Chelsea reaches out and squeezes his hand, but it's me she looks at when she speaks. "He knows he has to earn trust," she says gently. "We both do."

The quiet honesty in her voice eases the tension.

Aelith's dad inclines his head once. "Your caution is reasonable, Dawson. If our positions were reversed, I would likely feel the same."

That helps. More than the King's authority. More than his speeches. More than the way half the palace dropped to its knees when they saw him yesterday.

Chelsea helps.

Because when King Ithius looks at her, I recognise the same quiet certainty I see in Aelith. Not the exact same as what Aelith and I have, because their bond feels older, steadier, lived-in in a way ours hasn't had time to become yet. But there's devotion there. A kind of humility, too, like loving her carved something out of him and left room for someone better to grow.

"I'm not trying to be difficult," I say, which earns a tiny sound from Aelith that absolutely means *liar*. I ignore him. "But like I said, Aelith told me you weren't exactly warm and fuzzy before."

King Ithius's mouth tightens. "And as I told you, he was kind to phrase it that gently."

Hearing him respond that way a second time helps. Being humble and having accountability are pretty awesome traits.

The meeting begins not long after that, though calling it a meeting still feels wrong. Meetings have agendas and lamingtons. This is more like trying to rebuild a world while everyone involved is exhausted, traumatised, and armed.

The first reports are practical. Palace gates. Guard rotations. Food stores. Detained loyalists. Missing advisers. The Queen's personal guard, apparently, vanished with her, which is not comforting in the slightest. There are discussions about noble families likely to resist King Ithius's return, officers who supported Serresta's policies too eagerly, and which sections of the city remain unstable.

And of course, Fithrust remains missing.

I listen as best I can. I really do.

Some of it goes over my head because there are names and ranks and historical grievances flying around like angry birds, but I understand the shape of it. Taking the palace was one thing. Holding the kingdom is another. Changing the kingdom is entirely different.

Varek is the one who brings the room to the real point.

He lets several advisers argue themselves in circles about reinstating lawful order before he finally speaks. He doesn't raise his voice. He doesn't need to. The room simply seems to understand that when Varek talks, people should shut up and listen.

"Lawful order is not enough," he says.

The adviser speaking at the time closes his mouth.

Varek stands at the edge of the table with his arms crossed, massive and still and terrifyingly controlled. "Many of the laws were the problem."

Silence settles. It's not comfortable silence either. Instead, it's the kind that makes people shift in their seats.

He continues, "Riftborn are still held in labour camps. There are households in this city with servants who are not free to leave. There are settlements beyond the capital where families hide because discovery means chains, conscription, or execution. The Queen's removal does not free them."

The words land hard.

Riftborn.

Anyone not born of this world.

Humans. Othrynn. Pyronox. Species I’ve met and species I haven’t. People pulled from homes, families, lives, worlds, then treated like property because they landed somewhere powerful people decided they didn’t belong.

I should have thought about that more.

The guilt is uncomfortable because it’s deserved.

I’ve been busy surviving, sure. I’ve had a coma, a mate, a kidnapping, palace imprisonment, and a truly impressive amount of sexual confusion to navigate. But part of me knows there’s more to it than that. On Earth, I could drift through life being cheerful and kind and not think too hard about systems because most of them weren’t built to crush me. White. Male. Human. Aussie passport. Able-bodied enough to make a living teaching people to throw themselves down mountains for fun. I’ve had hard things. Foster care wasn’t exactly a luxury spa. But still, the world gave me room to move in ways it didn’t give others.

Here, I’m Riftborn.

Here, the system could have swallowed me too.

If not for Aelith.

If not for Varek.

If not for people who had already been fighting before I even knew there was a fight.

Aelith’s hand finds mine under the table. He doesn’t look at me, but the bond brushes with quiet understanding. Not pity. Not absolution. Just him feeling the shape of my thoughts and staying with me through them.

I squeeze his hand.

King Ithius leans forward. “You are right.”

Several advisers look surprised.

Varek doesn’t.

King Ithius’s expression remains steady. “I will not pretend this began with Serresta. Many of these policies existed during my rule. Others existed before me. Fear made them palatable. Power made them profitable. Neither excuses them.”

Chelsea watches him with a softness that makes my throat feel a bit tight.

The King continues, “The ownership laws will be abolished. Not revised. Abolished. All persons held under them are to be freed.”

One of the advisers inhales sharply. “Your Majesty, the noble houses will—”

“Resist,” King Ithius finishes. “Yes.”

“They will claim economic collapse.”

“Then their economies were built on cruelty.”

Bloody hell. Maybe I like him a little.

Chelsea’s mouth curves like she knows exactly what I’m thinking.

Varek remains still, but his guard lowers a fraction. It’s not trust—not yet. Varek looks like a bloke who probably requires three signed documents, a blood oath, and a hostage exchange before trust enters the room. But there’s acknowledgment in his gaze.

Good.

That seems good.

The conversation deepens from there. Shanae speaks about safe corridors for hidden communities. Drigthon outlines which guard units can be trusted to enforce emancipation orders without quietly selling people back to their former owners. Kael, in that calm, precise way of his, suggests mixed patrols—palace guards paired with rebel fighters—to prevent old loyalties from becoming new abuses.

Sonny leans forward and adds, “And maybe don’t call them emancipation orders like you’re handing out a favour. They were free people the whole time.”

The room goes very quiet.

Kael looks at him with such soft pride that I nearly grin.

King Ithius nods once. “Agreed.”

Another adviser begins taking notes so quickly, I worry the penlike thing might catch fire.

Then Varek says, “I will not lead your government.”

The statement lands hard enough to halt three separate murmured conversations.

I look at him, then Pax, then back at Varek.

Nobody seems shocked, exactly, but there’s tension in the air. Maybe because everyone knows he could demand power if he wanted it. He has the rebels. He has Dathanor. He has moral authority, which is deeply inconvenient for people who enjoy politics as usual.

Varek’s voice remains low and even. “I did not build a refuge to become another ruler deciding what freedom should look like for people who have

never had it.”

Pax’s hand shifts closer to his on the table. They don’t touch. Not quite. But Varek notices, because of course he does.

“I will help dismantle the system that hunted us,” Varek continues. “I will help find those still trapped by it. I will advise, negotiate, threaten, and fight where necessary. But I will not sit on a throne, and I will not replace one hierarchy with another simply because it would be convenient.”

Sonny mutters, “Hot.”

Kael closes his eyes.

I cough into my hand.

Varek ignores all of us with admirable dignity.

Aelith’s mouth twitches, and the bond warms with amusement. I almost poke him, but this is probably not the time.

“What do you want, then?” King Ithius asks.

Varek’s answer is immediate. “Safety. Representation. The right for every Riftborn to choose their own future.”

That word catches.

Future.

The room seems to hold it for a moment.

Then the King nods. “Then we begin there.”

The discussion that follows is complicated, messy, and surprisingly hopeful. It isn’t all perfect. Of course it isn’t. There are arguments about land, resources, law, compensation, punishment, who gets a voice, who gets a vote, and whether nobles who profited from slavery should be allowed anywhere near the rebuilding process. My personal answer is no and maybe also throw them into a bog, but apparently legal systems require more nuance.

Annoying.

Eventually, the conversation shifts to the rifts, and the atmosphere changes. Like everyone in the room leans closer to the same fire.

Maps are moved. Old notes appear. King Ithius speaks of the rift chamber beneath the palace, of experiments conducted before his disappearance, of theories that were never meant to become policy but somehow did anyway. Varek listens with terrifying focus, asking questions that make several advisers sweat.

“Returning people to their homeworlds must be considered,” Chelsea says. Her voice is gentle, but it cuts through the room.

I look at her.

She smiles sadly. “Not everyone who arrives here finds a mate. Not everyone who does will want to stay. And even those who are loved here might still grieve what they lost.”

That lands.

Hard.

Because she’s right.

Terrafeara gave me Aelith, and I still miss coffee that tastes normal, snow under bright blue sky, and the specific joy of finding a servo sausage roll at the exact moment hunger becomes everyone else’s problem. I miss Earth in little flashes, like remembering a song I used to love.

But I don’t want to leave. I know that before anyone asks. The certainty sits in my chest as steady as the bond itself.

Aelith goes very still beside me, and I turn my head.

“What?”

His guilt touches the bond before he speaks. It’s soft yet heavy.

Yeah, nah… absolutely not a fan of that.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I ask.

Aelith exhales slowly, and the look he gives me is so tender and guilty that my chest tightens before he even says the words. “Jamie returned to Earth.”

For a moment, I simply stare. The words don’t make sense at first. Not because I don’t understand them, but because my brain refuses to process them in the order they arrived.

Jamie.

Returned.

Earth.

Around the table, the conversation fades. Someone sets down a cup. A chair creaks. I barely register any of it.

“He’s home?” I ask.

Aelith nods once. “Several days ago.”

Relief hits so hard, it almost hurts.

Jamie is safe.

Not hidden. Not hunted. Not being dragged into the Queen’s obsession. Not a boy trapped in a brutal world because adults with power decided he could be useful someday.

Home.

Thank Christ, the kid is actually home.

My gaze flicks around the table, finally landing on Jack.

He's gone very still. There's a softness in his expression I've never seen before, his eyes suspiciously bright as he stares at the tabletop.

Solan's massive hand settles over his. The gesture is simple. Quiet.

Jack turns his hand beneath Solan's, lacing their fingers together. A small smile appears on his face. It's sad, relieved… proud. The kind of smile that only exists when missing someone and loving them happen at the exact same time.

For a moment, nobody says anything.

Nobody needs to. Because I think we're all imagining the same thing.

Jamie.

Alive.

Safe.

Home.

And maybe, getting the chance to simply be a kid.

Then another thought occurs to me. Not about Jamie but about the person who spent most of his time making sure Jamie survived.

I glance around the table. "Caly?" The word escapes before I can stop it.

A strange, sad heaviness settles across the room. The kind of sadness that arrives when everyone already knows the answer.

I frown. "Caly didn't go with him?" Which, I suppose, of course he didn't. I don't know what species Caly is, but he's definitely not human.

Jack's expression softens. "No."

There's an unpleasant twist in my chest. I didn't know either of them particularly well. Not really. Not compared to Jack and Solan. Not compared to Sonny or Kael and Varek. But I'd watched them, heard stories about them.

Jamie followed Caly around like a shadow half the time. And Caly... Caly always seemed to know where Jamie was.

Always.

Whether that was checking he had food, making sure he wasn't wandering somewhere dangerous, or quietly stepping between him and whatever new disaster Terrafeara had decided to throw at him that day.

The kid had looked at him like he hung the bloody moon.

"Oh."

The room remains quiet. Across the table, Varek lowers his gaze briefly. Pax reaches for his hand. And suddenly I understand that this isn't fresh news.

Everyone here has already had time to sit with it. To worry about it. To miss him.

"What happened?" I ask quietly.

"Jamie was sent home," Aelith says. "The opportunity was unexpected. There was little time."

I swallow. "So Caly stayed."

Aelith nods. The bond carries a flicker of what suspiciously feels like regret. For Caly. For Jamie. For all of it.

My gaze drifts towards the windows, towards another world entirely. A world where a teenager is probably trying to explain to people how he disappeared into a land full of monsters and somehow came back alive—and that's if he can actually tell anyone the truth.

And all without the person who'd protected him every step of the way.

"That sucks."

The words are inadequate—terribly inadequate—but they're honest.

Chelsea smiles sadly. "Sometimes doing the right thing hurts."

I huff out a breath. "Yeah, well, I don't like it."

That earns the smallest smile from Sonny. "None of us do."

The sadness lingers for another moment before Aelith's hand tightens around mine beneath the table. It doesn't fully pull me away from the thought, but it reminds me that separation isn't the whole story.

Because Jamie is safe and Caly is alive. And if there's one thing I've learned since arriving in Terrafeara, it's that impossible journeys have a habit of bringing people back together.

Eventually.

But this life has had a lot going on.

I lean across and kiss him—right here in the middle of the council chamber. In front of the King, the rebel commander, multiple advisers, and probably at least one person who will write it down in some official record as "human interrupts policy discussion with public affection."

When I pull back, Aelith looks stunned.

Good. He should.

"I'm happy. I'm so bloody happy he's safe." My voice wobbles at the end, which is inconvenient, but true. "And if you're sitting there feeling

guilty because you didn’t tell me while we were busy surviving the most emotionally chaotic week in history, please stop.”

A flicker of tenderness passes through the bond. “You deserved to know,” he says.

“Yeah, probably.” I squeeze his hand. “But I know now. And Jamie is home. That matters more.”

Chelsea makes a quiet, emotional sound across the table. Sonny wipes at his eye and then pretends he didn’t.

I look back at Aelith. “And in case this is also part of the guilt spiral, I don’t want to go back.”

The room stills again.

Aelith’s expression changes. It does so carefully and slowly, as if he’s afraid to hope too quickly. “You don’t?”

“No.” I smile, and this one feels gentler than my usual grin. “My mate is here.”

The bond lights up so brightly, I almost lose my breath. From love, relief, disbelief… and hope so fragile it makes me want to climb into his lap and hug him until politics goes away.

I do not climb into his lap.

Again: growth.

“I mean,” I add, because I am still me, “I’d love to visit Earth if that ever becomes an option. Snowboarding honeymoon, maybe. You’d be terrible at it at first, but extremely hot.”

Aelith stares at me, while Sonny bursts out laughing, and Kael looks like he’s trying not to.

Chelsea points at me. “I want to see that.”

Across the table, King Ithius winces. “I attempted snowboarding once.”

The room goes quiet, while Chelsea starts laughing. “Just once? Why is that?” she asks not so innocently.

“There was no need for a second attempt.”

“You spent three days complaining.”

“I bruised parts of my anatomy that should never be bruised.”

Chelsea’s smile turns positively wicked. “He couldn’t sit properly for nearly a week.”

The King sighs with the long-suffering dignity of a male who knows he’s lost this battle before it began. “The mountain was clearly defective.”

I choke on a laugh. “Your Majesty, I regret to inform you that’s not how mountains work.”

“I disagree.”

“You disagree with gravity?”

“Vehemently.”

The room feels lighter. Not fixed or healed but simply, wonderfully lighter.

The planning resumes with a different kind of energy after that. The idea of choice settles into everything. Freedom to stay. Freedom to leave. Freedom to return, if the rifts can ever be understood well enough to make that possible without tearing holes through worlds or dropping innocent snowboard instructors into monster-infested terrain.

Varek insists that any rift research must be shared between the palace and Dathanor, not kept under royal control. King Ithius agrees. Aelith proposes that Riftborn representatives be appointed immediately to oversee investigations, refugee relocation, and the dismantling of ownership laws. Shanae points out that representation appointed by a king isn’t the same as representation chosen by communities, and instead of getting defensive, King Ithius listens.

Actually listens.

That matters.

I watch him more than I probably should.

I still don’t fully trust him. Not completely. But I trust Chelsea, and I trust the way he looks at her. More than that, I trust the way he lets people challenge him. The Ithius Aelith described would not have sat in this room while a human woman, a rebel commander, and his own son dismantled royal authority piece by piece.

This Ithius does.

Maybe change is possible.

Maybe people can become better.

Maybe kingdoms can too.

The thought is dangerous.

Hope usually is.

We’re deep in a discussion about locating hidden Riftborn communities when the chamber doors open, just fast enough that every trained fighter in the room turns.

Prithan steps inside, and my chest tightens.

He looks awful.

Not injured awful. Not obviously. But he carries grief like armour today, and seeing him without Rowgr at his side still hurts in a way I'm not ready to look at directly. His eyes move over the room, land on Aelith, then King Ithius.

"We found her," he says.

The room goes utterly still.

No one asks who.

No one needs to.

Aelith rises slowly beside me, his hand still locked around mine. "Where?"

Prithan's jaw tightens. "The rift laboratory."

The effect is immediate.

King Ithius goes pale. Chelsea grips the edge of the table. Varek's silver gaze turns glacial, cold enough to cut steel.

The rift laboratory.

The place beneath the palace. The place King Ithius and whoever helped him once used to study rifts. Create them, maybe. Stabilise them. Tear holes between worlds and call it research until people started falling through.

"What is she doing there?" I ask, though I'm not sure I want the answer.

Prithan's expression doesn't change, but something in his eyes does. "Energy signatures are building."

The words mean very little to me, but the reactions tell me everything.

King Ithius steps away from the table. "No."

Chelsea whispers his name, but he doesn't seem to hear.

Kael is already moving towards the door. Varek begins issuing orders in that calm, spare voice that makes panic feel briefly embarrassed for existing. Shanae gathers the maps. Drigthon barks instructions to a guard near the entrance.

Aelith turns to me, and the bond surges with fear and urgency and then understanding.

"She's trying to open one," I say.

Nobody answers quickly enough, and dread settles heavily in my chest.

"Is she trying to leave?" Sonny asks.

King Ithius's expression hardens. "Perhaps."

"Or pull someone through," Varek says.

The room cools around those words, and for one horrible second, nobody speaks. Then the same thought arrives in all of us.

Jamie.

The boy the Queen believes might one day be her bonded. The boy who has finally, impossibly, made it home.

Aelith’s grip tightens around mine, telling me he feels the same terror crashing through me. Because somewhere beneath the palace, Queen Serresta has found the one place she should never have been allowed to reach. And if she knows even half of what King Ithius once knew, she might not just be trying to escape.

She might be trying to bring Jamie back.

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CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

By the time we reach the lower levels of the palace, the air has changed.

Not just because we're underground, though that's definitely part of it. The corridors beneath the palace don't have the same polished arrogance as the upper floors. There are no sweeping windows, no glittering crystal arches, no ridiculous fountains that look like they were designed to make people feel poor. Down here, the stone presses closer. The walls sweat faintly with damp, and the glow running through the crystal veins is thin and uneven, flickering in a way that makes shadows twitch where they absolutely should not be twitching.

It smells old.

Old stone. Old metal. Old secrets.

And, increasingly, like a storm.

Which is impossible considering we're under a palace, but Terrafeara has never once cared about what I think is reasonable.

Aelith walks at my side, one hand locked around mine with enough control that I know he's actively fighting the urge to put me behind him. Or over his shoulder. Or possibly in a locked cupboard somewhere with snacks and a note reading: *Stay here, beloved idiot.*

I would object to the cupboard on principle.

The snacks would help.

"You should not be here," he says, not for the first time.

"And yet," I reply, not for the first time, "here I am."

His jaw tightens, and the bond gives me the emotional equivalent of a very dramatic sigh. "This is dangerous."

“Mate, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but that has been the overall theme since I arrived.”

Kael moves a few steps ahead of us, silent and focused, scanning every doorway and turn before we reach it. Behind him, Varek walks with the kind of controlled stillness that makes everyone else seem noisy by comparison. Solan is a massive red shadow beside Jack, while Sonny stays close to Kael, unusually quiet but not letting go of his usual watchfulness. Shanae and Drigthon flank the rear with several trusted guards and rebels whose names I still don’t know, though I’m trying very hard not to feel bad about that because there are only so many life-or-death introductions a person can absorb within a couple of months.

The King walks behind us with Chelsea at his side.

That still feels surreal.

Not only because he was supposed to be dead, but because after seeing him in the council chamber, listening to him speak about dismantling the very systems he helped build, I can no longer shove him neatly into a box labelled Scary Royal Father-in-Law. He’s still scary. Very much so. But Chelsea’s hand remains tucked into his, and every now and then, he glances at her like she’s the only real thing in the room.

That kind of look is hard to fake.

Trust, however, is apparently not a light switch. Mine is more like one of those dodgy lamps in a cheap hostel where you have to jiggle the cord and hope it doesn’t electrocute you.

We move quickly, but not loudly. The rebels have clearly done this sort of thing before. The trusted guards too. Even the ones who look terrified don’t stumble or whisper or keep glancing over their shoulders like I want to. I’m the only one breathing like I’ve jogged up a ski slope at altitude, which is frankly embarrassing because I used to have amazing cardio.

Being kidnapped, unconscious, imprisoned, nearly executed, and emotionally rearranged by a giant blue prince has apparently not been ideal for my fitness routine.

Rude.

The rumble comes again. Low and deep. While it’s not loud, exactly, I feel it more than hear it.

The stone beneath my boots shivers, and everyone stops.

Aelith’s hand tightens around mine. The bond flashes with a fear so sharp, it tastes metallic in the back of my throat. Kael turns towards the

wall, head angled slightly as though listening to noises I can’t hear. Varek’s silver eyes narrow.

Chelsea’s face loses colour.

“Is that the rift?” I ask quietly.

Nobody answers fast enough.

Fantastic. Love it when silence becomes an answer.

King Ithius steps past us, placing one palm against the stone. The crystals beneath his hand pulse erratically, blue-white light fluttering beneath his skin and through the wall in response. For a moment, he looks less like a returned king and more like a man confronting a mistake he’d buried and prayed would stay dead.

“It has begun,” he says.

Aelith swears in Glowranthian.

I understand every word now.

All of them.

Even the extremely creative one involving a diseased swamp creature and someone’s grandmother.

Sonny’s eyebrows lift. “That sounded filthy.”

“It was,” I say faintly.

Aelith looks at me.

“What? Not the time?”

“No.”

“Fair.”

The attempt at levity lands about as well as a snowball in a volcano. No one laughs, though Jack’s mouth does twitch for half a second before Solan pulls him closer with a massive hand at his back. I think about Jamie then, out of nowhere and everywhere. Jamie on Earth. Jamie safe. Jamie maybe eating toast or crying or trying to explain the impossible to people who won’t believe him.

Jamie without Caly.

The thought sits heavy as we start moving again.

The corridors twist deeper beneath the palace, and the further we descend, the more the air hums. It presses against my skin and teeth, prickling over my arms as if the world itself has gone staticky. The crystal veins in the walls no longer glow steadily. They flare and dim in irregular bursts, throwing our shadows long, then swallowing them again. Somewhere ahead, wind howls.

Actual wind.

Underground.

Because apparently when reality gets punched open, it doesn’t care about building codes.

We reach a broad passage lined with old doors, all of them sealed except the one at the far end. That door stands open. Beyond it, light flickers in violent, impossible colours. Blue. Silver. White. A green so bright, it makes my eyes water. The rumble comes again, stronger this time, and dust sifts from the ceiling.

Kael lifts a hand, halting us.

Aelith tries to shift me behind him, but screw that. He gives me a look, and I give him one right back.

The bond fills with exasperation, terror, and the kind of fierce love that makes my heart hurt. He wants me safe. I know that. I feel it like warmth under my ribs. But safe is complicated when the Queen might be trying to drag a child back through worlds, and I refuse to hide while everyone else risks themselves.

Aelith leans close enough that his breath brushes my ear. “If I tell you to run, you run.”

“If you tell me to run, I’ll consider the wider circumstances and possibly make poor decisions.”

“Dawson.”

“I love you too.”

His eyes flare. Even here, even now, those words hit him.

Good. They hit me too.

Kael glances back, clearly torn between fear, annoyance, and the deeply unfortunate knowledge that he can’t physically stuff me into a cupboard either.

Varek steps forward, voice low. “We enter together. No uncontrolled energy unless necessary.”

“Why?” I whisper.

His gaze cuts to mine. “Because if the rift is unstable, adding force may widen it.”

Ah, right-o. So no blasting the Queen into next week. That seems deeply inconvenient.

Aelith’s father adds, “The chamber will be drawing energy from anything it can use. The old system was designed to gather, focus, and

stabilise. If Serresta has forced it open without proper calibration, any direct attack could feed it."

I stare at him. "Your old science project is rude."

His mouth tightens.

"Accurate," Chelsea says softly.

The King's expression flickers, and I suddenly remember that he started this. Not this moment exactly. Not Serresta's madness. But the chamber. The research. The belief that rifts could be understood, shaped, perhaps controlled. His guilt moves across his face before he can hide it.

Kael moves first, and Aelith follows. Then, because I'm either brave, stupid, bonded, or some very inconvenient combination of all three, I go with him.

The rift laboratory is nothing like I expected.

I don't know what I expected, really. Glowing tubes? Evil machinery? A giant lever labelled Definitely Do Not Pull? Instead, the chamber is enormous and circular, carved into the bedrock beneath the palace with tiers descending towards a central platform. Ancient metal rings hang suspended in the air around the centre, some rotating slowly, others shuddering as though caught between commands. Crystal pylons rise from the floor, each one threaded with pulsing light, and every pulse seems to drag more wind into the room.

At the heart of it all is the rift.

Not open fully.

Not yet.

It hangs like a wound in the air, a vertical tear of shifting light and shadow. The edges ripple, curling inward and outward as though the space itself is breathing. Through it, I glimpse flashes moving too quickly to understand. A blue sky. A road. Darkness. Trees. Rain on glass. Nothing stable. Nothing safe.

My heart sinks. I know that feeling. Not because I consciously remember the rift that brought me clearly, as I don't. But my body does.

It remembers the terror of falling through nowhere. The feeling of being ripped away from one world and spat into another like reality had sneezed.

Beside the central platform stands Queen Serresta.

She looks nothing like the composed, razor-edged woman who sat on her throne as if cruelty were a crown. Her hair is loose, strands whipping around her face in the rift-born wind. Her dark blue silk robe is torn at one

sleeve and dragging against the floor. The bright markings beneath her skin flash erratically, too bright, then too dim, as if her body can't decide whether to blaze or burn out.

One hand grips a medallion. The other holds a blade to Fithrust's throat.

Every person in our group goes still.

Fithrust kneels in front of her, wrists bound with energy restraints that glow darkly against their blue skin. Their face is pale but composed, which seems wildly unfair because if someone held a knife to my throat in front of a reality hole, I'd be considerably less dignified about it. Their eyes flick to Aelith, then to me, and even now, even like this, they manage the tiniest warning.

Behave.

Unbelievable.

I nearly laugh and choke at the same time.

Aelith makes a sound beside me that is barely more than breath, but I feel the horror behind it. His sibling. The one who helped us. The one who saved me from Jithusian. The one he had only just begun to trust.

Serresta smiles when she sees us. It's not a sane smile. "There you are."

The wind twists around the chamber, sending loose papers and fragments of old parchment skittering across the floor. The rift pulses behind her, lighting her from the back in shifting, unearthly colours. For one second, she looks magnificent and monstrous and utterly lost.

"Mother," Aelith says.

His voice is steady. The bond is not.

"I am not your bargaining piece," she snaps, though no one has said anything close. "I am not some relic to be locked away while lesser minds dismantle my kingdom."

King Ithius steps into the chamber behind us.

The moment she sees him, everything falters.

The rift flickers.

The medallion in her hand dips a fraction.

The blade at Fithrust's throat shifts, and Aelith's whole body coils beside me. Kael's markings flare. Varek moves half a step, then stops when Serresta's hand tightens again.

Serresta stares at the King. Really stares.

For a heartbeat, the mania cracks, and the mask slips.

Grief.

Rage.

Love, maybe, twisted beyond recognition by time and fear and power.

“You,” she whispers.

King Ithius’s face tightens. “Serresta.”

She laughs, and the sound is awful. It’s not even because it’s loud. Rather, it breaks in the middle. “Do not say my name as though you mourn me.”

“I mourn what became of us.”

“What became of us?” Her cruel eyes flare. “You vanished. You left me with a kingdom circling like carrion birds, with advisers whispering, nobles testing borders, rifts opening like wounds across the world. I held it together.”

“You enslaved people.”

“I protected what was mine.”

“You destroyed what was ours.”

For a moment, neither of them speaks.

The chamber trembles again.

Fithrust’s eyes close briefly as the blade presses closer to their skin, and Aelith takes a step.

Serresta’s head snaps towards him. “Do not.”

He stops.

Every muscle in him fights the order. I feel it through the bond, his need to act, to kill, to save. I hold his hand harder, not to restrain him, because that would be laughable, but to remind him he’s not alone inside the urge.

Serresta’s gaze sweeps across us then, landing on me with bright, feverish interest. “And you,” she says.

My mouth goes dry. I lift my free hand in the world’s weakest little wave before I can stop myself. “Hi.”

Aelith makes a strangled sound.

Serresta laughs again, but this time there’s no humour in it. “The human who ruined my son.”

“He improved me,” Aelith says.

Oh. My heart does something ridiculous and inconvenient.

Serresta’s expression twists. “You think this is love. You think this bond makes you stronger because your body sings when he touches you and your mind softens when he smiles.”

I don’t appreciate how accurate the first half of that is.

“But you know nothing of strength,” she continues. “The rifts choose. They always have. They bring power to those willing to claim it. King Ithius was too weak to understand that. He saw doorways and wasted himself on study. I see destiny.”

Varek’s voice cuts through the wind. “You see ownership.”

Her attention snaps to him. Hatred sharpens her face. “You.”

Varek doesn’t move. “Yes.”

“You built a den of thieves and animals from the scraps that fell through.”

“I built a home for people you hunted.”

“People?” She spits the word as though it tastes foul—she truly is a malignant tumour. “Riftborn are opportunity. Every one carries the possibility of something greater. Bonds amplify power. Cross-world mates change bloodlines, abilities, rule itself. A child pulled young through the rift, raised between worlds, shaped by survival and connection?” Her smile returns, trembling at the edges. “Can you imagine what he might become?”

Jack goes utterly still, while Solan’s growl rolls across the chamber, low and deadly.

Jamie. She means Jamie. She’s such a fucking psycho.

“He is a boy,” Jack says, voice quiet but shaking.

Serresta’s gaze flicks to him. “For now.”

Solan moves, but Varek catches his arm. The restraint isn’t gentle, but it works. Barely.

Serresta laughs as though delighted by this proof of her own importance. “You see? Even now you protect the vessel. Even now you understand his value.”

“He is not a vessel,” Jack says. His voice is still quiet, but the room hears him. Every word. “He’s my nephew.”

The rift pulses violently, and the medallion in Serresta’s hand burns brighter.

King Ithius steps forward. “Serresta, stop this. The system is unstable.”

“Of course it is unstable. You left it incomplete.”

“I left because it took me.”

“You left because you were weak.”

Chelsea moves beside him, and Serresta’s eyes land on her. I swear the chamber goes colder. Serresta looks at Chelsea the way someone might look at a stolen crown.

Serresta’s face contorts, and I suspect she’s working out who this woman is. Her proximity to the King is a dead giveaway.

For one second, I think Serresta will kill Fithrust right there. Aelith feels it too. The bond spikes so hard, I almost stumble.

Then movement happens near the back of the chamber. It’s small and subtle.

A Glowranth guard I barely noticed shifts position near one of the crystal pylons. He’s been standing there this whole time, I realise, half hidden behind flickering light and the edge of a metal ring. One of Serresta’s personal guard, I assume. Or I did assume, until his shape ripples.

At first I think the rift light is messing with my eyes. Then the guard’s blue skin changes.

Not fades. Changes.

His shoulders narrow. His height shifts. The lines of his face melt and reform with horrifying, fascinating smoothness. Blue becomes some other hue, harder to name, like his skin is learning a new story. The uniform hangs differently. The eyes are no longer Glowranth.

I hear Jack inhale sharply. “Caly.”

My head snaps towards him.

Holy fuck. It’s Caly? I’ve seen him before, chatted to him, but never seen him like this. Not changing. Not… becoming. He moves so fast, the Queen barely turns before he reaches her.

Everything happens in less than a breath.

He strikes her wrist with his bare hand, and the medallion flies free.

Fithrust twists away from the blade, dropping low with the kind of move that suggests they are much less helpless than the kneeling hostage situation implied. Aelith surges forward, but Caly is already there, catching the medallion as it spins through the rift-lit air.

For one suspended second, nobody seems to understand what we’re seeing.

Caly stands between Serresta and the rift, medallion clutched in his hand, his chest rising and falling hard. The rift behind him shudders, its edges beginning to curl inward now that the medallion is no longer feeding the same stream of power.

It’s closing.

Caly looks at Jack, then at Solan. There’s apology in his face. And hope. Then he looks at the rift.

“No,” Jack breathes.

Caly smiles. It’s one that breaks before it fully forms. “He’s alone,” Caly says. Then he jumps.

No hesitation.

No dramatic speech.

No waiting for permission.

One moment he’s there, framed in impossible light. The next, he is gone.

The rift swallows him.

The medallion goes with him, clenched in his fist, and the tear snaps smaller so violently, the whole chamber convulses. I hit Aelith’s side as the floor bucks beneath us. His arm locks around me, hauling me against him while crystal pylons shriek with overdrawn energy. The wind becomes a roar, then a howl, then a gasp.

The rift closes, and silence drops so hard, it hurts.

For several seconds, no one moves. No one speaks.

Caly is gone.

To Earth.

To Jamie.

Maybe.

Hopefully.

Dear god, hopefully.

Jack makes a sound that isn’t quite a sob. Solan catches him fully this time, pulling him against his massive chest while Jack clutches at him like the world has shifted under his feet. Maybe it has. Maybe it does every time someone you love disappears through a hole in reality.

Serresta screams. The sound rips through the chamber, furious and raw enough to jolt everyone from shock. “You took it!” She lunges towards the place where the rift had been, hands clawing at empty air. “You stupid little beast, you took it!”

Fithrust pushes themself up to their feet near Aelith, one hand pressed to their throat where the blade left a thin line of blood. Aelith reaches them first, gripping their shoulders, then quickly checking them over, fear and relief crashing through him so strongly, I feel both.

“You are hurt,” he says.

Fithrust blinks at him, startled by the concern. “It is shallow.”

“You should not have been taken.”

They give him a faint, shaky smile. “I shall try not to let it happen again.”

Aelith looks like he might either hug them or yell. After a heart beat, he pulls them close, and Fithrust goes stiff with surprise before slowly leaning into him.

The sight squeezes painfully at my chest.

Because this, right here, is what the Queen never understood. Bonds are power, yes, but not because they can be harvested. Love is power because it makes people reach. Makes them choose. Makes them protect even when protection costs everything.

Serresta turns, her eyes landing on Fithrust. The fury in her face changes shape. Not to grief, or regret, but blame. “You,” she hisses. “You helped them.”

Fithrust lifts their chin, though their hands are shaking. “I did.”

Aelith steps in front of them. Kael moves, too, and so does King Ithius.

But Serresta is faster than any of us expect. Energy flares around her hands, wild and unstable, drawn from the failing machinery, from the storm still trapped in the chamber, from whatever fractured source she has been using to force the rift open. The crystals answer her with a high, terrible whine.

I feel the charge of it in my bones.

She’s aiming at Fithrust. At her own child.

Aelith surges forward, but he won’t make it.

Kael raises his hand.

Too late.

King Ithius shouts her name.

Too late.

Varek moves.

One second he stands several paces away, still as carved stone. The next he’s there, between Serresta and Fithrust, a dark purple blur of lethal purpose. His blade flashes once in the chamber’s broken light.

Serresta goes still. The energy in her hands dies, and her eyes widen, not in fear exactly, but in disbelief. As if, right up until that moment, she never truly considered that someone might end her.

Varek catches her before she falls, lowering her to the stone with a grimness that’s almost respectful and utterly final. There’s no cruelty in it. No satisfaction. Only necessity.

The Queen dies in the room she tried to use to break the worlds open.

For a long moment, nobody breathes.

I stare at Varek, then at Serresta, then at Varek again.

I think of Pax, broken and bruised because of her. I think of Dawson from days ago—me, I guess—kneeling on polished stone while she threatened to measure how much pain a human body could take. I think of Jamie, a kid she wanted to drag back and groom into power. I think of every Riftborn hunted, owned, used, and discarded beneath laws she protected.

If anyone had the right, maybe it was Varek.

Not because he's cruel, but because he's carried the cost of her cruelty longer than most.

Pax appears beside him without a word.

He doesn't touch him straight away, but his presence is enough. Varek's shoulders drop a fraction. His face remains controlled, yet the silence around him feels different now, ringing not with victory. Not peace.

Ending.

Aelith isn't looking at his mother, which surprises me at first. Then it doesn't.

He's still holding Fithrust, one hand at the back of their head, his forehead nearly pressed to theirs. Fithrust clutches at his arm with a kind of shocked desperation that makes them look younger than I've ever seen them.

"You came for me," they say softly.

Aelith's expression twists. "Of course I did."

"I was not certain."

Pain flickers across Aelith's face. I feel old pain through the bond, chased by new regret. "I am sorry," he says.

Fithrust stares at him, and maybe those are the words they needed more than any rescue. Maybe all of them have spent too long not hearing the things that should have been obvious. The King approaches slowly, as though he knows he has no right to force himself into this moment. Fithrust sees him and stiffens again.

King Ithius stops several feet away. "I failed you," he says.

Fithrust's mouth trembles once before they contain it. "You were gone."

"I failed before I was taken."

The honesty lands heavily. Even Aelith looks at him then.

Fithrust’s expression crumples for a second, just a second, and King Ithius steps forwards with careful slowness. When Fithrust doesn’t move away, he reaches out. Their reunion is not dramatic. No sobbing collapse. No grand forgiveness. Just his hand settling gently against their shoulder and Fithrust closing their eyes like they’ve been standing alone for years and have only just realised they’re tired.

I lean into Aelith’s side when he reaches back for me. Or maybe I reach for him. At this point, it’s hard to tell where one instinct ends and the other begins.

Around us, the room begins to move again. Kael orders guards to secure the machinery. Drigthon sends two rebels to confirm the surrounding corridors are clear. Shanae crouches near one of the crystal pylons, examining the fractures with narrowed eyes. Chelsea moves to King Ithius’s side, touching Fithrust’s arm with such gentle warmth that I swear the poor royal sibling almost cries again.

Jack is still in Solan’s arms.

And Caly is gone.

That thought returns like a wave.

Caly jumped through the rift.

The rift to Earth.

With the medallion Jamie used.

I look at the empty space where the tear had been.

“So,” I say, because apparently my mouth decides some silences require me specifically, “Caly and Jamie are definitely fated mates, right?”

Every head turns towards me.

Excellent.

Great.

Love being perceived.

I gesture helplessly at the empty air. “I mean, he just jumped through a reality wound without hesitating because Jamie was alone. That feels pretty mate-coded.”

Sonny coughs. It sounds suspiciously like he’s trying not to laugh or cry. Maybe both.

Jack pulls back slightly from Solan, eyes red. “We don’t know that.”

“No,” I agree, softening because the look on his face deserves care. “We don’t. I just…” I glance at Aelith, then back at Jack. “This world keeps doing impossible things with bonds. Maybe it’s not done yet.”

Jack swallows hard while Solan rubs his thumb slowly along the back of his neck, grounding him.

“How would it even work?” I ask, more quietly now. “Caly’s on Earth. Jamie’s on Earth, sure, but Earth is pretty bloody big. What if he lands in the wrong country? What if he lands in the ocean? What if he gets spat out into a shopping centre and scares someone’s nan?”

“Dawson,” Aelith murmurs.

“I’m spiralling productively.”

“You are spiralling loudly.”

“Also true.”

Varek turns from the machinery, his silver gaze settling on the place where the rift closed. There’s blood on his blade and grief in the set of his mouth, though his voice remains steady when he speaks. “Patience,” he says.

I stare at him. “That’s a terrible plan.”

“It is not a plan. It is what remains when the first move has already been made.”

That’s annoyingly wise. I hate it slightly.

Varek looks at Jack then, and his tone shifts. Still controlled, still him, but gentler. “Caly chose with full knowledge of the risk. He will assess, adapt, and survive. His kind are difficult to trap and more difficult to kill.”

Jack gives a shaky laugh. “That’s supposed to comfort me?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not doing a great job.”

Varek inclines his head once, accepting the criticism like it’s a field report. “He also has to find Jamie first. We do not know where the rift placed him.”

The room absorbs that.

Caly could be anywhere. In truth, Jamie could be anywhere too. But they’re both on Earth, and both alive, as far as we know.

More importantly, both beyond the Queen’s reach. Though technically that’s no longer an issue. For now, maybe that has to be enough.

The rift chamber is contained slowly and carefully. Not fixed. Not safe. King Ithius and Kael both insist on that repeatedly. The system is shut down, the remaining medallion fragments gathered, and the Queen’s body removed under guard. No one cheers. No one celebrates.

It doesn’t feel like that kind of ending.

It feels like surviving the final crack of a storm and realising the landscape has changed so completely that you no longer know where the roads are.

Eventually, people begin leaving the chamber in smaller groups.

Varek goes with Pax, though not before speaking quietly with King Ithius near one of the pylons. Jack and Solan leave together, Jack moving like someone whose body is present but whose heart is currently somewhere impossible to reach. Chelsea stays with King Ithius and Fithrust for a while, her hand moving between them like she can physically stitch a family back together if she's patient enough.

Maybe she can.

If anyone could, it would be Chelsea.

Aelith and I are among the last to leave. We walk in silence through the lower corridors, past crystal veins no longer flickering, past guards who bow when they see him and then seem unsure whether to bow to me too. One does. Badly. I smile at him because he looks deeply stressed about it.

Aelith notices. "You are making them fond of you again," he says.

"I can't help being delightful."

"No, you cannot." The bond hums with exhausted affection.

When we finally emerge onto one of the outer balconies, the city spreads below us under late afternoon light. It looks different from here. Still scarred. Still tense. Smoke rises from parts of the lower districts, and patrols move along the main roads. People gather in clusters, staring towards the palace as if waiting for it to change shape in front of them.

Maybe it has. Maybe they just can't see it yet.

Aelith stands beside me, his shoulder brushing mine, and for once, he doesn't look like a prince performing control for everyone else. He looks tired. Grief-struck. Relieved. Changed.

Mine.

The word moves through me with such quiet certainty that I turn towards him. His eyes are already on me.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

He considers lying. I feel it. He *feels* me feel it. Then he exhales. "No."

My heart aches. I step closer and take his hand. "Yeah. Me neither."

His fingers curl around mine. The bond between us is steady despite everything, warm beneath the exhaustion and grief. Complete. Alive. Ours.

“My mother is dead,” he says quietly. “My father is alive. My sibling has returned to me. My brother is imprisoned. The kingdom is changing, and I do not know if I am ready for what comes next.”

I nod slowly. “That’s a lot before dinner.”

A sound escapes him.

Tiny.

Almost a laugh.

I count it as a win.

“Dawson.”

“What? It is. Huge day. Very dramatic. If this were a group holiday, I’d be leaving a strongly worded review.”

His mouth curves slightly, and bloody hell, that tiny smile does something to me every single time. I lean my shoulder into his arm and look out over the city. “When I fell through that rift, I thought my life was over.”

Aelith goes still beside me. Not tense exactly. More like he’s listening.

“I didn’t think it in a big poetic way,” I continue. “Mostly I was thinking a creature with too many legs was going to eat my face, which is less moving but very honest. Then I woke up in Dathanor, and everything was weird and terrifying, and you were there being all growly and gorgeous and deeply emotionally unavailable.”

He turns his head slowly. “Emotionally unavailable?”

“Mate, you growled at a doctor.”

“She approached too quickly.”

“She was trying to save my life.”

“She should have done so slower.”

I laugh, and the sound comes out softer than expected, and the city blurs a little.

“I spent most of my life trying to figure out where I fit,” I say. “Foster homes, jobs, countries, mountains, people. I was happy. I really was. I made myself happy because someone had to. But I never really belonged anywhere.”

Aelith’s hand tightens around mine, and I turn fully towards him.

“Then I came here, which, to be clear, I still think was a deeply aggressive method of matchmaking.”

His eyes soften.

“But I found you.”

The bond flares gently, as if the words themselves touch it.

“And I found this ridiculous world full of monsters and rebels and political meetings that could absolutely be emails if emails worked here. I found people who fight for each other. I found a family that makes no sense and somehow makes perfect sense.” I swallow, because the next words matter. “I found home.”

Aelith’s expression shifts, then breaks a little, beautifully so. He steps closer, lifting his free hand to cup my face. His palm is warm against my cheek, his thumb brushing lightly beneath my eye. “I do not deserve you,” he whispers.

I frown. “Incorrect.”

“Dawson—”

“Nope. Not accepting that. You don’t get to decide that for me.” I reach up and tap his chest, right over the glowing sigil that marks him as royal and mine and Aelith all at once. “You are brave, loyal, grumpy, occasionally arrogant, very hot, and in desperate need of someone to remind you that fun is not treason.”

His mouth twitches.

“You’re also kind,” I add, gentler now. “Even when you don’t know how to be. Even when it scares you. And you chose me. Over fear. Over power. Over everything your mother tried to make you.”

His eyes shine.

Not tears.

Glowranth eyes probably don’t work exactly like human ones, and I’m not about to ask because I’m having a moment.

But emotion sits there anyway. Raw and bright.

“I will choose you every day,” he says.

My chest aches so much, I can barely breathe. “Good,” I whisper. “Because I’m pretty attached.”

“Only pretty?”

“Deeply attached. Horribly attached. Annoyingly attached.”

“I prefer that.”

“Of course you do.”

He leans down, and this kiss is not desperate like the ones in the alley or hungry like the ones in bed. It’s slow, steady. A promise pressed into my mouth while the city breathes below us and the future waits with all its terrifying, hopeful uncertainty.

Behind us, the palace is no longer a cage.

Below us, the kingdom is no longer only fear.

Somewhere on Earth, Jamie is alive.

Somewhere on Earth, Caly is looking for him.

Here, in Terrafeara, Varek will keep fighting until every Riftborn is free. The King will have to earn his throne one choice at a time. Fithrust will learn what it means to be part of a family that doesn't demand they disappear to survive. Jack and Solan will wait. Pax and Varek will heal. Kael and Sonny will probably argue with everyone and somehow be right more often than is fair.

And Aelith and I?

We will stay.

We will build.

We will love.

When the kiss ends, I place my forehead against his neck and breathe him in.

"You know," I murmur, "when I said this place was all levels of weird and wonderful, I was mostly talking about you."

Aelith's arms slide around me. "Mostly?"

"Well, the yo-yo was a strong contender."

He groans, and I grin.

The sound of his amusement moves through the bond, warm and steady, and I stop waiting for the next disaster long enough to believe in what comes after it.

Not peace.

Not yet.

But a beginning. A real one.

And as Aelith holds me against him, his heart beating beneath my hand and the future stretching wide before us, I realise something bright and impossible.

My life didn't end when I fell through the rift.

It finally started.

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AELITH

I WAKE BEFORE DAWN.

For several heartbeats, I remain completely still, listening to the quiet. The palace has never sounded like this.

For as long as I can remember, silence inside these walls has carried tension. Expectations. Fear. Every corridor seemed to hum with unspoken calculations and carefully hidden loyalties. Even when the palace slept, it never truly rested.

Tonight feels different.

Not perfect.

Not peaceful.

But different.

The kingdom is wounded. There are laws to rewrite, councils to rebuild, citizens to reassure, and many sun cycles of damage to repair. My father has reclaimed the throne, but reclaiming trust will take considerably longer.

None of that disappears simply because one battle is over.

Yet for the first time in longer than I can remember, I do not wake expecting disaster. The realization settles strangely inside my chest.

Beside me, Dawson sleeps through history being made.

A small smile tugs at my mouth.

The blankets have somehow become tangled around one leg while simultaneously failing to remain over the rest of him. One arm is stretched above his head. The other is trapped beneath my shoulder because sometime during the night, he decided personal space was a concept best ignored.

I suspect he would argue that he is correct.

The bond between us hums softly. Complete and whole. Every time I touch it, part of me still expects it to disappear.

It never does.

The connection no longer feels like a thread stretched between us. It feels woven, a part of me in a way I do not have language for.

I can sense him even asleep. Not thoughts or words, but the emotions beneath them. Warmth. Safety. Contentment.

Home.

The word still catches me off-guard.

For most of my life, home was a place. Then it became a duty, then a burden. Now it is a person.

I brush a loose strand of hair from Dawson’s forehead. He makes a soft sound and turns towards my hand. The movement is so instinctive it steals breath from my lungs.

There was a time when I believed strength came from standing alone. My mother encouraged that belief. The court rewarded it. The kingdom expected it.

Need no one.

Trust no one.

Depend on no one.

The lessons were repeated so often, they became part of me.

Then Dawson arrived and dismantled them with smiles, terrible jokes, and a level of stubborn optimism that should not exist in any world. He refused to fear me. Refused to obey me. He also refused to leave, even when leaving would have been easier. Even when loving me became dangerous—especially then.

I study his sleeping face and try, once again, to understand how I became worthy of such devotion. The answer remains elusive. Perhaps it always will.

Outside the windows, the first traces of dawn begin creeping across the horizon. The sky shifts from black to deep green, the colours reflecting faintly against the crystal architecture of the city below.

My city.

The thought feels heavier now than it once did because I finally understand responsibility. The kingdom my mother ruled through fear

cannot survive unchanged. The world beyond these walls cannot survive unchanged either.

Riftborn remain scattered across Terrafeara. Families remain separated, and questions remain unanswered. Somewhere on another world, Caly searches for Jamie.

The thought brings a complicated mixture of hope and sadness. I suspect Dawson will spend the next several months worrying about both of them. Likely out loud and frequently… to anyone within hearing distance.

A fondness washes through the bond before I can stop it, and Dawson stirs. I freeze as one eye cracks open. It focuses on me.

“You awake?” he mumbles. His voice is thick with sleep.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

I consider the question. “There is a great deal to think about.”

He squints at me, then sighs dramatically, which is impressive considering he has been awake for less than five seconds. “That sounds exhausting.”

“It is.”

“Stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Thinking before sunrise.”

I blink.

He blinks back.

Then, apparently deciding the conversation requires no further contribution, he lifts himself onto one elbow and begins climbing over me.

There is no grace involved. None whatsoever.

Blankets become trapped.

A pillow falls to the floor.

One of his knees nearly catches me somewhere extremely unfortunate.

Eventually he succeeds in draping himself across my chest like a determined human-shaped blanket. Satisfied with this arrangement, he drops his head beneath my chin, and the bond settles.

The warmth of contentment spreads through me.

Dawson releases a sleepy hum, his arm tightening around my waist. “There,” he declares.

“There?”

“You looked like you were thinking too hard.”

“I was.”

“So I fixed it.”

I stare at the ceiling, then down at the male currently using me as furniture. A laugh escapes me. It’s soft and unplanned. Real.

Dawson smiles without opening his eyes. “Told you.”

The city continues waking beyond the windows.

The kingdom waits.

Responsibilities wait.

The future waits.

For a little while longer, I allow all of it to remain outside these walls while I hold my mate and he holds me right back.

And for the first time in my life, everything feels exactly as it should.

THE END

COMING NEXT: CALY

CHECK OUT A FUN BONUS SCENE WITH DAWSON, A SNOWBOARD, AND A PRINCE WHO HAS SEVERAL OPINIONS ABOUT GRAVITY, EXCLUSIVELY FOR MY FACEBOOK GROUP AND MY PATREON MEMBERS. BOTH ARE FREE SPACES TO JOIN.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BECCA SEYMOUR is a British/Aussie author of award-nominated MM romance, known for love stories that are steamy, heartfelt, and occasionally interrupted by monsters, mayhem, or men making spectacularly questionable decisions.

She writes everything from everyday guys and professional athletes to shifters, supernatural studs, and marshmallow-hearted monsters who look terrifying but really just need someone to love them. For research purposes, Becca has travelled extensively, attended sporting events, wandered through forests, stared suspiciously at caves, and spent an unreasonable amount of time considering the logistics of falling in love with Bigfoot. She insists this is all legitimate work.

When she isn't writing, editing, or inventing new ways to emotionally inconvenience fictional men before giving them their happily ever after, Becca can usually be found herding cattle, planning her next writing retreat, consuming chocolate, or adding another book idea to a schedule that absolutely did not ask for one.



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